

South African Activist looks to the future

Dr Barney Pitso, Chairman of the South African Human Rights Commission came to Australia last December to speak about reconciliation and human rights at the Diversity Conference, organised by the University of Technology. Dr Pitso, a human rights lawyer and Protestant priest spoke to OLGA YOLDI about the new South Africa and his hopes for the future.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) brought about a great deal of controversy. Some say that it was an interesting experiment but failed to bring much needed justice. Was it a question of resources or commitment?

That comment does not strike me as being fair. The TRC began with a budget of \$50 million, the question is, was the money used adequately? I believe the process was fair because people could still take the commission to court. Certainly in parts it was very legalistic, therefore it may have put a number of people from participating, and in being so legalistic it might have been very protective. But I can assure you, it was a good and fair process.

Don't you think it helped to open wounds and left the perpetrators run free?

When people were participating in the TRC they knew very well what to expect, they knew they would have an opportunity to speak. The TRC's intention was to give dignity, to give a voice to those who suffered, to those voices that had been suppressed for very long. That idea was accomplished.

That included also the perpetrators, the idea was to give them a voice so that they would say what they actually did and to unburden themselves. It is believed that in the process of unburdening people can regain their humanity and be reconciled with themselves and with those they hurt.

The TRC was a process, a mechanism for people to express themselves to tell their story. What sort

of compensation and recognition the victims should have received, that is a separate question. Not everybody that has been through the TRC has the same need for compensation. People and their experiences were different. There are people who suffered but did not want to go to the TRC. Others suffered as a result of what happened to their loved ones and went to the TRC for recognition.

The TRC did have the role to advise for a process of compensation and reparation and that did happen. The issue is if that has happened in a satisfactory way and that is where the controversy is. People who went to the TRC with the intention of obtaining compensation have not received it.

In terms of prosecution anyone who went through the TRC received amnesty and therefore became immune from prosecution. Those who did not go through the TRC are liable for prosecution. But important questions need to be raised: should this be a priority to pursue the perpetrators at enormous cost and at a time when South Africa has to grapple with enormous problems of crime and violence? The director of public prosecutions has set up a unit for prosecutions that need to be investigated. It means that enormous resources will have to be put towards investigations.

The director of public prosecutions has not ruled out prosecutions where there is evidence. It will not be easy to prosecute these people because there will be a need for resources, there will be a need for willingness of people to come forward. Many of these people may not be willing to come forward. These things happened long ago and the

reliability of witnesses may be questioned. My feeling is one can spend a lifetime pursuing prosecutions and you lose the big picture.

What is the big picture?

I believe we should be developing South Africa, making it the kind of country many of us struggled for. We have done the TRC. I believe that the efforts made to give voice, recognition and reparation were important but we shouldn't live the rest of our lives under the shadow of the past.

Is it possible to look at the future without having come to terms with the past? How do you see South Africa's future?

It is imperative we look at the future, we cannot be looking at the past. We have to engage in meaningful reconciliation in South Africa today. We need to understand what happened in the past so that we don't allow it to happen again.

We have reconciliation laws in place to protect human rights. We are in the process of constructing a future, a new South African society and that is what we should be devoted to. For that purpose we need to challenge the mindsets. We have to help build South Africa investing in the relationships we want to have. This is not about sentimentality but about how we make hard decisions about resources, about the economy, about creating employment, about dealing with continuous deep-seated racism in society. It is about constructing a more fair, just and equal society. That does indeed require some hard decisions particularly about the economy.

What initiatives has the government taken to create employment?

There have been some initiatives. Whether they have succeeded that is another question. The economy is not producing the level of jobs that are needed, neither is globalisation nor micro economic policies. There is a growth rate of three per cent of the economy. It has been consistent since 1995 but what we need is a growth rate of six per cent in order to impact on the figures of unemployment. Even though there has been a minimum growth rate it hasn't created jobs. Not even a three per cent increase in employment. Growth in the economy -capital, stock, shares-, those sorts of things don't necessarily produce jobs, which is rather unfortunate. It is difficult to escape the trends of the global economy and the global economy benefits those that are in power and not others. Wealth is still in the hands of very few in South Africa, that has not changed that much.

