

SPEECH BY DEPUTY PRESIDENT TM MBEKI, AT THE BANQUET TO CELEBRATE THE 120TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CAPE TIMES, CAPE TOWN, 3 APRIL, 1996.

Managing Director of the Cape Newspapers, Mr Rory Wilson, Editor of the Cape Times, Mr Moegsien Williams,

Distinguished guests:

In the Supplement on the "Cape Times" which the "Cape Times" carried a week ago, the distinguished editor of the paper, Moegsien Williams, writes that:

"A typical South African newsroom is an unhappy place, staffed by demotivated, mainly junior reporters and frustrated sub-editors who are expected to cover and produce newspapers able to reflect accurately an increasingly complex society."

Further on he says:

"We want to redefine the news. We sense it can't be 'journalism as usual' in the new South Africa... In practical terms, redefining the news means getting closer to the readership by engagement, new contacts, new story ideas and a move away from stereotypes."

I believe that the editor deserves our congratulations for the honesty with which he states his views and the courage with which he sets a vision for the "Cape Times" when, in addition to what we have already cited, he says:

"While we will expose society's ills and wrongs, we will be its cheerleaders when things go right and there are successes. While we will be opposed to many things, we are able for the first time to be passionately and uncompromisingly in favour of some things, especially our new-born democracy."

It may come to pass that fifty years into the unknown future, those who will be alive then, will see this particular period in the history of our country, as we effect the transition from apartheid to non-racialism and democracy, as the golden age of its rebirth.

It will turn almost exclusively on what all of us do, accepting as we must that if we fail to succeed, the fault will not be in our stars but in ourselves.

And what is it that all of us South Africans must do!

While recognising and cherishing the colour, race, language and cultural diversity of our country, we must nevertheless seek to build out of that diversity one nation which shares a common sense of patriotism.

Put in other words, we have to do battle with and against the legacy of racial division and conflict which has characterised South African society almost from the beginning of the period of our country's settlement by European peoples.

It is perhaps natural and should be expected that some among us will complain about why we thus continue to recall the past. After all, it is sometimes said, have we not ended the system of apartheid!

Is it not now time that we speak of the future rather than persist in recalling a painful past which is best forgotten, than kept alive by constant reference by those who have nothing original to say!

But I do not believe that if we are honest with ourselves we can seriously suggest that after these long centuries of our actual historical experience, it would be possible in a year or two or three or five to wipe out from the consciousness of many notions of racism and racial superiority.

Capable as we might be of achieving miracles, this is one of those that are beyond our abilities.

If we recognising this reality, then surely one of the things we must do is that we, as a people, should deliberately and directly engage this challenge and not pretend that it does not exist.

I would like to hazard the guess that most of us present in this room followed with some interest the debate between two of our bright intellectuals as they crossed swords in the print and electronic media on this vexed issue of racism.

I believe that it is important that the discussion should have taken place, whatever the pain it might have caused both to the jousters and the spectators.

I would also hope that it would free all of us from the inhibition to debate this matter in public, whether this arises from fear of derision or from concern that by discussing it, we help to fan the propagation of racism.

Over the recent past, including this very day, we have watched as the Rand has done somewhat of a mad dance, gyrating to the music of a band of faceless, odourless and non-corporeal musicians who are described as the market.

As I tried to listen to the music this band has been playing, I thought I heard lyrics which contained the refrain - this, after all, is just another African country!

And the recollection came flooding back of a now forgotten phrase - the white man's burden!

All this happens because there seems to be an accusation that is being made that it cannot be that a majority black government can properly manage an economy as sophisticated as ours is. After all, look at the rest of Africa!

And so it must remain the white man's burden, and it was never the white woman's, to preside over the economy, as the black are condemned to a predilection and a hereditary instinct to abuse political power for purposes that are inimical to the objective of a healthy and growing economy!

Cold fear grips my heart even as I say this, because I can hear the deluge of criticism that will wash over me.

Some will say that all I did was to make racist remarks. Others will ask - what did you expect from an Africanist!

Yet others will say - why does he not understand that what the colour-blind market is reacting to is the inexperience of the new government and not its racial complexion!

To which I will probably respond by saying that - you are probably correct! - and go to bed convinced that the new governments that replaced Salazar of Portugal and Franco of Spain inspired new confidence in the economic prospects of those countries rather than gloom occasioned by the inexperience of the new

democratic governments, that the economies of Portugal and Spain would collapse.

On this matter, those among us who have confidence in capacity of our government to be as intelligent as any other in the world and to be as literate as any other, as regards the factors that make for sustained growth and development in the modern world in which we live, will laugh best because they will laugh last as practice proves the sceptics wrong.

