

PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Inaugural King Moshoeshoe Memorial Lecture

University of the Free State

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I

In 2004, the University of the Free State turned one hundred years old. As part of its centenary celebrations, the idea of the Moshoeshoe memorial lecture was mooted as part of another idea: to promote the study of the meaning of Moshoeshoe. A remarkable documentary on Morena Moshoeshoe was produced and broadcast by the South African Broadcasting Corporation to much acclaim.

It is good to know that one of the aims of the Centenary celebrations, to deepen the legacy of Moshoeshoe through a lecture series, is being launched tonight. It is a singular honour for me to have been asked to be the first speaker in this series of lectures. This is a daunting task, given that there are among the audience expert scholars on the history of Morena Moshoeshoe. But it is wonderful that every year people will gather at the University of the Free State to reflect on some aspect of the extraordinary legacy of Morena Moshoeshoe. The University of the Free State must be commended for his initiative.

I am reminded that this lecture series ought to make us recall another series that began on March 12, 1972, the day known in Lesotho as Moshoeshoe's Day, when the first Moshoeshoe Memorial Lecture was delivered by the indomitable Mrs Helen Suzman on the topic: "Moshoeshoe the Statesman". Since then, many distinguished lecturers have presented this lecture. I am truly honoured to be part of a tradition that is now growing further roots on the South African side of the Mokare River. There are many in this audience tonight who have come from Lesotho. Their presence is testimony to the influence Lesotho, in its quiet persistence, continues to exert on South Africa.

To state this is to affirm a counter-intuitive truth. Common intuition would have us assert that influence flows from the bigger towards the smaller. In reality, it is not always so. We have many examples in history of how powerful people conquered others, only to submit to the superior culture of the conquered. This is testimony to the strength of culture. It is not how big a country is that finally matters, but how successfully it has organised its national life. It is the power of organised living that survives.

This lecture comes at a critical point in South Africa's still new democracy. There are indications that the value of public engagement that Moshoeshoe prized highly through his *lipitso*, and now also a prized feature in our democracy, may be under serious threat. It is for this reason that I would like to dedicate this lecture to all those in our country and elsewhere who daily or weekly, or however frequently, have had the courage to express their considered opinions on some pressing matters facing our society. They may be columnists, editors, commentators, artists of all kinds, academics, and writers of letters to the editor, non-violent protesters with their placards, and cartoonists who put a mirror in front of our eyes. Even when they venture into sacred territory, as some cartoonists recently did, they are only just reminding us that even the sacred can be abused for ends that have little to do with sanctity. It is their way of helping us, perhaps more profoundly than we realise, to preserve that very space of sanctity in our lives. They deepen our insights by deepening our understanding.

It is fitting to celebrate their courage. They remind us that leadership is not only what we do when we have been put in some position of power to steer an organisation or some

institution. Leadership is what all of us do when we express sincerely, our deepest feelings and thoughts; when we do our work, whatever it is, with passion and integrity; when we recall that all that mattered when you were doing your work, was not the promise of some reward afterward, but the overwhelming sense of appropriateness that it had to be done. The awareness of consequence always follows after the act, and then the decision to proceed.

As we celebrate these people of courage, we should also remember the actual threats they face from those who incite others, through hate speech, to commit violent acts against fellow citizens with dissenting opinions. It is not with courage that they incite, but with their recourse to the narcotic protection of the crowd. Let us remember that our constitution does draw the line.

Section 16, subsection (1) of our Bill of Rights prescribes under Freedom of Expression:

- freedom of the press and other media;
- freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;
- freedom of artistic creativity; and
- academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.

However, the right in subsection (1) does not extend to –

- propaganda for war;
- incitement of imminent violence; or
- advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.

II

Bloemfontein has a special history among South Africa's cities. I suppose it is no accident that it became a famous railway junction. Its geographical location became one of its major assets. In those days of the railway, well before the time of the highways, railway junctions got people from all corners of the country to converge at a geographically convenient spot, either as a destination, or as a resting place before an onward journey. Some railway junctions evolved into major centres of business. But Bloemfontein became something else. In time, people congregated here to confer, to debate, and to decide. It was in such an environment that prominent political, educational, religious, legal, and traditional leaders gathered to create the African National Congress in 1912.

Let's just recall some of these remarkable people who established the ANC on January 8 - 11, 1912. There was John Langalibalele Dube (1871 – 1946), who was to be elected the first President of the ANC. Sol Plaatje (1879 – 1932), became the General Secretary of the new movement. There was Pixley ka Isaka Seme, (1880 – 1951) credited as having been the intellectual spirit behind this founding moment. These were remarkable people, who were not only honoured by the positions they were elected into, but they in turn, enhanced further the dignity and stature of those very positions, such that there was dynamic complementarity between office and the personal attributes of those that filled it.

