

THE BRACKENFELL BOIL

By Dave Steward, Chairman of the FW de Klerk Foundation

Every now and then a boil appears on the 26-year-old face of the New South Africa. One such boil erupted on 6 October in Senekal - and another earlier this week at Brackenfell High School in the Cape. These ugly eruptions may reflect more than just a passing hormonal imbalance: they could indicate a deeper underlying toxicity that might threaten the whole body politic.

The problem arose when the high school announced the cancellation of the annual Matric Ball because of COVID-19. A group of matrics and their parents decided to hold their own “Masquerade Ball MX20” at the Skilpadvlei Wine Farm on 17 October. They sent out a general invitation on Facebook that stated that the entry fee would be R500 and that numbers would be limited to 100 because of COVID-19 regulations. There was no reference to race in the invitation - but some non-white matrics complained that they did not receive the original invitation and became aware of the event only two days before it was due to take place.

The ball was held on 17 October and was attended by 73 people including 42 matrics and two teachers. According to most reports no non-white students attended the ball - although one parent insists that “it was not a whites-only party and a number of children of colour attended.”

Following the ball, the matrics rushed off to post photos of themselves in their evening finery on their Facebook pages. However, none of those pictured on the red carpet leading to the event were black or coloured.

The Facebook photos were brought to the attention of the EFF which announced that it would hold a demonstration outside the school on 9 November to protest against this “blatant racism”. Parents - and elements from outside the Brackenfell community - including some bikers - assembled at the school to defend pupils who were in the process of writing matric.

A robust engagement ensued in which EFF demonstrators were attacked by members of the white crowd. An EFF demonstrator claims that she was hit with a baseball bat - and the white group charge that the EFF members threw stones and sticks at them. The SAPS was present in large numbers and appear from video footage to have done their best to separate the two factions. A 39-year-old white man was arrested for firing a pistol in the air - but was released when it became evident that the firearm was only a replica.

The incident quickly flared up in the mainstream and social media and elicited heated comments from a spectrum of politicians, talk-show hosts and commentators:

- The Brackenfell High School principal denied that the school had anything to do with the ball - which had been entirely a private function;
- Premier Allan Winde descended on the school with Education MEC Debbie Schäfer. He condemned the violence and said that his top priority was to ensure that the school and its surrounding area are safe, and that learning can continue. “Our matrics need to be able to write their exams without any disruption.”
- President Ramaphosa described the confrontation as “deeply regrettable” and called on all parties involved to act responsibly. Tilting in favour of the EFF demonstrators, he said that it was “the right of every South African to engage in peaceful protest, and any actions to suppress the right to freedom of expression, particularly through violence and intimidation, must be roundly condemned.” All this reminded the president “of a past we should never seek to return to.”



- The SA Human Rights Commission quickly joined the fray and, predictably enough, sided unambiguously with the EFF demonstrators.
“The Commission is deeply disappointed by the violence as well as the allegations that preceded it. The SAHRC is shocked to learn that in this day and age a racially segregated private event was held for matric learners from the school.... “The alleged holding of a 'whites only' event, if true, is also strongly condemned. No one should be allowed to bring back racial segregation to this country.”
- Doubling down on the rhetoric, the EFF insisted that “These terror attacks will not go unanswered. The EFF will descend on Brackenfell in its entirety and ensure that nothing operates. All those white racists who have an uncontrollable desire to control the movement of black people, and dictate where we can go and cannot go, will be taught the humility we taught racists in Senekal.”

What is the actual situation at the school? There are conflicting reports: some non-white students claim that they experienced racism and a sense of exclusion. Others deny that they ever experienced any form of racism. It is also evident that those protecting the school included parents of all races. A visit to the school’s website reveals a predominantly white Afrikaans-speaking student body - but with kids of all races working and playing together. Tuition is offered in both Afrikaans and English. The school appears to be a successful and happy institution with matric pass rates of 100%.

A number of points emerge from all this:

Firstly, violence from any quarter, regardless of provocation, is unacceptable. Anyone - from any side - who initiates violence or destroys property - should be prosecuted;

Secondly, the EFF is determined to blow up any charge - real or manufactured - of racism by whites as an excuse for aggressive and provocative mobilisation. It did so with Schweizer-Reneke nursery school teacher Elana Barkhuizen last year. Also, last year, it swept up violence in Coligny. It has done so again this year in its attacks in the Western Cape, on Clicks nationally and its racial mobilisation in Senekal. As Julius Malema said of white farmers in November 2016: “We are here unashamedly to disturb the white man’s peace.”

Thirdly, there appears to be no evidence, as yet, that there was any intention to exclude non-whites from the ball. However, although people can invite whomever they like to private functions - failure to include non-white matrics even in a private matric ball - if this is what happened - would constitute an unacceptable degree of insensitivity.

Fourthly, the main threat to race relations - as implied by President Ramaphosa and the SAHRC - does not lie in intentional or unintentional insensitivities such as those that may - or may not - have occurred at Brackenfell High School. It lies overwhelmingly in the undisguised determination of the country’s third largest political party employing an unacceptable provocatively racist stance and use of violence and disruption to achieve its goals. The EFF’s threat to “descend on Brackenfell in its entirety” is simply the latest provocation and such calls go beyond the parameters of peaceful protest.

We accordingly support the calls of President Ramaphosa and Premier WInde to all parties involved to act responsibly. Allegations of racism at the school and in the organisation of the private matric party should be speedily and impartially investigated. However, most important of all, all leaders of goodwill - including President Ramaphosa and the SAHRC - should unambiguously condemn the dangerous path of racism, violent intimidation and ethnic polarisation upon which the EFF has embarked.

We simply cannot afford the racial conflict that the EFF is clearly intent on fomenting. The boil must be lanced once and for all.