

The end of Our Generation – a tribute to Jakes Gerwel

By Zubeida Jaffer

Jakes Gerwel's death marks the steady passing of the lives of a special South African generation. He is part of those who did what had to be done and opened doors for South Africa and its people. How extraordinary that a young rural boy who grew up on a sheep farm in Somerset East became one of our greatest academics and political leaders. Thanks to his efforts we have in place a non-racial, non-sexist democratic South Africa that was achieved under conditions of great difficulty.

We were fortunate to know politics at a time when it could be defined by principle and not fully defined only as "the art of the possible." Today, politics in our country is at the baseline where it seems principle has taken a back seat. Jakes leave us at a moment when we could not have needed him more. But his time is passed and by his own admission when we spoke barely two weeks ago, he found it difficult to read the ANC politically. "When it is about ideological positions, one can make sense of what is happening but it seems more about personalities and factions," he said. Despite this, he found it difficult to align himself with any opposition party. His view was that no-one seems prepared to bring together all South Africans across political parties. Everyone was batting in their own corner.

In 1994 he did a rather odd thing by not voting for the ANC. Instead he voted for Constand Viljoen and his Freedom Front party. He had done this because he felt the ANC did not need help, but that the Afrikaners did. He also told me after he left office that he had disclosed this fact to Madiba who was rather amused and completely at ease with the decision of his director-general. During those elections the Freedom Front obtained 640,000 votes which gave the party nine representatives in the national parliament together with five senators in the Senate.

Jakes Gerwel was a man who exuded a quiet confidence but was resolute in his beliefs and actions. His resoluteness inspired conservative council members to join his march against the De Klerk Bills at the University of the Western Cape in the 1989. A colourful procession dressed in academic garb weaved its way across the campus filling students with awe. He was able to transform the UWC into a non-racial institution while at the same time keeping its staff and council fully supportive of his actions. This was no easy task as most universities have experienced post 1994. He was a forerunner of educational transformation and never complained but steadily pushed forward to introduce changes that made UWC not only a place of great learning but a place of great comfort. Students and staff did not feel they were out of place in an imposed set of foreign cultural precepts that they did not identify with.

When Thabo Mbeki approached him to take the position of Director-General in Mandela's office, he found himself at a crossroads. It meant having to leave academia which was his first love. But in the end he let go of his passion to serve his country and to acknowledge that this was an honour that he could not decline.

There could not have been a more appropriate person to run Madiba's office. He brought stability and order giving the first democratic South African president the administrative dignity he deserved. The pair in a special way represented the original inhabitants of our land. Although very seldom spoken about, both Mandela and Jakes Gerwel are linked to the Khoi-San who were largely wiped out by the colonialists. Madiba's matrilineal lineage is Khoi-San and his patrilineal lineage is Southern African Bantu - according to the DNA testing terms. It is such a great pity that this part of the story has remained buried in the South African imagination. If it is firmly woven into our dominant story it could bring the balance needed for greater healing. In working together, the two cemented the ties between two elements of our nation that continue to lie at the heart of building a stable nation

As a manager, Jakes was superb. He appointed the youthful Parks Mankahlana as spokesperson for Madiba and when it became clear that his strength was public relations not administration, Jakes saw to it that Parks was freed and was given the necessary support so that he could play to his strengths. He was a manager who gave his staff the necessary tools to do their job and very seldom interfered. I had the honour of working as his spokesperson when he became rector of the University of the Western Cape in 1987 and had the personal experience of his ability to trust his staff but at the same time provide direction.

As a political leader, he was quiet in his demeanour. He would observe and listen mainly and then draw together the elements of the issue in order to make a decision. There were times at the university that he closed his mind to different viewpoints but that was always once he had given some space to those ideas. Once he made up his mind though he was firm and unflinching and there was little that could be done to change his mind. He was not afraid to lead from the front.

Jakes was guided by core values taught to him by his parents. They were strict about commitments to family and marriage and here he did not waiver. He married his university sweetheart Phoebe Abrahams from Grassy Park and remained dedicated to her well-being and the well-being of his children, Jessie and Heinrich throughout his life. Over the last years they spent many weeks up in Somerset East, back to his place of childhood where he was most happy. It is hard to imagine how they will find the strength to cope with their loss.

During his time as director-general of the Mandela office, he was always accessible, treated the media with a great deal of respect and was keenly interested in building good trusting relations. Through Parks Mankahlana and Joel Netshitenzhe, there was never a shortage of coherent explanations of Madiba's decisions and activities.

He remained until his death, Madiba's right-hand man, travelling up to Qunu and being at his side when needed.

It is my hope that we will accept as a nation that the generation that brought about change and made enormous sacrifices is leaving us. Instead of complaining, young people today must set their sights on where they want South Africa to be in 20 years time and work to achieve this vision as we did. Many more doors are open to them now than before. Nothing comes without effort. Jakes Gerwel gave the best of his life to making the effort to lift himself from being a rural child to being a highly-educated person. In that process he never forgot his roots and went back often to help with the upliftment of his community and was always in essence the teacher.

Our youth have only two responsibilities - to seek as much knowledge and skills so that they can develop themselves personally and to ensure that they give back as our generation did to make South Africa a country where we all experience comfort.

Both as a teacher and a political leader, Jakes has done us proud. May he rest in peace.

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