I would like us to recall that there was a significant influence of Lesotho at this founding conference. Morena Letsie II, who was not present at the conference, was prominently represented by Morena Maama and the King's secretary, Phillip Modise. In a most

remarkable circumstance, Phillip Modise was, on the second day of the conference, the 9th, elected Chair of the conference. This connection between Lesotho and South Africa enables us to play a little more with our metaphor of the railway junction.

Lesotho, under Morena Moshoeshe, attracted people from various parts of our sub-continent, who had fled from the devastation that came to be known as *lifaqane*, as Shaka consolidated his kingdom through military conquests. While historians may give various explanations for these momentous events, there is general agreement that the resulting wars shook the social foundations of many societies in Southern Africa. It was in this context that Moshoeshe exercised leadership. How do you create order out of the surrounding chaos? More urgently, how do you sustain such order? Moshoeshe must have asked himself such questions as he sensed the pressure of external events pushing inwards towards him, and further sensed the limitations of confronting the pressures on their own terms.

He created a junction of sorts where those arriving would owe allegiance to the overarching values of peace and social justice while maintaining their languages and culture. Over time cultural plurality itself became a binding value. Moshoeshe was able to prove that diversity can be a binding attribute, in an environment in which it could otherwise be expected to be divisive. This seems a key principle of leadership for Moshoeshe, and is not an easy one to grasp. *You achieve the most unity among distinctive social entities where you give relatively free play to their distinguishing features.* This principle does not sit easily with our intuitions.

As in the case of railway junctions, geographical convenience for Lesotho was vital. As it turned out, the mountainous character of Lesotho presented a formidable barrier to any casual or determined aggressor. In particular, the strategically chosen Thaba Bosiu became the quintessence of defensive capability. We learn from the documentary on Moshoeshe that in the aggressive environment of the *lifaqane*, Moshoeshe introduced the notion of defence. At a time when nations enhanced their sense of security by attacking others, he introduced the notion of securing what you have. It was a radically different kind of mindset.

In addition to purely military considerations securing what you have must also crucially depend on achieving the voluntary allegiance of citizens. Again, Moshoeshe's method was counter-intuitive. Where conventional wisdom would have a leader wield his power to secure compliance, you are likely to have more compliance where it is voluntarily given than prescribed. The latter has only short term value. In a situation as uncertain and insecure as the time of the *lifaqane*, you needed, paradoxically, citizens with a greater sense of personal autonomy. Such citizens are more likely to be resourceful than those who are held on a leash. Of course, voluntary allegiance is hard to achieve. It tests to the limit, the ability of a leader to be patient and work the way of humility.

There is a remarkable story of how Moshoeshe dealt with Mzilikazi, the aggressor who attacked Thaba Bosiu and failed. So when Mzilikazi retreated from Thaba Bosiu with a bruised ego after failing to take over the mountain, Moshoeshe, in an unexpected turn of events, sent him cattle as he retreated, bruised but grateful for the generosity of a victorious target of his aggression. At least, he would not starve along the way. It was a devastating act of magnanimity which signalled a phenomenal role change. "If only you had asked," Moshoeshe seemed to be saying, "I could have given you some cattle. Have them any way." It is impossible for Mzilikazi not to have felt ashamed. At the same time he could still present himself to his people as one who was so feared that even in defeat he was given gifts. At any rate, he went on his way and never returned.

The unusual way Moshoeshoe dealt with Mzilikazi and other aggressors mirrored his relations with his own people. It is likely that Moshoeshoe surmised: the people around me, secured in a protective space, have survived social dislocation elsewhere. They may easily reproduce in the new environment the culture of aggression engendered by the dislocation they have experienced. That could render vulnerable the safe space that Lesotho could be, and became. It was not enough to secure the physical space: it was equally vital to create and secure a new psycho-social space through robust law and custom, and participative governance. A new value system was required, in which learned behaviour was turned round.

The way of Moshoeshoe strongly suggests that the application of old rules to new situations will almost always compound the problem. The leadership challenge is in being able to recognise that there is a new situation at hand, and that what needs to be done may involve applying unexpected solutions.

III

I look at our situation in South Africa and find that the wisdom of Moshoeshoe's method produced one of the defining moments that led to South Africa's momentous transition to democracy. Part of Nelson Mandela's legacy to us is precisely this: what I have called counter-intuitive leadership, and the immense possibilities it offers for re-imagining whole societies.

