

CHALLENGES FACING BLACK INTELLECTUALS IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

*A keynote address by Kaizer M. Nyatumba, Editor of **The Independent on Saturday**, at a Graduation Ceremony of the Faculties of Education and Commerce and Administration at the University of Durban-Westville*

Date: Saturday, 9 May 1998

The Honourable Chancellor of this proud institution, Mr Justice Hassan Mall;

The Chancellor, Professor MF Ramashala;

The Registrar: Academic, Professor A Brimer;

Deans of the Faculties of Education and Commerce and Administration Professors John Jansen and K Pillay;

Heads of Departments present;

Members of the University Staff, both academic and administrative;

Proud parents and relatives;

Graduands, students present, ladies and gentlemen:

Often when people begin their speeches they say glibly, as a matter of course, how honoured they are to have been invited to speak at whatever function they were asked to address. Let me say at the outset that I have never before felt as greatly honoured by an invitation to speak at any function as I do today. It is, indeed, a great honour for me to be here, and I was as deeply moved by the request as I am now by the warm reception that I have been given.

Given the nature and significance of today's occasion, it is only right and proper that I start with congratulating all those who are graduating this afternoon, those young men and women who will today receive their diplomas and degrees. This is their day. After three, four or more years of study, they have now come to the end of their journeys, although in many ways this is just the beginning of an even longer voyage ahead. Most of us here can imagine and understand the pride these young women and men are feeling today, for we ourselves have had similar moments. We can remember the joy and sense of accomplishment that we felt on our graduations those many moons ago.

Congratulations, then, brothers and sisters. You have worked hard to be here, but you will need to work even harder in the months and years ahead to make an impact in your chosen fields.

Let me hasten to add, ladies and gentlemen, that not for a moment am I unmindful of the fact that the young men and women graduating today have far more important things in their minds than to sit here and listen to me. There are celebration parties lined up, there are compliments and praises to be had, there are family members and loved ones to be hugged and there is the limelight to bask in. And that is as it should be, for today is your great day. All of that is richly deserved.

Therefore, I will not steal your thunder and upstage you in this, your hour of glory. On a day like this, which is imbued with so much academic significance, it is proper that we put the spotlight on black South African intellectuals and the role they are playing – or should be playing – in our country today. You know, as I sat there and looked around me this afternoon, I could not help but be moved by the beautiful array of black intellectuals assembled here in their resplendent academic regalia, for we have assembled here today some of the finest brains in KwaZulu-Natal and, indeed, in the country.

But we need to ask ourselves very honestly: To what use do we put the brains with which we have been so richly blessed? Are we content to use them only for our own, selfish good, or do we use them for the greater good of our country? Can we really say, and with a clear conscience, that our education has made a difference to people other than ourselves and our families in the areas in which we work and live, in our communities, in this province and, indeed, in this country? Can we look at ourselves in the mirror and say honestly: “Yes, Abraham Ongkopotse Tiro, we do remember your exhortation at that graduation ceremony at the University of the North in 1972 for us to make sure that our education is of use and relevance to our communities, and that we should be there for our communities during their hour of need?”

How concerned are we, as high-flying black intellectuals, about the plight of the ordinary people in our midst: you know, the messengers in the offices you will soon be working in, the maids and gardeners at our homes, the ladies who make tea for us at work, the cleaners on the streets of Durban? Do we care more about ourselves than we do about these people? I cannot answer for you, ladies and gentlemen, but I would like to suggest that each person here should try to answer that question himself or herself.

Please allow me, Mr Master of Ceremonies, to tell a story told so beautifully by the late American human rights leader, the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr, in a sermon about the Good Samaritan in the Bible. Dr King tells us that others had travelled on that winding and dangerous road before the Good Samaritan, and had seen the man lying helplessly on the road, clearly in need of help. He says when the people found the man they paused to think if they should help him, but reconsidered because they feared for

their own safety. Dr King says the question that those people asked themselves was: “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?”

Now that is how most of us would ask that question. Naturally we would be concerned about our own safety and welfare. Dr King tells us, however, that that is the wrong way of putting the question to ourselves. He says that when the Good Samaritan saw the man on the road, he turned the question around and asked: “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

That, he says, is the question that we need to ask ourselves. Not “If I stop to help the poor pensioner trying to cross the street, what will happen to me?”

I have chosen as a topic for my speech this afternoon “Challenges Facing Black Intellectuals in South Africa” for the simple reason that the alarming dearth of critical thinking from the ranks of the black intelligentsia in the country has long concerned me. Let us reflect for a moment on concrete examples of the things I am talking about. Take the Interim Constitution, for instance. Who are the people who crafted and fine-tuned it into the required legalese? Mostly white academics and lawyers, that’s who. It was they who made up the Technical Committee on Constitutional Issues which drafted the Interim Constitution at the World Trade Centre, with Advocate Dikgang Moseneke the only black member of that Committee. Fortunately, there was a bigger and better black representation in the Constitutional Assembly’s sub-committees which finalized our Constitution in 1996,

In your newspapers (whichever it is that you read), on your television channels and on your radio stations, who are the people quoted at length and often paraded as so-called “experts” on almost everything, be it politics, economics or law? Again it is overwhelmingly whites: the Mervyn Frosts, the Lawrence Schlemmers, the Robert Schrires, the Azzar Jammies, the Raymond Parsons and the Brian Currins of this world. Now, most of these individuals are fine people, but surely there is a need to see things from a black perspective as well? One is then moved to ask: where are the black intellectuals?

