



You could be forgiven for comparing the long queues at taxi ranks and bus stops in Capri townships to those found at the first democratic elections in 1994



Nelson Mandela and Cyril Ramaphosa during the signing of South Africa's first democratic Constitution 15 years ago



Minister of National Planning Trevor Manuel chats with President Jacob Zuma after the handover of the National Planning Commission's vision document for 2030

We need a fresh national narrative

SA must write a story that acknowledges the past, but also guides us towards a greater freedom, writes Zubeida Jaffer

Do we need a new national narrative that can make sense of where we are and where we are going? Do we need a new story that will inspire a commitment in all of us to strive to get to our destination?

Both the work of the National Planning Commission and the newly released policy documents of the majority party suggest that we do.

The ANC's policy documents talk about a second transition that requires a paradigm shift to social and economic development within a changed set of global conditions.

The National Planning Commission has developed Vision 2030, which focuses on where we want to be in 20 years. Will both of these processes take us towards a new narrative that could grip our imaginations? Or will those of us ready to act be stuck in ongoing meaningless controversy?

Let's pause for a moment and look back. Millions of us in this country were swept up in the liberation narrative. This became the foundation of the emergence of a new democratic state in 1994.

Before this, there were essentially three competing narratives coursing through the country's lifeblood in the past century: the liberation narrative, the Afrikaner narrative that became side-tracked by apartheid ideology and the liberal narrative committed to assimilation of the African majority into a European ethos.

Professor Njabulo S Ndebele, an author and educationist, wrote in his book *Fine Lines from the Box* that while apartheid insisted that the oppressed would develop better alone, liberals insisted that they would develop better within the prescriptions of the European.

Both, he said, insisted on being the human reference point of all the people of this country.

The first democratic election marked the beginning of a break with this world view that held South Africa in its grip for more than 300 years.

Alongside this came the narrative of the "Rainbow Nation" and, finally, in 1996 came the adoption of the Constitution, representing a compromise between all the different political elements in the country.

We continue to have this as the one key foundational document that intended to bind us all together. It is a non-partisan framework within which we function as a nation. At the adoption of the Constitution, then deputy president Thabo Mbeki made his moving "I am an African" speech, an inclusive narrative that continues to be inspirational. This evolved into his driving of an African Renaissance agenda that extended our narrative to

include the entire continent.

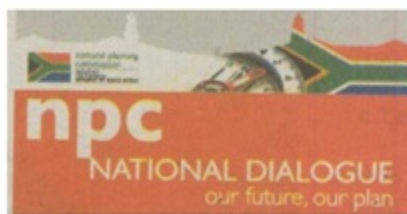
The liberation narrative was able to sweep large numbers of people in a common direction committed to get to their destination. When Nelson Mandela finally became president, our story inspired millions of struggling people across the world.

Since then, the world has changed. We are living in a time of tremendous economic and social upheaval. Surely we need a national narrative that can help move us forward in these changing times?

It is important to understand the triumphs and tragedies of our past in order that we can move forward with full awareness. However, there is nothing we can do about changing our past. We need to focus our energies on moving forward.

In preparing for this lecture, I examined the national narratives of other countries and came across a document entitled "Article X".

Way back in 1947, a Mr X



wrote a national narrative that was able to frame bipartisan consensus for the next 40 years in the US. In essence, the article argued that the US was the leader of the free world against the communist world, and that it would invest in containing the Soviet Union and limiting its expansion while building a dynamic economy and a prosperous society.

Last year on April 8, a second document, titled "A National Strategic Narrative", was issued by a Mr Y. Mr Y happens to be two senior members of the joint chiefs of staff of the Barack Obama administration who claim they write in their personal capacities to stimulate a national conversation.

They argue that the US is getting it wrong when it comes to setting its priorities, particularly with regard to the budget and the use of national resources. They say that the Americans are overreacting to Islamic extremism, underinvesting in their youth, and failing to embrace the sense of competition and opportunity that made America a world power.

In essence, their argument is as follows: "We want to become the strongest competitor and the most influential player in a deeply interconnected global system, which requires that we invest less in defence and more in sustainable prosperity and the tools of effective global engagement."

Will their alternative narrative grip the public imagination? Does it read the mood in their country accurately?

What is the mood in our country and what is the narrative we need to make sense of the world we live in? When Finance Minister Pravin

Gordhan presented his budget speech in Parliament recently (February 22), he hinted at the need for writing a new story together.

The minister said: "Our new story, our period of transition is about building modern infrastructure, a vibrant economy, a decent quality of life for all, reduced poverty, decent employment opportunities. It is a story that must be written by all of us."

Changed policies under discussion at the policy conference alone cannot provide the central impetus that will hold us together. Does the National Development Plan to be finalised in May have this potential?

I am not here tonight (March 12 2012) to suggest what the narrative should be, but I am arguing strongly that we have to consider developing a fresh national narrative.

I believe that a national narrative could be formulated by one or more individuals. We have a precedent for this in our

country. Way back in 1911 a South African lawyer, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, delivered a lecture that gave intellectual authorisation to the decolonisation process.

Seme's address led to a cultural and intellectual movement of writers, artists, and religious and political leaders whose objective was to construct a counternarrative to European modernity by defining African modernity.

You can find information on the New African Movement on a website developed by Professor Ntongela Masilela, a US-based South African academic.

Will we draw on our past narratives, acknowledge the three major dominant narratives and craft a fourth way that moves us forward?

We need a simple story that acknowledges our failings, but also recognises our strengths. The narrative could run alongside the National Development Plan spelling out what is expected of us all.

Here at the University of the Free State, we face the same challenge. What is the story of this university? What is the new story that we are in the process of writing? Can we find a way to write a story that acknowledges the past, but weaves together a thread that can guide us towards a greater freedom that so many of us long for?

The challenge here on the campus and in South Africa is to find the right words that will inspire us to understand what we have to do (right action) to live on a campus, in a country and on a continent that deserves to fully taste what it means to be free.

» Veteran journalist and author Jaffer presented these thoughts at the Critical Conversations Forum at the University of the Free State. Jaffer is writer-in-residence on the campus. Visit www.zubeidajaffer.co.za or send your comments to info@zubeidajaffer.co.za