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Annual Memorial Lecture

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Topic:

**SA TODAY: FROM FREEDOM TO
TRANSFORMATION
WHERE DO WE STAND?**

Speaker:

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The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

South Africa today: From freedom to transformation. Deepening the Voice of the People

Where do we stand?

Fifteen years ago, in 1995, when South Africa was just starting out on the long road of transition, Harold Wolpe wrote about the expectations of that extraordinary journey from apartheid to democracy, from freedom to transformation.

He knew it would not happen overnight, that the transition from apartheid was a complex task and involved much more than policy changes. It was about extensive cultural and ideological transformations, as well as institutional and social structural changes, he argued. That's what the building of a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist future would entail. Progress would be incremental, he said. The transition would take time. But at the end of the day, if we managed it get it right, it would amount to nothing less than a revolution of the social order.

In that piece he wrote in 1995, Harold carefully analyzed the then government's policy document upon which the early transition hinged: the Reconstruction and Development Program, or the RDP as it was commonly referred to, and its attempt to define a path of radical deracialisation and social development. As many of you will remember, I was the Minister in the Presidency with overall responsibility for the RDP in that first government of President Nelson Mandela.

And in his very excellent critique a year after the RDP was introduced, Harold put his finger on two fundamental flaws which the rest of us would only wake up to many years later: we conceptualized the state as the unproblematic instrument of the RDP; and we expected the ambitions, goals and aims of civil society to be consistent with and aligned to the RDP.

In other words, the goals of the RDP were taken to be unequivocal and subject to a single interpretation or consensus.

What this would eventually lead to, though Harold did not spell it out as such at the time, was the suffocation and demobilization of civil society as the state took over the reconstruction of the country.

And that's what I would like to focus on this evening – the importance of reawakening civil society and deepening and defending those voices, old and new, - as I attempt

to address the topic in question: where does South Africa stand today, 16 years into the transition?.

I guess like any teenager of 16, the young South Africa is looking a bit troubled today as she struggles to forge a lasting identity. She seems to be tugging in lots of different directions, all at the same time. She has recorded a great number of commendable achievements and only four months ago hosted a very successful World Cup – what was regarded as the coming of age in the eyes of the World. Yet there are many, many problems out there that paint a worrying picture. In fact barely had we begun to stop celebrating that ‘champagne moment’ we witnessed the deep fissures in our society as almost a million public sector workers poured into the streets and we saw an epic battle with the State - as an employer - and that brought back to me the bitter scenes of the Eighties when we experienced the war between the apartheid state and the democratic movement.

What happened, we asked ourselves as a bewildered public, to the social consensus that dumfounded the prophets of doom who had predicted we could not pull off successfully the World Cup? This is a subject that all of us need to revisit and place all actors under the microscope. I offer a few pointers.

Statistics tell us that while more and more youth are completing and passing their Matric exams, the quality of education has declined to the extent that the certificate is often not worth the paper it is written on. The quality of education is a critical issue and it is not being helped by poor infrastructure. More than 4,200 schools have no electricity. Only one in every 8 has libraries, while only 2 in every four have computers. It's not surprising therefore that South Africa has only 30 engineers for every 100,000 people, while Australia has 340 engineers for every 100,000 of its citizens. Or that almost 50% of our youth are unemployed. Logic will tell us that most of them will probably never hold down a job or enjoy the dignity of earning a pay cheque. And these are tomorrow's generations, tomorrow's leaders. Both they and South Africa deserve better.

We are also in a very unhealthy state when it comes to health. Recent reports show that life expectancy has declined dramatically and that we have a population with a heavy disease burden, with one in six adults currently carrying the HIV infection and our country and Region has become the epicenter of the HIV/TB epidemic. Our other health indicators bring us closer into the category of countries at war.

Nearly half of all households are living in a state of poverty. The number of social grant recipients has increased to 13.8 million while the income tax payer base is sitting at 5.7 million of an estimated 50 million head count. Or to put it differently, roughly one in every nine inhabitants is earning its way, while approximately one in every three is getting by on a state handout.

