

Address on acceptance of an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Stellenbosch

Stellenbosch, 20 February 2004

Madam Chancellor, Professor Elize Botha, Rector and Vice Chancellor, Professor Chris Brink, Distinguished faculty members, students and workers, Honoured guests, Ladies and gentlemen:

It might perhaps be inappropriate to mention what some might consider a mundane political fact on this more sublime occasion, the fact that fourteen months ago the African National Congress met at this University for its 51st National Conference.

However I mention this because I fully agree with the comments made by the Rector and Vice Chancellor, Professor Chris Brink, when he addressed the Rhodes Trust Centenary Reunion at the DF Malan Hall, just over a month after the thousands of ANC delegates had occupied the same Hall.

Professor Brink said of the ANC Conference: "Nothing like that had happened at Stellenbosch before. Stellenbosch got to know more black people, and more black people got to know Stellenbosch than ever before, in this short period of time. We broke down many barriers, demolished many stereotypes, and developed much better understanding of each other. I believe that the ANC Conference taking place in Stellenbosch was, and was seen to be, a contribution to nation-building."

I would like to believe that this occasion confirms the commitment of this eminent centre of learning to the goal of nation building, which is so central to the future of all our people and all future generations.

I would therefore like to take this opportunity humbly to thank the entirety of the University of Stellenbosch for the opportunity you have afforded us to return to the University, this time to accept the high honour of admission into its ranks as one of its honorary members and alumni.

The outstanding scientist, Albert Einstein, once said: "The further the spiritual evolution of mankind advances, the more certain it seems to me that the path to genuine religiosity does not lie through the fear of life, and the fear of death, and blind faith, but through striving after rational knowledge."

I have cited these words because it has seemed to me that our own path to nation building does not lie through the fear of life, fear of death, fear of the future and blind faith in the accumulated prejudices that cripple all of us, but through striving after rational knowledge.

The motto of the University of Stellenbosch is: Jou Kennisvennoot, Your Knowledge Partner. I trust that the University will be our Knowledge Partner as we travel along the road towards the building of a united but diverse nation.

I am convinced that it would be difficult for us to realise this vision if we do not strive after rational knowledge, to use Einstein's words, who also said "the process of scientific discovery is, in effect, a continual flight from wonder."

To arrive at the shared objective of a united but diverse nation, we must all embark on a voyage of discovery of our country, our continent and ourselves. Our own voyage of discovery of ourselves, our country and continent must also constitute a continual flight from wonder, wonder caused by the divisions, the antagonisms and the fragmentation of the past.

That flight from wonder, in which I am urging the University of Stellenbosch to play a critical role as our Knowledge Partner, must enable us to do what Professor Brink said we must do - breaking down the barriers, demolishing stereotypes and developing a much better understanding of one another.

We need the penetrating light of the rational knowledge of ourselves that onse kennisvennoot can and must provide, to banish the ogres, the goggas, the frightening shadows, the warped images, the demons, die goeters in die bos, that make it inevitable that we will continue to define our neighbour and compatriot as The Other, the antithesis of our definition of ourselves.

But even as it plays this role, the University will have to understand that this requires courage, tenacity and great spirit. This is because, again as Einstein said, "Great spirits have always found violent opposition from mediocre minds. The latter cannot understand it when a man does not thoughtlessly submit to hereditary prejudices but honestly and courageously uses his intelligence."

In this regard, we must draw courage from what Einstein said of these mediocre minds, that "Whoever undertakes to set himself up as judge in the field of truth and knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the Gods."

The hereditary prejudices of which he spoke tell us what we know or think we know about one another. Thus do these condition our behaviour and responses towards one another. Even as our political parties and movements join in a contest to win the support of the people of South Africa on April 14th, we can see how much our hereditary prejudices continue to be a potent weapon that is used to frighten and persuade, to define what and who is good, and what and who is bad.

