

# Avoiding the dangerous flipside of nationalism with its tunnel vision

Brent Meersman

MY SCHOOL teacher had a trick to help us remember the date. On a transparency on an overhead projector he'd write 1961. When turned upside down, it still reads 1961. One wonders who will be commemorating tomorrow, May 31, when 2011 marks 50 years since South Africa became a Republic.

It is not entirely by chance that this year also happens to be the 50th anniversary of the founding of Umkhonto weSizwe by Nelson Mandela in June 1961. By December of that year, comrade Petrus Molefe was dead, MK's first casualty, killed by a prematurely exploding bomb.

It is of course no coincidence that May 31 was also the day of the signing of the 1902 Peace Treaty of Vereeniging that ended the Anglo-Boer War, and the day in 1910 when the (now old) SA flag flew alongside

the Union Jack for the first time and the Union of South Africa was established. May 31 then, with that urge for order one finds among nationalist Afrikaners, neatly formed a series of stepping stones to the foundation of a republic, severing all constitutional ties with Britain.

The whites-only referendum that brought about the Republic was won by a narrow majority, 52 percent. The irony for South Africa, almost uniquely in the world, was that sovereignty and shrugging off the last vestiges of the imperial yoke, was seen as little cause for celebration by the vast majority of its subjects.

Nor was the rest of the world impressed, especially when Prime Minister HF Verwoerd made it abundantly clear in Parliament that the Republic was for the benefit of the white nation. Liberation was self-determinism for the Afrikaner; everyone else was to be annexed into

what was at the heart of its conception a Boer Republic. South Africa became almost completely isolated diplomatically from the rest of independent Africa. Shortly after, it was effectively expelled from the Commonwealth (South Africa rejoined on the last Republic Day celebration in 1994), and in 1974, from having once been among the 51 founders of the UN, it found itself a pariah state barred from the General Assembly.

At home, the new Republic had unleashed the Terror. As in many places in the world, post-independence nationalist movements, the National Party being no exception, turn into politically intolerant oppressors. Sovereignty is the bulwark to neo-colonialism, but it is also the shield behind which abusers of human rights like to skulk. Here ends the history lesson.

"Republic Day" should give us pause to think about what we mean

by nationalism. Patriotic or nationalist movements – and the ANC is one of them – like ardent sports fans, too often smack of flag-waving chauvinism, irrational loyalties, superiority complexes, and tunnel vision.

The advantage of such delusions is that one might just win the game.

Like a sort of secular religion, nationalism and its attendant pride is a dangerously effective way to mobilise people. It's when people behave like insects. Think of North Korea, or lynch mobs characterised by xenophobia. Nationalism is often the last resort of the despairing. Historically at least, the ANC's nationalism has been ameliorated by an inclusive vision and the internationalism of class struggle ideology.

When used prudently (the Fifa World Cup was a good example) nationalism can unify a people, especially one as diverse as our own, just enough to do good, and not enough

'Spinning race to whip up a mob smacks of thuggery'

to turn us into a zombie force.

Cosmopolitan cynics might say it's unity based on a nation state with boundaries arrived at by arbitrary colonial rule within which the people can't even agree on who rightfully owns the land.

Since 1994, we are a Republic in the true sense of the word. Desmond Tutu is widely credited with coining the term "rainbow nation". The people within this nation are struggling to forge a common identity, yet in some ways we are fortunate that the links between nationalism and

statehood have remained tenuous.

The potential still exists to repeat the sin of Verwoerd, whereby ownership of the national project is hijacked by a specific hegemony disguised as a majority. As his influence sickened in his second term, Thabo Mbeki, instead of exhorting national pride, started to crank up polarising racial rhetoric; pronouncements by prominent individuals, such as Jimmy Manyi's comments on coloureds (for which he unreservedly apologised), and Julius Malema's recent simplistic scapegoat remarks about white people, undermine a sense of belonging among a sizeable constituency.

