

[VC Badat cuts to the heart of darkness — and asks us to re-imagine](#)

Posted on May 3, 2011 by Makana Moon - Mike Loewe

Saleem Badat, Vice Chancellor of Rhodes University gave a magnificent graduation speech (many times over) to thousands of Rhodes graduates, friends and family recently.

I heard it once while attending the graduation of Nolundi Ntshakaza, a humble, church-going, hard-working Grahamstown township woman, who, despite mothering a clutch of children on behalf of other family members, spent a decade improving her lot. She went from a typical black working class suburban domestic to become headmistress of a proud community pre-school. That was thanks to Rhodes, especially Di Hornby who pioneered the process.

That speech of Badat's resonated and I've wanted to read the full text. Unfortunately, the VC does not write short speeches. Nor does he make them simple. These are rich, intellectually complex but exciting social contributions. That's what they are – incredible social commentary on Rhodes, Grahamstown, the Eastern Cape and South Africa.

I was delighted to open the Dispatch leader page today and see an edited version of that speech. My hope is that the VC himself had a hand in cutting it to the central issues.

I'm going to try and make it even easier for the rest of us and hack it down even further and give you my reading/opinion/comment. Believe me, he never said in so many words what I'm going to write, but after 28 years of journalism, this is what I was hearing and understanding between the lines.

South Africa is caught in a racist trap. Since 1994 rich black political and economic elites have seized power and ensured that we have become the “most unequal society on earth”.

The poorest 20 percent among us earn 1.7% of income, the richest 20% earn 72.5% of income. A startling 43% “eke out an existence of less than R3000 a year — R8.22 a day”.

That is horrendous.

I remember when activists used to bandy these kinds of statistics about to castigate the worst excesses of apartheid. They would be lambasting the devastation and loss of life of babies, children, women and the elderly at places like Thornhill, Glenmore and Dimbaza. Places just over those eastern hills you see outside your window.

Badat writes one of the most potent paragraphs of condemnation that I have heard in the post-apartheid/new SA period: “Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while alongside, crass materialism, corruption, tenderpreneurship and unabridged accumulation run rampant.”

I'd like to see this quote slapped on the back of a T-shirt worn by those noisy government-lackey unionists, especially those vrot-useless teachers we see so often prancing around in free tees emblazoned with unreadable and mindless "Forward to a ... blah blah" slogans.

Much of Badat's speech was about race or racism.

Government "communicator" Jimmy Manyi leads the pack with his "crass utterances" which Badat labels (through Manuel's words) as being the same old "apartheid" mindset.

Race — blackness — has been used in the scramble for power and money in post-1994 SA, not by Madiba, but by the others who circled around him like sharks in a frenzy, and then of course, the Mbeki and now Zuma eras.

The lust of these "black political and economic elites" served to "simply re-produce the severe class inequalities we already have".

This is illustrated with tabloid vividness by the "conspicuous consumption of our off-the-body sushi-loving elites" whom Badat links in the same sentence with "the rapid ascendancy of politically-connected elites into wealthy businesspersons".

Badat says these new elites "make no difference to eliminating the massive inequalities in our society".

What he's really saying, if you take the speech in context, that these self-same elites are actually creating those inequalities — and by logical extension, poverty.

Racism, racial classification, or as he delicately puts it, "using race to advance redress and social equity" "could ossify racial categorisations" and so South Africa returns to apartheid. He won't say it; but he does say we shall "continue to construct identities along the lines of race".

You choose.

So, in my understanding, we have government propagandists, lustful, callous elites, political cronies and crass fat cats — all inhabiting a new social space filled with strident and "repugnant tabloid chatter".

His final epithet for these people is to call them "charlatans", but I'm hearing racist confidence tricksters. People who are providing the social spin, the umbrella of lies if you wish, which provides the camouflage for the grotesque and continued subjugation of millions of South Africans who continue to struggle for basic citizenship and civil rights.

This sounds incredible given all the fabulous policy and Constitutional gains South Africa has made since 1994, but this is what I'm hearing in the VC's speech.

Enough of the depressing stuff. Let's look at the hopes and aspirations he speaks of.

Badat says it's time to free ourselves of this race "obsession" and to start a new struggle. It begins in the imagination: "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.”

Social justice and human dignity. Demand for these rights tend to heighten when there has been violence, and here the VC delivers a chilling analogy of where all the corruption and repression finally ends up — in massacres at places like Sabra, Shatila, Rwanda, and our very own addition to this gruesome pile of mass murder, South African xenophobia.

Heavy stuff, and courageous given that speech is delivered at the university’s most jubilant moment — our own royal wedding which we celebrate every year! But he never holds back. You can sense his passion in addressing his graduates. And he always tempers his speeches with hope and fun.

So what is he calling for? He says we are all looking for the “progressive realisation of hard-won citizenship rights so that we (can) live productive, rich, rewarding and secure lives”.

Our Constitution sets up the “ideal of full citizenship rights for all”.

We must seek to erode and dissolve racism and “establish a non-racial society in which social and cultural diversity is celebrated and (are) seen as a source of vitality” in which racism has no political or economic significance.

We need to construct identities for ourselves which are “rich, multiple, fluid, and dynamic rather than frozen along race lines”.

This is beautiful stuff mense. Worthy of memorising.

We are going to battle for this, but the final goal is a “non-racial society” where we will all feel free to acknowledge our African roots. Here the VC invokes the lovely lyrics from Pholokwane muso Vusi Mahlasela. He sings: “I may be walking in London. But the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart say Africa, say Africa”.

Now don’t get all mushy on me; the VC is tough taskmaster. He’s hard on people who too easily try and completely ignore the apartheid past. This is a man who took the blows of the security police thugs. That’s hard to forget. But he is essentially a rigorous and fair intellectual. Rainbows will not blind him to reality.

He knows we have a ways to go before South Africa does something about rampant inequality, sexual violence against women, crime and racial hatred. And he warns that some institutions — family, school and church — continue to promote racism.

Our way through this mess — and to achieve a measure of freedom and happiness — is to approach the ugly, complex and difficult and emotive issues “with sensitivity, honesty and courage”.

If we don’t, we are so screwed.

It’s lovely to hear him invoke Madiba’s message of finding freedom by adopting our responsibilities — and these are to ensure full citizenship rights for all South Africans living in a just, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society.

These are struggle ideas which are today “lost” on “too many in position of riches and power”.

So there you go girlfriends; another corker of a speech from Grahamstown’s most powerful academic leader.

I’d up that to one of South Africa’s most influential thinkers.

And now I must off to see why the residents of Hoeggenoeg have barricaded the road.