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GRADUATION ADDRESS : UNIVERSITY OF WITWATERSRAND

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Mr. Chancellor, post apartheid, non-racial South Africa has become an extremely popular crest-riding phrase on everybody's lips currently. It is a concept that has become heavily sloganized and like all slogans few people sit back to reflect on its precise meaning; to give it content; to analyze what it would translate into, come the day for which, I believe, most of us in here are yearning.

So, for the purpose of my address to your graduands and others here tonight I have elected to look at what a non-racial South Africa is likely to translate into. Are those of us who say we are committed to a non-racial South Africa talking about the same thing or are we in fact talking at cross-purposes? Are we operating on the same or different conceptual frequencies?

My concern for a clear operational definition of this magic word is of more than just flitting academic interest because of the nature of my work and as someone who, like many of you, is irrevocably committed to, and resolutely working towards, the realization and actualization of a dream, a fervent wish to see the dismantlement of the burden of apartheid and its replacement with an equitable and just non-racial political dispensation.

democratic

In order to find some answers to my self-imposed questions regarding the concept 'non-racial' and its variant "non-racist" in the post-apartheid context, I could not resist the temptation to investigate the use of these concepts which are so crucial to our understanding of the future South Africa. This provided me with an excuse for brusing up my rapidly rusting research skills.

Let me at the outset admit freely that for the high-powered empirical analyst the investigation would not qualify for a doctoral degree, not even a masters. The thrust of the investigation was to try and identify trends and tendencies, without laying claim to conclusiveness or completeness. Some might even assert that the investigation is limping with incompleteness. The approach was more qualitative than quantitative. The findings are only coarse pointers. The academic refinements are left to the relevant academics.

Coarse

x For the purpose of that brief investigation, whose tentative findings I would like to share with you, it is instructive to know that my subjects included articulate pupils and students from predominantly white schools and universities, including this university. They were compared with their contemporaries at black secondary schools and universities. The interview technique was used. The main purpose was to find out how the groups understand 'non-racial' in the South African context. I extracted only the salient elements of their responses.

Both groups expressed themselves firmly in favour of the need for a changed, non-racial, apartheid-free South Africa. Here there was a definite convergence in the thinking of the two groups.

The primary concern of the white group was on preparing themselves educationally in order to operate effectively in post-apartheid South Africa. Hence their strongly expressed desire to study hard and acquire appropriate knowledge and skills.

Consistent with their expressed desire to acquire relevant knowledge and skills, the white group tended to move in the direction of economic empowerment - the improvement of their financial lot. To lead a decent and comfortable life with the

necessary financial means motivated them to hard academic work and achievement. They viewed education as an essential enabler and prized it highly. Their focus was mainly future-directed.

In sum, the white group desired to prepare themselves for a South Africa free of racial considerations, where merit would be the criterion for employment and promotion and race was an irrelevant factor, or at least relegated to the background.

The over-riding concern of the black group was the dismantlement of the discredited socio-political apartheid order as quickly as possible. They were largely concerned with devising strategies to change the present oppressive order. They certainly recognized the importance of education but were more interested in hastening the demise of apartheid. They were more present-directed than their white counterparts. They wanted to do something for the achievement of a post-apartheid South Africa, now. They were not unduly concerned with their economic plight because, in their view, that would fall into place with liberation; it would be an inevitable spin-off.

This divergence is understandable given the reality of the operation of racial discrimination in this land. Blacks base their detestation of racism on personal experience. They know at first hand the psychological and physical hurt and humiliation that it inflicts. Their sensitivity to blatant racism is matched only by their abhorrence of subtle racism, so common in some patronizing liberal circles in which their intelligence is sometimes grossly undermined. For most whites it is something that falls completely outside their experiential world. At best they can only imagine the pain it engenders, and empathize.

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Further, the black group also expressed themselves in favour of the removal of race-based constraints. But they could not wish away race because their plight and present status was inextricably linked with race. Even with similar qualifications and skills the whites get a bigger share of the economic cake, they contended.

While recognizing the importance of merit as a universally acknowledge yardstick, they pointed out that in the abnormal South African situation merit tends to coincide with race. They, therefore, had grave misgivings about the application of the merit-bound approach which was heavily loaded against them.

Also, the black group emphasized the achievement of a 'non-racist' South Africa, even though they used the popular term 'non-racial'. They recognized race as a God-given reality that cannot be wished away. But they resent the use of a race to give unfair advantage to others because it puts them at a disadvantage. The problem is, of course, compounded when some would-be well meaning people take unfair advantage of their disadvantage to give effect to their hidden agendas.

For the white group there seems to be an inherent advantage in the term 'non-racial'. In a post-apartheid South Africa which is non-racial only merit would count and race would be disregarded. But because they have had more than just a race-determined head-start compared with their black counter-parts, they would continue to enjoy that advantage, albeit under a different, more respectable name 'merit' as against 'race'.

For the black people who have, over the years, been a subject race because of the colour of their skin this would, in all probability, not be acceptable in post-apartheid South Africa.