"The characteristic feature of this type of leadership," I have observed before, "is the ability of leaders to read a situation whose most observable logic points to a most likely (and expected) outcome, but then to detect in that very likely outcome not a solution but a compounding of the problem. This assessment then calls for the prescription of an unexpected outcome, which initially may look strikingly improbable. Somehow, it is in the apparent improbability of the unlikely outcome that its power lies. This is because the improbable scenario is soon found to evolve its own complex solutions, completely unanticipated. A leader then has to sell the unexpected outcome because he has to overcome intuitive (and understandable) doubts and suspicions that will have been expected. In this act of salesmanship, truth and the absolute integrity of the leader are decisive attributes."¹

Allister Sparks recalls one of the defining moments of the transition from apartheid to democracy when Mandela met some key generals of the South African Defence Force.

"Mandela, with his characteristic candour when the stakes are high, is reported to have given the generals his frank appraisal of the situation everyone faced:

'If you go to war,' he told the generals, 'I must be honest and admit that we cannot stand up to you on the battlefield. We don't have the resources. It will be a long and bitter struggle, many people will die and the country may be reduced to ashes. But you must remember two things. You cannot win because of our numbers: you cannot kill us all. And you cannot win because of the international community. They will rally to our support and they will stand with us.' General Viljoen was forced to agree. The two men looked at each other . . . and faced the truth of their mutual dependency.²

¹ Kader Asmal, David Chidester, Wilmot James. *South Africa's Nobel Laureates*, Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2004, pp.79. I have altered this quotation slightly which comes from my contribution to this anthology.

² Allister Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa's Negotiated Revolution* (Sandton: Struik, 1994), 202-4.

“Nothing could be clearer; nothing more devastating in its logic and the clarity of inevitable implications. Mandela’s technique is to concede to the relative strength of an adversary, a concession that buttresses the latter’s self-confidence. But the implications that follow the logic of the battlefield are devastating. They promise a low-value outcome too stark to disregard. They guarantee a pyrrhic victory of little worth to both sides. It is at that point that mutual interest emerges and is further affirmed by an agreement to explore a different path.

“The histories that led Mandela and his colleagues on the one hand, and on the other, General Viljoen and his colleagues, to converge physically in that house in Houghton, and even more significantly, to converge in understanding, are divergent. But that divergence is superficial. In reality, the political boundaries that define South Africa, its economic landscape which, in its capitalist manifestations is more than a century old, the complex human movements across the land in which languages and cultures interacted intimately, all point to increasingly common perceptions South Africans developed over time, of an overriding reality more experienced than consciously acknowledged. So, more than the discussants at the meeting ‘facing the truth of their mutual dependency’, they were giving recognition and legitimacy to unifying tendencies that were taking shape over time.

“The dynamics of that meeting in a house in Houghton are significant in another sense. I would submit that it is highly unlikely that General Viljoen could have given Mandela’s assessment of the situation with a similar degree of clarity, conviction, and authority. This is because General Viljoen and his colleagues had been socialized to defend white privilege won by conquest. Such a culture engenders inward looking behaviour. Where it is as powerful as South Africa’s white society was, it turns other cultures outside of it into instruments of its self-defined goals. It limits the capacity of its defenders to empathise with and to even imagine a common interest with outsiders.

“On the other hand, Mandela’s clarity of thinking, strong sense of purpose, his moral and visionary authority, are all definitive of an ascendant value system. General Viljoen and his colleagues submitted to this authority because it convincingly included them in its articulations. They recognised the leadership of someone they had oppressed to have the wisdom and integrity not only to seek a future that preserves their lives, but one which also promises new kinds of fulfilment. Only the oppressed have the human capacity to free not only themselves, but their oppressors as well.”³

IV

A number of events in the last twelve months or so have made me wonder whether we are faced with *a new situation that may have arisen*. An increasing number of highly intelligent, sensitive, and highly committed South Africans, across the class, racial, and cultural spectrum, confess to feeling uncertain and vulnerable as never before since 1994. When indomitable optimists confess to having a sense of things unhinging, the misery of anxiety spreads. It must have something to do with an accumulation of events that convey the sense of impending implosion. It is the sense that events are spiralling out of control, and no one among the leadership of the country seems to have a definitive handle on things.

³ Kader Asmal, David Chidester, Wilmot James. *South Africa’s Nobel Laureates*, Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2004, pp.76-77.

There can be nothing more debilitating than a generalised and undefined sense of anxiety in the body politic. It is a situation that breeds conspiracies and fear.⁴ There is a sense that a very complex society has developed in the last few years, a rather simple, centralised governance mechanism in the hope that delivery can then be better and more quickly driven. The complexity of governance then gets located within a single structure of authority rather than in the devolved structures such as were envisaged in the constitution, which then should interact with one another continuously, and in response to their specific settings, to achieve defined goals.