In one of his poems, Ben Okri says:

"O the hallucinations that can fall upon you
When you resist revelation,
When you resist epiphanies,
When you close yourself
Off from enlightenment.

The opposite of a spiritual dawn
Is a universal nightmare.

Then the mind multiplies
The illusion of things
Till they become not gods,
But god-like monsters."

This University has great educational and symbolic value for Afrikaans speakers, as well as many people from other language groups. It is also an important national asset for our entire diverse society, and not just a particular group. Changes and practices at Stellenbosch are therefore closely watched, and have a significant ripple or multiplier effect.

And indeed as Professor Brink said in the speech we have already cited: "There is a strong body of opinion that says that if Stellenbosch cannot become part of the mainstream, then the Afrikaners will not become part of the mainstream, and this would impair the whole grand experiment of building a non-racial society in our country. The question of what role Stellenbosch can and will play in the new South Africa is an important one - for historical reasons, for symbolic reasons, and for practical reasons."

Depending on the policy framework and the manner in which it is handled, our diversity is also a national asset. It can and must serve further to enrich and strengthen our society. In this regard, I would like to endorse the statement made in the Diversity Policy of the University, namely that within an acceptable policy framework, implemented by visionary and goal-oriented leaders, diversity is a necessary condition for quality education. True educational quality is based on the diversity of ideas. And diversity of ideas is strongly related to the diversity of people from different cultures and backgrounds.

This we must also say that a healthy diversity among our universities allows for different language policies. Now that Afrikaans has been liberated from its narrow Afrikaner nationalist straightjacket, Stellenbosch University must answer an important question - how can the University, as an academic and educational institution, equip and motivate Afrikaners and other citizens with Afrikaans as their first language to be participants in the common journey towards the birth of a united but diverse nation!

Or as Professor Brink put it more broadly - what role can and will Stellenbosch play in the new South Africa!

In this context I must make the point that Afrikaans has already proved itself as a national asset, side by side with other linguistic assets. The use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction is part of the institutional diversity of which I have spoken. And certainly the government has no intention and will not do anything to eliminate diversity of cultures, values and languages in our Universities, as long as this diversity serves a common national purpose.

The question we must answer together is how linguistic diversity can be utilised and developed in order to promote a creative interaction of people and ideas in our universities. This question should be answered by the universities themselves, within the framework of national policy and policy with regard to Higher Education.

I believe that our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brink, pointed the way forward for us when he said that the health and vitality of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at Stellenbosch is directly related to the expansion of diversity within the University community, and the use of Afrikaans as an instrument of empowerment, and not disempowerment.

In die toneelstuk "Kanna hy ko hystoe" van Adam Small, is die hoofkarakter die bruin grootmaakkind van Makiet, 'n arm bruin vrou uit die werkersklas. Kanna het gepresteer, maar in die buiteland. Hy het net huis toe gekom vir die begrafnis van Makiet. Toe is hy weer terug na die buiteland. Kanna het nie werklik huis toe gekom nie.

We must together ask ourselves the question - have Afrikaans speakers in general really come home to the new South Africa? How many of them have migrated inwards, rather than merely fashioning a tolerable physical existence for themselves in our diverse society? And what role will Stellenbosch University, with its large component of Afrikaans speakers play, to facilitate the home coming of the Afrikaans speakers?

This is a valued centre of learning. As it discharges its responsibilities to fight against the easy ways of thoughtlessly submitting to hereditary prejudices, honestly and courageously using its collective intelligence to build the new, it must, at the same time, defeat what the Kenyan novelist and thinker Ngugi wa Thiongo decried, when he spoke out against the "devaluation of intellect and intellectual achievement".

Wanneer ek hierdie Eikestad verlaat, sal ek deur ons land reis, en uitreik na die hoogste bergpieke. Daar sal ek trots aan die wêreld verklaar, dat ek ook, honoris causa, 'n geleerde van Matieland geword het.

Baie dankie!