

**Nelson Mandela 2018 Nobel Inspired Peace Lecture by
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House, University of Witswatersrand, JHB.**

05 October 2018

Programme Director;

H.E Ms. Cecilia Julin, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Sweden;

Dr Molapo Qhobela, CEO of NRF;

Mr. Olof Somell, Curator of Nobel Museum, Sweden;

Dr Gansay Pillay, Deputy CEO of NRF;

Students;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Thank you for inviting me to deliver this lecture, marking the auspicious occasion and centenary of the Nobel Peace laureate, Nelson Mandela.

Invoking the name of this iconic statesman enlivens the human imagination with abundant symbolism that conveys the loftiest ideals of human possibility, in the face of profound adversity.

Honouring his life and the inheritance it bequeaths, the Nelson Mandela Foundation has entitled its centenary programme: 'Be the Legacy'¹.

Such a framing of the heritage that Mandela's life and being vests in us – as freedom fighter, global revolutionary, peace maker, statesman and human being – mandates a keen understanding of the contours of his life, the critical highlights thereof and lessons that can be gleaned from his conception of democratic tenets as they pertain to his humanistic vision for society.

Mandela's articulation of a shared vision of post-apartheid society as one founded on inclusive dimensions in absolute, imposes exacting obligations on South Africans and the international community. As the modern inheritors of this vision,

¹ <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/the-launch-of-the-nelson-mandela-centenary-2018-programme-in-soweto>

we are globally enjoined to live within the moral parameters and philosophical paradigm he evidenced through thought, word and deed.

Memory and Legacy

When Nelson Mandela departed the mortal realm on the 5th of December 2013, we were confronted – in the immediacy of grief – with the question of walking in his footsteps, as it pertained most proximately to the South African nation, and internationally, keeping in mind the global dimensions of Mandela’s personhood.

Belonging to the world

Nelson Mandela’s transcendent universality lent itself to a borderless persona. He served as a figure of idealised proportions, a source of inspiration for global communities who saw within him a symbol of their varied struggles and in the achievement of a liberated South Africa, imagined the possibility of release from contextual empires of domination and relief through entrance into an unqualified humanity.

As metonym and metaphor his name has become ‘short hand for the trans-historical values that define human progress’.²

Thus the man, born in the kuMvezo village of the Eastern Cape – a rural area – transcended his humble provenance and was catapulted by the tides of history and circumstance to become an individual of notable and international significance.

Standing before you, I am evermore aware that Nelson Mandela belongs to the world, recalling the words of President Barack Obama who, at Mandela’s memorial, stated to the South African people:

‘The world thanks you for sharing Nelson Mandela with us’.³

² <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-12-09-mandela-special-parliamentary-sitting>

³ <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-12-10-obamas-tribute-to-mandela-the-full-speech>

The occasion of Mandela's centenary consequently invites you to share in his legacy, thus this address seeks to identify globally relevant lessons and challenges from Nelson Mandela's life.

Programme Director;

A brief proviso on the mythology of Mandela is necessary.

The international statesman was reflexively self-aware of the totalising nature of iconography and mythology: and their amalgamated tendencies to eviscerate the inevitable flaws of human character and in their place construct an unattainably perfect personhood and singular narrative.

As a consequence, he drew attention to this, saying:

'I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.'⁴

Such words highlight the humanity we must keep within our vista when thinking the life and meaning of Nelson Mandela, and engaging with the imprecise relationship between the recognisable and the knowable. In doing so, we are charged with guarding against the refashioning of Mandela into a figure of ideologically- informed propositions, used in service of ends that contradict his vision and being.

I turn now to the matter of historical context in seeking to outline a brief sketch of Mandela's development as a leader.

Historical Context

It is significant that the literal translation of Nelson Mandela's middle name, Rolihlahla, the first he was given before being bestowed an English name at school, is 'pulling the branch of a tree' – its colloquial meaning is 'troublemaker'. Such naming would prove prescient; as the freedom fighter would fulfil its inference, proving a thorn in the side of the apartheid government.

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/40281-i-am-not-a-saint-unless-you-think-of-a>

Grasping the historical formation of Mandela as leader requires a comprehension of the inextricable link between the individual and the collective – as his perspective was shaped within the overarching dimensions of the African National Congress: the liberation movement that became the first democratic government of South Africa. As such, his personal and political development is entangled with the passage of historical progressions.

