

## **STATEMENT OF DEPUTY PRESIDENT THABO MBEKI AT THE OPENING OF THE DEBATE IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, ON "RECONCILIATION AND NATION BUILDING"**

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, CAPE TOWN, 29 MAY 1998

Madame  
Honourable Members of the National Assembly;

Speaker,

I would like to thank our presiding officers, the whips and all the parties represented in the Assembly for giving all of us the opportunity, to discuss the important matter of reconciliation and nation building for which we have convened this morning.

The 1993 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa ends with an epilogue entitled "National Unity and Reconciliation".

Among other things, it says:

"This Constitution provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful coexistence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief of sex."

"The pursuit of national unity," it continues "the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society."

For its part, the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa has a preamble which among other things, says:

"We, the people of South Africa, recognise the injustices of our past... (and) believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity."

"We therefore... adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to heal the divisions of the past.. (and) to improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person."

In its "Founding Provisions", this Constitution also says that our Republic has as one of its values "commitment to promote non-racialism and non-sexism."

I believe that as we discuss the issue of national unity and reconciliation today, we will have to do a number of things.

The first of these, to which I am certain we will all respond in the same manner, is that we should commit ourselves to the pursuit of the objectives contained in these constitutions for a democratic South Africa.

The second is that we will have to answer the question honestly as to whether we are making the requisite progress:

- to create a non-racial society;
- to build a non-sexist country;
- to heal the divisions of the past;
- to achieve the peaceful coexistence of all our people;
- to create development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex; and

- to improve the quality of life of all citizens.

Thirdly, we will have to answer the question, again as honestly as we can as to:

- whether our actions have been and are based on the recognition of the injustices of the past, and,
- whether our actions have genuinely sought to promote the integrated Constitutional objectives of:
- national unity;
- the well being of all South Africans;
- peace
- reconciliation between the people of South Africa; and
- the reconstruction of society.

In the light of these prescriptions contained in the two Constitutions to which I have referred, let me declare some of the matters to which the government I represent is committed.

We are interested that, as a people, we move as rapidly and as consistently as possible to transform South Africa into a non-racial country.

We are interested that our country lives up to its constitutional commitment to transform itself into a non-sexist society.

We are interested that together, as South Africans, we adopt the necessary steps that will eradicate poverty in our country as quickly as possible and in all its manifestations, to end the dehumanisation of millions of our people, which inevitably results from the terrible deprivation to which so many, both black and white, are victim.

We are interested that we must deal with our political past, honestly, frankly and without equivocation, so that the purposes for which most of us agreed to establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, are achieved.

We are interested that our country responds to the call to rally to a new patriotism, as a result of which we can all agree to a common national agenda, which would include:

- a common fight to eradicate the legacy of apartheid;
- a united offensive against corruption and crime;
- concerted action to advance the interests of those least capable to defend themselves, including children, women, the disabled and the elderly;
- an agreement about how we should protect and advance the interests of all the different cultural, language and religious groups that make up the South African population;
- a commitment to confront the economic challenges facing our country, in a manner that simultaneously addresses issues of high and sustained growth and raising the living standards of especially the black poor;
- an all-embracing effort to build a sense of common nationhood and a shared destiny, as a result of which we can entrench into the minds of all our people the understanding that however varied their skin complexions, cultures and life conditions, the success of each nevertheless depends on the effort the other will make to turn into reality the precept that each is his or her brother's or sister's keeper; and
- a united view of our country's relations with the rest of the world.

We believe that these are the issues we must address when we speak of reconciliation and nation building. They stand at the centre of the very future of South Africa as the home of a stable democracy, human rights, equality, peace, stability and a shared prosperity.

Accordingly we must attend to the question whether with regard to all these issues and at all times, all of us behave in a manner which promotes the achievement of the goals we have mentioned, and therefore take us forward towards the realisation of the objective of reconciliation and nation building, without which the kind of South Africa visualised in our Constitution will most certainly not come into being.

So must we also pose the questions - what is nation building and is it happening!

With regard to the first of these, our own response would be that nation building is the construction of the reality and the sense of common nationhood which would result from the abolition of disparities in the quality of life among South Africans based on the racial, gender and geographic inequalities we all inherited from the past.

