

## Citizens and Subjects in the New South Africa

1994 was, politically, a revolutionary breakthrough. Racial oligarchy and brutal oppression and repression finally gave way to a democracy in which *all* South Africans became citizens and were accorded full citizenship rights.

Critical to this development was the imagination and courage that we displayed to rid ourselves of tyranny and to forge a fabulous Constitution and Bill of Rights which held out the promise of far-reaching political, economic and social rights that did not exist for all, or *at all*, prior to 1994.

Having been 'subjects,' millions of us made the significant advance to becoming 'citizens'. We looked forward to the promise of the progressive realization of hard-won citizenship rights so that we could live productive, rich, rewarding and secure lives.

Certain realities, however, seriously compromise our constitutional ideal of full citizenship rights for all. Indeed, they could condemn large numbers of us to conditions that are more akin to being subjects.

In *South Africa Pushed to the Limit* Hein Marais warns of the danger of the 'recourse to rousing affirmations of identity and entitlement' and to populist discourses of 'authenticity' – 'who is a *real* South African, who is a *real* African, who is *black*, what is a man, what is the role of *women*.' These utterances are accompanied by ever more 'narrow and exacting' interpretations of culture and tradition.

Marais' comments put into perspective recent events: the crass utterances of chief government communicator Jimmy Manyi on 'race'; the repugnant tabloid chatter of Kuli Roberts on so-called Coloureds; and Minister Trevor Manuel's amazing outburst that Manyi has 'the same mind that operated under apartheid.'

Given the apartheid legacy, there can be *no* quarrel with redress and social equity for disadvantaged poor, black and women South Africans. As Albie Sachs notes, pervasive inequities ‘cannot be wished away by invoking constitutional idealism.’

Still, we find ourselves in the grip of a *profound paradox*: the use of ‘*race*’ to promote redress and to advance social equity. In Sachs’ words, we are making ‘conscious use of racial distinctions in order to create a non-racial society.’

Such an approach has many dangers. For one, employing solely ‘*race*’ for redress purposes could benefit only or primarily the black political and economic elites, and simply reproduce the severe class inequalities that we already have.

The conspicuous consumption of our off-the-body sushi-loving elites and the rapid ascendancy of politically-connected elites into wealthy businesspersons make no difference to eliminating the massive inequalities in our society.

For another, using ‘*race*’ to advance redress and social equity could ossify racial categorisations and ensure that we continue to construct identities primarily along the lines of ‘*race*’.

Surely our goal as well as our strategies must be to *erode* and *dissolve* racial categorisations and ensure that our identities are instead rich, multiple, fluid and dynamic rather than frozen along ‘*race*’ lines.

In Sach’s words we must ‘never lose sight of the fact that the goal is to establish a non-racial society in which social and cultural diversity is celebrated and seen as a source of vitality, and in which race as such ultimately has no political or economic significance.’

In the fabulous and inspiring track called ‘Say Africa’, Vusi Mahlasela croons: ‘I may be walking in the streets of London. But the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart say Africa, say Africa.’ This is the case for most of us who live in South Africa.

We must confront the charlatans among us who stridently seek to give ever more 'narrow and exacting' answers to the questions of 'who is a *real* South African, who is a *real* African, who is *black*, what is a *man*, (and) what is the role of women.'

These self-serving answers could reduce millions of us to subjects and lay the basis for the chauvinism that leads to the killing fields of Sabra and Shatila and Rwanda and fertilise our own disgraceful manifestations of xenophobia.

We must loudly proclaim that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.' We must insist, for all the reasons that were given at the 'I am an African' speech at the launch of our Constitution, that we are all *Africans*.

At the same time, we must jettison glib formulations like 'forget the past and embrace the future' and also not confuse aspiration with realities, as in the 'rainbow nation.'

We have a long road still to travel before inequality, racism and sexism and prejudice and intolerance are defeated. As Njabulo Ndebele notes, 'the fact that racism may still exist in the actions of young students suggests that racism continues to be fed by institutions such as families, schools and churches' and we need to give attention to how 'we bring up our children.'

Issues of race, culture, identity, language and many kinds of hurt remain to be confronted. We will only be free and equals when we begin to tackle these issues with sensitivity, honesty and courage. We shy away from honest engagement with these difficult, complex and emotive issues at our own peril.

Having failed, yet again, to win the cricket world cup we have nonetheless triumphed in the dubious honour of now being the *most* unequal society on earth.

Already a perversely unequal society in 1994, during the past seventeen years income inequality has increased in general and within so-called 'racial' groups.

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of South Africa has fallen since 1994, while that of the richest 20% has risen. The poorest 20% earn 1.7% of income; the richest 20% take home 72.5%. 43% of our fellow citizens eke out an existence on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year – R8.22 a day.

Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, crass materialism, corruption, tenderpreneurship and unbridled accumulation run rampant.

What does citizenship mean for those who are poor, unemployed, struggle to survive or live in fear of rape, other violence and crime?

South Africa is an infinitely better place today than it was before 1994. There have been many positive social developments since 1994. Our institutions of democracy and justice and our media remain robust and vibrant, as do voices that seek to safeguard constitutional values and ideals and a just society.

On the final page of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Madiba writes: 'The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning'.

He adds: 'I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended'.

'The truth is that' we may be citizens, but our citizenship remains to be fully developed. We are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.' Our 'devotion to freedom' of all from want, to a life of dignity and an inclusive citizenship remains to be seen.

The idea that 'with freedom comes responsibilities' is lost on too many in positions of riches and power. Indeed, the 'long walk' to full citizenship rights for all in a just, non-racial, non-sexist, and democratic society 'is not yet ended.'

'We dare not linger' too long in in our walk to freedom for all, for there will be grave costs if we do so. We simply must re-imagine our future, forge new ways of conducting our affairs, and build new identities that are freed from the obsession with 'race' and focus instead on social justice and human dignity.