

# Address by President Nelson Mandela on the occasion of his acceptance of an honorary doctorate of the University of Stellenbosch

25 October 1996, Stellenbosch

*Speech originally delivered in Afrikaans*

Mister Chancellor;  
Mister Vice-Chancellor;  
Members of the University;  
Honoured Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the Rector has noted in his address of commendation, quite a few honorary awards have been bestowed upon me by reason of my present and previous offices. Understandably, therefore, people may suspect that speaking some words of appreciation on such occasions tends in the course of time to become a mere gesture of courtesy. I want to assure you, however, that I am deeply touched every time, not merely by the honour done to me, but above all by the warm affection towards me that such acts speak of so eloquently. Tonight is no exception; and I thank you.

It would be disingenuous of me to pretend that I was not deeply aware of the special historical symbolism of this occasion.

From the ranks of this University's alumni came each of the Prime Ministers who governed white-dominated South Africa in the era between the two Bothas. This University was the leading intellectual home of Afrikaner Nationalism. It was from this University that Apartheid received a great deal of its theoretical justification.

This institution has left its unmistakable imprint on our country's troubled history - a history whose scars still show.

Tonight you are receiving me with hospitality and warmth as the head of state of a democratic South Africa. Tonight this one-time cradle of Afrikaner Nationalism and white domination is honouring a person who for decades was looked upon as an arch-enemy of that same order. Tonight an institution that sought to give theoretical justification to racial separation and discrimination is conferring an honorary degree on someone who has spent very nearly a lifetime fighting for non-racism.

This occasion says much more about South Africa and South Africans than about the individual to whom the degree is being awarded. This occasion is testimony to the fact that we South Africans have struck out on the road of building a joint future, that we are in the process of breaking down the divisive bulwarks of the past and building up a new nation - united in all its rich diversity.

And for that I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

On this road of change and transformation an enormous amount remains to be done - in the country in general and certainly also here at the University of Stellenbosch in particular. What the situation requires of us, on the one hand, is to give due recognition for such changes as have taken place; on the other hand, it also requires us to acknowledge that both the rate and the scope of change still leave quite a lot to be desired.

With your leave I am going to misuse a little this occasion of the conferment of an honorary degree by saying a few words about some aspects of the matter.

Last week saw an event of the greatest significance that originated right here in Stellenbosch. This was when the Stellenbosch Presbytery of the Dutch Reformed Church confessed before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission a collective share in the systematic injustice of our past. Neither the message this conveyed, nor the impact this will make on the process of reconciliation, is to be underestimated.

The perception which many have that the Afrikaner community is the unilateral recipient in the process of reconciliation will be powerfully countered by acts such as that of the Stellenbosch Presbytery. One cannot but wish that Afrikaners over a wider front will engage in reconciliatory dialogue with fellow South Africans in the same way.

No-one is asking for Afrikaners to be reviled; nor does anyone desire Afrikaners to humiliate themselves collectively in public. What no-one can deny, however, is that Apartheid committed a terrible injustice to this country and its inhabitants, and that this was something in which Afrikaners had a central and substantial part.

The Stellenbosch Presbytery, in doing what it did, demonstrated greatness of spirit - and it did so, not acting in a state of humiliation, but acting in a spirit of humility! It is this kind of meekness and generosity of spirit which makes us receptive to our common humanity, and enables us to clasp hands each with the others and face the future together, aware of our fallibility and intent therefore on avoiding any repetition of such injustice.

What the Stellenbosch Presbytery did reminds us also of a narrow but significant current in the history of the Afrikaners and of this University which is often quite lost sight of and, indeed, passed over in silence. After all, is it not from this same University of Stellenbosch that there arose courageous voices of warning against and opposition to the doctrine of Apartheid? Voices such as those of a B. B. Keet, a Ben Marais, a Johan Degenaar, an Andr? Hugo, an Andr? du Toit, and others as well? In the affirmation of that current within your history lies the greatest hope, not only for yourselves, but for the whole of South Africa.

It is also in that kind of Afrikaans voice - a voice that is open to the rest of society, a voice that reaches out to the rest of society - that the case for Afrikaans's role and place as a scholarly and scientific medium can be most rewardingly presented.

My position on and attitude to Afrikaans have been expressed so often that surely there is no need to repeat them here. In common with all languages, no doubt, Afrikaans has to allot the credit or blame for its particular history of growth to the power relations in society. For all that, the fact of the matter is that Afrikaans is highly developed as a scholarly and scientific language. And as the Commission for Higher Education also mentions in its report: Afrikaans as a language of scholarship and science is a national resource.

The real issue therefore is not the extermination or preservation of Afrikaans as an academic medium. Rather, the question is this: amongst ourselves, how are we to negotiate a dispensation for the South African university system that meets the following three criteria? Firstly, that a milieu should be created and maintained for Afrikaans to continue growing as a language of scholarship and science. At the same time, that non-speakers of Afrikaans should not be unjustly deprived of access within the system. And moreover, that the use and development of no single language medium should - either intentionally or unintentionally - be made the basis for the furtherance of racial, ethnic or narrowly cultural separation.

Let me put it to you simply and bluntly: within a system comprising more than twenty universities, surely it must be possible to reach an accommodation to the effect that there will be at least one university whose main tasks will include that of seeing to the sustained development of Afrikaans as an academic medium.

How that institution is to accommodate languages other than Afrikaans is one of the details that can be settled through a process of negotiation. If we could manage to resolve the major political conflicts through negotiation, then surely the country's men and women of learning need not view a matter of this nature as posing some insuperable obstacle.

If those who care for Afrikaans conducted this dialogue in the spirit of openness and with the generosity of mind which we spoke of earlier, the case for Afrikaans would be that much stronger. By the same token, the whole situation would become that much easier for those of us who are willing to try and oblige the advocates of Afrikaans.

I would like to close with a quotation from a poem by Breyten Breytenbach in which he uses the word "Afrikaans" in the broad sense of "characteristic of Africa". The poem, in the form of a letter to Afrikanerdom, dates from the dark years of Apartheid:

net die hoop dan, barse broer,  
dat jy wat te klein was om op te neem  
tog iewers in ons groot land nog opneembaar is.  
my broer, my dor, verlate broer:  
iets wens dat mens weer in jou groei,  
dat alles groots, Afrikaans gaan word  
en jy ook in mensbruin mense bloei.

[Breytenbach's Afrikaans wording may be roughly Englished as follows:

Just hoping then, harsh brother,  
that you who've been too small to be absorbed  
yet are absorbable still somewhere in our vast land.  
My brother, my arid and forsaken brother,  
a wish: for human nature to grow back in you,  
for everything to come out grand and African,  
for you to flower in humanly brown humans, too.

- W.K.W.]

In the time since the writing of this Breytenbach poem, there has been many a change in South Africa. It still remains my wish, though, that we will all be absorbed together in this vast land. And that Afrikaans institutions and Afrikaans people will never again be surly and stand-offish and apart but, rather, that they will be an interwoven part of what we are newly creating.

It is in the knowledge that this University has a large part to play in making that wish come true, that I accept the honour of being made an alumnus of the University of Stellenbosch.

I thank you.