Mandela embodied the words of the great American thinker James Baldwin, who noted:

‘I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am also so much more than that. So are we all.’⁵

Programme Director;

The ANC, formed in 1912, represented a parliament for the African people, who were excluded from the main body politic on the basis of racially discriminatory legislation that would reach its apex in the system of *apartheid*, which literally translates to ‘apartness’. This hierarchically organised systemic structure of South African life, inaugurated in 1948, dictated every aspect of being according to race.

Tracing a line across the ages, the design of activist energies reveals itself to be shaped by specific historical conditions that necessitate the particularity of designated methods of contestation.

As an organisation, the ANC was initially defined by a moderate political outlook, being comprised of mostly middle class individuals, who chose to wage their struggle through constitutionally sanctioned means – including the use of petitions and demonstrations. This reasoned approach would be subject to a profound shift from 1949 onwards, buoyed by

⁵ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/525114-i-am-what-time-circumstance-history-have-made-of-me>

the inclusion of workers like Walter Sisulu in leadership structures, and occasioned by contextual vicissitudes.

Although the choice to pursue an armed struggle in 1960 was initially met with resistance, historical exigency would alter the course of resistance strategies in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre, where police killed 69 unarmed people who were protesting the pass laws that governed the movement of people of colour. The seminal event would see the organisations of the people banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, forcing them into underground structures and engendering the introduction of violent measures.

Nelson Mandela joined the ANC in 1944 and became instrumental in the development of its Youth League, assisting in the shaping of their radical mass-based policy, the Programme of Action, which was adopted in 1949. Together with exemplary leaders like Anton Lembede, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu, Mandela formed part of a new guard within the organisation, able to envision new political modes brought into being by the violent responses of the apartheid state.

In this, we see the emergence of a leader who acutely understood the methods required to establish a new way of being, even when it initially proved unpopular and was subject to rejection. The lesson this confers us demands a studied and brave response to the challenges of our era, knowing that to lead often translates into forming part of an avant-garde; going where none have journeyed before.

Explaining the rationale behind such an approach, Walter Sisulu commented:

‘In the face of violence, men struggling for freedom have had to meet violence with violence. How can it be otherwise in South Africa? Change must come. Change for the better, but not without sacrifice. My sacrifice, your sacrifice’⁶

⁶ Rantete, 1998: 17.

Mandela echoed Sisulu's words, at now famous the Rivonia Trial, where he stated:

'the hard facts were that 50 years of non-violence had brought the African people nothing but more and more repressive legislation, and fewer and fewer rights...it was only when all channels of peaceful protest had been barred to us, that the decision was made to embark on violent forms of political struggle and to form Umkhonto we Sizwe'⁷

The Rivonia Trial serves as a seminal moment in Mandela's life, identifying him as a pivotal leader in the struggle against white domination. It thus deserves attention, as multiple lessons can be drawn from Mandela's conduct and political tactics while in the dock.

The event that anticipated the Rivonia Trial took the form of a raid on the 11th of July 1963 on the Communist-Party-owned Liliesleaf farm. The farm was the locus of the development of the armed struggle, where the ANC sought to decide on a way forward after being banned by the apartheid government. It became the headquarters of the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe or MK, which translates to 'The Spear of the Nation'. The following statement from the MK manifesto, captures the atmosphere of this moment. It reads:

'The time comes in the life of any nation where there remain only two choices – submit or fight. That time has come now to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defence of our people, our future and our freedom'⁸

The apartheid police raided the farm under the intentions of capturing Walter Sisulu – a key leadership figure in the SACP

⁷ Rantete, 1998: 17

⁸ Rantete, 1998: 17

and ANC, however they instead interrupted a meeting of the MK high command.⁹

The events of that day saw Govan Mbeki, Denis Goldberg, Rusty Bernstein, Raymond Mhlaba, Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu arrested, as well as the plans for guerrilla warfare under discussion discovered, along with other incriminating documents that included Nelson Mandela's diaries.

These discoveries culminated in the Rivonia Trial, which would have huge repercussions for the status of the struggle and reality of apartheid in the global imagination, and the perception of its leaders, most seminally Nelson Mandela.

Programme Director;

Two anti-apartheid permutations that emerged from the trial deserve attention, for the instructional lessons they generate, as the trial indefinitely altered international understanding of the South African context, serving as a key moment that charted the course to the arrival of democracy.

The first permutation that emerged from the trial saw the appearance of iconic figures in the firmament of South African history as the theatre of court played out. These included luminaries like Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Ahmed Kathrada, Denis Goldberg, Andrew Mlangeni and – of course – Mandela.

