When transformation is a human right

COUNCILLOR MPHOTO PARKS TAU

This is as too few recognise out loud that we are discussing race, but in fact are talking about apartheid legacy forms of exclusion to do with the political economy, access and empowerment.

Let us start by insisting that there is an important distinction between a narrow anti-white or anti-black chauvinism, which some might call racism, and the deeply structural, racialised results of a set of social and economic conditions.

These are substantially the long shadow of deliberate apartheid social engineering.

This spans generations across the colonial and apartheid era – a shadow we only began to substantially confront at the dawn of liberation in 1994.

It is the latter that is now commonly understood as the racism that is the subject of popular rage.

I concur with the brilliant young scholar and author Lovelyn Nqakula, who spoke to our present complexity – and its historical roots – with such eloquence before the convocation of the University of Stellenbosch earlier this year.

People are not interested in having their anger placated or curbed,” Lovelyn said as she provocatively rendered her offering in fluent English and Afrikaans.

This approach, very much warranted in the current tense racial atmosphere in South Africa, was a far-from-silent rebuke of language as a tool of exclusion.

Lovelyn, and a full cast of more thoughtful commentators on the issue of race, all eventually arrive at the point where race as a social construct and a marker of social and economic exclusion interwork.

The conversation turns – inevitably and appropriately – to the living conditions of black Africans and other, continuously and systematically victimised groups.

At this point that we – the citizens – must seize the momentum and recognise that when we call for the fall of racism in the South Africa of 2016, we are seeking a theory and practice of meaningful social change for those who have the odds stacked against them.

To change the appalling legacies of apartheid systems that created this reality, you need 1 – the government, the private sector and civil movements – must support and drive systemic change.

This is the basis of the spatial, social and economic transformation agenda that the City of Joburg is leading.

The shadow cast by the colonial era, and deepened by the former Group Areas Act, the Native Laws Amendment Act and the Bantu Education Act – has left our city, let alone our country, with major deficits in economic development.

This is particularly the case in business ownership among the people of colour – which demands a radical developmental approach to achieve socio-economic transformation in our lifetime.

The answer is not to dispossess one elite and enrich another, but to collaborate to radically transform the social and economic landscape of the city.

The City of Joburg’s co-production programme, JozizilWork, partners community-based entities to deliver municipal services.

The programme stands as an example to the private sector of how real, bottom-of-the-pyramid enterprise development can work.

We are using JozizilWork, which has empowered more than 1 100 community-based entities, as a template to establish more micro-enterprise and micro-franchise opportunities for young people through the Vulindlela e Klooi programme – a partnership with civil and corporate organisations.

Another element of the Vulindlela e Klooi programme is the Massive Open Online Varsity (MOOV) centres in public libraries across Joburg. These are designed to break down barriers to opportunities by creating access to free smart education.

This is certainly a 21st century learning tool that is set to help our people escape the long shadow of the Bantu Education Act, and the wider deficits of a half-century of race-based social engineering.

The deepest part of apartheid’s long shadow has been the spatial design of our cities – the worst of which was brought by the Group Areas Act and the Native Laws Amendment Act.

For six decades, we have done Hendrik Verwoerd’s bidding, warehousing the poor on cheap land at the edges of the city – far from existing economies they can attach to.

This is a failed policy that the City of Joburg has deliberately moved away from with the Corridors of Freedom. The spatial redistribution programme seeks to restitch the city and bring people closer to economic opportunities.

The city is not seeking social change to build a system of racial preference. Quite the opposite.

We must confront a past that chose the development of our society; we must dismantle the very machinery that perpetuates basic human rights violations.

The practical question of how we do so is being actively explored as we lead the country’s fair-city movement towards a new, truly post-apartheid reality.

On that note, I urge all those who embrace the UN proclamation – rather than the worst of 1988 – to join us.