Is this cause for concern, 16 years into the transition? Should we be worried? I would declare decisively YES.

But if I am to be fair, I would also say that this is part and parcel of growing up and in that sense, we shouldn't be too hard on the young South Africa. And a bit like the teenager who goes through the troubled teens, a firm hand of guidance will never do any harm. And this is the time to guide the democracy and set it on a solid footing, before she gets any older and our problems get intractable.

Being part of a study of 'Peace, Security and Development' the theme of the World Development Report for 2011 (a more diplomatic title for the study of why States fail) I am intensely aware that we carry many of the factors that if we do not address decisively will lead us towards that trajectory. But a key aspect of the South African psyche is that we know how to pull back from the edge of the precipice. We did that in 1994 when the world predicted a bloody racial civil war and we repeated that in 2010 when the prophets of doom predicted a failed attempt to host Africa's first ever World Cup.

But if we are to do that, if we as South Africans are to offer guidance, to raise our concerns about the society we live in, then our voices need to be heard. We need to be able to defend the voices that are out there. We need to encourage new voices to emerge. We need to hear the collective voices of communities again. And we need to uphold the platforms upon which communities can raise their legitimate grievances.

If we cannot do that much, or if we feel we cannot, then we are allowing ourselves to be dragged back to the apartheid era. Because that's what apartheid did. It took away our voice by delegitimizing it and it criminalized our platforms. Our whole struggle against the apartheid regime was a struggle for voice, for the ability to

negotiate our futures.

And if we have lost our footing, then we need to go back to the lessons of the struggle and begin to raise those platforms again and find those critical voices. Because the way we fought the struggle is as relevant today as it was then.

We were all conscious that when we passed the ballot on the 27th of April in 1994, we were removing the demon of racial discrimination: we had deracialized the political system. But that did not mean that a day later our aspirations would be met. It just became a different kind of struggle post-94. And what was implicit in the Reconstruction and Development Program, in our approach to the new struggle, in how Mandela articulated his leadership, was that there had to be a principle of accountability; that we were building a people-centred democracy in South Africa; that the framework had to be about meeting what are legitimate expectations of people who had been excluded for centuries. That was the new struggle.

But it was then, in 1994, that we made the critical mistake that I alluded to earlier: we demobilized our civil society. And I, as Minister for the RDP, was part of that grave mistake, because in saying we had a legitimate government and that the government was there to deliver on the goals of the RDP; that the government would deliver houses, schools, hospitals, clinics, jobs and just about everything else the new South Africa needed, our own people became bystanders in the process. And that was when the real engine of our struggle for freedom came to a grinding halt, because the funding for civil society began to dry up as international donors swung their support from very viable civil society organizations to government-led programs. It was one of our biggest mistakes.

One thing we had failed to understand was that the driving force for reconstruction and development essentially had to be a very powerfully allied alliance between labour and the ruling party and the various forums where we met with other social partners, such as business, civic, women, youth and the dynamic plethora of non governmental organisations. The vibrancy of these all encompassing housing, education and health forums integrated a base of 'Peoples Power' emerging from the mass struggles of the Eighties into the governing process that contributed the passion of smart skills, intellectual, delivery and financial resources that gave our communities the right to mass participation and OWNERSHIP. It meant we knew that there was a 'long march' to the freedoms and rights we enshrined in our Constitution.

When the driving force was gone, political lethargy and political resistance set in. And the final nail in the coffin, which tore at the fabric of social consensus that underpinned our tradition in our fight for freedom, came with the introduction - some would say enforcement - of GEAR, the government policy to promote Growth, Employment and Redistribution, which effectively replaced the social consensus we had built into the RDP. But let us not be naïve that we did need to address the serious macro-economic constraints we faced. We had inherited essentially a bankrupt state with deep structural challenges that did require us to make some tough choices.