The critical thing for me is not the redistribution of wealth but the provision of resources to people. It is more important for a government to provide better services and get people out of the poverty cycle. There have been attempts to do so through policies and principles, but for that purpose it is necessary to shift resources and there is a lot of resistance to do so. On the other hand it has to be done in a way that does not destabilise the economy, that is an enormous challenge for us in South Africa where there has already been capital flight as a result.

Did Mandela achieve real change?

Mandela has been very important in the evolution of South Africa. He was the father of the new South Africa, and gave the new South Africa a confident start by his presence and his symbolism. It is going to take a long time to achieve change but the government is determined to bring up change. That is happening. Mandela at the time articulated that very clearly and it has been carried forward under the new government.

When Mandela came to power there was absolutely nothing. There was just an apartheid regime. The total reconstruction of the country was a very painful process, ensuring that the government was united, restructuring the civil services. Because there was nothing they had to draft new policies just about every walk of life. It was a frantic time. A lot of work was done in restructuring all aspects of government and the agenda for two terms was to consolidate and ensure delivery. There was much development carried out, the housing projects for instance were very ambitious. But the need for housing is still there.

What was it like growing up in an apartheid system?

At the time I was growing up schools were very disadvantaged. We lived in homes without basic facilities, one couldn't take anything for granted. We always made do with what we could. What I resented the most was the police repression more than the material things that were lacking, as well as the lack of movement, the constant restriction. You had to carry a pass otherwise you were subjected to arrest. There are things that one remembers that always stay with you, forever.

To what extent has the government delivered?

South Africans wanted a better life, they believed their lives would improve with the ANC government, for many people it did. We shouldn't underestimate the level of change, people have now access to health care, water, electricity, homes. There are things that haven't changed like unemployment for instance, poverty remains a problem but there has been change. A small minority became rich.

Education policies have also improved. There was an attempt to improve education in disadvantaged areas. However education still remain an enormous problem. Inequality hasn't been wiped out from the education system, this is an area of concern. The health system is also of enormous concern. In terms of development, there are some government

programs intended to encourage individual initiatives for capital or emerging entrepreneurs but people in South Africa aren't entrepreneurial. For some reason it doesn't come naturally to them, they are slow in benefiting from those resources.

Is the Human Rights Commission very active in South Africa today?

Very active and as usual under resourced. Many human right violations are still being committed. Racism, torture, these things are still happening as we speak. We get at least 200 complaints a day and last year we received 10,000 cases. Twenty per cent of those reach the final stages, many are rejected or not investigated further. It is simply not possible to eradicate evil from a society that has inherited the legacy of apartheid. It will take a longtime. Societies are not transformed overnight.

Do you think that crime is one of the most difficult challenges confronting South African society?

Crime is a worrying problem. There is a belief that crime has recently increased, but the thing is with the previous system you just didn't know what levels of crime there were or what constituted a crime against apartheid or an ordinary crime. It is now clearer. The police need to be retrained urgently. In the past the whole policing structure was around apartheid and there is an enormous need for re-education, for changing the culture of the police force in South Africa. There are worrying levels of crime. Our challenge is integrating the police force in the new society, to the new changes in order to get a competent police force.

Do you see much difference between generations in the way they perceive South African society?

Young people in South Africa are not preoccupied and burdened by the past. They are very aware of race relations, of the history of apartheid but they don't live in the shadows of the past. Young people are getting on with their lives, which is very good. I see it all the time. I see the new generation as being very different. Young people of different races don't mix and there is still a long way to go in terms of eradicating racism and improving race relations but the future generations in South Africa will grow up as free men and women. Freedom is the most important thing in life. There is a lot happening in South Africa and a lot more that needs to happen unfortunately. ■