

Speech by Prof H Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Stellenbosch University

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One-day Conference on Social Cohesion

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, Alderman Swartz, Dr Mamphela Ramphele; Father Michael Lapsley, community and religious leaders, everyone present here today

I have noted the focus on education in the theme of my address at this occasion -- *Fanning the flames of hope in Education* – but with your indulgence I would like to cast my net a little wider in order to try and make a meaningful contribution to today’s discourse and discussions -- also given the fact that I am at a bit of a disadvantage in speaking after formidable thinkers such as Dr Ramphele and Father Lapsley.

I think everyone will agree that we are far from a cohesive society, sad as it may be. One only has to page through our newspapers to realize that South Africa has moved from the miracle of 1994 to a society that needs a miracle to see our democracy survive and thrive.

It is not my intention to dwell on the past, but I think it is imperative to acknowledge (in the words of historians) that we can only build a future on our past; we can only move forward if we know where we came from. The problem is, however, that our past is not an open book lending itself to a roadmap for the future. I use the word “build” because working on social cohesion is like building a house. To build a house you first dig into the soil. Then you realize that in the imperfect trench you need to lay a foundation.

We did this in the TRC. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has pointed out in their report, and I quote: “The past , it has been said, is another country. The way its stories are told and the way they are heard changes as the years go by. The spotlight gyrates, exposing old lies and illuminating new truths. As a fuller picture emerges, a new piece of the jigsaw puzzle of our past settles into place.

“The report of the Commission will now take its place in the historical landscape of which future generations will try to make sense – searching

for the clues that lead, endlessly, to a truth that will, in the very nature of things, never be fully revealed.”

At best we are thus trying to build a new South Africa on the imperfect truth and an incomplete picture of our past. It is not the best of trenches to work from in building unity and one nationhood. The first fifteen years of freedom and liberation in our country has been very shaky. Problems abound on all terrains and spheres of our society. The reason? Some among us are making a fundamental mistake: they keep on seeking the perfect truth about our past, but by the nature of things, as the TRC pointed out, will never be fully revealed. So we do the next best thing – we work with half-truths.

Today, fifteen years into our democracy, we are still battling to come to grips with the true essence of freedom en liberty. We lay claim to liberty with very little regard for accountability; to our constitutional rights but give no consideration to the responsibility that it brings; and any notion of critical citizenship is thwarted by intolerance towards the rights and freedoms of others.

Working on social cohesion requires a much more perfect and solid foundation. Fortunately we have that in our liberal and progressive Constitution and our Bill of Rights. It reminds us that no right is absolute, no freedom limitless, and that we can only live our rights if we allow others exactly the same rights, freedoms and privileges that we claim for ourselves.

Out of the imperfect trenches we have laid a solid foundation in the Constitution and Bill of Rights – it is also the foundation for our common and shared future. Something that you and I will learn to stand for even though the authorities may be against such a stance.

We have made the imperfect trenches, laid the solid foundation of our Constitution and Bill of Rights. We have now proceeded

to build the house, but somehow, the house lacks character. The walls are bare and the rooms display an atmosphere of harshness and despair. What is missing is the warmth of shared values.

In a study done by Prof Hennie Kotzé and Ms Cindy Lee Steenekamp of the Centre for International and Comparative Politics at our University, published in February of this year (2009) – Values and Democracy in South Africa: Comparing Elite and Public Values – the researchers noted striking features in the levels of tolerance and trust in our society. These two values are imperatives for the survival of our young democracy. They surveyed opinion leaders as well the general public. It makes an interesting picture. Because sometimes the values converge at other times it separate.

Let's start with tolerance: Tolerance is an essential ingredient of democratic politics. This is especially important in a country like South Africa with its deep societal divisions where (in the words of JL Gibson) democracies may risk becoming majority tyrannies.

More specifically, political tolerance is an instrument that helps to maintain a stable democratic regime. According to Political Scientist, Prof Amanda Gouws, political tolerance is directly related to how willing people are to put up with their opponents. It entails the willingness to extend civil liberties to adversaries. It implies procedural fairness – a commitment to the rules of the game and willingness to apply them equally. Tolerance, she says, is the willingness to extend freedoms to those who are different: And may I add, those who talk about different things, who own different things and who have different needs.

But, tolerance is consistently related to perceptions of threat. In other words “the greater the perceived threat from others, the more likely a person is to be intolerant of the group”.

