Manufactured myths

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For those who embraced the nation-building myths of CNE, reasons or evidence for these beliefs were not relevant and critical scrutiny of them was not encouraged.

However, the development of rationality should be central to education, and students should be encouraged to exercise rational skills. While this does not mean that education is only about learning to engage in rational enquiry – education also legitimately promotes imagination and creativity – it does imply that education should not encourage students to embrace false beliefs.

Indeed education, and particularly education for a democratic way of life, must expose false beliefs, especially the myths that political and cultural entrepreneurs would have students embrace. This could occasionally require that students and citizens publicly renounce the nation's deeds and values.

But loyalty to the nation is expected of its members. While nationhood is often expressed as a demand for autonomy for the nation, this does not usually imply autonomy for its members. Although nationalists typically claim that every nation is unique, individual members of the nation must surrender their individual uniqueness in order to belong to the organic whole, identifying with and celebrating a given heritage.

'Christian National Education is a painful example of schooling aimed at nation building'

Nationalism offers little by way of inspiration to democratic deeds and procedures, and nothing to prompt debate. It serves a purpose in liberation struggles, but offers little thereafter.

Informed by a sense of history which is a combination of forgetting and retrospective mythologising, nationalism does not foster the exercise of reason or the informed, critical imagination and questioning of authority which should be developed by education. Nation building would pre-empt the exercise of democratic reason by discouraging open-ended public debate on alternative political possibilities, and exploration of proper rational grounds for action.

The related ideals of education and democracy are incompatible with that of the "nation". Nation building is not a defensible approach to education after apartheid.

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SA in grip of 'borderline syndrome'

The debate on nation building has overlooked the analogy between the role of good parenting in creating a healthy individual identity and the role of leadership in creating a coherent national identity. SHAUNA WESTCOTT spoke to Theo Schkolne.

IF THE South African community were a large extended family and its leaders were concerned parents, the problem that family therapy would have to address would be "borderline syndrome". So says Theo Schkolne, graduate of Duquesne University in the United States and McMaster University in Canada.

In individuals, "borderline personality" is indicated by a shaky and non-coherent identity, dramatic shifts in mood and a great potential for self-destructiveness. In the case of a collective, a diagnosis of "borderline syndrome" would be made on the basis of the volatility of emotion in the collective, the absence of a central, unified community core and collective self-destructiveness.

"I think that in South Africa, in this time of transition," says Schkolne, "the volatility of emotions focuses largely around fear, paranoia, mistrust, entitlement and the unresolved experience of woundedness."

In individuals, the causes of borderline personality lie in grossly inadequate parenting – what Schkolne calls "a profound failure in early nurturance and containment, where a sense of coherent identity is consumed by the needs of the parental figure or through forms of early deprivation".

If the analogy between parents and political leadership holds, it is not difficult to see how the barbarism of the apartheid order, and the wholesale neglect and cruelty emanating from institutions that should have provided care, sowed the seeds of the societal damage that now threatens the future.

According to Schkolne, even after the official death of apartheid, leaders are still failing in the essence of their task.

"Leadership in this country still seems to be grounded in the articulation of special interest needs. Even though this is legitimate in terms of past discrimination, it prevents them from fully encountering the diversity of cultural and human needs and experience. If we see the various diversities in our society as a family, then the parental figures are not providing real containment for all that diversity of needs.

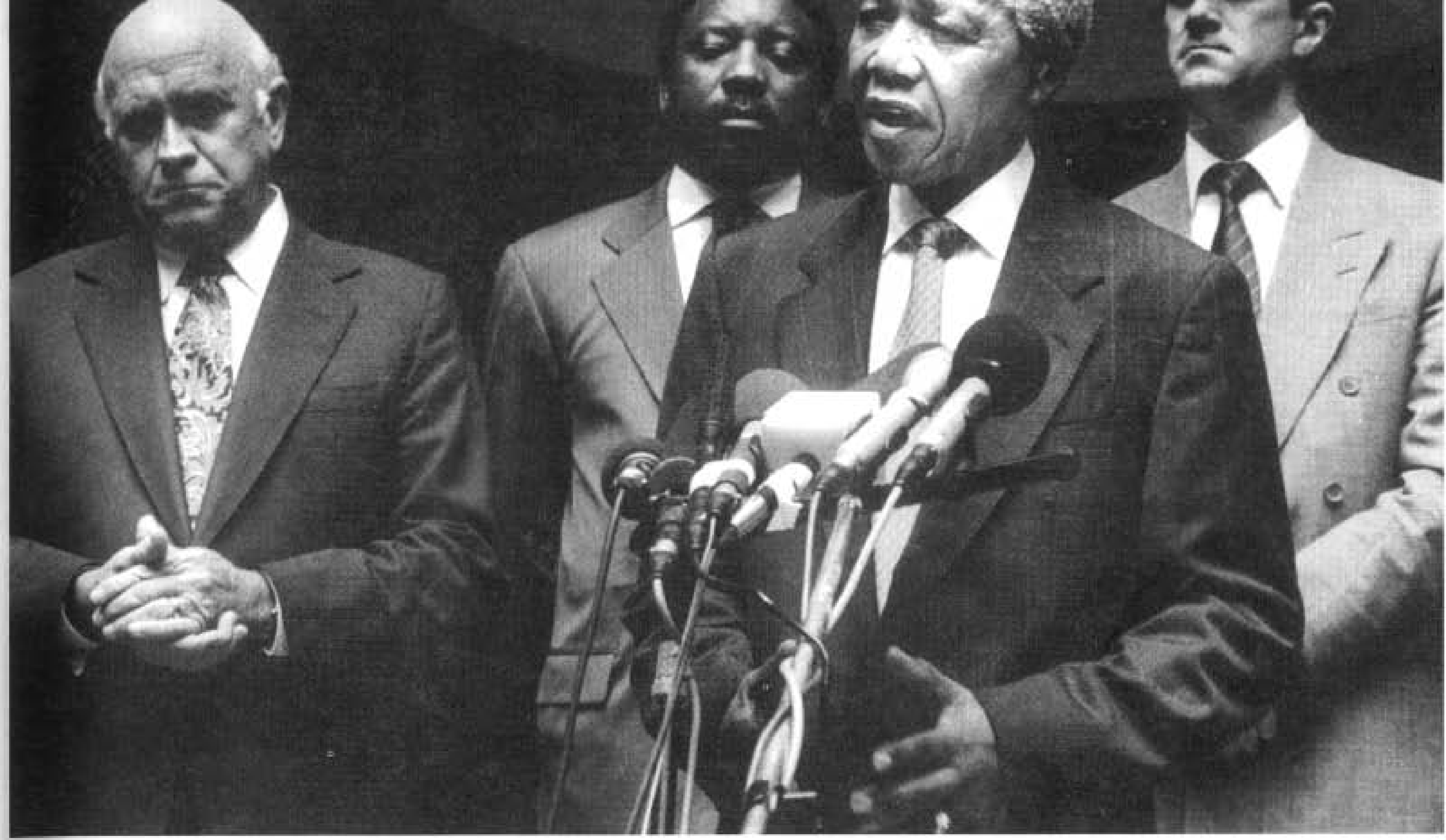
"Containment, a sense of safety, is what leadership should be offering; providing our diversity of communities with common ground. Instead, they dwell too much on the idea of entitlement. While this is legitimate, it may create a sense of fear in others of being dispossessed or relegated to the role of outsider.

