

SPEECH BY DEPUTY PRESIDENT TM MBEKI, AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL EDITORS FORUM

19 October, 1996

Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen

As Shakespeare's Macbeth hears of the death of his queen and approaches his own, in anguish and despair he pronounces the famous lines:

"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, Out, brief candle"

And so too might we descant after Macbeth, as we look through the processes of the transformation of our country - tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day...

But perhaps what we have gathered here to encourage in its journey of creation should give us cause to escape the embrace of anguish, to discard the cloak of despair, because tomorrow has become today.

We thank you for the opportunity you have given us to participate in this important event and are pleased to convey our sincere congratulations to you the editors and senior journalists on the formation of your new organisation.

The formation of this organisation today is all the more significant because of the fact that today we mark South Africa's Press Freedom Day. It is therefore an occasion on which we must recall the sacrifices made by journalists, other media workers as well as the broad democratic movement in the struggle to achieve press freedom and freedom of expression. Consequently it is a day when all of us should rededicate ourselves to the defence of these freedoms.

I am certain that this organisation will play an important role in our national life with regard both to matters that relate directly to the press and the wider issue of the reconstruction and development of our society.

Undoubtedly these matters will include important issues such as press freedom, the role of the media, the quality of journalist and media diversity.

It would clearly be important that such views that emerge from this discourse are communicated to society at large to assist in the process of ensuring that the discussion of these matters is both properly informed and inclusive.

It is my own firm view that Press Freedom in our country is not under threat. No forces or institutions exist within our society which have the strength or power significantly to compromise such freedoms as those of expression and the press.

The combination of organised popular opinion and the legal and constitutional framework would prove too strong for any threat to these freedoms to succeed.

I am not, by these statements suggesting that permanent vigilance is not required. Indeed the maintenance of the system of democracy and the protection of human rights themselves demand the highest level of vigilance by our society as a whole.

I make these remarks in the hope that we might agree that there is no need daily to sound the alarm bells about press freedom as though we were faced with clear and imminent danger.

Perhaps if there were such agreement among ourselves it might be possible to discuss matters affecting the media without this earning those not working in the media your wrath as enemies of press freedom.

I do not believe that the end of dialogue about any matter affecting our society helps us to build a stable democracy based, in part, on the encouragement of healthy debate.

We borrowed the words from Macbeth as a lead into a discussion of the pressing matter of the creation of a non racial society. We assume it to be true that we have taken this important step of bringing together the Black Editors Forum and the Conference of Editors to form the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) to address the same question of the building of a non-racial South Africa.

The coming of this moment might itself have been characterised by movement which could be described as a petty pace.

After all, if we are in search of a bench mark we are two-and-a-half years on since the establishment of our first democratic and non-racial government.

But whatever the pace, we have at last arrived at the creation of a united forum of editors and therefore, in practical terms, put down another foundation stone on which we will build the non-racial edifice which we all wish to see.

We believe that the important achievement for all of us represented by the establishment of SANEF must surely give us cause to escape the embrace of anguish, to discard the cloak of despair because it takes us further forward in the common struggle to create a non-racial society.

The reality we face, is that our country continues to be characterised by our racist past. It is difficult to talk of one nation and one people when enormous racial disparities in wealth, income and opportunity continue to persist.

It is difficult to talk of one nation and one people when to be poor is largely defined by race and colour.

It is difficult to talk of one nation and one people when control of our country's productive resources vest in white hands while the Black are defined as workers and consumers.

It is difficult to talk of one nation and one people while the patterns of human settlement remain defined by the group areas policy of the previous regime.

It is difficult to talk of one nation and one people when we have hardly made a dent in correcting the historical imbalance which resulted in 87% of the land being in white hands.

The battles that have erupted in many of our institutions of higher learning represent a struggle to redress the racial imbalance in the area of access to education and knowledge.

It is difficult to convince the young intellectuals engaged in these battles that our s is one nation and one people.

And so we can go on to recount what is common knowledge to all of us.

But clearly this is not necessary, for these are truths that are known to all of us.

When each one of us stands and reflects on what can be done to address these great challenges as a fundamental imperative of our progress towards the establishment of a non-racial society, and given the fact of the constraints that impact on the possibility to achieve rapid change - then might we all be excused when we recall the words of Macbeth, tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day ...

But what is it that gives hope when the temptation is to regress into gloom and despair.

What gives hope is the creation of institutions dedicated to the cause of non-racialism and empowered to ensure the victory of this cause.

The organs of government which have been set up in the last thirty months are among these institutions which are dedicated to the cause of non-racialism.

It is our responsibility as the government to ensure that they function effectively, keeping in sharp focus the fact that among their principal tasks is the responsibility to build a non-racial society.

But it goes without saying that the challenge of non-racialism confronts not merely the government but our society as a whole.

The agenda of non-racialism can never succeed if civil society is itself not among the motive forces that strive for its realisation.

The establishment of SANEF once more poses the vexed question whether the organisations and institutions which are not themselves non-racial can promote a non-racial outcome.

The question has been posed whether the Black majority should not preserve its own organisations in a situation in which it is disadvantaged as a consequence of our apartheid past.

It is often suggested that where Black people belong to organisations which are predominantly white they can only serve as token Blacks or to use an American expression "Uncle Toms" or what Malcolm X called "House Niggers".

We meet tonight to celebrate the establishment of a non-racial organisation SANEF. It will itself have to grapple with these real and difficult questions.

But we are entitled to believe that you would not have engaged in the serious struggle to create this organisation if you were not conscious, at least as citizens, of your responsibility to create a non-racial instrument that would consciously and purposefully and as part of civil society address the challenge of the creation of a non-racial South Africa.

As Editors you occupy positions of great eminence. You have a voice and are in control of means by which to make that voice heard. What you say and do today is therefore one of the determinants of what South Africa will be tomorrow.

Sitting together in SANEF as black and white South Africans we have the rare possibility to influence one another, to impact on one another as equals, to make interventions in our society ways which will explain why we thought it was ever necessary to come together to form one editor's forum.

Surely it cannot be that we formed SANEF so that we could have non-racial tea parties. Once more we congratulate you on this important initiative and wish SANEF success.

The important work it will do will make it unnecessary for you to say after Macbeth that all your yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death because they would have lit the way to a better South Africa for all of us.

Thank you.