

WHAT FREEDOM MEANS

Rex van Schalkwyk, member of the FW de Klerk Foundation Panel of Contributors

The trouble with political slogans is that they are meaningless. We have seen it with the communist and socialist policies, enacted in the name of the proletariat; the working class, and those who are exploited by the “capitalists”. In each case the principal beneficiaries are those who enact the laws; the victims are those in whose name the laws are enacted. The rationale for the extravagant privilege of the law maker is that the responsibility of statecraft is said to deserve a proper reward. And so Vladimir Ulyanov Lenin, Josef Stalin and even Nancy Pelosi sail by on the unearned benefits that properly belong to the creators of society’s prosperity.

Capitalism itself has been corrupted by those who claim to be its principal beneficiaries. In the Land of the Free, the free market has come to mean the licentiousness of the commercial and political elite to extract rent from the society at large by means of controlled and manipulated central banking; monopolistic practices and political patronage (writ large by the phenomenon of political lobbyists): the result is that in America the proverbial 1% owns 90% of the nation’s wealth. This is corrupted capitalism or a fascist economy; it is not the free market.

Political mendacity is not confined to the third world, and certainly not only to South Africa. But it is the South African situation that engages our attention. Freedom Day, celebrated as a public holiday is a celebration of...what? Freedom from oppression is not sufficient reason for ongoing celebration if one form of oppression is replaced by another. It is not the purpose of this contemplation to repeat the litany of spectacular failures that has accompanied 27 years of misrule. Policies that have failed elsewhere have been implemented with alacrity and when failure was, once again, the result, they have been pursued with increased vigour. The will of the people has been all but ignored: the land issue, now the centrepiece of ANC government policy has been demonstrated by innumerable reputable surveys, including one commissioned by the government itself, to be an issue that has little appeal to the broad citizenry; what is shown, on each occasion to be the principal concern (unemployment) is the issue most shamefully neglected and even ignored in a mindless pursuit of ideology. All the while the laws that make it harder for employers to employ and harder for the seekers of employment to find it, are relentlessly tightened in a policy that appears actively to pursue the outcome of unemployment.

At its most elemental level, freedom means a freedom from want. The government has answered this by instituting a basic income grant and a related child support grant. There are now over 17 million such beneficiaries; meanwhile on account of government’s destructive and extractive policies hundreds of thousands of taxpayers have escaped these shores and the tax base has consequently shrunk to a mere 3 million. Soon the bill will become unpayable. The 17 million, it must be said, are a critical component of the government’s ongoing support at the polls.

The best antidote to the want of unemployment is a sound education system. The failures of government in this regard are legion. At great national cost, poorly qualified educators

provide poor education. The poor education then results in poor outcomes. The government's solution to this predicament has been to systematically lower the standards of educational achievement. Many matriculants (even those who qualify for university education) are functionally illiterate and innumerate. Failure, if not at university then in life, is assured. All the while private educators, who provide quality education, are harassed by an encroaching barrage of vexatious regulation, ostensibly designed to protect the vulnerable. Meanwhile an obsession with numbers and quotas, as opposed to competence and excellence, is another guarantee of failure.

At the heart of all these failures is a government obsession, derived from the Marxist ideology to which it is committed, of centralised control. The ANC has no interest in individual liberty; it is the enemy of freedom.

Once the freedom from want is catered for, which it has been demonstrated, innumerable times, is the result of free individuals interacting freely with one another, the quality-of-life index comes into play. Abstractions, such as freedom of expression, of conscience, of religion, of association and freedoms from arbitrary and unreasonable detention, persecution and the like can be categorised as incidents of the rule of law: the barrier that the law sets against tyranny. How free we South Africans are of the tyranny of the state is a question that requires an urgent answer.

The propensity of the government to act in tyrannical mode has been abundantly demonstrated by the heavy-handed response to the coronavirus crisis. The government promptly, and almost surreptitiously, set up an instrument with dictatorial authority, known by the telling moniker, the Coronavirus Command Council. And command it did: on freedom of movement, freedom of association, freedom of religion, freedom of commerce, and this last one, with devastating consequences for the already appalling unemployment statistics. Massive, and avoidable business failure was the inevitable result. It is, of course, true that many other countries followed a similar course, but few, if any, did so with the same destructive enthusiasm as that adopted by the ANC government. The future outcome, we were authoritatively told, would be a radical economic transformation.

And now, in the face of all the destruction that has been wrought, there is the asinine determination to pursue the project of expropriation of property without compensation. This includes the sinister phenomenon of regulatory expropriation, whereby ownership of commercial rights may be expropriated by executive fiat. As elsewhere, in Zimbabwe, Venezuela and (dare one say it) The Soviet Union, the consequences are altogether predictable, but the ship of state ploughs on, heedless of all the considered and well-meaning opinions that have warned of catastrophe.

The government has seemingly no understanding of what is meant by the rule of law, and certainly no respect for its application. Individual freedom, of every category, becomes the inevitable victim.

**** Judge Rex van Schalkwyk is a guest contributor. His views are not necessarily those of the Foundation.***