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The Holding Together Program™**

The First of the International Lecture Series

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“The glue that holds nations together: a View from Africa”

INTRODUCTION

The invitation to join the celebration of the centenary of your nation's federation provided me with an opportunity to explore a question that is perhaps more urgent for my country than for yours. You have more than a hundred years under your collective belt compared to our tender seven. I am grateful for this honour and opportunity.

A few disclaimers are also appropriate. I am not going to attempt a theoretical exploration of the issue I raise in the title of my talk. My task is to utilize existing understandings of the evolution of nation-states to try and draw some lessons on how successful established nation-states are held together in good and bad times. The nature of the glue that holds them together will be explored on the foundations laid by the wisdom of 18th century scholars such as Rousseau, and expanded by many contemporary ones.

There is sufficient consensus amongst scholars that nation-states as we know them today have gone through a long evolutionary process. This evolution was driven by three revolutions¹:

- (1) The growing importance of the division of labour
- (2) The increasing need for effective administrative systems
- (3) The imperative of cultural co-ordination.

Jean-Jacque Rousseau had this to say about the social contract that human beings enter into in becoming members of civic units partly in response to the above imperatives, but also driven by higher order needs to become the best they can be:

*“Under the pact by which men (sic) enter into civil society everyone makes a total alienation of all his rights.....The rights they alienate are rights based on might, the rights they acquire are rights based on law.”*²

In Rousseau’s view, the entry into civil society transforms humans from being brutish into moral beings. The social contract that underpins this entry ushers in common liberty where no one has the right to do what the liberty of any other forbids him to do. True liberty in this formulation is never destructive of itself. Liberty without justice is thus a contradiction in terms.

How do nation-states come into being from fragments of communities with their own social contracts scattered over time and space? Even more important, how do nation-states retain their coherence over time and space?

¹ I draw heavily from David Smith’s The Ethnic Origins of Nations, Blackwell Books, 1986.

² Rousseau, J-J, The Social Contract, 1969, Penguin, pp32-33.

What type of maintenance service is required to sustain and enhance coherence?

EVOLUTION & MAINTANANCE of COHERENCE

There are several core elements that are critical to coherence of groups of people living together either through choice or force of circumstance. As men and women interpret and express their collective experiences of joy, conflict, triumphs, defeats, achievements, etc., these interpretations and expressions crystallize over time and are handed onto the next generations, who modify them according to their experiences and interactions.

What are the core elements that keep groups coherent? We can identify six³:

(1) A collective name. This evokes an atmosphere of drama and has power and meaning for those whom it includes, and a different one for outsiders. In those cases where the act of exclusion is deliberate and seen as unjust, the name often evokes even stronger passions from those excluded. The naming process is also important as an act of freedom. The right to name oneself is more important than the name itself.

(2) A common myth of descent. The key is not the actual descent in a genetic sense, but it is about explaining the similarities and a sense of belonging to a group. It brings together the twin threads of the Greek term *ethnos* namely, living together and being alike in culture.

(3) A shared history. A sense of history unites successive generations, each with its set of experiences that are added to the common stock. What matters is less the authenticity of the record, but the poetic, didactic and integrative purposes that record is felt to disclose.

(4) A distinctive shared culture. The most common shared and distinctive features are those of language and religion, but customs, institutions, laws, folklore, dress, food, music, architecture, even colour and physical attributes do matter. Language is often exaggerated as a key element of coherence. In practice, it is often the assault on a language used by a segment of society that triggers defensive coherence. The undermined language is then used to mobilize those aggrieved.

(5) An association with a specific territory. This matters as a symbolic geographical centre, a sacred habitat, a homeland to which to symbolically return, even when members are scattered across the globe or have lost their homeland centuries ago. The three key elements here are: sacred centres, commemorative association and external recognition.

(6) A sense of solidarity. The sense of identity and solidarity often finds expression in formal and informal support in times of stress and danger. Solidarity can override class, factional or regional divisions within a defined community.

The challenge then for nation-builders is not to be concerned about the cognitive salience of the above six features. Nor is it relevant to try to identify and confirm that all six elements are equally valid in a given situation. What seems to be critical is to identify what makes sense in a given community that purports to have shared memories and an association with a territory or a myth of shared ancestry. Under these circumstances historical experience shows that it is not impossible to then find a name, extend solidarity and gradually elaborate a shared culture.

³ Smith, D., The Ethnic origins of Nations, 1986, pp24-31.

But what of nation building in situations where few of the above core elements are shared? What of situations of conflicting myths and competing historical narratives? The conflict in the Middle East captures the tragedy of dual and conflicting claims on the same territorial space as sacred, commemorative and evoking the sense of solidarity within the ranks of the two peoples involved: the Palestinians and the Jewish people. The instability of many parts of Africa and the Balkans also reflects the failure to sustain an integrative narrative within an agreed social contract.

The challenge of the 21st century seems to be how to find ways of creating new social contracts within and between nations to enhance harmony and minimize conflict over competing claims. In this talk, I will use South Africa as a case study because it is my own country, but also because it embodies this challenge more than most other nations.

SOUTH AFRICA'S CHALLENGE

It is not surprising that many political observers did not hold out much hope for South Africa's successful transition from its divided past to a peaceful settlement and a stable democracy at the close of the 20th century. Almost all the cards were stacked against such an outcome.

There was no shared name for its people. There was no shared history. There was no myth of a shared ancestry or descent. There was no agreement on a shared territory, on the contrary, there were conflicting territorial claims. The bogus homeland system designed under apartheid to confuse indigenous people through a divide and rule strategy, complicated what was already a complex colonial heritage. There was no shared culture. There

was no basis for solidarity amongst all the people. So how did this nation come into being? How has it been held together over the past seven years?

The analysis of the six elements of national coherence referred to above, does not adequately emphasize the critical role of leaders as nation-builders. Leaders in circumstances such as South Africa not only had to create a climate for the negotiation process for a social contract (the new National Constitution with all its supporting documents and institutions), but they also had to create new myths that wove the new nation together from its fragments. The “rainbow nation” was one such myth that captured the imagination of a people struggling to come to terms with the palpable differences in physical, cultural and socio-economic circumstances. It was comforting for many to accept the rainbow metaphor. The rainbow nation idea did not ask for submission into a colourless society. But it acknowledged differences between South Africans and yet allowed for them to be bound together in a bow. One could remain an Afrikaner, a Xhosa, a Zulu, a Greek, an Irish person and still share the commonness of being South African.

Political leadership in the early phase of this fledging democracy was less focussed on technical good governance, but more on keeping faith alive in a shared future. The focus of the nation-building enterprise had to be on keeping hope of a better future for all alive on a daily basis. Given South Africans’ passion for sport, the rugby field, the cricket pitch, the soccer stadium all provided spaces for enactment of the magic of the rainbow nation. Nelson Mandela, fondly known by his clan name, Madiba, took up this challenge with passion. His distinctive colourful shirts, and his ability

to feel at ease in a Springbok rugby jersey, became part of the symbolism of a new beginning that broke with tradition at strategic moments, but stayed within it when the symbolic framework demanded it.

But what of the past? History in the case of nation building is meant to tell a story. But which story does one tell of South Africa's past that would resonate with the different experiences of the various segments of the society? Of heroes and heroic actions there could not be agreement. Heroes of one segment of the population, were seen by others as villains. For example, Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, is a hero amongst Afrikaners, but for those black people who were denied opportunities for development by his discriminatory education and other policies, he remains the ultimate villain.

This is where the need for magic comes in. Nelson Mandela's acute sense of history and its importance to those he was negotiating with, enabled him to show sufficient respect for Afrikaner heroes and the meaning they attached to their history. This extraordinary sensitivity and respect overwhelmed his opponents. They were forced to concede that difference of experience and the lack of shared meaning was not an absolute barrier to forging a shared future. This marked the beginning of the Madiba magic that the new South Africa came to rely on to get out of all manner of corners, including the threat of losing rugby matches against Australia!

Once established as a magic worker, Nelson Mandela continued to weave ever thicker myths that made it possible to confront the past and make peace with it. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was less about absolute

truth and spiritual reconciliation. It was more about ritualizing the entry into a shared territory where shared meaning and names are critical. South Africanness had to be embraced by, and embrace all people. Rituals need the right space and time as well as appropriate presiding officers. The combination of Madiba magic and Tutu's sense of ceremony and symbolism were much more important than the authenticity of the stories of pain and the confessions documented over the three year life of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The TRC was a necessary ritual to help South Africans in the quest to make peace with a history they could not share however hard they tried. The myths and meanings attached to history are too widely divergent to provide a basis for a shared future. But the imperatives of a shared territory provided urgency to making peace with the past. For better or for worse white and black South Africans had to learn to live together in the same bounded territorial space. Attempts by a small group of Afrikaners to establish a homeland they could have to themselves alone in the Northern Cape, have not derailed the larger push for South Africa to become a shared homeland for all its people. Like all rituals, enactment and re-enactment has to be done regularly. Effective communication especially through harnessing the power of modern telecommunications media, is crucial to success.