Whilst previously framed as 'terrorists' and 'communists', through the trial these leaders became metonymic: they stood in for the larger body politic of oppressed South Africans, while projecting a vision for the future on the basis of a humanistic conception of society. This served to undermine the moral underpinnings of the apartheid government, and its claim to superior ethical tenets, by evidencing a superior notion of civilisation constructed on democratic grounds.

⁹ <http://www.dac.gov.za/sites/default/files/liliesleaf.pdf>

Joel Joffe in his book, “The State versus Nelson Mandela, The Trial That Changed South Africa” states that:

‘The accused, of course, had a wider strategy which made the task of the defence far more difficult. Mandela and his co-accused were not prepared to restrict themselves to a straight legal defence; they wanted to go on a political offensive – to the court room to explain precisely what they were aiming to do and why. They wanted to put the record straight and answer in public the falsifications and distortions of the state’.

Rusty Bernstein in this memoir entitled: “Memory Against Forgetting” aptly sums up the same interpretation of the trial:

‘Here was the opportunity the underground had sought and failed to find – the opportunity to address the whole country, to explain the reasons why the struggle had to shift from total non-violence to a combination of violent and non-violent means; to explain why uMkhonto had been formed, by whom and for what purposes. Here at last was the opportunity to break out of the blackout of the state censorship and press self-censorship and replace unreliable rumour with an authentic policy guide for the whole people. The Rivonia Trial became the platform from which to tell the whole story, as it really was’.

As accused number one, Nelson Mandela used these propitious conditions to articulate the core of the struggle with remarkable clarity. His statement from the dock would go on to reverberate across the world, positioning him as the face of the movement against white minority rule; challenging the perception put forward by the apartheid government.

With astute political wit and lucidity, Mandela presented the moral foundations of the liberation struggle, outlining the circumstances that had occasioned the need for violence. As such, his speech would go on to be widely published and

inspire international action at the level of states, intergovernmental organisations and global civil society.

Most notably, the following words found resonance with transnational audiences across all backgrounds:

‘During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die’¹⁰

This willingness to perish for the purposes of a political goal was a perspective that was shared among the trialists. Advocate Bram Fischer, who represented the accused, wrote a letter to a young comrade, that expresses his admiration of this position. It reads:

‘I must tell you of one important event. Some days before the end of the argument in court, Govan, Walter and Nelson came to an early morning consultation to tell me of a decision they had taken with regard to the sentence if it turned out to be capital punishment. They had made up their minds that in that event there was to be no appeal. Their line was that, should a death sentence be passed upon them, the political campaign around such a sentence should not be hampered by any appeal for mercy...or by raising any vain hopes...We lawyers were staggered at first, but soon realised the decision was politically unassailable. But I tell you the story not because of its political wisdom. I want you to know to what incredibly brave men you and others will have to be successors’.

¹⁰ <https://www.news24.com/NelsonMandela/Speeches/FULL-TEXT-Mandelas-Rivonia-Trial-Speech-20110124>

The Rivonia Trial then represents a defining episode in South African democracy. It is a forceful reminder of the radical power of agency.

Programme Director;

It then follows that Mandela's vision for post-apartheid South Africa must be outlined, if we are to understand its global resonances and relevance in contemporary politics.

Mandela's Vision

Mandela's vision for democratic South Africa animated his unwavering commitment to national and global liberation. He consistently called for meaningful change that would lift vulnerable and marginalised people out of their abject experiences: measuring democracy not by the ballot box, but by the experience of significant difference.

As he noted in his inaugural address:

‘We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity’¹¹

Mandela, and many of the veterans of the liberation struggle, waged their fight inspired by a vision of a constitutional, democratic, stable, non-racial, non-sexist, united and prosperous nation that sought to contribute to a world that is just and equitable.

The dream that fired the imagination of Mandela and his comrades was not the inauguration of democracy without substantive change. His statements following the installation of a majority-elected government reveal a commitment to reconciliation and nation building that acknowledged the long road that lay ahead. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he states:

¹¹ http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1994/940510_inauguration.htm

The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. 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.¹²

The state of contemporary South Africa, and indeed many global democracies that content with historically-rooted divisions, serves as a reminder that the structural conditions that underpin the most hideous systems of discrimination are not easily undone.