The study showed high levels of intolerance among opinion leaders and the general public toward “outsider groups” such as immigrants or foreign workers ... and interestingly, they tend to agree that “when jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to South African people over immigrants (a fear that may be associated with a loss of economic opportunities).

Significant levels of intolerance were also noted among the general public towards having people of other religions or other races as neighbours or having a person with HIV living next to them.

However, it is all not only doom and gloom. What is striking, though, is that the general public showed far more tolerance in 2009 to those adhering to a different religion and to those living with HIV than in a study done in 2001; likewise they are more tolerant of people of a different race group than in 2006.

The study noted rapidly decreasing levels of intolerance among the general public since 2001 and this is an encouraging sign for social cohesion.

What it says, is that we are on our way, but not there yet. It seems that intolerance is busy receding, but that we still have a long way to go as far as political tolerance is concerned.

Let's turn to trust levels, as expounded by this research project.

Trust is an important aspect of a democracy since people "do not rule directly but by depositing their trust with delegates and institutions that bear responsibility for aggregating the interests and preferences of the people".

The study shows that although the opinion leaders from various sectors showed high levels of trust across a few variables such as trust in the people from their families, other nationalities or religious groups; the general public shows far lower levels of trust than the leaders. Less than 50% do not trust people of another nationality 'very much or at all'. More than half the population (50,7%) indicated that they do not trust people of a different race 'very much or at all'. The researchers noted that it is worrisome that after more than 15 years of democratic rule, the public place higher levels of trust in people of a another nationality than in people of a different race. Thus, I am more tolerant of your type, but I don't trust you yet.

The study postulate that a 'minimal form of trust is needed before tolerance is possible, that tolerance makes a deeper form of trust easier, and that deeper trust can lead to more robust form of tolerance. To become established, trust and tolerance must feed on each other in a **virtuous** cycle'.

It stands to reason that all of us will have to work harder on re-establishing tolerance and trust among all our people and communities – extending across the barriers of class, race, religion and nationality. What is required now is a sustained and concerted effort of bridging into other communities; inviting the foreign “others” in, breaking down the barriers of racial stereotypes and prejudices and finding ways of doing things together for the benefit of the common good. It is only through this bridging that we can start laying a new and solid foundation for the social cohesive society that has been escaping us for the last 15 years.

But in line with my metaphor, every house needs a roof. And this is provided by the confidence in our institutions.

Institutions such as the legal system, police and civil service depend heavily upon its ability to solve the problems they are designed to address. Their performance and effectiveness are of the utmost importance in demonstrating the notion of a government for the people – based on fairness, justice and equality. Failure by these institutions to perform and/or any notion of political bias will naturally fuel discord and distrust. The implication for social cohesion is clear, and I think I do not need to belabor this point.

Although the roof completes the house, it does not yet make it a home! Social cohesion turns the house into a home. Social cohesion is thus the glue that binds the people so that all of them would call the same place, home. Home is where they share warmth, love, calamities, challenges, loss and laughter.

The Constitution says South Africa is our house. Question is, how do we make it our home? Our challenge in higher education is to do research about the strength of the glue that binds us together as a family and makes this house a home to all of us -- a home with character.

A while ago, Mr Thabo Mbeki, our ex-president, spoke of a country with two nations – one white and rich and the other black and poor. I think he was wrong, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu pointed out in the first volume of the TRC report: “The past is another country”. And Allister Sparks in turn speaks in his book about “ Tomorrow is another country”. Essentially we are thus stuck between the country of the past and the country of the future – two different countries altogether.

If we as a society can succeed in learning to live our hard earned democracy, by building the levels of tolerance and trust among our people as well as re-establishing confidence in our institutions, we will have laid a solid foundation for a more social cohesive society and we can walk together toward a new horizon of hope, to the country of tomorrow that is beckoning. To complete the picture the Education and Church sectors need to strengthen these efforts by producing moral and ethical leaders.

The kind of leaders that is so aptly described in a poem by William Ayot:

It is called: **The Contract: a Word from the Led**

And in the end we will follow them

Not because we are paid,

Not because we see some advantage,

Not because of the things they have accomplished,

Not even because of the dreams they dream,

But, simply because of who they are;

The man, the woman, the leader, the boss ...

Standing up there when the waves hit the rock,

Passing our faith and confidence like life jackets,

Knowing the currents, holding the doubts,

Imagining the delights and terror of every landfall:

Captain, pirate and parent, by turns,

The bearer of our countless hopes and expectations,

We give them our trust

We give them our effort,

What we ask in return, is that they stay true.

THANK YOU.