

SUMMARY OF PRIZEGIVING SPEECH GIVEN BY R. D. ACKERMAN
HERSCHEL SCHOOL : FRIDAY 21 OCTOBER 1988

"Tomorrow's World - A Message of Hope"

"How can one know colour in perpetual green, and what good is warmth without cold to give sweetness" - a quotation by John Steinbeck.

This quotation is really a mirror of South Africa today. There is no country where everything is peaceful and calm and I believe that the warmth and the cold strengthens a people and gives enormous challenges.

I opened up my speech by giving a few anecdotes concerning young people and their views about South Africa :

1. A young man from India is spending a few years in South Africa and he came to my house and spoke to my young family about the fact that Indian Graduates, even when they are 35 years old, often have to stay in their parents homes and can only get a home of their own when they are about 40 years old and even then they only earn about \$35 a month. His view was that South Africa was an absolute paradise compared to India and he cannot understand why young people in this country don't see it the same way.
2. A young lady from Rhodes University, a coloured student, spoke to me recently and said that she used to feel that South Africa offered her no hope at all until she sat down and analysed the various changes that have occurred. She can now go to a University such as Rhodes, go to most theatres and hotels and pursue a life with hardly any discrimination and she began to realise that South Africa is changing and it is giving hope for her and her peers for the future.
3. Anton Rupert in a speech recently, said that there are fifty-five million people in Southern Africa and if only we could bury Apartheid, we could have such a strong hope for the future because we have all the mineral wealth that we could ask for and food self-sufficiency. The only thing holding us back was personal co-operation and a solution to a new political dispensation.

Section I : A few words on South Africa today :

The basis of the American Constitution is the acceptance that each person is 'born free with an inalienable right for life, liberty, justice and pursuit of happiness' and it was interesting to compare Mr Botha's statement at the opening of parliament eighteen months ago when he said "We accept one citizenship for all South Africans implying equal treatment and opportunities. We believe that human dignity, life, liberty and the property of all, must be protected regardless of colour, race, creed or religion". Even although there are so many things still wrong with South Africa, surely this was a sign that our objectives are in the right direction and that although we are not free of discrimination, we certainly are moving in that direction and even America with all its high-flying objectives, is also not free of prejudice and a lot of racial discrimination, despite the Laws of the Land having eradicated them. So there is hope for South Africa.

Many Laws have changed. There are over 102 discriminatory Laws that have been changed over the last five to six years and although the country hasn't been given credit for this, South Africa is a far happier and more moral place than it was five to ten years ago.

The aim of this speech is to try and convince young people that there is a hope for this country, that they don't have to feel disillusioned and that the main way we are going to solve our country's problems is to keep young educated people in this country and try and prevent the 'brain drain'. To try and show what we can do in South Africa from various areas, to encourage young people to stay and to show them that 'there is light at the end of the tunnel' - and a 'shining' light.

Section II : What are the goals of youth ? What do they basically

1. They want hope to develop their careers in peace
2. They want hope to bring up their children in a fair Society
3. They want a flourishing multi-party and non-racial South Africa

These goals I got from asking questions around the country at Universities and Schools, because I travel around the whole country incessantly and they came from talking to young people at Black and White Universities, Afrikaans and English. Their goals and their needs seem to be the same regardless of their backgrounds, so the real question then is - How do we meet those needs ?

An overwhelming majority of Blacks that I have encountered want to avoid, as passionately as most middle-of-the-road Whites, violence and unrest.

Section III : How can we achieve these goals ?

(a) The business community and professional people :

The business community has got to do far more on fair employment practices and providing houses and education for staff and voicing and fighting for the principles enumerated above - mainly the elimination of all discrimination and the importance of sitting round the table with Black Leaders to establish a shared power Constitution.

The making of profits, important as it is, is certainly not the sole aim of business and in a country like South Africa the business community has an enormous role to play and is playing that role, but not sufficiently cohesively.

The business community can influence overseas investors to back this country and create employment, because without employment we are going to have more and more poverty and more and more violence and this certainly won't encourage our youth to stay in South Africa. I have been encouraged by the contact I have had with people overseas who are beginning to realise that a strong economy and strong employment growth is the way to go and not Sanctions and Disinvestment.