The danger of such a centralised mechanism is that it soon depends on the leader that sets it up. This renders the mechanism inherently unstable and unsustainable. Collapse in such a single structure of authority, in the absence of a robust backup, can be catastrophic. Beyond that, successors may want to inherit the structure without a conceptual grounding in what led to its establishment. It can then either degenerate, or develop a life of its own in which those caught up in it seek only to preserve it for its own sake..

According to our constitution, South Africa is a democracy of devolved governance. The autonomy of devolved structures presents itself as an impediment only when visionary cohesion collapses. Where such cohesion is strong, the impediment is only illusory, particularly when it encourages healthy competition among the provinces, or where a province develops a character that is not necessarily autonomous politically but rather distinctive and a special source of regional pride. Such competition brings vibrancy to the country. It does not necessarily challenge the centre. This kind of autonomy is vital in the interests of sustainable governance. The failure of the structures to actualise their constitutionally defined roles should not be attributed to the failure of the governance mechanism. It is too early to say that it has not worked. The only viable corrective way will be in our ability to be robust in identifying the problems and then dealing with them concertedly.

Let me now characterise a combination of circumstances that seem to lead to the sense of unravelling. I would like to engage them in the form of questions. I resort to questions in order to avoid identifying and referring to difficult, if painful events, in a manner that could suggest that the mere reference confirms the problem implied. I want to avoid saying: "look at Khutsong" as if you will understand what I mean when I say you should look at Khutsong. I have found that it is such knowledge assumed to be shared that leads to despair, for it conjures a reality so overwhelming that it is fatalistic.

Let me ask some questions which have been asked.

Nothing could have been more frightening than when a plot by the Boeremag was uncovered and some members of the organisation were apprehended. The general assessment by those in the security services was that in the total scheme of things, the Boeremag were not such a threat. One hopes, though, that the vigilance of the state continued. However, in the course of the trial following their arrest, it was suddenly announced that some members of the Boeremag escaped dramatically from a maximum security situation. As far as I am aware, they have not been recaptured. Lingering questions remain which feed into other questions raised by other unresolved, threatening events. How extensive is the probable security fracture within the security and law enforcement agencies? What has been done to close the gap? For a matter of such importance, the public does not know very much. The scant communication may dangerously convey the message that either nothing is being done, or the state is failing in this matter. The sense of insecurity and vulnerability is accentuated.

⁴ Dr. Xolela Mangcu reflected on this phenomenon recently in an article in Business Day, 6 April, 2006

Then, we have seen some gruesome, needless killings recently. Why were two young girls abducted, raped, and then killed? Why was a little girls' home broken into, and not satisfied with raping her minder, and taking some family possession, the assailants then went on to murder her? Why is it, that increasingly the perpetrators are young men in their twenties? Evidence suggests that these are not isolated events.

Why did the matter of municipal demarcation lead to the situation in Khutsong! The problem there seems to continue unabated. There were a number of similar, seemingly local uprisings in small localities around the country, a fair number in the Free State. What have we learned about these uprisings which took place about the same time? What were they really all about?

What should we think about the seemingly unending cycle of labour stoppages around the country? The recent, on-going strike action has been, by all accounts, particularly brutal, so brutal that it is difficult to imagine a union celebrating victory eventually after so many deaths. What kind of victory could this ever be? This situation is not helped by trade union leaders who declare that they do not condone violence, and then go on in the next breath to express their understanding of it by invoking its apartheid origins. When they do this, they seem to convey their inability to hold their members to account. They seem helpless. Or are they?

I should mention the one event that has dominated the national scene continuously for many months now. It is of course, the trying events around the recent trial and acquittal of Mr. Jacob Zuma. The aftermath continues to dominate the news and public discourse. What really, have we learned or are we learning from it all? It is probably too early to tell. Yet, the drama seems far from over, promising to keep us all without relief, in a state of anguish. It seems poised to reveal more fault lines in our national life than answers and solutions.

The common thread among these events is the sense of an unending spiral of confidence-sapping problems with a beginning and no visible end. Individually they may have little to do with one another, only that they have cumulative effects. Are they elements of a cumulative message that *a new situation may have arisen?*

There may be a strong suggestion in all this that perhaps we have never had social cohesion in South Africa, certainly not since the infamous Natives' Land Act of 1913. What we certainly have had, over decades is a mobilizing vision. Could it be that the mobilising vision is cracking under the weight of the reality and extent of social reconstruction, and that the legitimate framework for debating these problems is collapsing, as a result? If that is so, are we witnessing a cumulative failure of leadership in dealing with this situation?

