

Remarks at the Cabinet/Sanef Indaba

Sun City, 29 June 2001

Let me join the Deputy President and Mathata in welcoming all of you here. I am very pleased indeed that we are able to meet. I was told not to bring any ties and suits and things like that, because the intention is to make the meeting as relaxed as possible to allow for a vigorous and frank and open interaction as is possible among ourselves and I think that's a good thing.

I've told this story before so the people who have heard it will pardon me. A few years ago we received the Chancellor of Austria and we had dinner with him. I think Alec Erwin was there, Trevor Manuel was there and I don't know who else was there among the Ministers.

The Austrian Chancellor said he was quite certain that as South Africans we get pretty fed up with the focus on South Africa by the international media. He said he knows of lots of things that happen in this country that get reported while similar things that happen in Austria don't get reported. And he said the reason why there was that kind of focus, in his view, was that South Africa is a 'pilot project', and he used that phrase. Here is a pilot project and therefore you must expect that the rest of the world will be watching you, because they're waiting for this country to solve problems which I need to address in Austria, but I'm waiting to see what to do, so that I can learn whatever I can, so that I can tackle those problems.

We were all very interested in this assessment of the Austrian Chancellor, of South Africa being a pilot project with the consequence that he mentioned. All of us in this room would be aware of that focus on South Africa and might very well be asking ourselves the same question as to why.

A day or two after we opened Parliament this year I was having discussions with the Secretary General of the United Nations and he said to me, congratulations on your State of the Nation address and he made complimentary remarks about it. So I said, Secretary General, where did you get the statement from? So he says, it's all over the US press and very well reported, very extensively and in a good way. So we talked about that with the Secretary General and said, that's rather odd for the US press. Those Editors who are here will know what the US press is like and we were quite surprised that they would pay that amount of attention to what is after all a rather small little country at the bottom of the African continent. But they did. And that interest has been sustained in the US press.

Even while we were there recently, I think the day we left the United States, at the last public occasion we attended at the National Press Club in Washington, there was comment about an editorial in the New York Times on the President of South Africa. It seems rather peculiar that the New York Times would want to devote that kind of space. When we arrived in Germany we were told that that editorial was in the International Herald Tribune.

All of which says that perhaps the Austrian Chancellor was correct when he said that the focus on South Africa is because we are a pilot project. We are involved here in a process which is truly exciting - the process of change in this country. When I have thought about what examples we can draw on to try and find the 'road map' that the Deputy President was talking about, they are difficult to find. I don't normally agree with the doctrine of exceptionalism, but indeed if one looks closely one would not find it very easy to find previous examples of countries that have had to handle the sort of challenges and problems that we face.

I think of the very exciting prospect of dealing with all of these things that the Deputy President was talking about, of the many phrases that we use every day. We speak of a non-racial society: very easily said, very difficult to do. We talk of a non-sexist society and that's also very easily said, but very difficult to do. But these are things that must be done. As government, we have to discharge our responsibilities to

do these things that are not only in the manifestoes of political parties, but are in the constitution of our country.

We deal therefore with a complex situation, and I'm sure a complex situation in which we will make many mistakes, but a complex situation, nevertheless within which we have to find solutions to these problems. The media has its role within that context, it has its own tasks - to report, to criticise, do other things. All of us play our role in this very, very exciting experiment on which the whole world is focused. We will disagree and fight and quarrel about many things. But perhaps the occasion today and tomorrow might give us a possibility to agree on some things, not on content but on the manner in which we work as government and the manner in which we work as the media. That might help.

There are certain things that I'm interested in. I'm told that Mathata [Tsedu] is going to present a particular paper on this and maybe my intelligence information is wrong, which might account for your reports about the weakness of the intelligence services.

There are things that are said like, the government is over sensitive to criticism. On this matter, let us try and find out. What is meant by that? What has the government done to merit such a conclusion? Truly I can't find it, but maybe because we can't find the explanation for this assessment, we continue to do wrong things on the basis of which the determination is made that we are over sensitive to criticism.

It is said that there is over-centralisation of government and the Presidency. I don't know why the conclusion is arrived at. I would be very, very interested to hear from Mathata what that means, because again as we've looked at that, we don't quite understand what is meant by this. But again, as I was saying, we might very well be doing wrong things to over centralise, because we have not been bright enough to understand that we are over centralising.

It's also said that a part of the problem with the President is that he's surrounded by advisers who are dodos. Now a lot of them are sitting around the table, like Alec Erwin, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, and Joe Matthews, Ben Skosana, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and so on, Frank Chikane, Essop Pahad, who are all the President's closest advisers on government things. I'm not quite sure why it is thought that they are dodos and why even the women become yes-men. It might be again that we don't quite understand the manner in which we work, which results in people arriving at this conclusion and therefore my advisers around here behave like dodos, not knowing that they are behaving like dodos. It might be useful to tell them what is it that they have done, which leads to this conclusion.

Perhaps there are some things that the government says and does about the media, which must puzzle the media and it would be an occasion for the media to seek some explanations, in much the same way as we would be very interested in some answers to questions like that. That is apart from all of the other things that we've got to do which have to do with what the Deputy President has indicated, perhaps agreeing on some ground rules, if nothing else.

But there is something that ought to inspire us as we do this work, and that is that all of us have the blessing to be involved in a very, very extraordinary process of creating a new world and that is truly exciting.

Sometimes I wish I had the possibility merely to report what is happening with regard to that, and I would write very exciting stories.