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# THE LENS

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## THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED ARTICLE:

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*Cancel Culture is the  
Antitheses to  
Reconciliation*

- **Felicity Harrison**

## CANCEL CULTURE IS THE ANTITHESES TO RECONCILIATION

For almost as long as humans have been congregating in shared spaces, issues of how to hold one responsible and accountable for one's actions have emerged.

In our modern context, the State is given the duty to ensure that people who commit crimes are responsible for their transgressions, and the justice system has developed civil law to take care of disputes between citizens.

The system, however, is far from perfect. We have seen how institutions, in their design and execution, have become captured by elites and elite interests.

Part of the problem has been that those who are connected, rich and powerful (determined by race in many instances) escape culpability because of their privilege and power. Increasingly, and especially in the era of social media, large numbers of people (or organisations) judged to be guilty of overstepping a social norm in the court of public opinion, are summarily "cancelled".

During the 1980's public censure was used to good effect when fighting the evils of apartheid. Economic sanctions, combined with boycotts, contributed greatly to the ending of apartheid. Things in recent years, however, have gone horribly wrong.

A form of McCarthyism, combined with the ability of social media to take issues globally has led to a situation where the practice of ostracism has become punitive, rather than rehabilitative. Social media have replaced the angry mob with pitchforks, using hashtags and cyberbullying instead.

It is not so much the fact that people are ostracised, but the degree to which it is done and the practices it engenders, that are problematic. The practice is problematic because of the way in which it cancels people, rendering them cut off from society, as a punishment for what they have said or done. This falls into the category of retributive justice. Often, when a person is cancelled, there is little or no chance of them one finding a way back; and this is where the problem lies.

**"THE ESSENCE OF RECONCILIATION AND JUSTICE ARE  
ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS"**

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In restorative justice, victims are given the opportunity to express the impact of what has happened and offenders are given the chance to see what they have done wrong and to change their behavior. The key to restorative justice is to reconcile and restore relationships broken by anti-social behavior. In Cancel Culture, this does not happen. This is a concern in all societies, and, I would argue, even more so in South Africa.

The South African Reconciliation Barometer measures public opinion and the latest edition notes that there are low levels of trust (and therefore social cohesion) between people of different sexual, religious and linguistic identities. This is largely as a result of our historical legacies and continuing social wounds which have not been healed. The current discourse in our body politic is increasingly polarised, with people operating in echo-chambers. The ability to listen has largely been replaced by loud rhetoric and most interactions are seen as a zero-sum-game. In a country that has not reconciled with its past, the addition of Cancel Culture is adding fuel to the flame.

We need to work together to have a culture where, when correction is necessary, it is done with compassion and empathy. Cancel Culture has had the effect of hardening racist, sexist and homophobic attitudes, often under the guise of free speech. Those who are cancelled seldom see the error of their ways and, even if they do, they are not given an opportunity to redeem themselves.

The essence of reconciliation and justice are accountability and restoring relationships. Cancel Culture emphasises accountability without the possibility of restoration. We need to learn to walk with those who are racist, and sexist, and xenophobic: correcting error but doing it with compassion. Cancel culture is not the way to do this

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