

ACCEPTANCE BY THE DEPUTY PRESIDENT, HON. MR THABO MBEKI, OF PATRONAGE OF THE YEAR OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

5 FEBRUARY 1998, CAPE TOWN

Master of Ceremonies,

I would like to express my profound appreciation for inviting me to act as Patron of the Year of Science and Technology, 1998, I regard it as a great honour. I look forward to this exciting year and all the interesting, varied and coordinated activities which you have planned to run throughout the year.

The launching of the programme today, at which we are linked by video-conferencing to five other centres in the country, shows clearly the great potential which resides in science, engineering and technology.

We are glad to learn that all the provinces have been involved in the planning as this will enable us also to reach those communities, which so far have had little opportunity to participate in such scientific activities.

We are confident that this project will generate public interest in science, engineering and technology and make people aware of the all pervading place of scientific progress in our daily lives. But more important, it is to bring this human experience closer to all our communities.

At the centre of this programme is its transformational nature. For the first time we are putting in place ways and means of bringing the whole population into science, engineering and technology.

The tragedy our country is that the majority of the people have been left out of such important activities in the past, especially black youth, black women and the rural poor.

It should thus come as no surprise that our country continues to experience a tremendous socio-economic disparity based on race, gender and the divide between the rural and the urban.

The programme is also going to enhance, expand and deepen the expression of our democratic practise as it takes science, engineering and technology away from the exclusive domain of scientists and technicians and empowers the people to participate in public debates, policy formation and the monitoring of policy. This will enable them to campaign about and react to proposed legislation in science, engineering and technology.

Economic expansion on one side, and advances in science, engineering and technology on the other, can hardly be seen apart. By expanding the participation of all communities in science and technology we are also making a contribution to the democratisation of economic ownership and participation as well as the building of an expanded and firm base for economic progress.

The attainment of a better life for all our people is dependent on our people achieving a competitive, growing and sustainable economy in which all our people participate.

We believe it is imperative for us to provide support and incentives for those programmes that aim to stimulate innovation. To achieve this goal and bring about real change we must expand the frontiers within which the creative genius and enterprising spirit of the people and the individual can find unlimited expression.

The measure of the advancement in the culture of a people is the extent to which it can identify the best elements in human civilisation and the speed with which it can assimilate these elements into its own culture as well as its ability to inject its own achievements into the totality of human progress.

Certainly, for our people to achieve this level of advancement, they should be allowed to enter the theatre of universal human exchange in science, engineering and technology.

We consider it of paramount importance to develop greater co-operation with our Southern African neighbours as well as the rest of Africa in the political, social and economic areas. Our interaction with the world is anchored on this strategy and principle.

Full reconstruction and development of South Africa cannot be achieved in isolation, outside and apart from renewal of the region and the continent as a whole.

We cannot achieve our own renewal in isolation from a region and a continent which continues to be afflicted with civil wars, famine, epidemics, multitudes of refugees, drug trafficking and many other evils which threaten to engulf the entire continent. We are certainly part of the continent and we share in its final destiny.

Master of Ceremonies,

The point we are making is that the reconstruction of our country and the rebirth of the lands of the people of Africa, happening as they do at the dawn of the twenty first century, can only happen if our peoples are empowered to take advantage of advances in science, engineering and technology.

Only three weeks ago we witnessed on our television screens and read in the print media about a young African boy who emerged out of a rickety shack in one of our informal settlements riding on a mini BMW-modelled sedan car.

Out of pieces of scrap metal from a refuse dump, and a disused electric generator, the young boy made us gaze at our television screens. Firstly, we gazed with a sense of injury for the opportunities many years of Apartheid rule have deprived him. Secondly, with a sense of encouragement for the many things we still have to do in order to make his dream, and those of many like him, a reality.

Again, taking into consideration the example from the informal settlement we have just cited, it should come as no surprise that The World Report on Competitiveness (1996) reveals that of the more than forty (40) countries that were investigated, South Africa featured at the bottom end of a list of countries assessed in the area of human resource development. Closer examination of the factors impacting negatively on our competitiveness reveals our weakness in the area of human resource development for science, engineering and technology.

During the Year of Science and Technology, as we draw the attention of the public to the centrality of science, engineering and technology, we must in particular capture the imagination of our youth - our future scientists. The key message to be put across during this Year must be that science, engineering and technology are important for the survival of our country in the increasingly competitive world.

The Year of Science and Technology is about communicating science, engineering and technology to the public.

Again, as the example from the informal settlement shows, laboratory scientists, engineers and technologists do not hold the monopoly for the generation of scientific knowledge and, therefore, it is part of their responsibility to draw the largest section of the people into the theatre of scientific inquiry.

Master of ceremonies,

As the saying goes: "imitation is the best compliment". I dare place before the manufacturers of Bavaria Motor Works (BMW) the notion that the mini BMW out of the shack is a compliment from the informal settlement on the achievement your company has registered in technology and engineering.

It is in this regard that I want to say to the media that your coverage of this minor incident demonstrates the key role you can play in this Year of Science and technology as well as beyond.

You can write more about exciting discoveries and their meaning for our lives. You can screen or broadcast a wide range of stimulating and informing programmes.

You can create a positive image of science and technology and influence people to gain a better understanding. You are the best placed to reach all communities.

Master of Ceremonies,

In accepting the Patronage of the Year of Science and Technology, I am reminded of the discussion between William Gladstone, the one-time Prime Minister of great Britain and Michael Faraday. As Gladstone was watching Faraday, the physicist, performing a fundamental experiment in electricity which to him, appeared to show no practical result, he asked Faraday:

"Of what use is such a discovery?"

Faraday replied, "Why, sir, you will soon be able to tax it."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We want to assure you that our involvement in the Year of Science and Technology is, indeed, not from the angle of collecting taxes, but because we think that we are starting a movement which will ensure that our country is prepared for the challenges of the new millennium.

May I wish you every success with your endeavours this year.

THANK YOU.