



# University of Cape Town

## GRADUATION

DECEMBER 12, 1985

ADDRESS BY E. M. WENTZEL, SC

Chairman of the Executive of the

SA Institute of Race Relations and

Chairman of the Johannesburg Bar Council

Mr Chancellor, Mr Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen:

A return to Cape Town for a one-time Capetonian is always a special delight and particularly so to a great occasion at U C T. In that other South Africa, in the Transvaal, one has to be content with the vicarious experience of memories. As you will discover, with increasing certainty as the years pass, this U C T is unique in beauty and in character.

Those of you who are about to graduate will be in a mood to reflect on your time at this University. The time of leaving is a time to ask yourself what is the purpose and nature of the University. It is an ordered community of students and teachers. Its purpose is to search for the truth. When the assault of apartheid was made in the 1950s, U C T was led by one of its most remarkable Vice-Chancellors, indeed one of the most distinguished of all South Africans, Dr T B Davie.

To secure its purpose of the search for truth, Dr Davie explained, a University must have academic freedom, that is the

freedom to decide whom to admit, who should teach, and what should be taught.

The doctrine of academic freedom is an assertion of the practice of democracy in society as a whole. In order to achieve democracy, that is to say a system in which value and weight is given to the wishes of individuals in society, the political system must place constraints on the power of the central governmental authority. A sensible way of doing that is to protect by law and convention a wide variety of institutions which, in one degree or another, are independent of the government. A university is one of these. Trade Unions, Churches, the Press are other examples. The Courts are the supreme example. Thereby is grassroots democracy practised in reality rather than in name.

In the 1950s, the Nationalist Government, as is not an uncommon experience for governments, was seized by a species of social engineering, the disease of apartheid. The government asserted the right to control the lives of all South Africans: where they lived, worked, studied, how they voted - if at all - and who they married.

At this campus the Holloway Commission on University apartheid heard evidence. Dr Davie testified for the University. A proposal was made that either a painted line or a barrier or fence should be used to divide students according to race in the lecture rooms. Each group would see the lecturer while being separated from the students of the other race. Let me interpose to say how distasteful it is to see the beaches and the decency of Capetonians disfigured by fences. Some day we will ask:

"Where have all the fences gone?" Experience will arm us to reply: "Back to hell with the hypocrites who erected them."

Dr Davie's response in the 1950s was characteristic: "If you paint a line my students will cross it; if you build a barrier my students will break it down."

Conflict between the government and the universities was inevitable. The universities were engaged in a search for truth. Apartheid, by contrast, was proclaimed as a given truth not to be questioned save on penalty enforced by law. The claims of the universities to independence and academic freedom could not be, and were not, acknowledged. But the universities responded with spirit and the assault was somewhat contained.

In its resistance, the University of Cape Town gave itself the foundation to survive and reassert its purpose when the climate was more favourable. It gave hope to other institutions also under assault. It taught us the value of keeping intact, as far as we were able, the character of the institutions under assault, so that that character and experience would influence the new society, now already in its creation.

I return to the University and its purpose - the search for truth. The structure of the University is designed to advance that purpose. The teaching function has the vitality of dialogue between students and teachers. This, in itself, is a stimulus to the research function. But perhaps above all, it is in the University's less formal self: in the canteens, in the casual discussions, in the political life around the S R C and Societies, and in the student press, that the habit of dialogue

and respect for the opinions of others is learnt.

In the 1950s this campus was a place of animated debate and controversy with the widest spectrum of opinions. This controversy is a feature of a search for truth. It is in contrast and in opposition to those who believe that the search for truth itself is a mere liberal diversion, that the truth is a scientific reality called Marxism by which all life's complications - political, economic, personal - can be understood and explained.

Its seductive power is instant wisdom and an instant authorised vocabulary of political solutions. For some young whites this given knowledge is the only privilege they can carry without guilt.

There is an evangelical energy released when significant numbers of young students believe they have found the means to liberate themselves from the evil society from which they have come. Indeed, one can rejoice at much of the creativity and courage one sees on the campuses today.

But there is also a negative side. That is a self-righteousness which not only does not wish to hear any dissenting opinions but will disrupt the meetings of those who express other views and vilify and anathematize those who express those opinions. Some student leaders show a lack of concern when ordinary students melt away and show no interest in student affairs. This is simply a contempt for the democratic process. It is also an indictment of those who do melt away and are too craven to state publicly the quite sensible, if unspectacular, things they believe privately.

These are some of the less happy features of university life today. They are a product of a society under great stress. The challenge to the universities, and to the great majority of those who teach and study there, is to keep faith with the University's purpose of the search for truth where dialogue and diversity is promoted. However evil our society, the University cannot play the role of the technician of revolutionary training.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of students and staff do not see the University's role in that radical view. They earnestly seek fundamental change and abhor racism, but have the sound common sense to know the relationship between means and ends. They know that the road to a non-racial democracy is not to be founded on violence and killing and the destruction of society.

At this University you will have been made aware of the society in which you live, and the danger that the society has already suffered a mortal blow. You will have a sense of crisis and be aware that a new society has to be built in which apartheid is eliminated. You will understand that your future depends upon this. More than any professional skill you have learnt here, your social awareness will enable you to make your contribution to a new South Africa.

In South African society itself, there is a danger - analogous to some of your experience on the campus - of a fatal polarization of political positions. By that I mean a presentation of the main issue of the future as a struggle

between capitalism and a Marxist socialism of an extreme and authoritarian variety.

Such a development would be disastrous for South Africa. It would falsely present an extreme, hardline left solution as the appropriate alternative to apartheid. We would but change one authoritarianism for another.

There are many, many South Africans who do not wish to choose the moguls of capitalism as their champions. Let there be free enterprise with its energy and its capacity to create wealth. But we live in a society of abnormal inequality, which must be redressed with vigour. To survive, any system in South Africa must acknowledge in a way that is obvious to all and real in content, the political and economic worth of all South Africans. A society with a healthy mix of public and private endeavour is worth striving for; a social democracy is worth striving for.

It is a solution that the capitalists would be well advised to accept. Many people, however, will perhaps be sceptical about whether the A N C will do so.

There are, however, two A N Cs: one is an ideal of national liberation in the hearts and minds of millions of South Africans, black and white. That A N C founded in 1912 has a noble history of forbearance in the face of insult and a steadfastness for non-racialism. The other is the A N C in exile, with its sadness and longing to be home, and its hardening policy of violence and even terror, and a hardline political programme forged in the alliance with the South African Communist Party and the undue representation of Communists on its Council.

Those are the wages of exile. Let us not forget that in those long years of exile it was not yet fashionable to make pilgrimages to ~~London~~<sup>Lusaka</sup>. America had not yet done its reverse-Columbus and discovered Africa. The A N C made its friends where it could; the influence of those who introduced the friends grew in the A N C.

The time has come to let the A N C be unbanned. Let it return home to campaign openly in the political arena. The A N C of 1912, which saw the future as a non-racial social democracy, is there in the hearts and minds of so many people who seek a moderate, peaceful solution. What we can all do is to convey a sense of urgency to those who govern us to allow all South Africans to participate fully and equally in the processes by which that solution can be found.

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