Indeed, upon the arrival of democracy in South Africa, the world looked to the country emboldened by the hope for change in absolute terms. The sheer weight of national and international expectation has proven itself to have been unattainable – given the anticipation of a total evisceration of the past. However, as James Baldwin reminds us:

‘The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.’¹³

The contemporary South African reality is one that signals Baldwin’s ‘great force of history’ – punctured by poverty, inequality, gendered imbalances, corruption, unemployment and other social, political and economic ills. Thus, post-Apartheid South Africa is defined in accordance with a long history of socio-economic inequality based on the notion of race as a fulcrum of socio-economic organisation.

For a time, the dream of Mandela, to borrow the words of Langston Hughes, appeared deferred. Hope has recently been reignited by a political shift in leadership that has brought with it

¹² <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/a-selection-of-nelson-mandela-quotes>

¹³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/411502-the-great-force-of-history-comes-from-the-fact-that>

optimistic sentiments that the vision of the post-apartheid context endures.

This hope is underpinned by the South African Constitution, which extends beyond conventional civil liberties to the incorporation of certain socio-economic rights such as access to sufficient food and water, social security, health-care services and an environment that is not harmful to health or wellbeing.

As Mandela noted:

‘As long as many of our people still live in utter poverty, as long as children still live under plastic covers, as long as many of our people are still without jobs, no South African should rest and wallow in the joy of freedom.’¹⁴

Thus within our Constitution is an injunction to “establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights” in order that we may “(i)mprove the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person” to contribute to building a better South Africa.”

The Nelson Mandela Foundation centenary campaign revolves around three identified focus areas that correspond with the democratic ideals he fought for. These are:

- ‘Fighting poverty and inequality,
- Striving to eradicate the scourge of racism, and
- Reckoning with our country’s oppressive pasts’.

Programme Director;

Such challenges are not solely confined to the South African context.

Global Challenges

The Western world, advanced democracies and totalitarian regimes continue to strain against the weight of ideology and

¹⁴ <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/a-selection-of-nelson-mandela-quotes>

history that translate into varied experiences of citizenship and the denial of citizenship in the first instance.

Our world is ruptured by numerous systems of prejudice and injustices, including racism, sexism, islamophobia, xenophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexual and gender identities.

That such reality defines the contours of experience in the modern epoch attests to the fact that freedom has both new and ancient frontiers, as the experiences of the past continue to haunt the present in ways that appear novel.

The life of Nelson Mandela, and his conduct as statesman, negotiator and reconciler, demands a transnational understanding of his vision, that must be premised on ethical leadership and critical agency in the face of seemingly immovable structural limitations.

Therefore, Mandela was recognised for his desire to bring Oppressor and Oppressed together. For his commitment to find common ground and purpose and to rid the country of centuries of racial strife and hatred. To instil a sense of unifying justice that would pave the way for reconciliation, understanding and nation building.

The Nobel Peace prize was a symbol of acknowledging more than just recognising Mandela's ideals and principles. It encapsulated and went to the very core and heart of humanity.

Alfred Nobel envisioned that the peace prize would harness and strengthen international peace and solidarity and, in the process, lay the foundations to build the bonds of peace and tolerance between nations. Ideals to which Mandela held firm to, even against opposition.

It is these very key principles enshrined in the Nobel Peace Prize that Mandela displayed coming out of prison as he strove to build a unified nation out of the fire of conflict, strife and bitterness.

Bishop Gunnar Stalsett, emeritus of Oslo (Church of Norway) and Nobel peace prize committee member recalls in an interview “having met Mandela, having met de Klerk, knowing they come from two opposing sides in the struggle, seeing them on the same platform conveying a message of what I would say was reconciliation, their body language was stronger than the words spoken as I sat...one of the proud moments in humanity, when hope is not in vain.”

Programme Director;

A brief aside is necessary, in the spirit of humanising the idea of Nelson Mandela.

Criticism

In the face of insistent hangovers of the past that hamper South African progress, some have sought to carp at Mandela’s choices in the negotiated settlement with the apartheid government – particularly concessions on economic policy and land reform, which remain contemporary sites of contestation.

As the adage reminds us, however, hindsight is twenty-twenty.

In the immediacy of a moment, the repercussions of our decisions do not reveal themselves with faultless clarity. With a view to context, we must also keep in mind the practical realities that underscored Mandela’s negotiations with the apartheid government: which included concerns over violence, apprehensions about divisions among African people, anxiety over the loss of international support and sanctions pressure, the threat of isolation, and a stilted process, among other challenges.

The atmosphere that caused Mandela to take certain decisions was rooted in his concern that precluding dialogue would lead to a state in which:

‘both sides would...be plunged into a dark night of oppression, violence and war.’¹⁵

Mandela was a leader who possessed the courage to take unpopular decisions, with the intention of undoing blockages to negotiation and a view to finding lasting solutions.

