More conversation and less anger

The discourse around racism needs thoughtful and constructive input, not the anger and intolerance that is leading it today

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WHAT South Africa needs now is more compassion, common sense and conversation, and less of the blind anger and intolerance that is leading us deeper into a racist morass.

Perhaps we need to do what the United Arab Emirates just did appoint a minister of Tolerance.

The debates around racism in South Africa have overstepped so much in recent months that they have degenerated into a witch-hunt that is now counter-productive. That’s no good. #RacismMustFall.

We are now at a place where white people’s every word, every gesture is being scrutinized by a self-appointed thought police for potential whiffs of racism. And in most instances, it seems such tendencies are found by these kangaroo courts and the guilt is brandished in public. There is no defence. Once you have these branded marks, you are like a leper of old.

This leads on the one hand to a hyper-sensitivity, almost a paranoia, among people and institutions that want to avoid these scars of shame at all costs, and on the other hand it leads to some who say: whatever we do, you will condemn us, so go to hell.

In this atmosphere those who wield recklessly the racism issue like a machete, thrive and change the rules of the national discourse.

Learning pieces are published in mainstream publications defending T-shirts proclaiming “Kill all whites” and the movements on two campuses that are mobilising around the slogan “F*ck the whites.” No debate, no attempt at countering these arguments are tolerated and those who try are summarily branded racist or reactionary.

Statements like “don’t police black pain” and “we don’t want to know what whites think and say” are heard regularly on campus and on social media.

This was the climate that recently motivated institutions such as Stellenbosch University to react too quickly and harshly to rumours of racism. In my view, the two “purple face” students got a very raw deal from university management.

We are still waiting for humble apologies by management, the student representative council and the lobby group Open Stellenbosch.

This is an important principle: these two students’ right to dignity and justice ought not to be regarded as any less important than that of any other student just because they were born of white parents. Who would have thought that such a statement needed to be made in 2016 in South Africa?

In principle it is, of course, a good thing that racism is now put under a new, harsher public spotlight. Racism is a cancer that has not been eradicated. It needs to be watched regularly and on campus the mere reference to the term has taken on new meaning.

The broad white reaction that this is yesterday’s business and that we should rather focus on development and good governance is myopic and inappropriate.

But the aim of the campaign against racism must surely be the destruction of racism and not an excuse for legitimising other forms of prejudice and racial hatred or the crude public expression of personal frustrations. Anger for the sake of anger is destructive; there has to be a desire for a better society on the other side of anger.

I have little doubt that we wouldn’t have had this heated debate about racism now if we had made more significant progress towards an equal society and if black South Africans had a more substantial share in the economy.

The problem is thus as much or more about the economy and the structure of society as it is about white attitudes and utterances. It must surely follow that this structural problem should be the primary focus rather than the alienation and demonisation of an entire population group.

White South Africans obviously have an important role to play in the struggle for equality, but it is equally obvious that those in power since 1994 who have squandered our resources have to be confronted head on.

The now popular argument that racism equals prejudice plus power and black people thus can’t be racist is too simplistic and in my view often used as an excuse for bigotry. In any case, how is racial hatred and intolerance a lesser evil than straightforward racism?

I find intolerant and dishonest that so many of the campaigners act as if black South Africans still have no power or influence and are still oppressed as they were before 1994.

I often hear the complaint that black voices aren’t heard, but I hear this mostly from black people who dominate the public debate and media.

I wonder how many people have considered that calling white South Africans unwanted visitors in the country of their birth and their ancestors’ birth is a form of racism as hurtful, damaging and offensive as anything else.—News24