"The real task for leadership is to build the sense of national identity that we have never had because of our history of separation and division. A national identity must be based on the celebration of unity within diversity. The challenge for leadership is how to articulate that – because that is containment."

Schkolne stresses that a sense of collective identity should not be confused with the prejudiced stereotyping that assigns to outsider groups – Afrikaners, Zulus, gays, Jews, scapegoats of any sort – characteristics that encapsulate and separate them from others.

"The characteristics of the national personality, as modelled by leadership, should include respect for difference and diversity, and a search for all those things that are common in people's interests, needs, values and views. This commonality is obscured when people are set up against each other in a competitive way."

Can a society suffering from borderline syndrome hope for recovery? That depends on the leadership, says Schkolne. Leaders need to find and provide "those transcendent values that truly don't relate to majority or ethnic power but rest on the common threads". Such a commitment will foster the development of "a solid national identity



ROLE MODELS: Celebrating unity within diversity? SOUTHLIGHT: Henner Frankenfeld

that is less volatile, more contained and more respectful of fellow human beings".

Another way of putting it is to say that leaders must find a way to provide the nurturing whose lack has caused such terrible wounds. In a sense, talking about redistribution is saying the same thing: the South African nation as a whole is in need of good parenting.

However, Schkolne cautions, to demand that the bad parent becomes a good parent is no guarantee of any result. Nor can real nurturance come out of a sense of unbridled entitlement.

What will help healing is "the perception that those on the top rung show an appreciation for multi-perspectivity – the diversity of experience on key issues – and that the idea of power and how easily it can be gained is not the overriding ethic".

Unfortunately, this kind of commitment to unity while celebrating diversity is not the stuff of which election campaigns are made, particularly male-dominated ones. Schkolne points out how revealing the terminology can be: "flattening the opponent", "getting on top of" the issues, the State President's recent assertion that politics is "not for sissies", for instance.

Nevertheless, there has been some progress down the path towards healing and unity by means of multi-party negotiations, which bear some resemblance to the therapeutic notion of "the talking cure".

Problematic about the negotiation process, however, has been the fact that so much of it has taken place and continues to take place behind closed doors. Returning to the family analogy, the problem is that parental figures can collude with each other and abrogate their responsibility to the broader family.

Schkolne suggests that the whole process of negotiation "needs to be viewed, not in a voyeuristic sense but as if through a one-way mirror, so that people can get a sense of how the leadership is doing".

'It is not difficult to see how the barbarism of the apartheid order, and the wholesale neglect and cruelty emanating from institutions that should have provided care, sowed the seeds of the societal damage that now threatens the future'

Televising the process of consensus being reached would be "containing" in itself, for example. Those spoken for would feel affirmed. All would experience that it is acceptable to dissent or, as Bertrand Russell put it, that "democracy is when it's safe to be unpopular".

Another area Schkolne identifies as potentially problematic is the room for non-accountability under the list system of proportional representation (PR). "There's a paradox which comes up here: with the new PR system there's hope for more diverse representation, but at the same time people can find themselves on semi-anonymous party lists with no accountability to constituents, only to party elites, and that short-circuits feedback to communities."

As between parents and children, so also between leaders and communities: there has to be "a proper feedback loop".

As for the explosion of ethnic allegiances in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, troubling to any enterprise of nation building, Schkolne has comforting words: "I believe that's largely to do with the coercion of a false national character which did not celebrate diversity or acknowledge the needs and perspectives of individual communities. It's the result of totalitarian parenting.

"In the Soviet Union, totalitarian parenting treated everyone the same. In South Africa, the 'parents' favoured certain 'family members' above others. Their self-deceptive and cynical manoeuvres projected the idea that everyone was receiving equal nurturance, when in fact gross deprivation was the order of the day."

But can a population as diverse as ours really have a coherent national identity?

"Yes," says Schkolne, "but only if the basic, fundamental needs of the more disadvantaged are met, so that there's a sense in which the outsiders – who are masses of individuals, ultimately, not just 'the masses' – are brought in, and given an individual voice, not simply a collective one."