

Speech at the installation of Dr Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert as Chancellor of Stellenbosch University

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Minister Naledi Pandor; Chair of Council, Dr Paul Cluver, and respected members of University Council; representatives of other institutions of higher education; dignitaries; colleagues; ladies and gentlemen good evening and welcome to the installation ceremony of Dr Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert as the new Chancellor of our University.

In my installation speech fifteen months ago I said that I was proud to take over the position of Rector of the University at a point in time when both our University and our country faced many challenges. I regard this as another one of those moments. The installation of Dr Van Zyl Slabbert as the new Chancellor of the University is an indication of our University as an institution moving with the demands of the time as an active and relevant role player in forming and shaping the future of our country – student by student.

Stellenbosch is known for producing leaders who have had a formative influence on the course of history in this country in the most divergent ways. By now we are overly aware that Stellenbosch is known as the cradle of apartheid – for understandable reasons – and I am on record as saying that no excuse or apology will undo the damage that apartheid has done to our country and its people.

But Stellenbosch is also known for the progressive thinkers and alternative voices that it has given rise to – people who did not mindlessly follow twisted ideologies but rather represented the voice of the wronged and the social conscience under suppressive circumstances. Many were rejected and vilified. They were ostracised and pushed to the periphery of society, at times ridiculed, made out to be proclaimers of heresy; many were incarcerated, while others had to pass their time under house arrest. But the spirit of their liberal thinking and their belief in social and political justice could never be locked up between the four walls of a jail cell. This is the spirit of Stellenbosch that should be celebrated, pampered and immortalised. And we are currently hard at work to do exactly that.

It is in this spirit that I wish to welcome you today to the installation of one of the other voices of Stellenbosch. When he was a student and lecturer here, Dr Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert voiced his displeasure and dissatisfaction with a government and political order that he experienced as being unacceptable. Most of you are familiar with his later endeavours that went against the stream and his political activism, and in a few minutes I will say a bit more about his illustrious career.

But first I want to pause for a moment and consider a few facets of Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, the man, in the context of the other voices of Stellenbosch. In my mind there are a few qualities that set him apart:

- His outspokenness in the face of injustice. Throughout his life Dr Slabbert has been known as a man who is willing to risk all for his beliefs. During his student years at Stellenbosch University he became interested in politics and thus rejected the ideology of Apartheid. In order to make a difference at student level, he ran for a position on the Students' Representative Council (SRC), but was not elected as his politics was considered too liberal. Years later, at the height of his political career, Dr Slabbert once again stood up for his beliefs and resigned from Parliament in 1986, citing that "it had become irrelevant" in the context of the then-South African society.
- A second quality is his unwavering belief in dialogue and honest discussion between authentic partners. In 1987, just a year after he declared Parliament irrelevant, he made the groundbreaking and historic journey to Dakar, Senegal, with a group of predominantly Afrikaner politicians, academics and business professionals to engage with the then banned African National Congress (ANC). This conference, which became known as the Dakar Conference, was organised by Dr Slabbert and Dr Alex Boraine under the auspices of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa) of which Dr Slabbert was a founder member. This is the one dialogue with the so called enemy that captured the imagination and the newspaper headlines. But there were others that took place under a veil of secrecy in the townships and squatter camps, and far beyond our borders in Ghana, Nigeria, Lusaka, Harare and Burkina Faso.
- A further quality is his conviction to not only do things right, but to do the right thing with integrity – at the expense of popularity. One does not need a vivid imagination to realise what implications initiatives such as the Dakar talks held for him as a liberal Afrikaner. But, despite this, he is now regarded as the one figure who had a lasting influence and impact on Afrikaner politics and thinking in the establishment of a peaceful political transition to a government of national unity and the democracy that following in 1994.

In summary, one could say that he lives the principle of critical citizenship and in that regard he embodies a cornerstone of the endeavour of Stellenbosch University to produce students that can serve our growing democracy and the challenges of our economy to the best of their abilities.

This brings me to the challenges facing Stellenbosch University at the current juncture. Although the position of Chancellor is a ceremonial one, I envisage a

significant role for him in the successful repositioning of the University through which we wish to raise the academic excellence and international stature of the University, as well as in the expansion of the diversity profile for it to become a multicultural institution characterised by its focus on non-racialism, and free from ethnicity and sexism. This is what the Strategic Framework of 2000 demands of us, and this mandate was reconfirmed by the University Council earlier this year.

