



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

SPEECH BY DARYL SWANEPOEL, CEO OF THE INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE: NALHISA DIALOGUE ON BRIDGING THE GAP, CROSSING THE DIVIDE: STEPS TOWARDS A POST-APARTHEID HERITAGE: FREEDOM PARK, TSHWANE: 10 MAY 2023

Preserving South Africa's liberation history is important for nation-building

Ladies and gentlemen,

Firstly, allow me to say how pleased I am to be associated with this project. It is I believe an important one. Because it is important for a nation to preserve its history for posterity, and to learn from its past in order not to repeat its mistakes. More so in South Africa which is emerging from a divided past. In our case, it is not only about history, but also about social cohesion, healing, and the building of a nation.

Maybe I should start on a disappointing note. And I do so because it underscores the importance of the National Liberation Heritage Institute of South Africa's (Nalhisa) objectives.

Reconciliation and nation-building have taken a backseat in current-day South Africa. This betrays the Freedom Charter's central objective of creating a South Africa that belongs to all who live in it, black and white. It undermines the need for healing our society, and the bringing together of the diverse communities that form the South African nation.

The political narrative is often toxic. It is divisive, often hurtful, and quite frankly, in many cases inciting. This is evidenced by the number of hate speech complaints landing on the desk of the Human Rights Commission and legal contests within the judicial system. It is an indictment. This is not where we should be nearly thirty years into the democratic dispensation ushered in by visionary leaders in 1994. And it is a regression from the early years of post-apartheid South Africa when the Mandela's and the Mbeki's and the De Klerk's of our nation put reconciliation and nation-building on the top of the agenda. When we were inspired by Tutu's coining of the Rainbow Nation.

"Kill the farmer, kill the Boer" may be an accurate recalling of struggle history, a nostalgic reliving of whence we come from, but is it wise and in the interest of the national project? For every action, there is a counter-action. Those of us that roam the social platforms will know that of late there seems to be a growing yearning amongst some for the past order: idolising the old South African flag, nostalgic back flashes of the Apartheid military might. It may be that the South African Defence Force was efficient in its oppression. It may be that the flag has historic significance. But is it wise to stir up division? I think not.

Unfortunately, we need to accept the reality that not all South Africans have embraced the new dispensation. That is a fact of life, I guess. The problem lies in the fact that the views of what is clearly a minority in South Africa are not being sufficiently countered with the positive re-enforcement of the true South African spirit of Unity in Diversity. Reconciliation, nation-building, and social cohesion, are simply not the priority that it should be.

Social cohesion, ladies and gentlemen, is not a nice to have. It is not a soft issue. It goes to the heart of economic growth and social stability. Empirical research that the Inclusive Society Institute, of which I am the CEO, has been exposed to, shows that societies that experience low social cohesion, tend to be more unstable and have poor economic growth, whereas societies that experience a high level of social cohesion, tend to be more stable and perform well economically.

Social cohesion is therefore crucial for a successful South African future. And it MUST be a national priority.

Enough of the depressing. Here is the good news. The Inclusive Society Institute does extensive polling on social cohesion in South Africa. What this polling tells us is that a huge majority, across all races want a united South Africa.

Most respondents in our latest poll were of the opinion that it was important for all South Africans to unite. In fact, 65,76 percent of respondents agreed with this notion, whilst only 12,69 percent of respondents disagreed. For Indians it was 75,74 percent, for coloureds, 74,8 percent, for whites 69,76 percent and for blacks 63,91 percent. Across the spectrum a very strong mandate to build the South Africa that belongs to all who live in it, black and white.

The survey suggests that there is a relatively high level of integration between the various race groups in the country when it came to everyday life activities. Moreover, the integration appeared not to be forced integration but rather of a voluntary nature, where there was a high level of enjoyment flowing from such integration and friendships being formed. 65 percent enjoy working together with people from other population groups, 55 percent have friends from different population groups, 53 percent regularly entertain friends and colleagues from other groups, and just over half go to church or mosque and so on, with people from other population groups.