(b) Students and young people :

Young people can play a role by realising that if there are enough people who care, you can solve anything and by remembering a biblical quotation used by Jack Kennedy "To whom much is given, much is required". In other words, to use education to improve South Africa, to eradicate prejudice and to go out into the World with a fresh approach for a new South Africa.

Prejudice against colour or religion or age is something we have got to fight and students coming from a school like this are not only privileged, but are really able to change the attitudes of the older generation who have been too tied to prejudice and group thinking.

Another area that youth can play in the new South Africa, is to fight Drug Abuse and the scourge of AIDS - probably the most important problem facing Southern Africa in the years ahead, far more important according to many experts than the political problems that we are going to face.

(c) The Government :

The Government has to urgently and immediately abolish every aspect of Apartheid - we have gone a long way towards achieving this, as mentioned earlier, but there are certain crucial areas that still have to be tackled.

Detainees must be released and Detention without Trial must be eradicated from our system and the Leaders of all groups in this country must get around the table and sort out a shared power Constitution.

Most people in this country don't want an extreme Left Government or an extreme Right and there are enough people who want peace and abhor violence to sort out a Constitution which could be multi-party, non-racial and democratic.

(d) Extra Parliamentary Groups :

There are understandably many people who do not have the Vote, who feel that South Africa is pointed in the wrong direction but it is so crucial for them, together with those who have the Vote, to put aside past fears and past injustices and find a way to build something together.

The extra parliamentary groups must realise and many do, that Sanctions and Disinvestment are wrong and will only create poverty and ruin the Economy and ruin the chance of people having jobs and if business and extra parliamentary groups can get closer to each other and realise that they have a common destiny for a shared South Africa and a South Africa free from discrimination, there really is great hope for the future peace in South Africa.

I have been encouraged by my meetings, not only with overseas people regarding Sanctions, but with Black Leaders in South Africa who basically want the same as we want and that is a non-violent, non-racial Democracy. They don't want to see the Economy ruined by Sanctions and Disinvestment. They don't want to see their people out of work and there seems to be a common thread developing amongst a vast number of people which only augurs well for a solution to our problems.

Section IV : Conclusion :

I don't feel that the above goal and aim is a pipe-dream. I feel confident that it can be achieved if all four groups work towards achieving a common peaceful destiny for South Africa.

I would like to wish the Matriculants good luck for their exams and congratulate those who are being awarded prizes, but I would also like to give the non-prize winners a feeling of optimism because my experience with young people is that a lot of people who don't earn prizes at school, often do extremely well in life.

When I was at the School about ten years ago for Prizegiving, a lady giving the speech said that young people must be given 'roots and wings'. They get their 'roots' from the school and from their parents and their 'wings' from their education and from their parents' attitude and I feel that this is probably the key area that we as parents and teachers must follow. To give our children a strong grounding and a strong faith in the future and 'wings to fly' from a free unprejudiced education.

I was at the School for four years in the early '30s and I left exactly fifty years ago and look how the School is flourishing. In fifty years time people will look back and say 'look how Herschel has flourished over the last fifty years' because South Africa is going to be here in fifty years time and in a hundred years time and the problems that we see now are really small compared to the problems that our forefathers faced - the problems between the English and the Boers at the turn of the century; the problems of the 1st World War; the Great Depression in the '30s; the 2nd World War and all the subsequent problems that we have had in South Africa, so I feel very confident that we will 'row through the present stormy waters' and realise that South Africa has a golden future, if we can all learn to build on our differences and realise that we have a common destiny.

"A land of plenty with manna from heaven would be a dull stultifying place. Oh Lord, don't take away any of my trials, struggles and heartbreaks" - this is a quotation from Neville Cardus, a great writer, a Sports Commentator and an Art and Music Critic in America, who died recently. The meaning behind this quotation is so similar to my opening quotation from John Steinberg, 'trials and troubles' doesn't mean hopelessness, in fact it gives us hope because with challenges we can only grow.
