

## RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: A WORK IN PROGRESS OR FORGOTTEN IDEAL?

By Adv Jacques du Preez, CEO of the FW de Klerk Foundation

South Africa will mark National Reconciliation Day on 16 December 2020 with a focus on *racism and gender-based violence*.<sup>1</sup>

One of government's key calls to action in this regard is for all South Africans "to confront their preconceived ideas about race and racism."<sup>2</sup>

During 1993 and the CODESA it was envisaged that reconciliation, peace and stability would be defining characteristics of our new constitutional dispensation as the transition from apartheid to a new non-racial state gave us an opportunity to reach out to each other to deal with our past, reconcile and build a new South Africa.

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 diversity of our country. 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.

Further to the above, government indicates that 16 December "is an opportunity to celebrate how far we have come and that South Africa belongs to all who live in it and we must appreciate and respect our diversity and unique heritage which unites us as a nation."<sup>3</sup>

Government also indicates that "the fight against racism is everyone's responsibility. Speak up when you witness discrimination. Interrupt racist talk and make it clear that it has no place in our society. Let us work together to expose institutional racism and wherever racism is treated as the norm."

Is government really committed to this?

It is crucial that racist and hurtful non-inclusive behaviour anywhere in South Africa should be addressed with firmly and effectively. Equally critical is a unified and unambiguous condemnation by all South Africans - including government - of racist threats and instigation of violence as such actions have the potential of provoking racial conflict that would cause immense harm to South Africa - we have seen this in Senekal and, more recently, Brackenfell: If we are talking about racism, nation-building and reconciliation, we should all be deeply concerned that throughout the events (particularly at Brackenfell) the main focus of media, institutional and government attention was not on the EFF (and, subsequently) the PAC's inciteful racist behaviour and intimidation - but rather on the school, the Western Cape Education Department, a private matric party and unsubstantiated allegations of racism at the school.

Government also indicates that "reconciliation is linked to transforming our society by broadening the participation of *all* South Africans in the development of the country."<sup>4</sup> Can it be said that all South Africans are made to feel equal and equally welcome in South Africa?

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<sup>1</sup> [Reconciliation Month 2020 | South African Government \(www.gov.za\)](https://www.gov.za/news/education/schools/2020/12/16-reconciliation-month-2020)

<sup>2</sup> [Reconciliation Month km\(clean\) Final.pdf \(www.gov.za\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Reconciliation Month km\(clean\) Final.pdf \(www.gov.za\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Reconciliation Month km\(clean\) Final.pdf \(www.gov.za\)](#)



Consider the Department of Tourism's decision in April this year to provide pandemic relief to businesses in the tourism sector based on solely on B-BBEE codes. This, in effect, meant that only certain companies, and South Africans, benefitted from accessing government relief funding to mitigate the effect of the coronavirus pandemic. The simple fact of this matter is that white-owned companies in the tourist sector - one of the sectors that experienced the worst devastation of the pandemic - did not receive COVID-19 assistance, which makes no sense when one considers that most of their employees are not white.

Surely solidarity at any time, yet particularly in such a crisis - as well as government financial rescue assistance - should transcend race, would promote solidarity, and foster positive race relations?

Such action by government unfortunately begs the question whether it sees one group in South Africa as more deserving than another of government assistance - based on their race? If this is the case, how can it possibly be expected to be conducive to reconciliation between our peoples?

On Reconciliation Day all South Africans must ask certain key questions: Is the dialogue about our history and future to be exclusive or inclusive? Will it benefit South Africa if only people who agree with each other talk about the future - or the past? 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?

How can reconciliation in South African society be fostered where certain people are told that they are not welcome or worth less than others?

26 years into South Africa's new dispensation the coronavirus pandemic has crystalized a vast number of South Africa's most pressing issues - however, the virus has also shown us that *it* does not see, nor discriminate, on the basis of race. If we as a country, this year, are looking to build on the reconciliation we achieved together previously, it is up to all South Africans to see that we do the same.

If all South Africans confront their preconceived ideas about race and racism - especially those in powerful leadership positions - and refrain from hateful, inciteful and racist behaviour we can more effectively work towards continuing reconciliation of our people in line with our constitution's founding values: Human dignity, non-racialism, non-sexism, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms.