

A LECTURE ON NATION BUILDING

An address by Kaizer M. Nyatumba, Executive Editor and Political Editor of The Star, at a Leadership Seminar of the Institute for Political Leadership held at Dikhololo, outside Brits

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In her collection of short stories, *JUMP AND OTHER STORIES*, South Africa's only Literature Nobel Prize Laureate Nadine Gordimer focuses, albeit at a literary level, on some of the things that some of the country's citizens, perhaps through no fault of their own, have come to symbolize and be associated with. And it is not a flattering picture that she paints.

Aptly entitled *Comrades*, the story tells of a white woman, Mrs Hattie Telford, who has just attended a Johannesburg university conference on "People's Education". As she is about to get into her car, a group of black youngsters approach her and ask if she is going to town. She is on her way home not far from the university, but nevertheless agrees to give them a ride to the bus station in the city.

The youngsters' spokesman, who is the only one among them who has a smattering knowledge of English, soon informs Mrs Telford that he and the others have come from Harrismith in the Free State – where they are members of the local Youth Congress – to attend the conference, and that for hours they have not had something to eat. Mrs Telford invites them to come home with her so that she can give them something to eat.

In the course of the stilted and halting conversation with them at her home, she discovers (1) that the youngsters have not been at school for a number of years, (2) that "they are the children growing into young men and women for whom school is a battleground, a place of boycotts and demonstrations, the literacy of political rhetoric, the education of revolt against having to live the life their parents live", (3) and that "they have pompous titles of responsibility beyond childhood".

Like their spokesman Dumile, they have all had some stints in prison. As their hostess observes, they seem to know very little beyond shouting slogans and being involved in what Dumile describes as "political activity".

Gordimer writes:

She looks at them all and cannot believe what she knows: that they, suddenly here in her house, will carry the AK-47s they only sing about now, miming death as they sing. They will have a career of wiring explosives to the undersides of vehicles, they will go away and come back through the bush to dig holes not to plant trees to shade home, but to plant landmines. She can see they have been terribly harmed but cannot

believe they can harm. They are wiping their fruit-sticky hands furtively palm against palm.

This, obviously, is a work of fiction but, like all good fiction, it is not far removed from what used to pass for reality in this country until recently.

After all the conflicts that have taken place in this country over the years, after all the propaganda of yesteryears has done untold harm to race relations and in the process badly poisoned some psyches, the challenge now facing us as a nation is collectively to gather the pieces and to allow long-festered wounds of the past to heal. *That* is the challenge facing us as a nation: to rebuild ourselves from the near-ruins of our inglorious past.

But just how exactly do we do that, and where do we begin? That is the onerous task which has been lumped on my small shoulders this morning. It is a difficult task to execute, for nation building as a concept is very broad, indeed.

Institute for Political Leadership Manager Mr Danie du Plessis, members of staff at the Institute, honourable graduates, ladies and gentlemen: Allow me to take this opportunity to congratulate you most heartily on your completion of the six-month Leadership Course offered by this Institute. The first intake of 50 students since the Institute's inception slightly more than six months ago, you must no doubt be proud to be pioneers. I have no doubt at all that just as you have learned a lot from this course, so, too, have those who instructed you and offered lectures during your six months here, as well as those who founded and managed the Institute.

As you no doubt know, education is dynamic, and in any educational situation the teacher, the instructor or lecturer also learns something. At the very least, the act of teaching, instructing or lecturing helps the person regarded as a knowledge-sharer to clarify some of his/her thoughts, as well as to question or confirm some of his/her assumptions and prejudices.

Surely if we are to talk about nation building we will need at the very least to be on the same wavelength with regards to what we mean by that expression. We will need to arrive at a common definition of the concept.

What, then, do we mean by "nation building"? Well, let us choose the simplest definition. Fortunately for us, the phrase is almost self-explanatory. I suggest that we accept as our common understanding the definition which says that nation building is the act of promoting nationhood, the advancement of one's nation and the sharing of national goals with one's fellow citizens. If we accept this definition, it will stand to reason that any act which puts the country's interests first and promotes loyalty to the country has the effect of building our nation.

Unfortunately, in our case even “nation” needs to be defined. In our polyglot society with so many different – and at times competing – ethnic and tribal groups, there are those who argue that their ethnic groups represent their “nations”. And so it is not uncommon, as you will no doubt attest, to hear some top politicians in KwaZulu-Natal speaking of “the Zulu nation”. It must be clear, therefore, that the *nation* about which we speak today is the only nation worthy of that name: all those who make the population of this, our beautiful country, the Republic of South Africa.

Nation building, therefore, must of necessity be the act of promoting a spirit of greater South Africanhood, the advancement of our country’s interests and the sharing with our compatriots of our national goals. This is especially important for us in the context of the shameful past whence we have emerged. It is incumbent on all right-thinking South Africans and their leaders to work actively towards ending the conflicts and cleavages of the past in our country.

In fact, we have no alternative but to pull together. We have been yoked together as a nation by forces far greater than ourselves – ranging from colonialism, the sheer force of history, conquests, through to the apartheid we have only recently overcome. We are inter-dependent on one another as a people, and the fate of any one group in our country must, of necessity, have an impact on that of us all. As others more eloquent than me have long said, we must all learn to live together or perish together as fools.

