

## **Talk – Inter-SRC Meeting – University of Free State 5/5/2012**

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Honorable ladies and gentlemen, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Prof Verschoor, Dean of Student Affairs, Mr Rudi Buys, colleagues from various faculties and departments, student leaders, friends and guests, good morning - thanks for inviting me. Given the particular conjunction we are in as a country, I have now grown to love and remember Martin Luther King Jnr, especially when he says (paraphrasing Holland):

‘God give us leaders

A time like this demands strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands

Leaders whom the lust of office does not kill

Leaders whom the spoils of life cannot buy

Leaders who have honor; leaders who will not lie

Leaders who can stand before a demagogue

And damn his treacherous flatteries without winking'

How I wish we could have leaders of this calibre - especially at this point in our democracy.

Talking about student leadership and governance at a university, especially a university like ours which is going through a period of transition, compels one to confront many other issues arising from the context of the times in which we live. As a country and a university we have come a long way. As a generation, we also are living in interesting times. I say this because it is important to locate issues of student leadership and governance in context.

Last month, thinking about the global context, I decided to read, for a third time though, one of the seminal works of Eric

Hobsbawm titled *The Age of Extremes*. It is because I keep trying

to explain to myself, the meaning of the times we are living in and the implications for the fate of mankind. But now and then I get convinced that the greatest problem of mankind in our time is the loss of that which makes human beings human. With the diminishing spiritual condition of our modern times and 'the loss of metaphysical certainties', the world is gradually losing its human dimension. If the world is to change for the better during our lifetime, the change will have to start in human consciousness – 'in the very humanness of the modern men'. Leadership is therefore key to the changing of the human condition – it is key to the awakening of a new deeper sense of responsibility towards other human beings and towards the world. In the light of my reading of Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes* I am of the view that among the causes of the basic tensions in the world today is how to be human and learn to live in humane ways versus the rush for material wealth, status and power. That is why leadership matters today more than before – it is here that leadership which leads through the power of personal example

becomes so vital. The talk about effective governance is not sufficient because effective governance requires leadership and effective leadership requires balanced human beings. Our time, ladies and gentlemen, requires solid, well rounded and effective leaders; our country, especially now, requires models of leadership that can engender 'a new hope'. The importance of commitment, conscience and consciousness in 'leadership matters', especially in this country of ours and this period, always need to be underlined. The spiritual impoverishment one finds in some of our communities and the lack of self-respect and self-love has bequeathed a shameful legacy among the youth. This is what the university has to deal with - institutions of higher learning are where many of the youth end up going for advanced education. The dominant consumerist culture, combined with weak spiritual foundations and inflamed by a populist politics of a divided ruling party, and of course we cannot ignore the confusion cause by a fringe of rightwing ideology paddlers, contribute to many of the problems we find amongst the youth and among

student populations at universities. There are many divisions to heal at our universities in South Africa; divisions according to race, ethnicity, rural versus urban, gender and class, beliefs systems, as well as sexual orientation – these are challenges we encounter in many of our institutions. Populist ideologies, usually very inchoate, often thrive and take advantage of these kinds of barriers to integration and co-operation. Student leaders have to deal with all these problems – I call these problems relational inhibitors and enablers.

Let me get to the key issue: what should be the role of student leadership in a transforming institution like ours? Perhaps let start me with what is NOT the role of student leadership in transitioning institutions. The role of student leadership is NOT to lead students to immobility and silence in the name of transformation. Instead the role of student leadership is to break the silence of the students and have their voices heard so that they can be active partners in building a cohesive and united university. This then

requires careful choice of the paradigm of student leadership so that student leaders and the student population can speak with 'one voice'; a voice which shows leadership unity; a voice which even though showing unity is NOT authoritarian; a voice which even though confident and frank does NOT posit an US versus THEM scenario in university relations – be they relations with non-resident students, student political organisations, church movements, or the management of the university. In many instances the US versus THEM stance is an offspring of ideologically driven extremisms.

I personally hate extremisms – they often produce radical hotheads who at the end of the day have nothing positive to contribute towards the building of a collective humanity. As an academic I hold antipathy to overly fixed categories and empty ideological phrases that petrify thought in a hermitic structure of static views.

This university has come a long way and is now going through strategically crafted and thought through changes that seek to balance equity, excellence and stability. It is important that the paradigm of leadership among student leaders finds ways of negotiating articulations rather than encouraging ruptures in the overall interest of consolidating the victories gained and winning over converts from opposing camps. We can only do this through the shining example of our track record, and most importantly, we should understand when tactical retreats are a solution to pave the way for more giant leaps forward. As leaders it is important to find synchrony between timing and positioning. An adversarial approach towards management usually does not help; it increases the tensions.

Student leadership is important in the life of any university; it creates conditions the university requires for the construction and production of knowledge. This is very important; hence co-operation between student leadership and management is so

vital. Only mature student leaders can understand this. Only they can understand that we all are but a passing phase; let the good things we can do be done now for we will never walk this path again.

We want our student leaders to be better leaders than we are. Perhaps at one moment some of you may end up leading this country. But I hope when their time comes, you will save South Africa from the democratisation of shamelessness and corruption which has taken an upper hand.

I thank you.