

Bridging the Great Divide

“A more tough minded dialogue with the past will reveal how much we have gone through and how far we are capable of going”

The Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare wrote this, thinking of his own nation but I believe it gives us pause for thought on South Africa and its efforts towards building a diverse unified nation. Have we undertaken the “tough minded dialogue with the past” which Osundare writes about in order to reveal how much we have gone through and if not how can we address this challenge?

Recent developments much commented upon in the media, suggest that we have not. When numerous internet and social networking sites contain racial profanities towards whites and blacks, when struggle songs are sung mainly to provoke, it seems to me that we have done far too little to educate our youth and ourselves about the past in a nuanced way so that they understand the contributions and barriers created by all South Africans.

The interesting thing about recent postings on the internet and social networking groups is that they emanate mainly from young South Africans, the so called “born free” generation. The kind of “hate speech” that we commonly hear and see on such social networking groups suggests to me that there is a serious malaise in South Africa that not even the euphoria of the World Cup will be able to overcome. It seems that the anonymity of the internet allows people to say the kinds of things they would never say face to face, and so perhaps it’s a good thing that these comments appear because they make us question ourselves, our commitment to building non-racialism and they prick the dangerous bubble of “rainbowism.” They do not represent a resurgence of racism, but merely a new way of expressing entrenched feelings.

It seems to me that the racial divisions in the country are becoming worse, not better. Most whites have made little or no efforts to address their apartheid past and are rarely, if ever seen at commemorations to mark National Days. Those who have departed for lives abroad all too often run down the country of their birth in an effort to rationalise their moves. Black South Africans are becoming increasingly angry and bitter. The race card is played more and more often, every petty minor misunderstanding is attributed to race so that the term “racist” is in danger of losing its meaning and Nero fiddles while Rome burns.

The myth of “the Rainbow Nation” has long ago lost its currency if indeed it ever had any. To try to turn the 2010 Fifa Football World Cup into a panacea for all of our deep rooted problems and to assume that somehow the glory and enthusiasm around the event will wipe away the schisms experienced in today’s South Africa is surely extremely naïve. The radio commentators calling for us ‘to pull together so that we can have a good World Cup’ have in my mind lost the plot and possibly never even really understood it in the first place.

It was very comfortable for white South Africans when Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu coined the phrase, “the Rainbow Nation”; somehow, magically we were “off the hook” .We have shown since that all too many of us prefer to remain in our behind our high walls making little or no contact with our black fellow countrymen. The rainbow is alas a white rainbow in most, though not all, white households. The level of same status contact between whites and blacks

(for which we must all take responsibility) remains minimal. Recent research undertaken by my organisation shows that the divisions between white and black South Africans are wider than they were ten years ago. There is less communication, trust and support between the races than there was ten years ago. The epithets and racial outpourings from whites and blacks alike on the Internet show us that there is indeed still a long road to travel.

And what of our black youth, those who were not born, or who were children during the struggle? What do they know about their white fellow countrymen? How many authentic friends do they have, who are white, Indian or coloured. Why do they so often stereotype all whites as if there are no whites struggling for involvement in Nation building? What of the Jeremy Cronins, Mary Metcalfes, Ben Turocks and Liz Floyds? Surely we need our leaders at all levels to show us the way in building a non-racial democracy. When did the ANC become a party for Africans only, what happened to the dream of non-racialism which many fought so hard for?

Our constitution is the envy of many countries and yet the current spate of racial mudslinging serves to trash it and draw us away from the noble ideals embedded in it. As our first president, the Honourable Nelson Mandela reminded us, "The Constitution of South Africa speaks of both the past and the future. On the one hand, it is a solemn pact in which we, as South Africans, declare to one another that we shall never permit a repetition of our racist, brutal and repressive past. But it is more than that. It is also a charter for the transformation of our country into one which is truly shared by all of its people - a country which in the fullest sense belongs to all of us, black and white, women and men."

While the present government struggles to overcome the legacies of past inequality and more recent corruption there is a need for us to honour the solemn pact contained in our constitution and to begin to bridge the racial divides which threaten to overwhelm us. We need to teach our children that indeed "all men are equal". We need to speak out boldly against racism in all of its forms and teach our children to do likewise. As parents we need to talk to our young people and understand what they think and give them hope for the future in South Africa whether they are white or black.

Organisations can play their part by developing policies that outlaw racism in their workplaces and by encouraging same status contact across the races. Initiatives to build non-racialism should be encouraged and rewarded and built into Employment Equity planning.

To be a rainbow nation is something to which we should aspire, it is indeed a noble idea but one which requires effort from all South Africans old and young, black and white, abled and differently abled and from all faiths. If we all undertook to reach out to someone who is different to us once a day, greet that person and acknowledge their presence it would be a small beginning which could help us grow into a changed country, one which is genuinely striving for non-racialism. A nation which lives up to its constitution – "a country which in the fullest sense belongs to all of us, black and white, women and men."

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