The second question we posed is - are we making the requisite progress towards achieving the objective of nation building, as we have just defined it!

If we elected to answer this question in a polite and reassuring manner, we would answer - yes, we are making the requisite progress.

However, I believe that perhaps we should answer this question honestly and deal with the consequences of an honest response, however discomfiting it may be.

Accordingly, our answer to the question whether we are making that requisite progress, towards achieving the objective of nation building, as we defined it, would be - no!

A major component part of the issue of reconciliation and nation building is defined by and derives from the material conditions in our society which have divided our country into two nations, the one black and the other white.

We therefore make bold to say that South Africa is a country of two nations.

One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure.

This enables it to argue that, except for the persistence of gender discrimination against women, all members of this nation have the possibility to exercise their right to equal opportunity, the development opportunities to which the Constitution of '93 committed our country.

The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled.

This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure.

It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, with that right being equal within this black nation only to the extent that it is equally incapable of realisation.

This reality of two nations, underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white minority domination, constitutes the material base which reinforces the notion that, indeed, we are not one nation, but two nations.

And neither are we becoming one nation. Consequently, also, the objective of national reconciliation is not being realised.

This follows as well that the longer this situation persists, in spite of the gift of hope delivered to the people by the birth of democracy, the more entrenched will be the conviction that the concept of nation building is a mere mirage and that no basis exists, or will ever exist, to enable national reconciliation to take place.

Over the 4 years, and this includes the period before the elections of 1994, we have put forward and sustained the position that the creation of the material conditions that would both underpin and represent nation building and reconciliation could only be achieved over a protracted period of time.

I would like to reaffirm this position. The abolition of the apartheid legacy will require considerable effort over a considerable period of time.

We are neither impressed nor moved by self-serving arguments which seek to suggest that four or five years are long enough to remove from our national life the inheritance of a country of two nations which is as old as the arrival of European colonists in our country, almost 350 years ago.

Let me digress briefly and say something about the ongoing process of German unification.

As the Honourable members are aware, the two post-war German states united into one country in 1990.

After 45 years of division into two states with competing social systems, the German leaders and people understood that, truly to become one country and one people, they too, like ourselves, would have to address the central questions of national unity and reconciliation.

This was despite the fact that here we speak of a people who share the same language, colour and culture.

The seriousness with which the German people treated that process of the promotion of German national unity and reconciliation is reflected, among other things, by the extraordinary volume of resources which the richer, developed West Germany transferred to the poorer and relatively underdeveloped East.

During the first five years of unification after 1990, \$586,5 billion of public funds were transferred from West Germany to East Germany to underwrite Germany's project of national unity and reconciliation. This exceeded East Germany tax revenues for the same period by a factor of 4.5.1.

Further to illustrate the enormity of this effort, these transfers amount to 70 times the size of the national budget which this House is currently debating.

To help finance this extraordinary expenditure, a 7,5 per cent surcharge on individual income tax was imposed in 1991 and extended in 1995 for an unspecified period of time. Correctly and interestingly, this was designated a "solidarity" tax.

It might also be of interest to note that despite the huge flow of German public and private funds into the East, at the end of this first five year period, per capita income in the East still amounted to 74 per cent of income in the Western part of the country.

In our case, the reality is that in the last five years, the nation increased by a mere 10 per cent.

I purposes, taking into account the increase in population, we are spending the same volume of money to address the needs of the entirety of our population as were disbursed to address the needs of essentially the white minority before the democratic transition.

Our own "solidarity tax" was imposed for one year only, accompanied by much grumbling from some sectors of our society.

Before we digressed to Germany, we were making the point that four or five years are not enough to weld the two nations which coexist in South Africa as a consequence of a long period of the existence of a society based on racism.

To respond to all of this, in conceptual terms we have to deal with two interrelated elements.

The first of these is that we must accept that it will take time to create the material base for nation building and reconciliation.

The second and related element is that we must therefore agree that it is the subjective factor, accompanied by tangible process in the creation of the new material base, which must take the lead in sustaining the hope and conviction among the people that the project of reconciliation and nation building will succeed.

Given the critical importance of the subjective factor, therefore, we must return to the question we posed earlier during this intervention.

That question is - are we all, as the various parties in this parliament and our society at large, behaving in a manner which promotes the objectives of reconciliation and nation building, within which the kind of South Africa visualised in our Constitution will most certainly not come into being!

