

Opening address by Prof H Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, at the Winelands Conference on Public Leadership for Added Citizen Value, 17 March 2010

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Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to welcome all of you here to the 12<sup>th</sup> Winelands Conference of Stellenbosch University's School of Public Management and Planning.

### LEADERS TO THANK AND BLAME?

When this series of conferences was initiated back in 1987, the globe was still in the grip of the Cold War, and South Africa was still locked in apartheid. Today – 23 years and 11 Winelands Conferences later – we live in a world and a country radically made over.

To paraphrase the old Boland Bank commercial – who do we have to thank? Our leaders. The good ones.

Well, at least in part.

Of course, the converse is also true. Everything that is wrong with this “new world order” and “new South Africa” can be blamed on our leaders – the bad ones.

Or can it?

### CONTEXT OF LEADERSHIP

Let's look at the context within which public leadership plays itself out. Here are a few examples of global problems:

- Massive poverty and widespread inequality: As pointed out in a 2006 United Nations (UN) research paper (by Branco Milanovic), the wealthiest 10% of the world's population receive half the total income, and the poorest 10% just 0,7%. That means the richest earn as much in 48 hours as the poorest earn in a year;
- The recent global financial crisis exposed bad management practices and selfish, immoral decisions by high-flying business leaders;
- Political and military conflicts continue to exact a high toll – for example, the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which followed the 9/11 attacks in the US; and
- The planet is under threat from global warming, climate change and ecological degradation due to unchecked human consumption.

In this part of the Global Village, we are not immune to these problems, but in addition we have a few bugs of our own:

- “Tenderpreneurs”: Individuals who exploit their ties with the ruling party to get lucrative government contracts;
- Fat cats in government and the public service who get huge salaries and golden handshakes – which they spend on expensive cars and mansions – without doing their jobs properly;
- Corrupt public servants who steal from the state coffers – money exacted from citizens in the form of taxes, which are supposed to be used for the good of all in society;
- Officials who allow public services to deteriorate – for example, ailing health facilities, an increasingly potholed road network, and municipal water purification and sewerage works that are collapsing;
- Law enforcement agencies that seem unable to curb our unacceptably high crime rate.

### LACK OF SERVICE DELIVERY

Little wonder then that we are experiencing what has become known as “service delivery protests” at an ever increasing rate. Hardly a day goes by without angry residents taking to the streets somewhere to reject poorly built low-cost housing, demand better education, and so on. It is ironic that the socio-political space occupied by anti-apartheid protests under the previous regime is now filled by service delivery protests.

### WHAT WENT WRONG?

As I have said before, South Africa has gone from the miracle nation to a nation that needs a miracle to make our hard earned democracy work. What went wrong?

I don’t claim to have the answers, but I find it useful to look at the ethical challenges we face as a nation and the fact that our leaders seem ill-equipped to deal with them. The necessary ethical reflection among those in positions of leadership seems to be lacking, not to mention the necessary climate for ethical decision-making in organisations.

### CHANGE AND CRISIS

The notion of leadership has become a major theme of discussion – not only in the political world, but also in the world of business and education. One can hardly pass through a bookshop without spotting yet another new book on leadership. This is not surprising. In a fast-changing world, people will necessarily focus on what is required to turn their hopes and dreams into reality.

It is also a time of crisis, to which this fair province, the Western Cape, is not immune. Leadership battles, factionalism and divisions are paralysing service delivery, which means that massive apartheid legacies remain uncorrected.

Our leaders will do well to pay heed to the following lyrics from the beautiful choral music of the late Danish-American composer, Morten Lauridsen:

*“Contre qui, rose?*

*“Against whom, rose, have you assumed these thorns?*

*From whom does it protect you, this exaggerated defence?”*

### WESTERN CAPE

The Western Cape has all the features of the rose: the most beautiful flower, but it has some scary thorns.

What Lauridsen is saying, is that thorns are defences deployed to ward off enemies. The rose assumes there is a war in the environment, so it comes prepared.

The stinging political battles in the Western Cape makes me feel we think of ourselves as under perpetual attack from our enemies. The reality is that the assumption is often wrong. The thorns hurt the very ones who love the rose, who reach out to it. The assumption of war shuts out those who could have been allies in a common cause.

We need leaders who understand the nature and the behaviour of a province that acts like a rose. We are searching for leaders who can deal with communities who feel themselves forever under attack and forever beleaguered and marginalised.

### UNIVERSITIES

As we think about leadership, we should recognise that universities as knowledge institutions are key in providing research and analysis of the challenges of society. In order to equip leaders with the competencies they need, there is need for an academic base.

At Stellenbosch University, we have been engaged in a process of becoming significantly different and significantly better – different from our past, and better able to help meet the needs of the people of our country and continent.

We call this our pedagogy of hope, which is aimed at doing science for society. By aligning our considerable expertise and renowned academic excellence with the international development agenda, we want to become more relevant to society, in particular the poorest people.

In our core activities as an academic institution, we want to help:

1. eradicate poverty and related conditions.

We also want to promote:

2. human dignity and health;
3. democracy and human rights; as well as
4. peace and security.

And we want to:

5. balance sustainable use of natural resources with the need for a competitive industry.

We have come up with a range of trans-disciplinary projects that are embedded in the academic core functions of teaching and learning, research and community involvement, but are also aimed at changing the world. In this way we want to become a centre of hope in Africa, and help to counter the pervasive pessimism about our continent.

#### STELLENBOSCH SCHOOL OF PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

The work done by the host of this conference, the Stellenbosch School of Public Leadership, helps our university make a positive contribution to effective and ethical public leadership for good governance and sustainability in South Africa, Africa and globally.

The School is involved, inter alia, with:

- Continuous teaching, reaching large numbers of public leaders across South Africa and globally;
- Basic and applied research, policy advice and consultancy to all spheres of government in South Africa, and also increasingly in Africa and internationally;
- Building capacity in good governance by supporting such initiatives as:
  - The African Democratic Leadership Academy;
  - The Sustainability Institute; and
  - An envisaged Centre for Anti Corruption, which is in the process of being established.

By the way, I think the proposed name change would be in order. “School of Public Leadership” is much punchier than “School of Public Management and Planning”.

## LEADERSHIP FOR WHOM?

I started out by saying that we can only *partly* attribute positive developments in the world to leaders. It would be a mistake to consider citizens mindless followers. As we know from the history of the anti-apartheid struggle in this country, the seemingly impossible can be achieved when ordinary people stand together for a common cause.

When leadership is provided by the masses, the leaders – in effect – become the followers. All they have to do is execute the mandate given to them by the people. If they don't, they are breaking the social contract underpinning the institution of democracy.

I also said at the beginning that we can't blame everything that is wrong in the world on bad leaders. Democracy empowers citizens to choose their government, and to use civil freedoms to pressurise their representatives to fulfil their duties.

The following quotation attributed to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century French philosopher Joseph de Maistre is well known: "Every nation has the government it deserves".

The challenge facing those in positions of public leadership is to give the people what they deserve – a better life.

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