

The Union of South Africa is our collective history, building a better life for all is our collective responsibility

BUSANI NGCAWENI* on the Union centenary

Published: Business Day, 2010/05/24 07:39:14 AM

A WEEK ago, my son's school called and presented a case for why he should retain other science subjects but replace physics with history. This, the teacher explained, was based on academic assessments coupled with his first-term performance.

History? I hesitated. Why not geography? With maths, engineering design and geography, he could at least study town planning or any other built-environment course.

As fate would have it, the next evening I attended a Financial Times dinner that was addressed by Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe . After his address, he fielded few questions from the audience. One came from a student, who asked: "As a white teenager who forms part of the president's award youth programme, I want to know how the youth can help our country to grow as a world power? And how can we promote our rainbow nation?"

Motlanthe replied: "Two ways: the first step is to acquire a good education and skills.... The second is for us as a nation to collectively own our history. Part of our difficulty is that we look at the history of this country from two opposite sides.

"Whereas everything that happened to this or that section of the South African population did so in the midst and presence of all South Africans... I have been astonished by all the deafening silence about the fact that this year marks the centenary of the Union of SA. And we should be familiarising ourselves with what it meant and so on; because it is our common history... But of course there's deafening silence because, from the perspective of those who were excluded from Parliament, that's not their history. And from the perspective of those that were (included) ... (they) feel that that's part of history that they would rather forget. And yet if we are to truly build a united democratic, nonsexist, nonracial and prosperous South African nation, we have got to begin by owning this history as indivisible history. It doesn't belong to this section or that section, it belongs to all of us."

Having received this insight, my response to the school was affirmative. Not only because my son now has a greater success chance, but mainly because here is an opportunity for him to balance natural science with a social science subject, which I hope will make him a wholesome citizen who understands where this country comes from and what his obligations are to society.

Many liberal parents frown when I say that my grade 10 son has obligations that include helping "our country grow as a world power" and to "promote our rainbow nation". Verbally and through literature, I channel him to appreciate this fact.

But of course many would rather avoid this conversation because it either reminds them of discrimination or the unfair advantages their forebears enjoyed. I am glad that my son will learn that this country is achieving its greatness against the backdrop of sacrifice and struggle; a struggle led by visionary men and women who, well before and after the formation of the Union of SA 100 years ago, sought to build a united, nonracial, nonsexist, democratic and prosperous society. Even at the height of dispossession and repression, these great men and women maintained a principle of inclusivity and representation.

For example, when the leaders representing the “natives” presented the “African Claims” in London in 1909, they did not call on the Queen of England to take away her “white people” from SA.

In fact, they never argued against the formation of a unitary state. Instead, they told the British imperial masters that forming a union that excluded the majority from the body-politic of their country was morally, legally and politically unjust.

The response, of course, was negative.

From that point on, the project of building a just and inclusive society reached a tipping point. The visionary men and women representing rural folk, chiefs, kings, peasants, labourers, literate and the illiterate joined hands and formed what later became the African National Congress (ANC). Their aim: to build a just society.

One hundred years later, this remains our lighthouse and a mandate of the governing party throughout the democratic dispensation. The constitution has institutionalised this mandate.

It is strange that, today, some people doubt this and argue that the constitution is not safe with the ANC in charge. This argument coincides with the “swart gevaar” theory, which sustained an illegitimate government in power by scaring white citizens.

The same people frown at the idea of discussing the union, its meaning and consequences. They advance what appears to be residual resentment, a phenomenon whereby the capacity and intentions of black leaders are doubted. No explanation is offered for why the constitution was not changed, even when the preponderance of numbers in Parliament allowed the ruling party to do so.

More recently, calls have been made for extra measures to hold the president and the Presidency accountable. Since no scientific explanation backs this proposal, we are left to conclude that the premise is residual resentment, which in fact undermines the head of state and the executive. This will ultimately weaken democracy and all the principles upon which the constitution was founded.

As we mark the centenary of the Union of SA, we should avoid such excesses. Democracy is a two-way street: there are rights and obligations of the governing and governed. Weakening the authority of the governing by casting doubts in the minds of the governed does not promote national unity. Instead it breeds political mistrust and instability.

I would hate to think that this is the aim of those arguing that the constitution is under threat. After all, why would the ruling party undermine the constitution that it drafted and could have easily used its successive parliamentary majority to alter? Even in the face of growing inequalities — with the majority trapped in poverty being those excluded by successive laws from 1910 onwards — why is the ANC sustaining a view that SA belongs to all who live in it?

That we have millions of people socially and economically deprived is a fact. That these deprivations are also a function of “accumulated disabilities” is a fact. To reverse these deprivations, South Africans should work together by rallying behind those entrusted with the responsibility to lead society. Criticism and opposition are inalienable in a democratic system. However, there is an obligation to those who oppose to do so constructively.

My son will learn this history at school unmediated by my ideological prejudices. So, as Business Day’s editor challenged readers to reflect on this painful period in our history, let’s also remember that deprivation, illiteracy, unemployment and landlessness did not begin in 1994. What 1994 offered was the opportunity to progressively redress accumulated disabilities.

Challenges notwithstanding, the government has played a key role in creating a better life for South Africans.

This should be acknowledged by all. Delivery failures should not be a curse but an inspiration to all to work harder and faster in pursuit of improved living conditions. Such solidarity will safeguard the constitution and ensure realisation of its provisions; not some pseudo-oversight structures targeting the head of state.

This is our collective obligation, as much as 1910 — a year that marked the beginning of consolidated racial exclusion and deprivation — is our collective history.

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