The people cannot afford a Jacobin figurehead unleashing a Republicanism every bit as toxic as all past head-chopping revolutions, more especially one that sees itself as elite, with a bling lifestyle that vulgarises its professed mission.

Spinning race to whip up a mob smacks of thuggery; the fascist tail on the flipside of the African Socialist head. When information is withheld in the "national interest", we must ask if this is truly the case, and who can be trusted to decide such things on our behalf; when industry is "nationalised", we must ask, for whose benefit? when the president can commit 2000 of our troops to conflicts in other states without going through Parliament, we should rigorously interrogate such deployment ("peace-keeping" is still warfare, albeit ostensibly of altruistic motivation).

Rainbows are beautiful celestial things associated with hope and promise. They are also a trick of light, an illusion – incorporeal, ephemeral, ethereal. Our nationalism should happily remain the same.

● Meersman is author of *Reports Before Daybreak* (Umuzi, 2011).

## CLASS-IFICATION

# Still blinded by the colour barriers

Oliver Meth

RECENTLY, various South Africans leaders have been making pronouncements about race, identity and what it means to be African.

These statements are not only shaping our national conversation we have with one another. They are also having a direct impact on how young people view themselves. Perhaps it is therefore no surprise that many young people continue to grapple with identity and finding a place in South Africa today.

Race seems to be a constant point of conflict; I would like to challenge the current debate from the perspective of a young South African who has grown up in this society. Any chance the youth may have to remain 'colour-blind' after birth is taken away through a society still obsessed with race.

Society calls me a "Coloured" and my original birth certificate classifies me as a "Cape Coloured".

And so I have been dubbed as a person of "mixed race" and constructed as "Coloured" in South Africa, instead of being named an African.

My dad is what would be termed "African or black" and my mom has been classified as "Coloured". They were never married or even lived together. I grew up with my grandmother, my mother's mother, in a "Coloured" community, south of Durban.

Would my race identity have been different if I had grown up in my father's African township community? Would I feel or be "Black" or still "Coloured"?

Having grown up in the coloured community I find myself trapped into the "Coloured" community's search for recognition battling to position themselves in a society where there is a sentiment that "Coloureds" are never "Black" nor "White" enough.

This search for a "Coloured identity", should in my opinion rather focus on deconstructing inherited identities and start adopting a new framework in which an African national identity becomes a reality.

The fact that we are so ethnically,



HERE WE ARE: This image is in the Nelson Mandela section at the Iziko Slave Lodge Museum in Cape Town. What makes us African? asks the writer.

culturally and linguistically diverse should become a central starting point of a South African identity. Our democracy is based on a compromise between diverse political groups and acceptance of our differences.

The fact that we have multiple identities should be the basis of our shared South African-ness. This country is a melting pot of people with their roots in Africa, the East and also the West. We should move away from past "racial" constructions and find the common South African identity. As the constitution's preamble clearly states "building a non-racial society".

Our identity is shaped by our childhood, culture, geographical location, common history and globalisation as well as through our

names, surnames, families, ancestry and country of birth. Why do we tend to make it mainly about race?

This year, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) together with 17 youth produced a film collection, titled: *African Identities: Shades of Belonging*. The debut film's focus is on the youths' attempt to understand who they are and what makes them African.

The short documentaries place a strong emphasis on identity formation and its relevance to building inclusive societies by these young people, who were brought together from across South Africa and the African continent to explore issues of identity and belonging.

The project, equipped the youth to utilise film as a vehicle to bring Africans from across the racial and

cultural divide together in an effort to instil values needed to build effective communities as the cornerstone of nation-building and contribute to the national conversation by drawing people with diverse views together.

One of the participants, Nadine Cloete, traces in her film *My family tree* her past generations and enters a search of her ancestral roots redefining herself as an African. Cloete said she has been classified as "Cape Coloured".

"It took me a long time to question this 'coloured' label. I see myself as South African, as human. Intrigued by documentaries I asked fellow young South Africans around me how they perceive the matter of race and identity."