He was willing to plunge into the unknown in order to find the enemy, facilitating multiple breakthroughs and remaining true to his principles, politics and country. In mounting critique, we are advised to remember that this was a man, who when offered conditional release on the basis of rejecting violence, said:

‘I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom. Too many have died since I went to prison. Too many have suffered for the love of freedom. I owe it to their widows, to their orphans, to their mothers and to their fathers who have grieved and wept for them. Not only have I suffered during these long, lonely, wasted years. I am not less life-loving than you are. But I cannot sell my birth right, nor am I prepared to sell the birth right of the people to be free.’¹⁶

Nelson Mandela used his time in prison to reflect on the necessary conditions for reconciliation and humanism within South African society. As a result, upon being granted freedom, he walked out of prison without bitterness and resentment, and emerged in the mould of a statesman.

He was not preoccupied with anything other than achieving a peaceful resolution to the struggle that would require the participation and inclusion of all South Africans.

He evidenced a rare ability to rethink timeworn beliefs, which led to his pursuit of non-racialism and support of multi-racial

¹⁵

<https://poseidon01.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=214093085021010118106117127097069009041041002020012032119071117127027026004104122076001026027033028026029089029000097123101003106052042018076075125095100069005094088002009031098083020104070076092102089082112085114064112087102068008024011000097082099105&EXT=pdf>

¹⁶ http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/before/850210_udf.htm

platforms. In a time of exacting global divisions on the basis of identity, ideology, nationhood and experience that is mobilised in the service of separation, the lessons drawn from Mandela's measuring of time, history and context, which underscored the processes he pursued, exemplifies his spirit of humanism and inclusion.

As he commented on his prison spell:

'It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred; he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity. When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both.

As he led the government of national unity – anticipating the transition of the South African state – the generation of Nelson Mandela successfully inaugurated the arrival of democracy in South Africa. It is the South African body polity's task to take it further.

Programme Director,

I return now to the question of global challenges, and the lessons that can be drawn from Mandela.

On an international front, we can be forgiven for asking 'where are the statesmen in the mould of Mandela?'

Apprehending the present condition of global leadership reveals a vast chasm in ethical, moral and humanistic leadership on a state level. As numerous factors converge in the creation of a more globalised world, we seem to be growing

further apart – retreating into our borders and concerned solely with national interests.

Nelson Mandela knew that South Africa's liberation was not separate from the continent. He translated his vision of a free, equal and just post-apartheid state across the globe, conscious of lopsided global power relations and the increasing authority of multinational corporations.

Faced with the realities of climate change, our world requires leaders who evidence Mandela's character, moral certainty and pursuit of peace, as it is haunted by new authoritarian regimes that bring with them the threat of war, deepening divisions across historical lines, and the inauguration of a new epoch of tense national and geopolitical relations, and modern technological powerhouses.

Contemporary necessity demands the advent of leaders who are equal to the challenges of our time, and untainted by the trappings of power, corruption and other sins of incumbency, lest we fall into the hollow of historical disputes.

Such a tension presents itself in the on-going conflict between Greece and Turkey, as well as, the trade war between China and the United States of America.

The spirit of statesmanship, negotiation and reconciliation that Nelson Mandela embodied – makes a call for peace through dialogue.

Mandela tasks us with the creation of a transformed state of global politics, premised on the recognition of the humanity of each individual, and conditions that enable prosperity, justice, peace and security.

In closing, Nelson Mandela exists as a towering figure in the human imagination. Transcending his posthumous condition, he has entered into the domain of the immortal. His depth of conviction, moral character and humanistic ethos renders him beyond the frail condition of humanity.

The statesman's universal message of liberty, equality, justice and peace for all, the courageous actions that he demonstrated, and the figure he cuts in imaginations past and present, has led to his treasured iconised position in the global arena. He belongs, at once, to his family, the liberation movement, South Africa, the continent and the international community – as his memory endures.

Such a condition is encapsulated by the words of South African poet Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, who wrote:

'But memory
Defiant like the sound of pain
rides the wave at dawn
in the marrow of the desert
palm: stands looking still
and the bitter shape
of yesterday's weaves
timeless tomorrows
in the leaves
of laughter larger than
singular birth...'

Programme Director,

I hope that this 2018 Nobel Inspired Peace Lecture will contribute towards the body of knowledge of Mandela, and his relevance for global politics today, as we pursue the construction of a better managed and humane world.

Thank you for your kind attention.