The University will be confronted by significant challenges on this path. I have on many occasions already pointed to the challenges of relevance, significance and greater accessibility for all within the context of our Vision 2012. I would like to highlight one important challenge:

The current rate of participation in Higher Education by Afrikaans-speaking coloured people and by black people is generally tragic. The discrepancy between the participation rate of white Afrikaans-speaking people and coloured Afrikaans-speaking people is frightening. On the basis of the latest census figures, the participation rate of Afrikaans-speaking coloured people in Higher Education is 4,5%, while the rate for white Afrikaans-speaking people is close on 51%. The participation rate of English-speaking white people is in the region of 72% and that of African Blacks is 11%. This is a disturbing picture for our growing economy and poses particular challenges to all our Universities, but to Stellenbosch in particular.

It necessarily places tremendous pressure on the entire education chain – from primary education through secondary schools to tertiary education. Stellenbosch University is working hard at addressing these challenges and a number of development programmes are already in place on different levels. Our Chancellor, in his personal capacity, is involved in divergent development initiatives and it simply makes sense that we identify our synergies in our endeavour to address some of our critical educational and development needs.

In this manner, the long association of Dr Slabbert with the University will acquire a new dimension. Dr Slabbert has a long and illustrious association with Stellenbosch University. As a conscientious student he obtained four degrees – a BA degree in 1961, a BAHons (cum laude) in 1962, a Master of Arts (cum laude) in 1964 and a doctorate in Philosophy in 1967 – from this institution. During his time at the University he also served as residence head of the men's residences Majuba and Simonsberg – but he is a proud and unmistakable Wilgenhoffer.

He has held various teaching positions at Stellenbosch University as well as the universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Rhodes. In 1972 and 1973 he was Professor and Head of the Sociology Department at the University of the Witwatersrand.

A year later he became a member of the Progressive Party. In the same year Dr Slabbert was nominated to stand for Rondebosch in the general election and

triumphed over the National Party (NP) candidate by 1 600 votes. In 1979 he took over from Colin Eglin as the leader of the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), becoming the youngest leader of the official opposition in the country's history. During the years 1979 to 1986, while at the helm of the party he managed to significantly influence the party ideology. He also served as Chairman of its Constitutional Committee.

Dr Slabbert is the author of several books, including a book he wrote with Professor D. Welsh called *South Africa's Options: Strategies for Sharing Power* (1979) as well as *The Last White Parliament* (1986), *The Quest for Democracy* (1992), *Afrikaner Afrikaan* (1999), *The System and the Struggle* (1990) and *The Other Side of History* (2006).

He is a recipient of the Abe Bailey Travel Scholarship, was a research fellow at the Bergstraesser Institute for Social Research in Freiburg, Germany (then West Germany) in 1977 and received the American Cultural Exchange Scholarship. In 1982 he was a visiting fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Five years later he was chosen as the Tanner Lecturer at the Brasenose College of Oxford. He is also a former visiting fellow of the All Souls College of Oxford.

After his formal retirement from politics Dr Slabbert became a full-time political analyst and consultant for various companies. In 1993 he established the Open Society Foundation for Southern Africa (OSFSA) and in 1995 the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) came into being. He is currently the non-executive chairperson of Caxton & CTP Publishers and Printers (Ltd) as well as Adcorp (Pty) Ltd, both listed companies. He also serves on the board of directors of FirstRand Ltd.

Dr Slabbert has been awarded honorary doctorates from the Simon Fraser University in Canada, as well as the University of the Free State and the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

In 2003 Dr Slabbert returned to his *alma mater*, this time as the Chairman of a panel which had been assigned to investigate the so-called "vigilante attacks" by students on students. A 25-page report was released citing that "it was a matter of urgency that residents and campus culture be placed on a new footing" and that what was considered student fun was in conflict with the Constitution and Bill of Human Rights.

His Chancellorship of SU represents a homecoming for Dr Van Zyl Slabbert and we are looking forward to a long and fruitful relationship characterised by constructive engagement in the interest of the pressing educational needs of our country. I guess, all that remains to be said is: "Welcome home, Dr Slabbert".