

75TH ANNIVERSARY - UNIVERSITY OF NATAL

CONGRESS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICIALS  
OF SOUTHERN AFRICA 1985

DURBAN. 19TH SEPTEMBER 1985.

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Durban Country Club

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Ladies and gentlemen, I received the invitation to address you here at this Dinner during the seventh Congress of the public relations officials of Southern Africa Universities, and being a Congress of University people, I was asked to address you in my capacity as Chancellor of the University of Zululand and as a Trustee of the Natal University Development Foundation. I assumed that these non-controversial titles were selected to give me a University status in a University function. I am not going to suggest that they were selected to make what I say more digestible as a course in a very appetising meal because if I did so, you would later say I was cheating. Having come to you as a University man, wearing a University hat, I am in fact going to claim the right of free speech. Free speech is after all underscored about everything that is said about academic freedom in this country. I will indeed speak my mind in the vein of what another letter to me about this function called my "broad ranging portfolios and interests." Both in asking me to speak as a University man and explicitly giving me the opportunity to speak about what I like within my broad ranging portfolios and interests, the organisers of this Congress have unleashed Buthelezi on you!

I am aware of the fact that public relations experts are so often regarded as having to talk with their tongue in their cheek as they undo the blunders of important people, or as they present unpopular decisions to those who have to consume them. This is perhaps one role that public relations people enact, but public relations people themselves have made me aware that they do not quite see life like that. I have the dubious honour of attracting attention from a great many sources. One of the categories of people who seem somehow to be attracted by me are in fact public relations experts. Every so often somebody I have never heard of before seeks an appointment with me and because they do so in the promise that they want to be of service to me, I invariably agree to see them. When I do so, it transpires that they believe that I have got an atrocious image in the press; that I have got bad press

mannerisms; that I have got a style which does not do me justice when being interviewed on television; and that my language and demeanour require schooling and that I in fact need their services. I then immediately become tolerant, because I am a humble man who does not in the least mind being criticised and I am only too glad to hear advice from those who know so well how to do that which I try so hard to do.

What I learn from these people is that they lack the understanding of the complexities of my political life, and they most certainly understand little about what it takes to survive as a Black national leader with a mass following in South Africa. When I rather shyly point out to them that despite the deficiencies which they have so eloquently enumerated, I have somehow managed to amass the largest Black membership that any political organisation has ever had in the history of South Africa, they sometimes turn to tell me: be that as it may, my deficiencies really do show when I address myself to more sophisticated audiences. And then when I again even more shyly point out to them that despite these deficiencies, or perhaps even because of these deficiencies, people like President Reagan have noticed me, and people like Margaret Thatcher have noticed me and people like Mr. Shimon Peres have noticed me, and that somehow I think - I may be wrong - that Mr. P.W. Botha has noticed me, and that I have been awarded honorary doctorates, that I have been voted Newsmaker of the Year by the South African Society of Journalists, that I have been awarded the Knight Commander of the Star of Africa by Liberia, that I have been awarded the French National Order of Merit, that I have received the George Meany Human Rights Award from the Council of Industrial Organisation of the American Federation of Labour, that I have received the Paul Harris Rotary Award, that I have been conferred with the Honour of Apostle of Peace (Rastriya Pita) by Pandit Satyapal Sharma of India and that in addition to these, shall I say modest recognitions of my small contribution as a public figure, I have somewhere around August each year to tell my Personal Secretary that my diary is so cluttered that I cannot accept another speaking appointment for six months, the poor little public relations experts quietly go away to think about one or two things!

I am making these points in jest, but I am also making them to emphasise the role of the truly professional public relations experts who see themselves not as fountains of wisdom, but as two-way conduits between what is important on the one hand and how important things need to be conveyed on the other hand. And it is on this more serious note that I would like to say just a few words this evening.

This country has been plunged into a crisis the magnitude of which is awesome in its implications. Never before has truth hung so poignantly balanced, and never before has there been so much confusion sown by so few amongst so many - to plagiarise a famous saying - about such ordinary things. In our South African situation, truth has been elaborated out of existence and ordinary

common-place words like democracy, justice, fair play, equality and freedom of speech have been defined in a South African complexity which defies understanding by ordinary people throughout the world. One of the gravest dangers we face in our country is the danger of thinking that South Africa cannot be normalised and that we need some kind of unique formulation of justice, some kind of unique expression of democracy yet undiscovered by man and yet undiscovered by Mr. P.W. Botha and all his President's Council.

Universities are in the forefront of change in at least two very important ways. Firstly, they stand in the cross-fire between eager young minds which have idealist outlooks and all the harshness of South Africa's political reality, and in the second place every University has to explore that uncharted sea in a ship called academic freedom manned by relevance and responsibility. How Universities can reconcile young idealism with reality and how they can reconcile theory and practice, will determine the extent to which Universities make a major contribution towards the process of normalising this country of ours.

I have heard the most bigoted of views being defended in the name of academic freedom, and I have seen the most blatant of party political commitments being defended as the expression of free thought. And I have again and again seen how difficult it must be for any University to present a balanced image of itself to the outside world.

Universities must be a veritable nightmare to public relations experts. In an industrial empire, the Chairman or Chief Executive Officer could demote people, or fire people who presented the image of the enterprise concerned which was disadvantageous to it. University students and lecturers on the other hand have a licence to abuse the institution which nurtures them all in the name of academic freedom. If you here who are experts in the field of public relations think I am going to go on to feel sorry for you, then you are misreading me. I am glad our Universities are like this. It is in the ferment of ideas and in the free flow of thought that we can possibly discover truth in the ruins left behind by ideological warfare. I am not commenting on academic freedom in a derogatory way. I am attempting simply to point out one dynamic which public relations personnel in our Universities have to accept as beneficial.

