

HERITAGE DAY - 24 SEPTEMBER 2020: UNITING FROM A DISTANCE.

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This Heritage Day we are slowly emerging from the most immediate aftermath of Covid-19 and its devastating effect on our country, economy and people.

On this day -and in a country belonging to all its' people - South Africans are encouraged to celebrate their culture, the diversity of their beliefs and traditions.

One of the most important aspects recognised in the Constitution of South Africa, is the importance of our collective heritage and the rich cultural, linguistic and historical landscape painting the canvas of our people's diversity. The South African Constitution unambiguously speaks to this in its' preamble: South Africa belongs to all who live in it - united in our diversity - in the wider context of a nation and country recognising the injustices of our past; honouring those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land as well as respecting those who have worked to build and develop our country.

The late adv George Bizos SC (who passed away last week) was committed to South Africa's Constitution, as well the need for all South Africans to adhere to it - especially our leaders. In August 2016 he spoke about reconciliation and the increasing importance for the need to be unified in our diversity as South Africans when he said:

"We need leaders who believe in the value and promise of the Constitution and want to see it upheld and realised. It is inappropriate for leaders to make reckless statements about race that incite hatred or violence, or to speak flippantly about amending the Constitution without due regard to what is in fact required to achieve this. Certainly, more can - and must - be done to achieve the vision of the country that many of us had for an equal and united South Africa".

Adv Bizos SC was also completely against words and rhetoric that sowed division and pain in South Africa. He understood, and made it quite clear, that:

"It is of no assistance to us to utter generalisations about black people or white people, Christians or Muslims, men or women, but rather to follow the example of innumerable others, irrespective of their colour, religion or political views. Instead of blaming one another or pointing fingers, let us work together to achieve building constructive national unity, promoting constitutional rights and promoting harmonious non-racialism between all who live in South Africa".

The heritage of all South Africans is inextricably linked and any of our component peoples' heritage therefore belongs to all other South Africans equally. The heritage of one group is also not more important than that of another: Our Constitution places a special premium on cultural inclusivity and equality in South Africa.

This includes cultural inclusivity and equality of the heritage of all our peoples. From the first nations of South Africa such as the Khoi, Nama and San to our other indigenous African peoples - the Zulus, Xhosas, Ndebeles and Swazis; the Tswana, Pedi and South Sotho, Tsonga and Venda. From white South Africans descended from the Dutch, English, German, Portuguese, French and other European settlers to our extended Indian and coloured community as well as the Malay, Asian and countless others who arrived from the Dutch East Indies and elsewhere between the 17th and 19th century.

A key question South Africans must answer going forward is whether the dialogue is to be exclusive or inclusive? Does it benefit South Africa if only people who agree with each other talk about the future? Is this preferable to gathering collective insight from participants that differ from each other?

Can anyone who - according to the Freedom Charter and the Constitution - has joint ownership of the country, be excluded from the discussion about the future of the country? Do we want to leave our children a South African heritage of once having broken the chains of apartheid and racial hatred - together as a nation - only to regress and be born back into an increasingly racially polarized and re-racialized society: A society where certain people are told that they are not welcome or worth less than others?

South Africa's constitutional negotiations of the early 90's accurately reflect the moral fibre of South Africans working together. During the process parties with long histories of hostility and suspicion came together and forged a new constitutional dispensation under the most difficult circumstances. The strengths of the South African approach -our approach - were its inclusivity, its genuine attempt to accommodate the reasonable interests of all parties, including minorities, as well as the strong provisions that it established to entrench the Constitution as the supreme law of South Africa.

Dr Martin Luther King Jr said that people fail to get along because they *fear* each other; they fear each other because they *don't know* each other; they don't know each other because they have *not communicated* with each other. Like so many other South Africans I share Dr King Jr's dream of a heritage that our children will one day live in a nation where they are not judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.

It is quite simple: If a varied and rich cultural heritage like ours is not equally protected and managed in a sensitive, constitutionally compliant and culturally sensitive manner, the unifying power inherent to it *collapses*. Conversely, if we can embrace our shared heritage - even its painful aspects - by being inclusive, we can collectively be more proud of not only who we are and what we have overcome: But of what we can still achieve *together*.

If we succeed in doing so, we will be better able to guard and cherish our heritage, which includes our shared inheritance of the new and constitutional South Africa.

On this Heritage Day,

Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso.

God seën Suid-Afrika. God bless South Africa.

Mudzimu fhatutshedza Afurika. Hosi katekisa Afrika.