The question of reparations, symbolic and material is still outstanding. This is one of the greatest failures of the TRC process. Bygones will not be bygones as Nelson Mandela had hoped for. There are still too many raw wounds. But there is enough acceptance of a shared future to create space for time to help the healing process.

But how does one sustain the sense of belonging by all South Africans? How does one enhance the solidarity so needed to face up to enormous challenges of gross inequalities of opportunity? How does one help those impoverished by the divided past to develop the capacity to engage with the new institutions of their society as equal members?

How does citizenship get enacted in a manner that gives effect to substantive equality for all? How does one address the capability problems of poor black South Africans in a manner that does not alienate their white compatriots? How does one change the texture of social relationships to reflect shared citizenship rather than the entrenched master/madam/servant relationships? How does one deal with the culture of racial superiority and inferiority that has coloured social relationships for so long? These are troubling questions. Failure to address them will lead to the unraveling of the new democracy.

Addressing the material needs of impoverished South Africans must continue apace. Much has been accomplished already. Much more remains to be done. The key to keeping hope alive is for South Africa's leaders to heed Emile Durkheim's counsel on "the need to upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and collective ideas which make its unity and its personality."⁴ This regular affirmation is not only important for those who experience material deprivation, but also for the whole society to recognize that its self-interest is tied up with reducing the levels of gross inequalities in the society. Solidarity action in this regard

becomes less a matter of charity, but more one of civic duty. As Anton Rupert, one of South Africa's successful industrialists said of black people much earlier during the apartheid era: "If they do not eat, we cannot sleep."

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

There is much that living in the United States of America has opened my eyes to. The most important is perhaps that the USA has had more than two hundred years to perfect the art of regularly upholding and affirming the collective sentiments and collective ideas that are embedded in what it means to be an American. It is thus not surprising that the poet Walt Whitman would sing:

*"O, I see flashing that this America is only you and me,
Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,
Its crimes, lies, thefts, defections, are you and me,
Its Congress is you and me,
The officers, capitols, armies, ships, are you and me,
Natural and artificial are you and me,
Freedom, language, poems, employments, are you and me,
Past, present, future, are you and me,
I dare not shirk any part of myself,
Not any part of America, good or bad."*⁵

Whitman is not merely using poetic license here. He is reflecting the strength of America's sense of being a place for all: The immigrants who

⁴ As quoted in Smith, D, 1986.

have come to it over different historical periods under widely varying circumstances. The indigenous Americans whose rights are now increasingly given effect in law and in social practice. The lack of a shared history and a shared myth of ancestry, are trumped by the association with a shared territory, a shared name of being American be it Asian-, African-, Italian-, Native-American, etc. The acceptance of a shared culture that embraces and celebrates to varying extent the diversity of contributing cultural traits is also vital. As the renown novelist, Chinua Achebe points out: “ it is ultimately a matter of balancing stories. You cannot balance one thing. You balance a diversity of things. And diversity is the engine of the evolution of living things, including living civilizations.”⁶

But it is the solidarity that is enhanced by an entrenched culture of philanthropy unequalled anywhere in the world that helps to forge the sense of belonging – the **you** in **me** and the **me** in **you**. The value attached to philanthropy is not that of charity, but of enlightened self-interest – the use of personal wealth to advance social causes. Solidarity as a civic virtue is not only valued privately, but it is regularly and publicly reaffirmed and enacted in rituals and ceremonies to embed it in the fabric of American society.

What can South Africa and other newer democracies learn from one of the oldest democracies? The overwhelming lesson is that nation building is a never-ending task. It requires the continual focus of national leaders. Any complacency with the business of continually weaving together the

⁵ Quoted in Barber, Benjamin, A Place for Us: How to make Society Civil and Democracy Strong. Hill & Wang , N.Y., 1998.

fragments of society that come with their own sense of *ethnos* is bound to be costly. The Nigerian civil war in the sixties illustrates this. So too the unraveling of the promise of Zimbabwe as a stable and prosperous democracy. The protracted conflicts in the Great Lakes, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea all remind us of the fragility of nation-states.

There are high maintenance costs to keeping nations together. Rituals, ceremonies, symbols and the co-ordination of the sharing of cultural meanings are at the heart of affirming and re-enacting the myths that are central to what it means to belong to a nation. Myths are after all the glue that holds nations together.

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Sydney, Australia, July 2001.

⁶ Achebe, C., Home and Exile, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.97.