There is a serious question for you, and we will do well to attempt to answer it. From where I am sitting, the answer, I am afraid, is not very inspiring. For make no mistake: black intellectuals we have aplenty in this country, but their priorities are wrong. Commendable exceptions – like Professor Themba Sono, Professor William Makgoba, Professor Herbert Vilakazi, etc. – do exist, but by and large our black intellectuals are content to make money, to hold down good jobs, to live well and to forever hold their peace.

I said earlier that most black intellectuals were content to make money and live well. Lest I am misunderstood, let me hasten to say that there is nothing wrong with living a good life, for God knows that we are entitled to it, but for Pete's sake there's a whole world out there – beyond the campuses of our tertiary institutions, beyond our beautiful homes and beyond our immediate communities. We live today in probably one of the world's most exciting countries, with pregnant possibilities. We live in historic times, and before our very eyes is a modern-day miracle and renaissance of sorts as we bury the old and embrace the new.

Let us pause and ask a question that some over-eager non-racialists among us may already be asking within themselves: are we not being racist to still talk of blacks and whites in present-day South Africa, and to complain about whites generally hogging the new opportunities and still clinging to positions of influence and authority disproportionate to their numbers? The answer to that question should be a resounding "No".

It is nonsensical to suggest that we should now pretend that there are no differences in our respective melanin contents and to say that it is racist to point out that FW de Klerk is white and Thabo Mbeki is black. What is racist is to say that because FW de Klerk is white, then he is automatically superior, innately intelligent and, therefore, deserves to enjoy certain privileges which his black counterpart – because he is automatically inferior and innately asinine – should not enjoy, and vice versa.

Education, I submit humbly, ladies and gentlemen, is not about a piece of paper called a diploma or a degree that you receive at the end of your studies. There are many people walking around in this country with so-called diplomas and degrees of which they are not even worthy. They have earned them, alright, but to get them they took a hotchpotch of courses not because they would make them better people or better in their respective professions or fields, but because those courses were regarded as easy and easily passable. And these people forgot very quickly even the things they learned in those "passable courses" because they learned things to memorize and regurgitate them, raw as they found them, when examinations came. They did not read things for knowledge's sake, to keep those things neatly tucked away in those precious pockets of the mind so that they can always be reflected upon again and again.

Those are the people who will not open their mouths to participate in any public debate or policy formulation, for they do not want to reveal their ignorance. So they keep quiet while important debates rage on all around them, content only to boast that they are proud holders of this or that diploma or degree. Such people never come with original ideas of their own, but are forever content to mouth worn-out clichés and commonly-held wisdoms, and are only too happy to go with the tide.

Education, I submit further, is not about money. By all means let us make money, move into beautiful houses in formally whites-only suburbs and drive beautiful cars; but that is merely incidental to education. There are, after all, some people without education who live in more beautiful houses and drive even posher cars. Education, then, should first and foremost empower us to think critically, embolden us to hold and express unpopular views if we believe in their correctness, and make us love education for education's sake and believe in our abilities.

Armed with knowledge, we as a people can face the future with a justified sense of optimism, for it is ours to conquer.

Hearty congratulations, yet again, to the graduands here assembled. Long was the road that you have traversed, but longer still is the road ahead. Education, both formal and informal, never ends. Therefore, gird your loins, forever keep an open mind and study, study, study. For you may do well to recall Alexander Pope's wise words:

*A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us up.*

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, let me leave you with the following anecdotes. Many years and centuries ago, there was an old, wise man who was known for giving wise counsel. Now the man was very old and had not spoken to anybody for quite a long, long time, and yet the people in his village were growing more and more concerned by the day. Some even believed that he would die any time, so they stood around him under the tree where he sat and asked him to say something to them before he died. The old man just looked at them, but said nothing.

Again they begged him. "Please say something," they said; but he just looked at them. And so it went on for a long time, and eventually he moved his dry and parched lips slowly.

Excitement grew. "He is going to speak! He is going to speak!" the people shouted excitedly, calling other villagers to come. The old man spoke, very slowly, and said: "Never be afraid to do what is right. Decide on what you think is right and stick to it." And then he died.

If you remember nothing else that I have said here today, I will be happy if you, ladies and gentlemen, could at the very least remember at all times those pearls of wisdom

which dropped from the old man's lips minutes before his death. For how many people are there among us today who know what is right, but will not do it?

The last anecdote that I want to leave with you is about two young men who lived in a remote village. These young men were intrepid mountaineers, and one day they set about to climb the highest mountain in their area. As they were climbing the mountain, it suddenly became windy and stormy, until one of them gave up and returned to his village. When his fellow villagers asked him about his friend, he replied: "The last time I saw him he was still climbing the mountain, higher and higher. It was windy and heavy rain came down with hailstones, but on and on he went, climbing the mountain."

Now, may the same be said about you, ladies and gentlemen. May it be said about you that you never gave up in the face of any social storms or calamities. Let it not be said that you are the one who went only as far as half the mountain, but turned back when real glory beckoned.

Once again, congratulations to all of you, and may God bless you.

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