

Response of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, to the debate on The Presidency Budget Vote

National Assembly, Cape Town, 12 June 2008

Madam Speaker,
Honourable Deputy President,
Honourable Members:

Let me first acknowledge the delegation from the Republic of Burundi both from Government and Palipehutu-FNL, led respectively by the Minister in the Burundi Presidency, General Evariste Ndayishimiye and the Palipehutu-FNL and its President, Agathon Rwasa. I am very pleased to extend a warm welcome to our dear friends from Burundi.

Also with us today are 36 students from the Archbishop Mitty High School in California who are visiting Johannesburg and Cape Town to interact with other students, as well as visit street children and those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Again, to them, we say welcome to South Africa.

Madam Speaker:

In his book, "India After Gandhi", the Indian historian and academic, Ramachandra Guha, quotes a Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who chaired the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constituent Assembly, which drew up India's Constitution soon after India's independence in 1947.

Dr Ambedkar, an Untouchable in terms of the Indian caste system, warned that when India became a Republic in January 1950, it was:

"going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril."

Sixty years after its independence, India today continues to live the life of contradictions which Dr Ambedkar, an Untouchable Man, decried 59 years ago, while it is engaged in a continuing struggle to resolve these contradictions.

On January 1, 1863, the then President of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln, issued the famous Emancipation Proclamation announcing the liberation of the black slaves.

Among other things, the Proclamation said:

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom ..."

As the Hon Members know, thereupon followed a costly civil war one of whose ultimate purposes was to ensure that the African-American population enjoyed the political equality of which Dr Ambedkar had spoken of in 1949 with regard to India.

One hundred and forty five years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, the United States continues to live the life of contradictions of political equality and social and economic inequality, which Dr Ambedkar, an Indian Untouchable Man, decried, even as the people of the US remain engaged in a continuing struggle to resolve these contradictions.

The French Revolution triumphed in 1789, and gave to all humanity the task to build a world based on the now historic vision - Liberty, Equality and Fraternity!

Less than three years ago, in October and November 2005, France was engulfed in very destructive riots or violent civil unrest, which obliged the then Government of the French Republic to declare a state of emergency.

Those involved were mainly young French citizens whose parents had migrated to France from both North and Sub-Saharan Africa. What drove them to their desperate acts were their experience of racial and social discrimination and the endemic poverty afflicting their communities.

Two hundred and nineteen years after the victory of the French Revolution, which blessed all humanity with the glorious vision of Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité, France continues to live the life of contradictions of political equality and social and economic inequality, which Dr Ambedkar, an Indian Untouchable Man, decried, even as the people of France remain engaged in a continuing struggle to resolve these contradictions.

We achieved our own emancipation a mere 14 years ago. We adopted our current Constitution only 12 years ago.

We too, like the French, the American and Indian peoples made the determination that all our people must attain and enjoy political equality. But like them, and as Dr Ambedkar had said:

"In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value."

Having listened to many debates in this House, our Parliament as a whole and other fora in our society over the last 14 years, many a time it seemed to me that we were very determined to ignore or radically minimise this reality such that it should cease to be of any material significance in terms of our thinking, our planning, and the messages we communicate to the masses of our people.

Out of this manner of proceeding has emerged a perhaps unstated proposition based on a false notion of South African exceptionalism. In terms of this, miraculously, or by an extraordinary act of God, our country would give birth to new ways of social development which would prove that we are far wiser than the French, the Americans and the Indians in terms of solving the social and national contradictions of which Dr Ambedkar spoke in 1949.

Clearly, the inequalities in social and economic life, born of our social and economic structure, of which Dr Ambedkar spoke, will persist in our country for a significant period of time.

The contradictions he spoke of will continually put to the test the durability and resilience of our political democracy.

Consequently, we must continue to insist upon, and pursue programmes aimed at the eradication of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, precisely to abolish the social and economic structure whose stubborn persistence has given birth to the unsolved contradiction in our country, in France, the US and India.

In our case, given the fact that the social and economic structure has very deep roots, the leaders in this House and Parliament as a whole, the Honourable Members, and other leaders in our society, have at last to understand that the task we face and have faced for the last 14 years is truly revolutionary in character.