Again, my own answer to this question would be a very definite - no!

Clearly, it would be irresponsible for me to make such a statement without substantiating it.

Let me therefore cite openly some of the interventions or non-interventions which, over the last four years, have not helped to move us more speedily towards the attainment of the objective of reconciliation and nation building.

Unlike the German people, we have not made the extra effort to generate the material resources we have to invest to change the condition of the black poor more rapidly than is possible if we depend solely on severely limited public funds, whose volume is governed by the need to maintain certain macro-economic balances, and the impact of a growing economy.

What this throw up, inevitably, is the question - are the relatively rich, who, as a result of an apartheid definition, are white, prepared to help underwrite the upliftment of the poor, who as a result of an apartheid definition, are black

If we are serious about national unity and reconciliation and treat the obligations contained in our Constitution as more than words on paper, we have to answer this question practically.

The South African Revenue Service is engaged in a difficult struggle to ensure that every individual and corporate entity meet their tax obligations.

I am informed that so far SARS has established that something in the order of 30 per cent of our corporations are not registered for tax purposes. These are people, who by honouring their legal obligations, could make an important contribution to addressing the material challenges of national unity and reconciliation.

They deliberately choose not to but will not hesitate to proclaim that the Government has failed to "deliver".

Many of us in this House find it very easy each time we speak to demand that the Government must spend more on this and that and the other.

At the same time, we make passionate demands that taxes must be cut and the budget deficit reduced.

The constant and, in some instances, dishonest refrain for more funds, in many instances incanted for party political gain, reemerges in our streets as when, only a few days ago, public sector workers marched behind posters which bore the words - "give us more" "give us more".

In the majority of cases, the call for the transformation of both public and private sector institutions and organisations, in particular to address the issue of racial representativity, has been resisted with great determination.

Indeed, one of the issues of great agitation in our politics is the question of affirmative action.

To ensure that it does not happen, some of what is said that "black advancement equals a white brain drain" and "black management in the public service equals inefficiency, corruption and a lowering of standards".

In many instances, correctly to refer to the reality that our past determines the present is to invite protests and ridicule even as it is perfectly clear that no solution to many current problems can be found unless we understand their historical origins.

By this means, it comes about that those who were responsible for or were beneficiaries of the past, absolve themselves from any obligation to help do away with an unacceptable legacy.

The current situation suggests that the TRC will be unable to complete its work especially with regard to the full disclosure and attribution of many acts of gross human rights violations.

This will leave the law enforcement agencies with no choice but to investigate all outstanding cases of such violations, making it inevitable that our society continues to be subject to tensions which derive from the conflicts of the past.

Some of our country, including some who serve within the security forces, are prepared to go to any length to oppose the democratic order, including the assassination of leaders and destabilisation by all means.

These include the new well-known story of the alleged involvement of former freedom fighters in plans to carry out a coup d'etat as well as other disinformation campaigns which the intelligence services are investigating involving allegations that Minister Mufamadi is involved in the cash-in-transition robberies, while Deputy Minister Kasrils and myself are responsible for the murder of white farmers.

Last week, I mentioned in the House the negative impact of such events as the recent appearance of the President of the Republic in court, the SARFU saga and the matter of the appointment of the Deputy Judge President of the Natal bench.

I am certain that many of us can cite many examples of interventions which have not contributed to the goal of national unity and reconciliation, including the many instances of resistance to pieces of legislation which seek to transform our country away from its apartheid past.

And yet we must make the point that the overwhelming majority of our people have neither abandoned this goal nor lost hope that it will be realised.

An important contributory factor to this is that there are, indeed, significant numbers of people in our society, including people among the white and Afrikaner community who, by word and deed, have demonstrated a real commitment to the translation of the vision of national unity and reconciliation into reality.

Again last week, in this House, I said that much of what is happening in our country, which pushes us away from achieving this goal is producing rage among millions of people. I am convinced that we are faced with the danger of a mounting rage to which we must respond seriously.

In a speech again in this House, we quoted the African-American poet, Langston Hughes when he wrote - "what happens to a dream deferred?"

His conclusion was that it explodes.

Thank you Madame Speaker.

Issued by: Government Communications (GCIS)