

Speech to the NCOP

Cape Town, 10 November 1998

Chairperson
Honourable Premiers
Honourable Members of the NCOP

The suggestion that we should address the NCOP was first put to us after the National Assembly had debated the important question of national reconciliation.

As we understood it, this Honourable House also sought to reflect on this matter.

Several months have passed since that discussion in the National Assembly. It may therefore be somewhat difficult to go back to that debate in the manner in which it was conducted in the National Assembly.

This is not to say the topic itself has lost its relevance. But it may be that we should address the issue somewhat differently from the way it was approached in the National Assembly.

If this affects the debate adversely, I would like to apologise that, for reasons beyond our control, it proved impossible for us to be present in the House on the earlier dates that had been proposed.

The Honourable Members will remember that during the debate in the National Assembly to which we have referred, we said that our country was, in reality, made up of two nations, the one black and poor and the other white and well-off.

That statement did not go down well with some in our country, with one commentator asserting that not only had we wasted the time of the National Assembly by requesting that it set aside time to discuss the issue of national reconciliation but that what we said about two nations would not convince the poor that we were their champions.

The recently released reports of Statistics South Africa however confirm what we said, which, I am sure, we all know.

Nevertheless, it is still important that we cite some of the facts conveyed by these reports, if only to reemphasise the enormity of the challenge we all face of transforming ours into a non-racial and non-sexist society.

Using the 1995 Income and Expenditure Survey, Statistics South Africa reports as follows:

23% of African households are in the bottom income category, compared with 11% of coloured, and only 1% of Indian, and white households.

On the other hand, 65% of white households are found in the top income quintile, compared with 45% of Indian, 17% of coloured and 10% of African households.

Elsewhere SSA says that "income distribution in South Africa is highly unequal."

The poorest 10% of households in the country received as little as 1% of all household income in 1995, while the poorest 20% received only 3%. The poorest 30% of households received only 5% of all household income, while the poorest 50% received only 11%.

The report goes on to say that 60% of households received only 16% of all household income, while 80% had 35%.

On the contrary, the most affluent 20% households had as much as 65% of all household income, while 10% received as much as 48%.

The richest 20% of households had 65% of household income while the poorest 20% had only 3%.

Similar disparities are evident when we consider income distribution by gender.

The Statistical Service says that 26% of female-headed households are in the bottom income quintile as opposed to 13% of male-headed households. On the other hand, 27% of male-headed households are in the top income quintile, compared with 11% for female-headed households.

Where it combines race and gender the Service says that 31% of African, female-headed households and 19% of African, male-headed households are in the bottom income category.

In contrast, 5% of white, female-headed households and 0,5% of white, male-headed households are in the bottom income category. At the upper end of the scale, 73% of white, male-headed households are in the top income category as opposed to 6% of African, female-headed households.

As I am sure we would all expect, we also find that African, female-headed households in non-urban areas have the lowest income of all categories of our population.

The combination of abject poverty at one end and a comfortable affluence at the other, compounded by the fact that this describes a black-white divide and most acutely, a black female against white male disparity, constitutes an explosive mixture which has to be addressed if we are to guarantee stability for our country.

The question we have to ask ourselves during this debate and beyond is how committed are we, as an important section of the political leadership of our country, seriously to ensure that we move as rapidly as possible to close these race and gender disparities!

Of course, none of us will stand up and say that the matters we have raised are of no concern to them. All of us without exception will decry the human disaster represented by the figures we have quoted and urge that something be done to change the picture they paint.

But each time practical steps are taken precisely to achieve this result, the seeming national consensus breaks up and each retreats to his or her corner to pursue their own partisan interests.

I would make bold to say that this rule has held on every issue that has arisen since 1994, relating to the redistribution of income, wealth and opportunity.

It is absolutely certain that whenever the issue is raised of redistribution of resources from the wealthier provinces to the poorer ones, strenuous objections will be made by those who will seek to protect their privileged position.

It is equally certain that when measures are instituted to get the more affluent to contribute more of their income to the upliftment of the poor, a mighty hue and cry will ensue.

The idea that increases in the incomes of the more affluent should be allowed to rise more slowly to enable us to move towards reducing the gap between the well-off and the poor is sure to be met with loud and vigorous opposition.

Similarly, the notion that a portion of the assets of private corporations should be devoted to the social upliftment for which our country cries out, not governed by the objective of the highest profit rates in the shortest period of time possible, will be booted off the stage as an expression of a pernicious communist stratagem against the freedom of the owners of wealth.

Any measure to introduce security of tenure on white farms for poor, black farm workers will be denounced as an unacceptable encroachment on the property rights of the white farmers, regardless of the fact that farm evictions drive those evicted ever deeper into the misery of absolute poverty.

When the system of funding education is changed to encourage those who have the means to contribute to the cost of educating their children, so that the limited resources available to the state are used to educate those whose parents do not even have enough to eat, a veritable storm break out with the haves demanding their share of the small cake.

Similarly, any talk of affirmative action, once we move beyond the platitudes, will evoke charges of reverse racism and determined resistance to any effort to speed up the process of ensuring that those who were deliberately and systematically disadvantaged catch up with those who were placed ahead by the system of colonialism and apartheid.

All of us find it the politically correct thing to do to sing in chorus about the need for a strong opposition, but never about the need for a strong and united national effort to end the continuing degradation of the black majority.

