

SA - a place for everyone?

Published in *The Witness*, 31 Aug 2009

A small furore about a big issue was recently created when the ANC Youth League's Julius Malema strongly criticised the dominance of the state's 'economic cluster' by individuals drawn from 'minorities'. It appeared that he was not alone in this concern. The individuals referred to in the 'cluster' were Pravin Gordhan, Ebrahim Patel, Rob Davies, Barbara Hogan and Gill Marcus. The 'minorities' involved, making sense only if we accept as valid apartheid's race classification through the Population Registration Act of 1950, are then coloureds (for surely Trevor Manuel can't escape, and has not been exempt from such categorisation in the past), whites and Indians. Of course, the general notion of 'minority' relies on a notion of an identifiable 'majority', and here Malema identified that dominant group as 'we, black people' and regretted the absence of 'an African child' as Governor of the Reserve Bank. He threatened an 'uprising' unless the issue was properly addressed.

At the outset, it should be noted that the term 'minorities' must be very carefully handled. This applies whether it is created from the perspective of those in the 'majority' (no matter how defined, but with the power to name others), or whether from within 'minorities' (calling for recognition or defence or special treatment). The label of 'minority' has served to identify those who taint, who pollute or contaminate the 'majority'; those who deny 'us' the homogeneity that 'should be' and 'would be', if not for 'them' and their foreign ways. The examples are too many, also in South Africa (apartheid and post-apartheid), for us to play along with that tinder-box of cleansing.

The language and words employed become important within the presentation and discussion of the debate arising out of Malema's statement: 'minority', 'race', 'black', 'African', 'white', the pride of the ANC 'on being a multi-racial organisation', 'transformation', 'non-racial'. All need scrutiny, for their content, for the intention in their use, and for potential consequences. But, there are also larger issues that arise from the accusations and the responses. These do need to be debated, as two of the public participants have called for. Lindiwe Sisulu, who initially criticised the 'minority' appointments, called for the 'multiracial organisation' (the ANC) to 'debate this issue' and repeated that 'the South Africa we [the ANC] want to create is one where people are no longer measured in terms of race'. Two days later President Zuma weighed in and said that he did not want 'race' to be debated as this would take South Africa 'backwards': 'The ANC does not look at things from a race point of view ... We are a non-racial organisation'; and added, against the run of evidence, that 'We never looked at things in terms of race and ethnicity, but [rather] in terms of non-racialism, as South Africans'. This raises the role of the Constitution in guiding society, through its commitment to dignity and to non-racialism within an inclusive citizenship, to mention but two over-arching values.

The Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity (ccrri) at UKZN was formed in direct reference to the Constitutional commitment to a 'non-racial and non-sexist' South Africa. The Centre sets out to explore the myriad ways in which notions of race dominate our thinking, behaviour, policies and practices, despite repeated (but largely empty and confused) use of the term 'non-racialism'. Racism is the most extreme

expression of the race thinking that informs our society. The ccrrri wishes to develop the notion of non-racialism, not just as an easy 'feel-good' term but as a long term goal that will ultimately be descriptive of the society, and of that which leads towards such a desirable future. Utopian it is, but Rick Turner and Steve Biko and many others called for such utopian thinking as a necessity in order to contemplate social interaction beyond the dominance of race thinking. This is a debate, a discussion, which should involve all of us – because it offers a glimmer of a potential inclusive future.