I am sure that some of you will be heartened by what I now have to say. You will remember that a time came in our history, only now months ago when the Government had to admit the permanent presence of Blacks in so-called White South Africa. I often smile to myself when I recall what Dr. Gerrit Viljoen said recently about Blacks in White areas in large numbers being not only necessary but desirable. Now if an ex-Broederbond chairman and a doyen of Afrikanerdom steeped in National Party apologist thinking, has in

the end to admit that Blacks are not only necessary but that they are also desirable, surely public relations officers in our Universities can say that freedom of speech is not only necessary but also go on to say that it is desirable. That which is desirable is sometimes most contentious and that which sometimes simply has to be, is sometimes most difficult to accept. Sometimes truths of the deepest meaning give rise to the greatest of controversies, and I am sure that public relations work in our Universities presents professional hazards seldom encountered elsewhere.

This has been so vividly revealed to me in recent months. In April this year and again in June I wrote letters to something like 6 000 prominent South Africans. I attempted to address a cross-section of South African opinion-makers and amongst others I wrote to leading academics in both English and Afrikaans universities and I wrote to English and Afrikaans clergy and I wrote to English and Afrikaans businessmen. I also wrote to English and Afrikaans Members of Parliament and to English and Afrikaans members of our City Councils. I addressed letters to Blacks and Whites, and I addressed letters to generally recognised pro-government institutions and anti-government institutions. Hundreds of letters are pouring in in response to those I sent out and never before have I been made so aware of the extent to which these institutions of our country divide people who in fact have got such deep common cause.

Opinion polls are normally used to divide people into groups which can be separated on one or another criteria so that they can be counted. The responses I have received to my letters have shown me just how misleading this dividing and counting can be. Beyond differences of opinion, researchers establish there is a deeper and broader South Africanism for which I can only thank God. Everywhere I see evidence of thinking and feeling about our situation. I discover in the thinking of members of the National Party a sensitivity which you would never believe possible when you hear Mr. P.W. Botha, or Mr. C.J. Heunis, speaking. There is a deep ferment going on both in Black and White society. There is a deep turning over of important issues. There is in the air a kind of ripeness of time into which I looked through the responses I received to my letters. It was as though somebody had drawn the curtains apart and I could see through a window which I had not looked through before.

Universities should be the great harvesters of this thinking and feeling. Life in South Africa is not one of stark alternatives, and the scene as I see it is not painted in simple blacks and whites, nor is it painted simply in Black White and Red. There is a richness of human experience and a pliability of human minds and a willingness in human hearts to come to terms with realities around us which talk of a vast storehouse of goodwill. But goodwill is an asset which we should now start employing. Like other important assets it has to be put to good use. No matter

how much goodwill there is, unless it is discovered, gauged and utilised, it is of no use at all. Goodwill like any other asset can be wasted. I am mentioning these letters and my awareness of the goodwill which has miraculously been kept safe despite our strife-torn country because I believe that intergroup relations is not something which only needs to be researched by our Universities. It is also an employable commodity in university programmes which could be of real benefit to South African society.

I want to venture the opinion that our Universities have insufficiently extended their commitment to the communities around them and to society at large. Every university is a participant in its intellectual day and age but the cleverest of today's theorists, will sooner or later be made to look foolish by tomorrow's intellectual talent. If Universities are so to speak trapped in their intellectual day and age, they are also in one sense trapped into their social and political day and age. However impoverished that day and age may be there is something there that Universities can do. This may sound trite but I hope that when I add another observation, the triteness will disappear. The best that any statesman has ever done in the history of the world has been done within the acceptance of his or her day and age. There is a real prospect of our Universities being too analytical and too futuristic and under-employing intellectual resources at its disposal in the service of man and society as it is now found. There is a danger that our Universities will be participants in the process of polarisation rather than participants in building bridges between polarised groups.

The adherents of academic freedom are many and varied. Unfortunately some of them are walking intellects so austere and so remote from mankind that they make no contribution towards making Universities relevant to communities and relevant to the societies in which they live. People suffer now, they die now; they kill each other now; they plot and plan to destroy each other now, and it is in the now that people also seek to build bridges and to avoid killing and to avoid polarisation. The here and now of Universities are important and the here and now of their contribution to society at large is important.

When your neighbour falls down and is bleeding you then immediately do the best you can with what is at hand. You improve a tourniquet or a splint. You don't refrain from doing that which you can do because the best means of improvisation have not yet been fully researched. You don't allow your neighbour to die in front of you while you glean from his dying that which can add to the knowledge of saving lives. There is a lesson to be learned in this homely analogy. Universities urgently need to do more to relate University life to community life and to South African society. We need to do more to make Universities participants in ongoing realities, rather than remote ivory tower commentators on the stupidity of man. I believe that Universities face a very real challenge in presenting themselves to society as institutions

sharing deep concerns about our future. If there is any validity in what I am saying, then the public relations work of our Universities needs to be professionalised. Brilliant professors, lecturers and students are sometimes very stupid in their public relations work. What Universities have to offer need to be presented to South African society and need to be presented in a way which only professionals can succeed in.

I have been most careful in not saying what a University should or should not do. I am not being prescriptive and I hope that I have not been heard as condescending. As a Chancellor of a University, I am again and again reminded how difficult it is for my University to remain above divisive politics and to present itself as an institution of great utility to the communities which surround it and to South Africa at large. Whenever I visit other Universities I am made aware that my University is not the only University with difficulties, and I plead for that understanding of man and society which demands that Universities become institutions of utility in the here and now.

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