Despite all this, we are in the fortunate position that among the people of our country, both black and white, there exists a deeply entrenched will to find that common purpose which will enable these millions to act together to build a society which will assure all of a better life.

I say this being fully conscious of the issues which trouble our national minorities in particular. These range from fears among the Coloured and Indian populations that they are threatened by affirmative action;

concern among the Afrikaners that their culture and language are in danger;

conviction that the country is disintegrating in the face of rates of crime and corruption that are supposed to be running out of control;

to a dark foreboding about a future without President Mandela, the defender of national reconciliation, tolerance and liberty, all of which are thought to stand in grave danger from actions that will be taken by ourselves, whom the eminent personage, fighter against white and all other tyranny and Nobel Peace Prize winner, His Grace, The Archbishop Tutu, has described as tyrants-in-waiting.

Despite all this, it would seem to me that there is a great yearning among all our people to find one another, at the same time as each finds his or her place within our new reality, rightfully claiming their space, while voluntarily and equitably sharing the common place which constitutes the common nationhood with other South Africans.

As the Honourable Members know, the Honourable Dr Mangosutho Buthelezi, President of the IFP and Minister of Home Affairs and I have been interacting with leaders of the Afrikaner people for a number of months to listen to their views about South Africa today and tomorrow.

Unfortunately, we have still not completed this process, owing to the fact that we have to meet a larger number and wide range of people.

Nevertheless, we believe that it is necessary that we submit an interim report to the Cabinet about the rich lessons and message we have gathered so far, to enable the Government to adopt such measures as may be necessary to address the legitimate concerns of this important section of our population.

At one of the meetings we have held, with a section of the leadership of the Afrikaner youth, a statement was made by one of these young leaders of our people which I have sought to communicate to our country and region in statements I have made at other public gatherings.

I feel privileged to quote this statement of the Afrikaner youth in this important House of our national legislature. What they said was:

"Yesterday was a foreign country; tomorrow belongs to us!"

In these few but extraordinary words, these young people conveyed to me a message which I, too, should be proclaiming from the mountain top, but which, perhaps, I am unable to integrate within my being, because, to me, yesterday remains, still my native country!

But I understood this also that the Afrikaner leaders with whom we had spoken, had said the same thing, that they were committed to a future of our country which they would help to construct in a way which would ensure that all of us, including they, could honestly and truthfully say that the morrow belongs to all of us.

I believe that it was the same spirit, however dimly or clearly understood, that inspired the social partners represented in NEDLAC to agree to a common programme to begin to address the urgent, national challenge of reducing the intolerable levels of unemployment in our country.

Similarly, the process spearheaded by the successful holding of the first meeting of the Morals Summit, designed to address the issue of the near collapse of moral values in our society, demonstrated our ability as a people to united in the struggle to build a better future for all our people.

We experienced the same thing when the country came together to commit itself to the common fight against HIV/AIDS to ensure that our people, especially the youth, do not get wiped out as a result of failure to act to stop what is developing into a pandemic threatening the health of the nation as a whole.

All these confirmed the maturity of the masses of our people, who understand very well that, indeed, there are national objectives which we must approach as a united nation, however fashionable it may seem to proclaim oneself as an opposition champion.

All this has occurred in a situation in which national brawls have broken out about such grave matters as the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the appointment of Mr Tito Mboweni to the South African Reserve Bank and the successful political and military activities carried out to ensure that the people of Lesotho live in conditions of democracy, prosperity, peace and stability and the controversy about what the correct thing to do is, to contribute to peace, stability and freedom in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But the expression of a striving towards an indentification of a common national agenda has also happened in a situation in which an important African country such as Nigeria has begun to move resolutely towards the restoration of democracy, the year in which our country hosted the highly successful Summit Meeting of Non-Aligned Countries, and in which we proved that we have enough resilience to withstand the severe instability which has affected the world economy and the talent to rank among the leaders in the Commonwealth world of athletics.

In the period ahead, all of us will be challenged to answer the question what our contribution is to the fundamental objective of building a non-racial and non-sexist South Africa, which is, itself, the fundamental condition for the achievement of the goal of national reconciliation.

It may be that we will make important progress in this regard if, at last, we all recognise the fact that the politicians are not, at this stage, capable of reaching any consensus among themselves about what our national goals are and how we should set about achieving these.

Our people will then judge all of us not according to how shrill our voices of criticism and opposition are, but as to what we have done to help eradicate the apartheid legacy which continues to imprison the entirety of our people, regardless of race or gender.

As we progress towards the conclusion of the year, I would like to take this opportunity to salute the Honourable Members of this House for the work you have done to help establish the legislative framework which underpins the transformation agenda to which the majority of our people are committed and the work that has been done by the provincial and local governments to improve the lives of all our people, whatever the difficulties and obstacles.

As long as we accept this that we are all immersed in a complex but exciting process of education about how to build the society which the millions of our people visualise in their dreams, with none of us endowed with a gift of prophesy which allows any one of us to be the sole fountain of wisdom, so long will we all have the possibility to shake off the shackles of our yesterdays and truly embrace the challenge of building a common future.

I trust that our debate to day will contribute to the cultivation of this spirit of humility and courage to break loose from what is narrow and selfish,

Thank you.