Whatever my own fate after this evening, I will continue to assert it as one of the challenges our society faces, to confront the issue of racism in our thinking and understanding, as an essential part of the building of the one nation towards which so many aspire.

In any case I believe that we have no choice but to deal with the material circumstances in our country which are the consequences of our racist past and whose continued existence is precisely the fodder that feeds racial tensions, resentment and possible conflict in future.

I refer here, of course, to the enormous disparities in income, wealth and opportunity between black and white which continue to characterise our society.

The new South Africa the millions dream of cannot both be new and continue to carry this feature of a racially advantaged minority and a racially disadvantaged majority.

It used to be only a few years ago, perhaps as a result of what we ourselves said, that there was a genuine fear among those who had something to lose, that what we were after was the seizure of everybody's property and its redistribution among the people.

I recall distinctly very wise advice being given by one of our major captains of industry that if we nationalised the corporation he heads and handed out its shares to all adult South Africans, all we would achieve would merely be to destroy the company and with it the economy.

Happily, we have passed the stage when the spectre of such disastrous adventures still haunted some in our country and the world. At least I trust that we have passed that stage.

Ahead of us must unfold a programme of work to rebuild and expand our economy on a sustainable basis.

Clearly, among other things, this must include sharply increasing the rate of investment, expanding and modernising our manufacturing sector, developing our human resources, increasing our international competitiveness and changing the patterns of our international trade, especially with regard to the product mix of our exports and imports.

At the end of it all, we want to see an end to the high levels of unemployment we continue to experience, a radical reduction in the incidence of poverty, ignorance and disease - a South Africa in which wealth, income and opportunity are shared equitably and in which the racial divides of today are a thing of the past.

None of us can doubt the enormity of this challenge and the vision, dedication and measured impatience it will require of all of us to achieve this result.

But equally, it would be difficult to overstate the excitement that derives from that challenge and the

sweetness of the reward which success will bring, as we see one more person employed, one new family properly housed, yet another engineer qualifying and another playhouse built so that the community around can gain access to theatre.

I have absolutely no doubt that we will realise this dream, relying on the resources of both the public and the private sectors as well as the creativity and enthusiasm of the masses of our people.

It may be that history will judge these first two or three years of our democratic rule as the period during which we constructed the engine which must pull us forward towards the truly non-racial, non-sexist, prosperous and peaceful South Africa we all desire.

Perhaps the occasion will present itself one day to discuss the component parts of this engine, among which are correct and realistic policies and programmes, reorganised and remotivated government structures, active co-operation between government, labour and business and the involvement of the masses of the people in development.

It may also be that the political, constitutional, economic and social successes we achieve will help to push back the negative assumptions that some make about the African continent as well as contribute something to the world-wide struggles to end racism and to find lasting stability in multi-cultural societies.

Thus history has granted all of us the privilege to be the midwives of a new nation, to transform the ethos of our society from despair to hope, to be pioneers and voortrekkers on the road to a glorious future, which none of us have ever traversed.

And so we come back to Moegsien Williams.

What we want to achieve cannot be achieved without the "Cape Times" publishing according to the dictum with which he ended his article: "Serve your readers and practise independent journalism."

But how shall this be realised with newsrooms that are unhappy places, staffed by demotivated, mainly junior reporters and frustrated sub-editors!

To this we must also add, how can it be achieved with newsrooms that still desperately need to address the urgent questions of better race and gender representativity!

The society we seek to build is as much in need of an independent press as it requires job creation.

And the press it requires is also of the kind that Moegsien Williams sought to describe - one which is capable of moving away from stereotypes and one which is not embarrassed to be passionately and uncompromisingly in favour of some things, especially our new-born democracy.

Gerald Shaw has written of the occasions when the Cape Times stood up for justice at critical moments of the history of our country.

Another critical moment in that history is upon us and requires that those who have vision and a sense of the revolutionary transformation which faces our country, must indeed redefine the news and position themselves and the information media they represent and lead so that they too become an important element in the engine that will take us to our destination.

I believe that we should take example from Moegsien Williams and not fear to criticise ourselves, to change ourselves from what we were and be satisfied merely to repeat by rote that this or that is the nature of the media, and then run as far and as fast as possible away from the confronting the challenge of defining the role of the press in these changing times.

The history of the Cape Times must surely serve those who are its producers and owners as an inspiration to do better and set new standards rather than as justification for complacency and stagnation.

I would like sincerely to thank the leadership of the Cape Times for giving us the opportunity to participate in one of the events marking the 120th anniversary of this important paper, to extend our best wishes to all who are responsible for its production and to express our confidence that it too will play a role that it will define for itself to participate in the birth of a nation.

May I request you to rise and drink a toast to the health and success of all who work at the Cape Times and its continuing successes over the next 120 years.

Thank you

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