

Speech by Thabo Mbeki at the installation of the Chancellor of Vista University

Soweto Campus, 29 August 1998

Mr Chancellor
Vice Chancellor
Chairperson of Council and Members of Council
Minister of Education
Workers, students and staff
Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all, I would like to congratulate Premier Mathole Motshega and Dr Hugh Africa on their installation today in the senior positions they occupy at Vista University.

I am confident that they will discharge their functions in the positions they assume with distinction and with dedication to the development of this institution of higher learning.

This morning, 200 hundred students from the University of the Free State and the QwaQwa Campus of the University of the North began the arduous task of recounting the 600 000 votes that were cast at the last General Elections in Lesotho earlier this year.

Two days ago our Government appealed for student volunteers at these Universities to carry out this task. The students responded without hesitation and within 24 hours we had the full quota of the numbers required.

The students responded with this alacrity because they understood that the people of Lesotho are confronted by a serious crisis which has to be addressed urgently if that country is not to slide into a situation of further conflict and instability.

They understood that where another is faced with problems, they have an obligation to help where they can. They proceeded from the position that freedom, democracy and stability for the people of Lesotho also expands our own frontiers of freedom, democracy and stability.

I would like to take advantage of this happy ceremony, which takes place with the participation of the students of Vista University who are the fellow students of the Universities of the North and the Free State, sincerely to thank our students who have been in Maseru since this morning.

On behalf of our Government and the country, I thank them for disproving the thesis that our students at institutions of higher learning are incapable of responding to the call to national duty, being devoted only to everything that serves their selfish interests.

Their response recalls the excellent lead that was provided by black medical students who were the first to accept the need for them to render community service as part of the process of the completion of their studies and as an expression of a lifelong commitment to contribute to the achievement of the objective of building a healthy nation.

The Jeremiah's, who cannot be true to themselves except in the context of the propagation of a vision of a predestined African failure, will denigrate these examples of an African commitment to the achievement of the greater good.

They will falsely tell you and the world that we will fail in Lesotho, in the Congo and in Nigeria, to encourage you and I to give up trying and to submit to despair.

As a people, we survived many years of colonial and apartheid oppression. We survived because we dared to win.

Because we dare to win, we will succeed in Lesotho, the Congo and Nigeria as we succeeded to vanquish white minority rule in our country, despite its cheer leaders of various political hues who had convinced themselves that to be black was to define oneself as a permanent loser to the inherent superiority of those who had been our white masters for generations.

The peoples of the Kingdom of Lesotho, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Federal Republic of Nigeria will achieve their objectives of peace and democracy regardless of the wishes of those who wish that they, ourselves and the rest of our Continent will fail to attain these aims.

Mr Chancellor:

I would like to believe that the students who readily, volunteered to go to Lesotho would be conscious of the fact that as they join our country's intelligentsia on completion of their studies, they have an obligation to apply their knowledge and skills to the search for solutions to the many problems which confront our country and Continent and thus contribute to the goal towards which all of us aspire, of securing a better life for all.

Needless to say, to be best placed to make this contribution, these students would need to study hard so that they master their particular disciplines.

Again needless to say, this also requires that the lecturers, professors and the administration at our institutions of higher learning must themselves apply themselves with great devotion to the task of producing a well qualified and competent intelligentsia, comparable to the best in the world.

I am raising these questions because surely all of us must have cause to be gravely concerned about some of the things that are happening at some of the historically black institutions.

It is here that there is the highest level of instability, which necessarily subtracts from the critically important task which these institutions must fulfill, of education and research.

I am told that one of our university Vice-Chancellors has made the correct observation that universities are not a site of struggle but a site of learning.

I do not know how many of us have heard this message, understood it and taken it to heart in terms of our behaviour.

I am certain that even where we have to engage the issue of the transformation of our institutions of higher learning, we can do this in a manner that does not deny us the possibility to proceed with the task of the education of our youth.

Similarly, we must get this out of our minds that there are inexhaustible funds available within our system of public finances which will make it possible for us immediately to redress the gross imbalances we inherited from the apartheid years.

Indeed, acceptance of this reality should lead all of us to reject totally the notion that students are entitled to fail and to repeat classes as long as they wish, thus wasting scarce resources that could have been spent on students who have more respect for themselves, their families and the millions of the poor in our country who are ready to sacrifice so that our youth has access to education.

Among others, the young intellectuals of our country should be addressing the centrally important questions of what the organisations of the youth and students and the SRC's should do:

- * to inspire the student youth to study! study! and study! - to learn! learn! and learn!;
- * to focus on those areas of education which are critical to our emergence as a winning nation;
- * to make their own input into the process of the reconstruction and development of our country; and
- * to prepare themselves to play their due role as qualified professionals in a society going through a truly revolutionary transformation.

When I have asked the questions of some of the student organisations that attach to themselves the label "progressive" what they are doing to contribute to the reconstruction and development of our country, the response has been a deafening silence, broken only by the sound of the toyi-toyi and the sickening chant - give me this! give me that! give me the other!

To clear away the confusion, including among those who entertain the false notion that the democratic order provides an opportunity for licentious conduct and a collapse of social and individual discipline, a new initiative will have to be born among our youth targeted at mobilising the millions of our young people to participate in the process of the rebuilding of our country.

Of necessity, we must also raise the question of the startling and terrible relative absence of the black intelligentsia from the public discussion going on in our country about its transformation.

There seems to be a paralysis of thought or a withdrawal from an open engagement of the burning issues of the day among this important section of our population, which is difficult to explain.

And yet it was natural to expect that these, who are the most educationally empowered among us, would be in the forefront of the struggle to set a national agenda focused on the genuine emancipation of the millions of black people from whom they originate and of whom they are part.

Instead, quite often, we are treated to the spectacle of some black souls at our universities, who are regularly trotted out by our media as some so-called expert political commentators, but who, in reality, are nothing more than an acute embarrassment to all genuine black intellectuals.

Clearly, the black intelligentsia, including those who work in this University, needs to ask itself whether it is discharging its responsibilities to itself, to the country and to the students for which it should set an example by its own activity and conscious social engagement.

But the University also, as an institution, needs to ask itself the question whether, during this extraordinary period in the history of our country, it is doing enough to position itself in such a manner that it serves as a resource for the community in which it is placed, such as Soweto in the particular instance of today's convocation.

It needs to pose the question to itself as to whether it is building the culture and tradition such that its students and teachers will take it as a matter of course that to be a true member of the Vista community is to be committed to the service of the people of South Africa.

And we must also ask the question whether the quality of management at the historically black institutions is of the calibre we seek, such that, despite the obvious and incontestable position of disadvantage, these institutions nevertheless conduct themselves in a manner that measures up to their responsibilities as joint architects of a brighter future for the masses of our people.

Today, we celebrate the elevation to positions of responsibility two among our compatriots who have a long record of devotion to the struggle for the emancipation and upliftment of the peoples of South and Southern Africa.

We are confident that they will do what they have to do to communicate to the Vista community and infuse into this community, the spirit which moved the students of the Universities of the North and the Free State to volunteer to serve the people of Lesotho during this weekend.

We wish them success in their endeavours, and pledge to them our support, inspired by the hope that this University will, in time, develop into one of the principal centres in our country of higher education, research and incubator of the ideas and the men and women who will give our people the possibility to say that, at last and permanently, we have emerged from the valley of darkness.

Thank you.