Margo Newman, 29 years old,

Who are we?  
Race & Identity

said race did not shape her identity nor does it influence her decisions today. "I guess I have been fortunate to have been raised in a family that is diverse and encompasses members of all races and religions. Decisions are purely based on morals, opportunity and self growth".

I posed a question on the issue of race and identity on facebook and most people such as Refilwe Africa echoed similar sentiments: "Race does not shape my identity. The society I live in does, so does the position I occupy in that society".

Ayanda Nyoka says she has been privileged to be exposed to a multi-

racial social life from an early age "so I'm quite open to friendships with people from other different ethnic groups. And if ever my children were to be in an interracial relationship, I will support them."

"Identity is not fixed or permanent. It evolves and changes, as we grow and are exposed to new ideas, people and experiences. I went to an affluent multi-racial school and never thought about 'race'. I actually do not see race and I felt colour-blind, but as soon as I got out the school gate, into the bus I was reminded by society that I have a label."

So how do young people with optimism become bitter and negative about their prospective according to the race category they belong to? Why do younger children, who

make friends so easily across the colour line, learn to become suspicious of black or white as they reach the teenage years?

Perhaps it is precisely because race has become a scapegoat for larger economic and political problems, the complexity of which neither "White" nor "Black" South Africans fully understand. Many "Whites" and "Blacks" today would blame their deteriorating standard of living on one another. If only we could deepen our analysis to probe beyond the obsession with race as "the cause" of problems.

Focusing the issue of identities to race can divide us and trap us in boxes that do not allow us space to grow; we can no longer express our full potential or connect with others who are different from ourselves. Identity is a fluid, an ever changing phenomenon.

Race is a social construct. We cannot depend on a social construct to define an ever changing entity. That is not only destructive to oneself, but to others and the nation.

So, how can we build a truly non-racial society if we do not challenge the "racial" views presented to us daily by the media, politics, sport, arts and music?

How should our youth become citizens who vote according to political ideology and political programmes rather than according to race groups if race remains the driving variable for election campaigns?

As we go in search of a true identity, the question that still lingers in young minds of youth: who are we and what makes us an African?

Are we an African simply because we were born in Africa? Or does the colour of our skin, the language we speak, or the blood that flows through our veins stake or strip our claim to belonging?

Will past atrocities continue to colour our identity or can we find acceptance in the eyes of others?

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## Dangerous leaders fear press

"A FREE press is one of the pillars of democracy. A bad free press is preferable to a technically good, subservient one." So said former president Nelson Mandela. This is something that he seems to understand far better than today's ANC.

A functioning and strong democracy should have nothing to fear from a free press, no matter the hard time it is given.

Today's ANC seems to think that it needs to clip the press's wings because it is being given a hard time.

The older our democracy gets, the less mature the ANC becomes.

Is the ANC trying to end democracy? Obviously not. Above trying to protect state secrets, it really is about protecting members of the government who have committed crimes against the state.

Does this mean the ANC is an inherently corrupt institution that wants to plunder the state? No. It just means the ANC's arrogance and shortsightedness will cause the ANC to be like that. To use extreme language, one could almost say that the ANC is unwittingly permitting people who work for the state to commit crimes against the state.

The truth is that the ANC protects its own. If members of the ANC are found guilty of misconduct, that means it will be an inter-

In My Arrogant Opinion  
khaya dlanga



and things work very differently here. We have a judiciary which will examine the constitutional validity of the proposed law. If the judiciary sides with the ANC, it had better be aware that it will be next in the line of fire. A democracy needs a free press to thrive, and a free press needs a democracy.

Thomas Jefferson once said: "If I had to choose between government without newspapers and newspapers without government, I would not hesitate to choose the latter."

The ANC needs a free press for its very survival. The press is not dangerous, only dangerous leaders find it dangerous. Naturally, the government has called the press the opposition. The role of the press is not to be an a\*\*kisser, especially in a country with a weak opposition.

The ANC appears to be serving its own interests with this information bill, not the interests of democracy. The party is extremely powerful. The truth is that there are many things the ANC could have done with that power, but has chosen not to. When you have great power, restraint is your greatest asset.