Indeed, the historic political accommodation arrived at in this country has been born of the realization that our future and our fate are inextricably inter-linked. There was a realization on both sides of the political divide that unless a negotiated settlement was reached speedily, the economy would continue to haemorrhage, the country would continue to be ungovernable and forces opposed to negotiations would have time to mobilize against the process.

If my memory serves me well, *Sowetan* Editor-in-Chief Aggrey Klaaste and his colleague, the late Sam Mabe, were the first to promote the concept and philosophy of nation building in this country. Klaaste had just been elevated to the position of *Sowetan* Editor and, helped by Mabe, he immediately set about creating a new identity for the paper.

He was worried about the moral decay which was then prevalent in the country. The culture of learning was dead at most schools in the townships and there was a worrying lack of respect for life in the country. Klaaste and Mabe argued that Kwame Nkrumah had got it wrong when he urged his fellow Ghanaians to seek first the political kingdom. They said the economic kingdom had to be sought simultaneously with the political one.

However, Klaaste’s understanding of nation building (you will remember that Mabe died a violent death in Soweto in 1990) found expression in encouraging people to keep and maintain gardens at their homes, organizing choral contests and honouring people in

society who are making positive contributions. He later entered into negotiations with the SABC and other institutions and got them to co-sponsor some of these functions. Minor through these things might seem to be, overall they were received well by the paper's readers, in spite of harsh criticism from some, and appear to have made some difference. From Klaaste's perspective, identifying the paper with nation building also paid dividends: his paper's circulation soared and he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate.

Reviewing the paper's nation building initiative last Monday, Klaaste quoted from the first speech that he made on the subject on 21 October 1988: "We would thus be able, after the reconstruction of collapsed power structures, to do the good things not for ourselves, but all South Africans. And if we do not do that speedily, I have a feeling in my bones that the next upheaval will surely lead to the wastelands. Everything tells me so. The economy is depressed, there are many frightened and unhappy people. All it needs is a match applied to the dynamite stick for things to blast off."

Concluding his speech in 1988, Klaaste said: "But we will continue. The ultimate ideal is we, who are in the majority, will build ourselves, by seeking help internally and externally for that matter, to build South Africa for its people."

In its barest minimum, nation building means putting the country first. In the case of politics and the media, it means that we must all work together to promote the country's interests. Politicians, of course, being politicians, will differ with one another and call one another names, and that is as it should be in a democracy. What is important, though, is that at a time when the country's interests are threatened, it is incumbent on all of us to pull together.

It must be said, though, that it is in the country's interest, and therefore promotes nation building, for political parties to keep one another on their toes and for the media to act as a watchdog. Tensions will occur and often people will speak with different voices, but that in itself is necessary in a democracy.

But nation building is not one big move by people in leadership or in government. Instead, it is a series of actions or moves, preferably consistent actions or moves, which make a difference for the better, touch a heart, improve the life or condition of a person and generally make ours a better nation and a better country to live in. Yes, people in the public eye are perhaps better able to take bigger, token steps which may overnight improve the lives or change the conditions of our people, but it is the ordinary citizen, the ordinary man and woman in the street, who wields more power. Their collective actions are capable of having a bigger and longer-lasting impact on our welfare as a nation.

At all times, however, we must allow ourselves to be guided by the national interest in our quest to build our nation. We need to be careful, though, because there will always

be some who will define the national interest narrowly to suit themselves. There are some who will argue, as it has already happened, that *they* are the embodiment of the national interest and that, therefore, criticism of them or their actions amounts to lack of patriotism because it is against the national interest. Such sophistry we should not be too much concerned about.

So, let us state the obvious. It is in our interest as a nation that there is political stability in the country, that there is a viable opposition party which will keep our governing party on its toes, that the economy is strong, that those we have elected into positions of authority are men and women of integrity, and that our Government is accountable to the citizenry. All those things are in the country's best interest.

Clearly, then, nation building is neither the prerogative nor the preserve of certain individuals, whatever their station in life. Instead, it is everybody's responsibility. You, as political leaders, have to play the political game within those rules; and so, too, should we in the media. You are well within your right to differ with your political opponents and to nail them, as it were, but even in your pursuit of power you are expected to put the country's interests first.

Naturally politicians will differ, based on their backgrounds and ideological positions, on how best to advance the national interest; but usually there is agreement on what is in the national interest. The ANC and the National Party might agree, for instance, that it is in South Africa's interest for the economy to perform better than it is doing at the moment, but they may differ on just how exactly that can be done.

Our democracy is still relatively new and untested, and we are still in the process of bringing together disparate and formerly antagonistic groups to forge one nation. It goes without saying, therefore, that it is imperative to promote unity rather than division, to emphasize what we have in common rather than what divides us, and to embrace reconciliation and nation building.

Leaders of all stripes – political, religious, business – can help in this regard by adopting goals and policies which enhance, rather than detract from, our togetherness as a people. Ordinary South Africans can help in this regard by using their minds instead of blindly following leaders as though they were a flock of sheep; by standing with their leaders when their leaders' policies advance the country's interests and by rebuking those leaders when they advance policies which could harm us as a country and a nation.

Hearty congratulations again to you, ladies and gentlemen, on the completion of your six-month course. Long was the road that you have traversed, but even longer is the road ahead. As you know, education, both formal and informal, never ends. Therefore, gird your loins, forever keep an open mind and learn, learn and learn.

In the final analysis, then, nation building is about principles, about not allowing oneself to be swayed by anything from either the truth or what is right.

May I once again thank you for this invitation and wish you the very best in everything that you do.

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