What our country has been about in our years of liberation has been to give itself a new birth - not merely new houses, and new clinics, and new schools, and new roads, and more jobs, and much else besides - but also a new national identity, of equal citizens in a non-racial society, of equal citizens in a non-sexist society, of equal citizens in a society liberated from poverty, of equal citizens in a truly popular participatory democracy.

The Minister of Sport and Recreation, the Hon Makhenkesi Stofile, reflected correctly on this challenge when he said:

"Structural inequality is very deep in our society and it has the great potential to damage nation-building if not carefully handled. The past lives in ubiquitous ways in the present, grappling to pull the present back, also spawning forces that push it forward. In addition, the present marches to the future not in linear fashion, but it has to zigzag around many obstacles. Ours is a long walk precisely because in 1994, we arrived only at the end of the beginning."

Similarly, the Hon I.S. Mfundisi sought to remind both us and the nation of the reality that we are only at the beginning of our journey when he said:

"The teenager that is South Africa is behaving like a real teenager. Like a typical teenager the nation is impatient, intolerant, rebellious and aggressive... We should bear in mind that teenagers have suicidal tendencies: this country, therefore, as it awakes and becomes aware of itself should be nurtured to avoid self-destruction... There are things that need unity of purpose by all South Africans, black, brown and white, young and old. These are fighting crime, poverty, sexism, racism and other similar evils such as Xenophobia."

The Hon Pieter Mulder also sought to address our strategic, rather than short-term challenges, which we must do, when he said:

"As long as there are white people who say that all black people are bad, we are not at all making progress. But as long as there are black people who say that all white people are bad and whites do not belong in Africa, we are also not making any progress at all. If the good people from the different groups can work together, we can resolve our problems. If we can learn this alone from the recent events, we are making progress to create a place in the sun for everyone, and together start resolving Africa's problems."

To underline the critical point made by the Hon Pieter Mulder, the Hon Makhenkesi Stofile cited a comment made by Oliver Tambo in 1982 that "We must take our common destiny into our own hands."

Strangely, in this context, which demands that we take our destiny into our own hands, and as the Hon Andries Nel pointed out, the Hon Leader of the Official Opposition in the House found "the leader" and "the kind of man we can believe in", in the United States in the person of Senator Barack Obama. To the contrary, I would have thought she would use this podium vigorously to project her leader, the Hon Helen Zille as "the kind of woman we can believe in", but clearly the Good Lord works in mysterious ways.

Most unfortunately, the Hon Rev K.R.J. Meshoe went back to his old ways of showing little respect for the truth.

My humble advice to the Hon Rev K.R.J. Meshoe is that he would have been well advised to ask our Ministry and Department of Foreign Affairs about the allegations made by "The Washington Post". I am

certain that this would have enabled him to present a more truthful view about the positions his Government has taken at the UN Security Council with regard to Iran, Sudan, Myanmar and Zimbabwe.

Happily, the Hon Patricia de Lille avoided the journey across the Atlantic Ocean, determined to remain firmly South African. She pleaded, and pleaded, and pleaded that all of us and the nation must understand that she is, most definitely, according to her own opinion of herself, a great South African patriot.

To respond to this special pleading, from now onwards, personally I will be honoured to address the Hon Member as Patricia the Patriot.

An important part of the message of Patricia the Patriot, or rather the Hon Patricia the Hon Patriot, was about leadership. In this regard, among other things, she said:

"It is to the President of a country that the people look to, to give them a sense of direction and of hope.... What South Africa needs right now is leadership that can inspire us again.... We need to restore to the Presidency the trust and leadership it should embody.... But we cannot restore it without it being earned. And that, Mr President, is your challenge."

The issue of leadership is indeed, very critical. In my humble view, the revolution suggested by the challenge posed by Dr Ambedkar in India in 1949 fundamentally requires not a leader but a leadership. Hon Members who sit in this House for the greater part of the year are an important part of that leadership.

Every member in this House is a leader of our people, and an integral part of the leadership I insist our critically important and unavoidable process of fundamental social transformation needs and demands.

Neither Hon. De Lille and Botha spoke of their own responsibilities as such leaders, content to perform on the public stage as militant critics and vigilant watchdogs. As I sat and listened attentively to what they had to say, I asked myself the question - when will they accept their responsibility to lead not partisan factions, but the nation!