The ANC must refrain from being arrogant regarding its power, as tempting as that may be. But unfortunately, it seems to be becoming more arrogant by the day.

## Another South African default position?

THE headline in Friday's Mail and Guardian, "Gaddafi: Zuma to appeal for 'sanity'", was surely ironic. Appealing to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi for sanity is a bit like appealing to Robert Mugabe's Supreme Court for justice.

Zuma's mission to Tripoli is a mystery and perhaps a secret that should not have been exposed. First reports suggested his mandate would be to seek an "exit strategy" for Gaddafi and that he would visit on a joint mission with Turkey.

His people later said it was "misleading" (not the same as plain wrong) to say his aim was to persuade Gaddafi to surrender power.

They also said he would go, not as part of a Turkish mission, but as a member of the special AU presidential committee on Libya. Yet he would go without the four other presidents on the committee.

The AU committee, and then the AU as a whole, held summits to discuss Libya in Addis Ababa on Thursday, but did not mention Zuma's mission in their statements.

Since then Zuma's people have explained that the president is going alone because he was asked by the rebels fighting Gaddafi to do so, and that a one-on-one meeting was likely to accomplish more.

The Mail and Guardian headline

Window on Africa  
peter fabricius



quoted came from a remark from one of Zuma's people that his mission would be "to see if he can bring sanity to the issues".

That Zuma's mission would be to persuade Gaddafi to surrender power seemed logical, since the AU presidential committee's first mission to Libya last month failed on this point.

Gaddafi then accepted the AU's road map to peace – which basically called for a ceasefire and then negotiations for political reform. The rebels, however, refused to talk unless Gaddafi and his family all retired from politics first.

But Zuma's people are suggesting something distinctly different; that Zuma's aim is to persuade both sides to begin unconditional talks. They hint that the rebels may be coming round to that position, as the war is dragging on without victory in sight.

But if he is meeting Gaddafi on behalf of the rebels today and is apparently not going on to Benghazi to meet the rebels, what will he try to persuade Gaddafi to do?

Will Zuma perhaps offer Gaddafi a face-saving solution whereby he and the rebels agree to unconditional negotiations about political reform – but with a secret understanding that those will conclude with Gaddafi's departure?

If so, why would the rebels trust Gaddafi's word on this when they don't seem to trust him on anything else?

The countries leading the Nato campaign are suspicious of Zuma's mission, first of all because they wonder what an exit strategy for Gaddafi would entail when he seems about to be indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes. That would make him a fugitive from ICC justice for all ICC-signatory countries, including South Africa.

For these Nato countries unconditional peace talks may be worse as they fear Gaddafi would abuse any ceasefire to regroup and then strike back harder at the rebels.

It may seem churlish to cast doubt on any peace effort, but a bad peace mission could aggravate the problem. If Zuma is carrying some real deal in his pocket today, well and good.

But if this is just another South African default proposal – a la Zimbabwe and Ivory Coast – that if

everyone just leaves us Africans to sit down and talk then all will be well, that is not so well and good.

There are worrying signs of the latter.

Zuma's spokesman, Zizi Kodwa, suggested to the Mail and Guardian that the Nato air strikes against Gaddafi's forces were part of the insanity that Zuma was going to 'Tripoli to cure'. The Nato action "didn't help. It hardened attitudes on all sides," he said.

Sure. Without those air strikes there would indeed not be hardened attitudes on the rebel side now, just rigor mortis. Recall that the UN Security Council – including South Africa – authorised the no-fly zone and "all necessary measures" (unambiguous UN-speak for military action) against Gaddafi because he had vowed to capture the rebel headquarters Benghazi and hunt down the rebels like rats.

Zuma is able to travel to Tripoli today only because Nato prevented Gaddafi crushing the rebels.

Unless South Africa sheds its ideological baggage and clearly comprehends – and strategically embraces – the role that Nato force has played and could yet continue to play in this complex and dangerous game, it could hinder, rather than help, the people of Libya.