That situation could effectively translate into the maintenance of the status quo. It could in fact generate greater racial conflict and hostility out of which we are desperately trying to graduate.

To the graduands : I have brought to your attention these rather revealing findings for your serious consideration as you proceed into the dawn of post-apartheid South Africa. I sincerely believe it is important at this stage to start thinking through carefully what certain key concepts used in present-day South Africa are likely to translate into in the not-too-distant future. We cannot afford the luxury of ignoring them or sweeping them under the carpet because they cause mental discomfort. They are there as a hard reality to be addressed. To disregard them would be to postpone inevitable disagreement at a critical time in post-apartheid South Africa when pressing nation-building issues will have to be vigorously debated and settled. We need to put our cards on the table to know what we are bargaining for now and anticipate the larger implications that could flow from the situation described above honestly and fearlessly.

X Further, the analysis of key concepts is important because the meanings attached to certain politicized concepts tends not to agree with the dictionary meaning but with common usage and the perception of the users; perception which is based on experience. Consequently, in a racially divided South Africa, the finer nuances of the meaning of words and concepts tends to be related to perception and experience which are race-linked in our context.

Also, in South Africa the attribution of meaning to certain terms is sometimes used to promote race-inspired hidden agendas; to blur rather than clarify them, especially by the native speakers

of the language used. This game in linguistic deception might be academically and politically satisfying to some but it does carry destructive negative elements for future race relations. For the majority non-native speakers it is much more than just a semantic or linguistic game. Their very well-being and future as a people depend on it. It is a very serious business.

The most classical addition to this linguistic game came from the leader of the Conservative Party on television the other day. He asserts, unashamedly, that they are being unfairly accused of being racists when in point of fact they are merely race-conscious. That really boggles the mind. I leave it to the linguistic experts to disentangle the semantic mess. But for me it is as clear as mud.

For too long intellectuals and academics in South Africa have for various reasons tended to give concepts colorations that suite their purposes - either to derail thought-direction or to give academic respectability to some hideous ideologies. Race-based concepts have suffered outrageously in this regard. Can we still, in this day and age, afford the luxury of misleading conceptualizations with all the possible consequences that could erupt around them and derail us from our socio-political tracks.

Mr. Chancellor, from the foregoing it is apparent and can be inferred that the problem of language usage in post-apartheid South Africa could be a highly contentious matter. According to demographic predictions 85 percent of the population of South Africa in 2020 will be Africans. A sizeable percentage of those people will not be fluent in English or Afrikaans. This could effectively inhibit meaningful communication when it will be needed most. To promote good race relations across the colour line, it will not be too much, I believe, to expect our white

country-men to learn at least one African language. Most Africans speak at least four languages, even if their mastery might not be outstanding, yet they can make themselves understood reasonably well.

At present there is a very unfortunate tendency to equate fluency in English with intelligence. Too often we hear it said that some black person is intelligent because his mastery of English is good. He is articulate, has a lovely turn of phrase, an Oxford accent and is by that reason intelligent. One wonders how many of us would qualify as being intelligent if English were to be substituted with Zulu or Sotho in that equation.

This preoccupation with linguistic facility often has an inhibiting effect in non-racial organizations. Because of their self-consciousness black people serving on non-racial committees sometimes feel terribly inhibited. This engenders self-doubt instead of a positive self-concept. It shatters them self-confidence. x

This often promotes dependency on their white colleagues and leads to an unfortunate situation in which things are done for them instead of with or by them. Post-apartheid South Africa will need a correction of that situation. They will definitely need to graduate out of dependency and subservience because that is demeaning in the extreme and would be out of place in post-apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, their white counterparts will have to discard their subtle domination and manipulation.

Let me hasten to say that English as an international vehicle of communication will certainly still play its role as a cementing medium for the different races and tribes in post-apartheid South Africa. Its role will still be cardinal but realistic.

To the graduands again: Most of you will live the better part of your lives in the much-talked about post-apartheid South Africa. It will not be enough to carry happy non-racial thoughts about it because they will prove inadequate for its demands. They have been used much too often to the point of being threadbare by others before you. Indeed, they have become transparent with over-usage. They are a debased currency.

As the chemistry of our politics changes, you will need to find acceptable moral high ground from which to make your contribution as graduates and South Africans holding their heads high and standing your full height in the future South Africa.

As you go into that future with all sorts of variables that don't permit of accurate prediction please don't add to the unending list of to-day's yesterday's men. The market is saturated with them. We desperately need to-day's and tomorrow's men possessed of moral courage and integrity. You are those men. We need men of vision. You are those men. We need men who are prepared to put their shoulders to the wheel of progress. You are those men.

As we say heartiest congratulations for your splendid achievements and you celebrate your well deserved success, our warmest congratulations go out to you and your families who supported you as you worked day and night towards a worthwhile goal. We say nothing succeeds like success.

We wish you what you wish yourselves. You have proved that you can smoke the academic pipe without coughing.

Thank You.