
Consensus is possible provided the setting is conducive

By Ben Turok

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We have come to expect the unexpected from former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela. Not long ago we heard she had submitted Mt Kilimanjaro. More recently she followed that up with yet another remarkable summit. This was a different kind of summit, but an impressive effort nevertheless. She gathered

about 300 distinguished personalities from all over the country at her base, Stellenbosch University, for the launch of the M Plan for Social Justice.

Even though the Constitution has a number of clauses dealing with health, housing and other socioeconomic rights, Madonsela argued how could it be possible that South Africa does not have such a social plan? That is the next mountain she plans to climb, and it looks like a number of prominent personalities are set to join her.

Minister in the Presidency Jackson Mthembu made the first move, delivering a speech from President Cyril Ramaphosa who was in Japan, after the Vice Chancellor formally opened the conference. What followed the formal speeches was an extraordinary panel of personalities representing a wide range of interest groups from top business to academia with some unexpected individuals thrown in.

The result could have been total discord and complete disagreement on the critical issues of employment,

human rights and the rest. After all, all speakers emphasized that our social problems are dire and the country is in serious political turmoil on every major issue. So how could a panel as diverse as this come to any kind of mutual understanding?

Surely Madonsela could not have expected anything but an intense wrangle from this opening panel? There was Busisiwe Mavuso, Chief Operating Officer of Business Leadership, Nicky Newton King, CEO of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, former President De Klerk, Professor Jonathan Jansen, University of Stellenbosch, Dr Pali Lehohla, former Statistician General, and myself, a former ANC MP.

Yet all the panelists found themselves in agreement in support of the M Plan, while acknowledging the difficulty of implementation. They all spoke with much passion about the numerous problems facing the country and acknowledged serious tensions gripping our people.

My view, that we are in a kind of national stalemate, seemed to find favour. I argued that in our national politics, in economic decision making, in so many areas of public policy we seem to be paralysed. I argued that this condition goes back to 1994 when

the liberation movement and white power signed up to a non-aggression pact which did not, however, include the kind of plan that would transform the socioeconomic profile of the country. Hence there are many continuities from the legacy of apartheid which have not been addressed. To overcome this would take more than an appeal to morality and good citizenship. The persisting conflicting interests have to be identified and mediated.

In a remarkable series of presentations, each panelist approached the topic from their own perspective. The two representatives of big business were highly critical of the indecisiveness of government in dealing with the severe problems in state owned enterprises and the public service, but were equally forceful in their commitment to social transformation.

Mr De Klerk first read a formal statement but then opened up with an emotional apology for apartheid and an affirmation that having a white skin was

not a licence for special treatment. He is in complete support of non-racialism and a fair deal for all.

Dr Lehohla gave numerous examples of failed social policy and Professor Jansen talked about the deficiencies of our education system.

Contributions from the floor generally referred to distrust in government, lack of confidence in political parties and a strong sense that civil society organisations have a vital role in improving the material socioeconomic conditions of our people. A number of speakers spoke passionately on how poverty is the outcome of unemployment and inevitably has led to a rise in crime, corruption and low growth.

One speaker contrasted the conditions in the suburbs and the townships, which highlight the continuing divides everywhere. My view was that even as we talk about a new plan we need to pay a great deal of attention to the often subtle

continuities in various forms which perpetuate the injustices and prejudicial conduct of apartheid.

On the face of it this was just one more conference bemoaning the poor condition in which the majority of our people live. We have heard this many times. What was different for me this time was the consensus that emerged from the most diverse of panels. Were these just fine sentiments suited to the occasion? I am sceptical enough to believe that not every top business tycoon would support Busisiwe Mavuso's passionate statement for social transformation or that brokers in New York are as interested in Nicky Newton Kings' critique of how financial markets work.

The point, however, is that when leading personalities take off their formal mantles and meet in an informal setting and for a good social cause, they speak to the truth and actually find each other. This surprised them all. Clearly this was a summit with a difference. **NA**