And what followed was a decade of State led development and while we successfully stabilised the macro-economic environment our institutional failures impacted on our capacity to deliver the 'better life' we promised and an adversarialism and factionalism set in that still continues to torment us. Trust had broken down not just in the engine of our democratic Alliance but began pervade society. Fear began to creep in and was to lead many years later to the 'Polokwane moment.'

But enough about the problems. What about the solutions. What can we – you and I – do to turn this around?

As I see it, has to be about constructing a new social compact. But not at the national level only. At every level of society. We need to have a debate, a real debate about the choices we have to make. And most importantly, we need to decide how to place accountability and performance at the centre of that debate.

Take the debate around the media as an example. The media, that very important pillar in our society, is under enormous threat right now because of the proposed Protection of Information Bill and the punitive Media Appeals Tribunal, topics of hot discussions these days.

But we are losing sight of the real debate that is begging because of the fear these punitive proposals are instilling in us. The media is not perfect. Far from it. It needs to take a long look at itself; the quality of its reporting and coverage; the investment on the part of media owners and editors in diversity, in journalistic talent, and in retaining that talent; in ensuring the sustainability of the media at a time when the sector is under financial threat all over the world.

But as much as that debate is needed around an improved and more robust media and media ownership, we must remember that we need the media for the simple reason that all of this is about much more than the media. It's about the kind of society we live in. We need the kind of open and democratic society that we vowed to create 16 years ago. Yet today we are talking about building a 'society of secrets'. We cannot do that. It flies in the face of our traditions and our promise of a people-centred democracy.

It goes back to what I said earlier about that leadership that is accountable; that is open; that will not shy away from debate and from scrutiny. A leadership that is confident in itself to lead from the front, not from behind heavy closed doors.

It brings me back to what icons of our struggle would say today. What would be the voice of a Harold Wolpe, an OR Tambo or a Chris Hani today?

Watching an interview done with Chris Hani in the early Nineties in which he spoke about his 'suspension' ahead of the ANC conference in Morogoro in 1969. This because he dared to be the voice of the cadres who were feeling disillusioned with the direction of the armed struggle. He was adamant that he made the right decision to talk and to raise not just his individual concerns but of many of our cadres in the frontline of fire. We don't talk about that very openly because that is a stain on our past, rather than a tradition of our movement.

And let me link that back to my core message tonight about voice, about a strong civil society. Each and every one of us must be able to stand up and be counted, without being looked upon as a threat to government, because we are the very reason they are in office. We put them there, based on a manifesto, a set of goals that would lead to a better life for all of us, not just them. And our voices matter every day, not just on voting day.

Consensus-making is not easy. It is a pain-staking process. It is time consuming and many times troublesome. But it comes with the terrain. There is no short cut. In public office I learnt the hard way that leaders in any organisation must be able to take the heat and if you can't take the heat, then you have to get out of the kitchen.

We have to be a movement that is confident about ourselves and a movement that will embrace diversity. We called ourselves a broad church that aspired towards great human principles. That is why we became one of the most recognized and respected liberation movements in the world. That is why we are close to celebrating 100 years of struggle activism and politics.

Remember in Nelson Mandela we have a man who represents the legitimacy of people who feel marginalised all over the world. Madiba stands for human dignity. He stands for human rights. He welcomed robust and dynamic debate. He was committed to the kind of ideals that became the hallmark of the ANC. That is who we are and what we stand for.

And let me be very clear on this last point: I am not driving a sensational newspaper headline here that will be construed tomorrow as an attack on the leadership of my movement. I am not targeting any one individual. I am harking back to our past, to our decades-long struggle and the traditions that brought us to power in 1994 and the traditions that I firmly believe in. This is in my name too.

We do not believe in corruption. We do not believe in a state system that becomes an employment agency for the individuals and an ATM machine for their friends.

We cannot allow vampire economics to become a way of life in the new South Africa – where tenderpreneurs deliver shoddy housing and roads and basic services to us in the name of our government, and with our money; where licences are sold at high premiums to the highest briber; and where corrupt state officials undermine the competitive capacity of our economy and force out the honest business men and women because they are not politically connected or won't pay backhanders and bribes.