Even more encouraging is that the trend largely replicates itself across all racial groups. It tells us that the majority of South Africans have commenced the journey toward reconciliation, nation-building, and social cohesion, even though there is still a long way to go.

But here is the nub of the problem. South Africans doubt as to whether one nation can be formed from amongst the different groups. Only 47,18 percent of respondents agreed with the notion that it is not possible to form one nation out of all the different groups in the country. Put otherwise, they didn't believe it possible. Once again, similar trends across all race groups.

So, there is a clear disconnect between what people desire – a united South Africa, and what they believe is possible. And that is what we have to collectively work on. We need to close the gap between what people want and what they believe is possible. And that is what, in my opinion, makes the Nalhis project so important.

It has to be the conscience of the nation. It needs to remind us of the ideals we fought for, and the dreams we had, and still have, as a nation. It needs to be a constant reminder of from whence we have come, and it needs to be the compass as to where we wish to go.

And it needs to be alive and responsive to what is being said and what is happening in contemporary South Africa. It needs to be an effective tool deployed to counter the nonsense of division. South Africans in the main do not want division, they want to build the nation. It is through telling the story of the liberation struggle and what it stood for, that undermining and lacking leadership will be countered.

And in telling that story, Nalhisa must ensure that it is an inclusive portrayal of the struggle. It must be the story from both sides. After all, both sides came together through negotiation – I remind you of Codesa – to set South Africa on the path of inclusive nationhood.

Rhetoric and symbolism matter. Mandela was the master. He taught us the importance thereof. He was brave enough to enter the lion's den to confront the division – he wore the Springbok jersey, the jersey of the rugby system that excluded people based on their race. He had tea with the wife of the father of Apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd. And it wasn't a capitulation, no, the nation came together, and South Africa was stronger for that.

Maybe I should at this point tell you my own story, and that of the National Party. A story that is grossly underplayed and under-recorded in my view. We all celebrate the peaceful transition from Apartheid to the Rainbow Nation. Of even more significance I believe, is that the two main protagonists, the African National Congress and the National Party in later years drifted towards one another, to the point where it no longer made sense to oppose one another in the building of the country, but rather to work together, inclusively, to be co-builders of the nation. So, they merged in 2005. I was the Secretary General of the National Party at the time. So, it fell to me to organise, from the National Party's side, the merger. And to deregister the National Party at the IEC.

Warring parties, through dialogue, were able to find sufficient common ground that enabled them to become co-builders of a united country. This is a lesson that many across the globe could take to heart.

That said, reconciliation is not an event, it is a process that needs to be endured and nurtured. And I am afraid that the gains made were somewhat squandered by corruption, and dropping the nation-building ball. This is evidenced by the drifting of traditional NP supporters away from the mainstream since then. But I can tell you that it can be reversed. The Afrikaners, for one, who traditionally supported the NP, want a united South Africa that works for all. They want to help build an inclusive South Africa. But they are losing faith because we have swayed. And the only way to get them on board, to reverse the trust deficit, is to ensure good governance and to not only get the rhetoric and symbolism right, but to back it up with sustained and credible actions and deeds that give effect to the talk.

I ask Nalhisa to include this history in their archives and story-telling. Nudge our leaders: they will be surprised by the goodwill should they take this to heart, and keep reconciliation high on the agenda, but not only in word, but, as I said, through sustained deeds as well.

In closing:

In telling the South African liberation story, Nalhisa must play an activist role aimed at getting the narrative, the rhetoric, and the symbolism right. It is a huge, but noble task of national importance. I reiterate that social cohesion is not a nice to have, it is of national importance.

I call on all South Africans to support the work of Nalhisa. I call on the funding community and corporate South Africa to back this project. It is an important cog in the wheel that is needed to help build an inclusive South Africa, in which every South Africa will be able to have his or her fair share of prosperity and happiness. There is no doubt, the nation will be stronger for it. This, empirical evidence, not anecdotal science, tells us, is what South Africans want.

And it aligns with the work and objectives of Nalhisa.

Thank you very much.