

Andre Keet

Dispatch Dialogues

2 March 2010

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Max's presentation on "Freedom, Citizenship and the Constitution". Today is also an opportune moment for me to recognise Max's role as a damn good and brave journalist during very difficult times. After all the accolades already bestowed on you Max (including a few by Madiba himself), be assured that these big credits reflect the small acknowledgements of Afrikaans-speaking people like myself, Bass (a friend in the audience), Anneline (my partner, also in the audience) and thousands of others. We are children of the 80s and since the late 80s and early 90s the Vrye Weekblad was a source of inspiration...brave, intelligent, investigative and provocative journalism. We were deeply saddened and angered by the Lothar Neethling rubbish that ultimately led to the closure of the newspaper. My family's collection of newspapers made four trips with us ... and they are still here with us. In a moment of alcohol-induced insanity and humanity I offered my collection to the new institute to be established at the University of the Free State in response to the "Reitz Racism" debacle. I am now trying to get out of that agreement.

I've started my university years in 1983 at UWC during the year of the birth of the UDF and was supposed to complete my 1<sup>st</sup> degree in 1985, the year of the formation of COSATU. That did not happen and I, like many others, had to write a few supplementary exams before I could graduate. At least we were at an institution which fostered a culture of sympathy for and political literacy around students' struggles ... unlike the glorified high school as you have described the University of Stellenbosch during your student life. We grew up in a country in turmoil, governed by the brainless and racist arrangements of a tri-cameral parliament, the transitional and most exciting phases of the 90s and the consolidation of democracy in the first decade of the 2000s. The term "consolidation" in this instance may be a highly

qualified one. The point is that we were there, and we are here ... and we all have our worries about the “now” ... but, above all, we have a good dose of hope for our future.

It is difficult to argue against your observations regarding the kinds of political practices dominating our landscape at the present moment. I also want to share your sentiments that ‘whites’ got the best possible deal possible during the negotiations of the early 90s. Today, they are indeed also better off economically and politically. In fact, they were qualitatively better freed than black Africans during the 1994 elections.

The cold engagement of “whites” towards the TRC, exacerbated by the qualified apologies of their politicians, was a lost opportunity for reconciliation. Now, even more so, there is almost a total disregard for an authentic reading of history. If we can have an integrated reading of history, in the way that you propose in your writings, we will go a long way.

I marvel at the way in which you dug up the history of Mohlomi in central SA who was born four years before the “so-called father of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant in 1724”. The historical confirmation of his philosophy of ‘botho’ or ‘meelewende’ humanism, his notion of diplomatic immunity, the political application of concepts such as love, pacifism, democracy, women’s rights and tolerance as rooted in an African philosophy should forever silence those who are trying to argue away the existence of a properly formulated African philosophy. And, because Afrikaners in particular and “whites” in general are so rooted in Africa, I find your thesis that one can choose your forefathers and foremothers very appealing. If this thesis is applied across our ‘racial’ spectrum it can certainly play a powerful political and reconciliatory role. So yes, let us choose our forefathers and foremothers and let us choose wisely...but let us not forget or rewrite our history.

Our country is in a mess, we have our challenges ... but one of my mentors in the early 1990s, Owen van den Berg, remarked that it will only be when the old South Africa comes under new management (he hated the notion of a new SA), that we will realise the limited resources available to us to rebuild the country. Presently we have endemic crime, structurally anchored poverty, corruption, social delivery protests, inequality, systemic discrimination and an increase in hate crime and hate speech. These coalesced into a deep national pessimism, especially on the part of our “white” sisters and brothers.

As we are all well aware, the racism and discrimination so deeply entrenched in our structures has its mirror images around dinner tables, “braaivleis vure”, “kuier om die kospotte” and the like. Anyone serious about SA and him or herself and their children and families, anyone who has a slight sense of critical national pride, will have to start challenging the prejudicial expressions against other people in our homes, shacks, tents, the workplace, and within the confines of our friendships and close relationships. We have to start confronting those issues in our circle of influence and we have to do this collectively. With a criminal justice system struggling to deal with crime, we have to jump in and help wherever and through whatever means we can. This country has enough hope for all of us to deal with these challenges and to do our small part.

The newspapers, over the weekend reported that more than 5000 families (mostly “white”) are returning home from abroad because they want to. This should be seen as a good sign in addition to those that Max mentions towards the end of his speech. But we need to acknowledge that historical privilege and structurally anchored inequalities have less to do with the kind of leadership we have and more to do with our incapacity to express our humanity as a responsibility and obligation towards others. The political images that flash through our media channels and are presented as a national political discourse, negatively so, do not constitute the Country. The idea of a “New South Africa” is rooted and anchored in ordinary people’s struggles

for a “better life for all”. The critical citizenry that is so central to a democracy is not constructed in the image of this political discourse. Rather, it is constructed as its counterbalance.

Max, the movements that you are referring to as those which should defend our constitutional democracy are already in the making. People need to join and strengthen them. Young people at this university are capable of amazing things. They and others should be roped in.

Let me end with a few questions to Max:

- a) In your correspondence with Breyten Breytenbach, you reprimanded him not to equate leaders with a country, as leaders are not a country. This reminded me of Rorty (an American philosopher of the pragmatist tradition) who argues that “national pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals ... it is a precondition for development, freedom and citizenship.” Do you think South Africans have a sense of the link between freedom, citizenship and “critical national pride”?
  
- b) The claims and counterclaims of rights within a constitutional democracy seem to breed a discourse of conflict. Simone Weil, a French philosopher who died at the age of 34, wrote a piece on the human personality where she argued that rights are built on an adversarial logic. She is at pains to explain that the obligation towards the other human being should come before the claiming of rights. She has built her argument on an African compassion-based notion of justice and can probably be regarded as an intellectual follower of Mohlomi and Moshoeshe. Do you think our logic of rights (not rights itself), which is based on procedural justice through endless court battles, can take us anywhere? Or do we need to redefine our concept of justice?

- c) I agree, the judiciary is a pillar of constitutional democracy. Do you think they are doing a good job in this regard? Or are they simply open to those who have the resources to claim rights. More accurately, are they open only to those who can *buy* rights?
- d) Civil society, more often than not, unfortunately only thinks within the limits of the Constitution. There is a whole new world beyond the Constitution that needs to be explored through our social movements: one that presents human suffering not simply as a violation of human rights and one that thinks of humanity as more than a conglomeration and collective exercise of human rights. It is a world that can give meaning to Mohlomi's ideas that love and compassion should be political concepts. How do we create a life-world where civil society can play such role?

Thanks for this privilege

André