

# New series aims to dissect attitudes around race and identity in the new SA

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THE CAPE Times, in conjunction with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), today launches the series "Race and identity".

Few topics have been discussed so frequently, and yet, one senses, with such limited progress. So why give it another try? Should we devote time and energy to identity debates when we face the kind of material and economic challenges that we do?

Perhaps the simplest answer is the most obvious. We need to keep talking until we change the way we think and act – and that, clearly, is some way off. IJR's South African Reconciliation Barometer shows, for example, that South Africans have not changed much since 2001 in the way they view people from other race groups. We know attitudes are not likely to change until towns and

## Who are we? Race & Identity

cities have become more integrated – and more equal across socio-economic lines. This, of course, will take time.

This is not to say that many ordinary South Africans have not experienced profound and positive changes in racial relations since 1994. It is to claim that these changes are not yet enough, and that we need to find more creative and effective ways to overcome the exaggerated impact of race on identity formation – over other experiences accumulated at work, school, in social circles or faith communities, to name but a few. Indeed, can we identify specific areas, even abroad, where

significant progress in this regard has been made and from which we can learn?

On the other hand, we will also be asking if and how the quality of our debates on race are taking us forward or keeping us hostage to past paradigms?

Minister Trevor Manuel's widely-publicised letter to government spokesman Jimmy Manyi after his comments about coloureds' place in South African society certainly implied frustration about the quality of current race discourse.

The letter seemed to capture some of what remains unsaid in our many race debates. To Manuel, Manyi's inference that coloured people are somehow a "special case", in "over-supply" in the Western Cape, and "in need of redistribution" hinted at something that has gone very badly wrong.

One often hears these days that people are worried about resurgent ethnicity, racism and xenophobia and that all is not well in our communities. Talking about race in the way Manyi did not only misses the point, Manuel seemed to say, it messes things up even further.

But Manuel's suggestion that Manyi's thinking permeates the "highest echelons of government" should make us think beyond social transformation alone. It hints at political power. How are our leaders really thinking about race, ethnicity and identity? Does the constitutional vision of a non-racial, non-sexist society find bearing in the way South Africa is governed in practice, or is there a disjuncture between our professed and practised values?

The post-apartheid state, at least officially, has been resolutely non-

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racial and non-ethnic. Leaders have spoken about building a nation and not preserving bantustans, about fostering integration, not federalism, and about reconciliation, not victor's justice.

South Africans should not rest too comfortably on their considerable laurels. For one, race will sadly remain an important factor determining who South Africans will vote for during the next round of local elections, just over a month away. In this regard, Michela

Wrong's book about Kenyan whistleblower John Githongo, *It is our turn to eat*, is instructive reading. The book sets out to describe corruption, but ends up describing ethnicity.

The central theme that emerges is: ethnicity corrupts and corruption ethnicises. British colonial policy left Kenya a deeply ethnicised society, with one tribe periodically replacing the other at the "trough", as Wrong puts it. Consequently, corruption and ethnicity became inseparable, two sides of the same post-colonial coin. Ethnic networks, not democratic parties, took control of Kenyan state power and used this to steal billions in foreign aid and tax money at the cost of ordinary citizens. Eventually, deeply disillusioned citizens lost interest in politics and turned on one another to vent their frustration.

Ugandan, Rwandan and Burun-

dian history have all displayed similar patterns – all with very violent consequences. What makes South Africa different?

We see signs of growing ethnic tension "in the highest echelons" – and consensus seem to be spreading that the scourge of corruption is becoming increasingly pervasive. Are these factors linked, and if so, in what ways?

The series over the next coming weeks will allow voices from different perspectives to explore the continuing impact of race on identity formation, politics and social transformation in our country – and hopefully spur us on to work more concertedly to align what we do and think with what we say we believe.

● Dr Du Toit is executive director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. For more information, see [www.ijr.org.za](http://www.ijr.org.za)