Small and medium businesses are the backbone of every successful state. Our agreed strategic goal is job creation. Every job matters. Corruption is a powerful disincentive to investment both domestic and international.

So is policy uncertainty. The recent controversy about the call for the nationalisation of the mines is another example. From my own experience as a trade unionist I know that most of our mines in South Africa are deep level often down to 3 km. It requires an engineering and management capacity that is a scarce resource globally. We

struggle to run many of our local Governments and our hospitals where would we get such skills. Where would we get the trillions of rands to compensate shareholders? I know that the prohibitive financial investment required before we take an ounce of precious metal. President Zuma addressing gathering of investors in Brussels recently said the mining sector is a critical revenue and employment backbone of our economy. The National Union of Mineworkers reiterated strongly that such debate would have a negative impact on employment already reeling under the job losses caused by the global economic recession. It is not that we should not debate nationalisation but determine where in the wish list we need to set it especially when the State already owns all mineral rights in our name. So who really would benefit from such a debate?

Why don't we debate the crisis in education? We have recently accepted that the implementation of our Outcome Based Education system has failed a generation of our children. What are going to do with this generation? What are we replacing OBE with? How are we preparing teachers, students and parents? How do we align our education outcomes with the goals of job creation, reconstruction and development?

These are the tough choices we have to make now.

If we cannot have transparency and openness, then we are sowing the seeds of a society that is failing to meet the expectations of its people and losing legitimacy in their eyes.

We have a lot to offer, as a country and as a continent. Africa – which the Economist magazine once labelled the hopeless continent - outperformed the developing world by 2% in terms of growth this past decade. And South Africa – the gateway to the continent - is a very important player in Africa. We account for 30% of Africa's output but only 5% of its population.

Before we were dragged into a recession last year by the global economic downturn, we had recorded very strong growth rates for a number of years. And we are still strong, but we will need to push our competitive edge if we are to fulfil our dream of sitting in the A-league or joining the powerful nations of China, India, Brazil and Russia in the BRIC bloc, where we belong as a strong, emerging economy.

We have extraordinary resources. Consider platinum, which is just one of our many strategic assets. We sit on such vast reserves of it that we meet 80% of the world's demand. It is such a strategic commodity today that, according to industrialists, one in five products out there today either contains some of the precious metal or is produced by it. But platinum is also very rare, and both things combined – its rarity and its strategic use - its ounce price has almost tripled over the past decade. And the same can be said of much of our mineral wealth and our most precious resource, our people.

But we need to put our shoulders to the wheel and together helping to grow our economy by being innovative about unlocking the potential of our enormous endowment of human, natural and mineral resources.

Despite the threats we are facing, we must remember that we still have freedom of expression in this country. We can speak out. We can stand here tonight and discuss these things. We still have a critical media. We watch people stand up every day of the week and criticise government, the private sector and even civil society. We witness others demanding accountability. That openness is there. And we will not lose it until such time as we decide to let it go. And I cannot imagine South Africa, as I know it, reaching that point. The choice is in our hands. It is up to us to raise our voices and to make sure that we are heard now.

We need to find our voices again. I've said it many times this evening, and I say it again. Our voices are critical. We need to organize our communities – which sadly are still constructed around the same kind of spatial make-up that existed in the apartheid era. And from those communities we need to allow leaders to emerge who will represent their aspirations and put words on their grievances. Without leadership, people feel alienated from the societies to which they belong. Alienation breeds resentment and anger. We see this month in, month out with service delivery protests. And a lack of leadership feeds opportunism and extremism. We saw that in the awful xenophobia of 2008.

To conclude, I want to go back to Harold Wolpe's definition of a successful transition. In his view, if we were able to transform into the kind of society we struggled for, then we would have achieved a revolution of the social order. That is still possible. The ball is still in our court. But we need our voices – all of them - if we are to run with that ball.

But we must remember that we don't need to reinvent the wheel. These formal and informal structures are already in place. We need to have the leadership and the political will that will make sure that civil society can have a legitimate place at the table.

Thank you.

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