If I may betray a confidence, at the close of the Debate yesterday evening, I had a short discussion with the Deputy President of the ANC, the Hon Kgalema Motlanthe, and expressed this concern.

In response, he said - there will always be some people who call themselves leaders but are content to curse the darkness, while making absolutely no effort to light the candle!

Take the matter of the role of our country with regard to our important neighbour, the Republic of Zimbabwe.

It seems to me perfectly obvious that one of our principal tasks in this regard is to assist the people of Zimbabwe to find one another with regard to the resolution of the immense problems they face.

There are some farther afield from us who choose to describe us as a so-called Rogue Democracy, to the absolute delight of the Hon Rev K.R.J. Meshoe, because we refuse to serve as their subservient klipgooiers against especially President Robert Mugabe.

Given all this, the Government I am honoured to lead will continue to engage the Zimbabweans to convey to them our views and feelings about any matter we believe is fundamentally or otherwise at variance with processes that must respect the will of the people.

We will continue to insist that the people of Zimbabwe must have the possibility freely to choose their leaders and Government and refuse to participate in projects based on the notion that we have a right to bring about "regime change" in Zimbabwe.

We will also continue to argue that the people of Zimbabwe will have to unite to extricate their country from the economic crisis in which it is immersed, and that we will contribute everything we can to support the realisation of this objective.

With regard to the leadership task arising from Dr Ambedkar's 1949 comments, as they relate to our country, I am arguing that what we need is not some supreme leader, but a leadership, including the Hon Members, which understands the imperative relating to the fundamental social transformation of our country.

The Hon Ben Turok correctly addressed yet another important pillar of the construct we need to help achieve this fundamental social transformation, and thus resolve the contradictions which Dr Ambedkar spoke about. In summary, the Hon Ben Turok said we must, while further entrenching our democracy:

- construct an efficient and effective developmental state;
- ensure that this state has the necessary capacity to carry out meaningful national socio-economic planning, without creating a command economy;
- ensure that this state is able to mobilise and lead the whole of society to address the challenges of poverty and underdevelopment on a sustained basis;
- build an effective and functioning partnership between this state and the national business community;
- mobilise the masses of the people into a united, conscious movement for sustained development; and,
- democratically determine our own growth path, refusing to be trapped into neo-liberal propositions about economic development which, historically, have absolutely no provenance.

Related to this, once more the Hon Bantu Holomisa called for a National Convention which would "debate issues of the economy as well as social cohesion". I have been informed that Parliament has already taken the decision to discuss these issues, and was pleased to hear that the elected assembly of our elected leaders had taken this important decision.

Together with a good number of other Hon Members, including the Deputy Minister of Science and Technology, the Hon Derek Hanekom, the Minister of Education, the Hon Naledi Pandor, spoke correctly about our considerable achievements since 1994.

The telling of this truth is important in itself as the pursuit of our objective to solve the Ambedkar contradictions requires that we constantly and honestly review our progress and failures.

In addition, the Hon Derek Hanekom pointed to another critically important issue in this regard. This is a matter with which any organiser or commander would be familiar. I refer here to the issue of never demoralising one's forces.

Having accurately identified some current problems, the Hon Derek Hanekom said:

"In the face of these challenges it would be easy to descend into a mood of pessimism, and to lose sight of the immensely positive changes that have reached every corner of our country since the arrival of democracy.... " This I have also observed, which I am certain is, in part, born of the failure to understand the true nature of the process of change our country is undergoing, that many in our society seem to thrive on negative messages about our country.

These, including many in the media, and some who spoke here yesterday, seem absolutely determined to cultivate and entrench a permanent sense and mass psychology of present gloom and impending doom, thus to communicate the entirely false message that our democracy cannot but fail and collapse, as virtually a predetermined outcome.

Thus, constantly, we find that many of those who belong within the leadership echelon charged by history with the task to lead a revolutionary process of fundamental social transformation in our country:

- see it as their task constantly to run the country down;
- to deny or minimise its achievements;
- to exaggerate its weaknesses and failures;
- to judge it negatively against tasks it could never achieve, objectively; and,
- to measure its progress and failures according to standards befitting very much older and wealthier democracies, all which are located in the Western world.

