



FW de Klerk
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INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR TOLERANCE

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In 1994 I was five years old. I had no idea what was going on in our country. At my preschool we all played happily together in the sandpit - a smartie box of different colours. Now, 18 years later, I know what had happened - because year after year we were taught it at school. I have come to appreciate what our country has gone through and what we have risen above and accomplished. As a shining example FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela took the bold step of acceptance and tolerance in 1994. Together they took hands and showed the world what peace, compromise, acceptance and tolerance meant. In reflecting on the International Day for Tolerance, I have come to the sad realisation that the South Africa of today has lost its spirit of tolerance.

One of the causes for this lack of tolerance is our failure to reach agreement about our shared histories. Everyone feels their version of history outweighs the other. Yet as a whole our history proves that we are a nation of survivors and champions. Take the 1800s for example; the Xhosas and the Zulus stood up to British imperialism. The Xhosas fought nine border wars against the British and the Zulus won the Battle of *Islandlwana* in 1879. The Boer nation also resisted British imperialism during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899 to 1902 - in what was perhaps the most serious colonial war that Britain ever fought. All three peoples fought against the odds, and they all demonstrated the determination of South Africans to resist foreign domination. I have however, become increasingly aware of the fact that tolerance for the history of others, and subsequently, pride in the complete history of our country, is a rare commodity.

In our current school system the colonial part of our history is covered in a fleeting manner, yet the divisive issue of apartheid is the main topic of history lessons throughout the five years of high school. I understand that it is important to educate school children about our recent past, but is it necessary to teach it in such a manner that some people are always depicted as victims and heroes - and others as perpetrators and villains? Surely history is much more complex than that?

We cannot erase the bad parts of our history, if only if it were possible. But is it perhaps possible to deal with our history in such a manner that it does not hinder racial reconciliation and cause intolerance to fester among our people? The Freedom Charter says that “[w]e the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white”. I cannot help that I was born white any more than someone else can help the fact that they were born Indian or black or coloured. We are all in this together, we need to set aside our differences and build the future of our country.

51% of the current population of our nation, like myself, was under the age of six in 1994 and never truly experienced apartheid. Yet our country’s history of past racial intolerance is still used as the perfect scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in South Africa today. Our



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Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, has also pointed out this sad fact when she said that, *“[f]or example, the fact that we have mud schools, I refuse to believe that this is due to apartheid. Schools that don't have desks, that don't have books which have not been delivered properly. These things have nothing to do with apartheid”*.

Many whites are intolerant of black South Africans and blame them for everything that is wrong in the country. They do not take into account the enormous disadvantages with which so many black South Africans continue to wrestle.

It is true that we are shaped by our history, but we should not allow our divided past to prevent us from working together to shape a better future. We must celebrate International Day for Tolerance by following the example of Mr De Klerk and Mr Mandela, and join hands to fight the intolerance that is eating away at the unity of our nation.