

Nzimande: Today's students understand the message of 1976

15 June 2016 - Studying hard at transforming South Africa's universities and colleges, the students of today understand the message of the generation of the era of the Soweto riots.

History, a German philosopher once remarked, repeats itself. First as tragedy, second as farce.

South Africans old enough to remember the student uprising which erupted 40 years ago this week and ultimately led us to freedom 18 years later remember the ongoing tragedy, the bloodshed, and the personal sacrifice forced upon people of all ages by a militaristic and bloodthirsty regime.

And we wonder whether history's repetitions – threats of violence by bullying minority party leaders, or arson attacks in the dead of night – are indeed farcical, or instead carry the poisonous seed of unnecessary further tragedy within them.

We recall the funerals, the disappearances, the torture, the township wars, the decades wasted in prison by people demanding freedom, equality, and opportunity. And we ask whether liberty and empowerment for all are really still the objectives of those who believe that inflammatory rhetoric and deeds are today's avenue to progress.

We recall the personal courage required to take to the streets of Soweto, Langa, or Imbali, facing paramilitary police in armoured vehicles ready to open fire at any moment. And we recall that, regardless of the bloody and tragic consequences, the youth of 1976 had no choice but to stand against the guns of an inherently unjust, brutal, and exploitative system.

Whatever our criticisms, whatever our justified angers and disappointments at the slowness of change today, the difference is that we are free to choose how to engage the political debate. We all, every day, enjoy the fruits of the sacrifices of those who laid their lives on the line between 1976 and 1994 so that a democratic South Africa could emerge, an argumentative country in which government of the people is indeed by the people.

In education we have achieved in two short decades what the industrialised north took centuries over, and what apartheid was determined to prevent forever: universal basic education, a massive opening of the universities to young people previously unable to afford to study, and an even more dramatic growth in the numbers receiving technical and vocational training.

We have founded new institutions and expanded overall student numbers rapidly, with 205,000 of the poorest university students this year receiving state aid. At the same time, the ratio of technical and vocational training college to university students has risen even more dramatically, from 1 to 4 to close to 1 to 1.

Not that anybody would know any of this, were they simply to listen to the preachers, prophets, and hustlers currently criss-crossing the land dressed in designer red or blue, promising utopia by August 4 while passing themselves off as ready to govern. The problem with utopias is that they are very difficult to turn into reality.

They certainly don't become reality any quicker through firebombing education infrastructure or threatening – as the red-suited man has repeatedly – to mobilise violence against the state. This democratic state of ours may be struggling to transform the residual paramilitary

mindset of the police, it may even be taking too long, but ours is decidedly no longer a state hell-bent on violence against its own people.

This is not a state whose democratically elected government refuses debate and discussion. To threaten violence against it is to flout the Constitution and the rule of law while silently promising the people a return to years of turmoil and pain. It is to fundamentally disrespect the legacy of the youth of 1976.

So while the dress code may have become a little farcical in its incarnation pairing freshly laundered boiler suits with red Gucci leather jackets and loafers, we are in fact in danger of a second, unnecessary tragedy if the current opposition narrative persists.

It is a narrative of anger, of ears sealed against rational debate, eyes shut tight against reality, including the nature of the real challenges facing us as a country as we change for the better. It is a narrative initiated during the 1999 election by another minority party, one which had absorbed most of the Broederbond-fuelled members of apartheid's ruling National Party, and much of its ideology. A narrative under the simple catch phrase, "Fight Back."

Let us resist asking whether, more precisely, this small party was in fact calling on its clientele to vote to fight blacks. Instead, it is useful to track forward what the slogan has gifted the present.

Combining the arrogant mix of genteel racism and paternalistic social engineering which is right-wing liberalism with the slick media operation of that well known devotee to the facts, George W Bush, today's official opposition has never, even for a day, actually imagined itself in government. It has instead fought back with fundamentalist, destructive, and confrontational opposition.

Take the opposition spokesperson on higher education. She attacks the Department of Higher Education and Training for not contributing more than 10% of the estimated cost towards the repair of recent damage to universities by a small and increasingly isolated criminal element.

Ignore her failure to condemn these criminal acts of arson. Or more positively to appeal for alumni and the private sector to come to the assistance of the institutions, as Advocate Cassie Badenhorst has at the University of Johannesburg. Look instead at the inaccuracy as she talks about damage "at the five historically disadvantaged universities".

As the daughter of a former Wits Vice Chancellor, she surely remembers the founding, funding, and function of the institution down the road called Rand Afrikaans University before we transformed it into UJ? An exceptionally well resourced place of privilege, not a struggling bush college, one which sucked resources away from Wits for two decades.

The same university which has suffered the biggest loss by arson. And one of whose oldest alumni has challenged his fellows to help, rather than seeking confrontation.

The opposition is ignoring the best news from our universities and colleges across the country in 2016. South Africa's students are at their books, empowering themselves and the country for the future. Their real and challenging issues notwithstanding, about which we continue engaging them.

Which may be why those hell-bent on confrontation with a government which – for all of its challenges – has made tremendous progress in transforming not only higher education and

training in the spirit of 1976, but the whole of society, must sneak, balaclava camouflaged, into universities under the cover of night to burn the resources tens of thousands of students need desperately.

These incendiaries are not today's incarnation of 1976 revolutionaries, young people facing the armed and brutal enemy by their thousands on the open battlefields of township roads and schools and Bantustan universities. This is a pitiful, minuscule group of generally rather privileged young people who, failing at their studies, seek redemption in hotheaded rhetoric and acts of anonymous, wanton destruction for which there can only be one answer: jail.

Their actions are indeed tragic. Ours, as responsible citizens – whether students, parents, university staff, communities, or government – is to ensure an end to the confrontation, to look back at 1976, and to recognise just how fundamentally our country has already been changed for the better as we push on with further and very necessary transformation.

Eighteen years old in 1976, Dr Nzimande is the Minister of Higher Education and Training.

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