Whereas some in this House, like the Hon Patricia the Hon Patriot correctly argued that the President of the Republic needs to communicate a message of direction and hope to our people, so does the rest of our leadership, including her, have an equal obligation to communicate a message of direction and hope.

In our situation this is a critically important task that cannot be left just to one leader, while the rest are left content to define leadership as amounting to nothing more than the right to criticise and to act as a so-called watchdog, to justify their failure to light the candle.

In their own ways, the Hon Members F.T. Maserumule and J.J. Maake sought to address this question. For instance, the Hon Maake said:

"I always stand on this podium and try to teach the Opposition the right ways, the right way of listening to people when they talk to them, the right way of behaving in response to events in our country, but they never listen.... We forcefully open a kid's mouth, with the kid screaming and kicking, and give him her castor oil or cod-liver for his or her own good. And that is surely not violence. I tend to think that is the only solution left for me in order to help my fellow compatriots out of their shifting sense of illusion."

I sincerely hope that all of us are South African enough never to require to be force-fed, in order to understand the imperatives of our national reality!

Madame Speaker:

Various Hon Members have raised a number of specific issues, including matters relating to the institution of traditional leadership, the need for an Institution of Higher Learning in Northern KwaZulu-Natal, the fight against crime, a housing project in Limpopo, issues relating to inter-governmental relations, and alleged discrimination against Coloured people.

We will indeed respond to all of these and others, directly to the Hon Members who raised these issues. With regard to the Hon Simmons, I am certain that, despite what he said, the Presidency has been regularly in contact with him and is engaged, with his Office, in the process of agreeing on the date and venue for the meeting he requested.

I would like to thank all the Hon Members for the effort they took properly to intervene in the Debate we had yesterday.

In particular I would like to thank all the Hon Members, and would in this instance like to single out the Hon Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi, for the kind remarks they made about me personally. I sincerely value everything they said, knowing as I do that it was spoken honestly.

In this context I must confirm that within my personal knowledge, the Hon Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi told the truth when he spoke about his relations with the late President of the ANC, OR Tambo.

Our history, like life itself, produced outcomes that might not have been intended by the actors. When I first the Hon Dr Buthelezi many decades ago, as he said, I approached him as a political senior to myself, and a comrade-in-arms.

In the years since he stopped serving in the national Government, I have made it a point to listen carefully to everything he says. Constantly, I have marvelled at his wisdom and his deep concern to sustain a value system that is critical to the survival of our democracy.

I was very pleased when, yesterday, the Hon Essop Pahad acknowledged Shenge's unfailing sense of courtesy. Even at my age, this is a deeply human characteristic I must still emulate successfully from Umntwana wa kwaPhindangene.

Shenge, many thanks for everything you have done for all of us. Yesterday you quoted the Latin saying by Seneca - *errare humanum est* - to err is human!

Those who act will err. Those who do nothing will carry no blemish of any errors. To them is therefore given the possibility to criticise those who chose to act. That, you and I, will have to accept as an unavoidable corollary of what had to be done.

Not very long ago, a Bishop from Cameroon, who came to see us to discuss the situation in Zimbabwe, told us his people have a proverb which says - those charged with the task to fetch water from the river should not listen to the songs of the frogs! And neither should you!

This I would like to say to this House and the nation:

- Together, during the last 14 years, and longer, we have recorded truly remarkable achievements;
- Acting together, we have placed ourselves on course to emerge as a winning nation;
- Today we face particular problems, in the same way that we have faced other difficult problems in the past;
- In the past we overcame these problems and will, now also overcome the new problems we face;
- In the past we have never allowed our problems to condemn us to demoralisation, despondency and pessimism;
- In the present we know that our problems constitute a challenge to which we must respond with vigour, confidence in our capacity, and optimism about our future; and,
- Now is the time for those who aspire to lead to put the yoke of leadership on their shoulders, understanding that they serve only as one draught animal in the span, with no possibility to claim or receive any special benefits.

Those who have spoken of the legacy of the President of the Republic, need to know that there is no other legacy the President seeks apart from what has been said above.

All that remains is for the leadership gathered in this House, which understands its responsibilities to the nation, what it has to do far beyond this Parliamentary perimeter, to assume its leadership of the masses that have to be mobilised and focused on the task of sustained development.

I thank all the Honourable Members for their attention.

Thank you.