In the context of the public drama we have been witnessing, there is the real sense that none of our leading organisations seem in control of the situation. We seem to be on auto pilot where good work continues to be done by remarkable and dedicated public officers almost as if they are saying "our work will speak for us". But the continuing good work and the continuing sense of crisis run parallel, sending conflicting messages. Few are the voices that give some authoritative reassurance. I am making a descriptive rather than an evaluative statement. I do not believe that there is any single entity to be blamed. It is simply that we may be a country in search of another line of approach. What will it be? *Has a new situation arisen?*

Regrettably, we may witness a resort to old solutions, useful under old situations that have passed. We may very well witness a call to unity, where the counter-intuitive

imperative would be to acknowledge disunity. A declaration of unity where it manifestly does not seem to exist, will fail to reassure. We have seen much in the public domain which suggests that there may be many within the “broad alliance” who have the view that the mobilizing vision of old may have transformed into a strategy of executive steering with a disposition towards an expectation of compliance. No matter how compelling the reasons for that tendency, it may be seen as part of a cumulative process in which popular notions of democratic governance are apparently devalued; where public uncertainty in the midst of seeming crisis induces fear which could freeze public thinking at a time when more voices ought to be heard.

I am a speculating member of the public, looking for answers. It seems to me that we need a confidence-building mechanism by which we could acknowledge the situation we are in, whatever it is. We need a mechanism that will affirm the different positions of the contestants, as well as validating their honesty in a way that will give the public confidence that real solutions are possible. It is this kind of openness, which never comes easily, that leads to breakthrough solutions, of the kind Moshoeshoe’s wisdom symbolises. Who will take this courageous step? What is clear is that a complex democracy such as South Africa’s cannot survive a single authority. Only multiple authorities within a constitutional framework have a real chance.

I want to press this matter further.

Could it be that part of the problem is that we are unable to deal with the notion of “opposition”. We are horrified that any of us could become, “the opposition.” We have demonized this word. It is time we began to anticipate the arrival of a moment when there was no longer a single, [overwhelmingly dominant political force as is currently the case. Such is the course of history and change. The measure of the maturity of the current political environment will be in how it can create conditions that anticipate that moment rather than ones that seek to prevent it. This is the formidable challenge of a popular post-apartheid political movement. Can it conceptually anticipate a future when it is no longer overwhelmingly in control, in the form in which it currently is, and resist, counter-intuitively, the temptation to prevent such an eventuality? Successfully resisting such an option would enable its current vision and its ultimate legacy to our country to manifest itself in different articulations of itself, which then contend for social influence. In this way, the vision never really dies; it simply evolves into higher, more complex forms of itself. If the resulting versions are what is called “the opposition” that should not be such a bad thing – unless we want to invent another name for it.⁵ The image of flying ants going off to start other similar settlements is not so inappropriate.

I do not wish to suggest that the nuptial flights of the alliance partners are about to occur: only that it is a mark of leadership foresight to anticipate them conceptually. Any political movement that has visions of itself as a perpetual entity should look at the compelling evidence of history. Few have survived those defining moments when they should have been more elastic, and that because they were not, did not live to see the next day.

I believe we may have reached a moment not fundamentally different from the sobering, yet uplifting and vision-making, nation-building realities that led to Kempton Park in the early 1990s. The difference between then and now is that the black majority is not facing white compatriots across the negotiating table. Rather, it is facing itself: perhaps really for the first time since 1994.

⁵ See Edgar Pieterse & Frank Meintjies, *Voices in Transition: The Politics, Poetics and Practices of Social Change in South Africa*. Sandown: Heinemann, 2004. pp.16-17.

This is not a time for repeating old platitudes. It is the time for vision and bold, mature leadership. Could we apply to ourselves the same degree of inventiveness and rigorous negotiation we displayed prior to the adoption of our constitution? In the total scheme of things the outcome to the current leadership drift could be as disastrous as it could be formative and uplifting, setting in place the condition of a second negotiated mandate that could lead to a true renaissance sustainable for generations to come.

Morena Moshoeshe faced similarly formative challenges. He seems to have been a great listener. No problem was too insignificant that it could not be addressed. He seems to have networked actively across the spectrum of society. He seems to have kept a close eye on the world beyond Lesotho, forming strong friendships and alliances, weighing his options constantly. He seems to have had patience and forbearance. He had tons of data before him before he could propose the unexpected. He tells us across the years that moments of renewal demand no less.