



Mandela at LSE

An inspirational occasion

Nelson Mandela, awarded an LSE-nominated honorary degree of the University of London in 1996, stepped on stage at LSE's Peacock Theatre to a standing ovation from more than 1,000 students, staff, alumni and friends of the School. Another 600-plus people watched via a live videolink in Clement House. More tuned in to hear the event on the Students' Union radio station, PuLSE FM.

Mandela spoke of change, of peace, of the dawn of an African century. He accepted a gift of an LSE baseball cap from Professor Giddens, and proudly put it on. The Director then announced two surprise tributes. Poet Laureate Andrew Motion came on stage to read a poem written in Mandela's honour. Finally, as lights were dimmed, out of the darkness came the voices of the Kingdom Choir and singer Joan Armatrading, singing their tribute song *The Messenger*. Mandela stood up and danced. So did everyone. The applause was tremendous. An unforgettable day.



An extract from Nelson Mandela's speech at LSE on 6 April 2000

Africa and its position in the world today

Being a former head of state has its advantages. One of them is having the time to speak in institutions where young people must listen while their elders pose difficult questions. I trust that my honorary membership of the student unions of a number of London University colleges, including LSE, will not mean that I have to try and provide answers myself! Nor that I will be examined on what I say. One shares one's thoughts with every confidence at a university with a proud record of solidarity with the struggles of oppressed people, and which is also renowned worldwide, as a centre of learning and enquiry.

LSE, as part of the University of London, was in the vanguard of the great army of men

and women across the world who responded to the call to isolate the apartheid regime. They insisted that human rights are the rights of all people everywhere. I feel greatly honoured to have an honorary degree from the University of London. Today brings an opportunity to thank LSE in person and with all humility for the part it played in that tribute to the South African people for their achievement in turning from conflict to the peaceful pursuit of a better life for all.

For many South Africans, LSE also meant the opportunity for learning that apartheid denied them in their own country. Those who were students are now working in all sectors of our society, leaders of a nation, leading a bright and

common future. We continue to draw upon you for training and knowledge in fields that are critical to the development of our country. May your practical solidarity and our partnership long continue. Your invitation to me to reflect with you on the challenges facing Africa speaks of your continuing commitment to our shared goals and I thank you most sincerely.

A difficult question I wish to pose today is simply this: What historical stage is Africa going through? As is generally the case with questions of history and development, an adequate answer will require years of work by African historians and social scientists in partnership with institutions like yours.

This is especially so, given the rapid and far-reaching changes affecting the world as a whole. And it is quite likely that future historians will not see this period in quite the same

way as we who are living through it. So I will exercise that privilege I refer to, and not try to answer the question, other than to say this: we are convinced that we are in a period of decisive historical significance for Africa and its place in the world. We are determined that this 21st century shall indeed be the African century.

The idea of an African renaissance has taken hold in our continent with all the resonance of an idea whose time has come. The rebirth we are engaged in is not one that will culminate, as European renaissance did, in colonisation and dominance of a world economic system, of which the slave trade was an integral part. Ours is, however, a rebirth that must deal with problems that derive from Africa's historical relation with the rest of the world, established in that period. And this must be achieved in a rapidly globalising world. A second historical project, related to the first, is that of building strong institutions in a united continent. Political, economic and social institutions at national, regional and continental level...

The vision expressed in the idea of African renaissance is that of the reconstruction and development of an Africa in which people's lives are constantly and rapidly improving towards standards broadly in line with the best in the world.

It is also a vision of an Africa that is integrated in the world on an equal basis. Africa collectively stands at the bottom of the world stage of development – completely. This means for millions, the ills brought by poverty and underdevelopment, the scourges of disease such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/ AIDS, and educational programmes that are far from what is needed for Africa's full participation in the modern economy and society. As the world is seeing now in what the floods are doing to the people of Mozambique and part of South Africa, it means a vulnerability to environmental disaster.

If, despite all this, we talk with conviction of realising our long-cherished dream of rebirth and reconstruction, it is because the conditions for doing so now exist. They include the stage of development of the world's economy. While this brings the danger that historical imbalances may be entrenched and even worsened, it also brings opportunities for Africa as a region of vast untapped potential. The conditions improved at the liberation of South Africa as the culmination of Africa's struggle against colonial and white minority rule. This brought a new possibility for the continent to focus energies and resources on shaping its own development, rather than having to devote them to resistance to colonial and racial oppression.

And the conditions for the regeneration of Africa include the growing mass movement of Africans during the past two decades, manifested in struggles against dictatorships and



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undemocratic rule. Part of this process, and in turn giving it impetus, is the emergence of a new generation of African leaders, capable men and women who are not prepared to accept as inevitable the current conditions under which the ordinary African lives. It is for such reasons that we are hopeful for the future. This is not to gloss over our problems, or to underestimate the scale of what is required. Nor is it to ignore the fact that some of our problems are of our own making as we know from the record of the first decades of independence.

The achievement of our vision requires rapid industrialisation, that exploits our scarcely tapped resources and our strategic geographical location. In turn, that requires massive programmes for infrastructural development, for the regeneration of our cities, and for the education of our people. In our interdependent modern world what happens in one country impacts on many others. What happens in Africa impacts on its relations with the world. Sustainable growth and development therefore requires peace, security and stability. And they require the unity of the African continent. Peace is the greatest weapon for development.

Conversely, conflicts and tensions that undermine stability and security can set back the progress that we have started to make on

Left: Mr Mandela arrives at the Peacock Theatre
Below left: South African high commissioner Cheryl Carolus greets guests at a breakfast reception before Mandela's speech

the path of development. What gives hope is that Africa's leaders are finding creative ways of addressing the resolution of conflicts. We do believe that South Africa's transition, hailed by many as a miracle, though in reality it was based on the actions of humans, has had a great importance in demonstrating what is possible when the will and the conditions for peace are there.

What is always difficult in life is not so much that we influence and change others, the most difficult question is to change yourself in accordance with the conditions that you confront. And as I have pointed out before, one of the most difficult questions which faced those in jail, those in exile, and those that work on the ground, was to reconcile our emotions with our thinking. Our feeling was that under no circumstances shall we sit down with the apartheid regime who have subjected us for centuries to some of the most painful experiences you can think of. For that reason, it was unthinkable for us to sit down with our enemies and talk. But our brains said if you don't sit down with these people, your country will go up in smoke, and innocent civilians will be slaughtered. The infrastructure of the country will be destroyed. Community development will come to an end. And the problem was to reconcile these two – your feelings and your thinking.

We faced problems among our own comrades and colleagues, we faced problems with the enemy that had continued to say for decades 'we will never negotiate with terrorists.' And we had to find a way so that they could cross a bridge without humiliation. It was through the ability to reconcile these two contradictions that we were able to bring about a peaceful transformation in our country, and to confound the prophets of doom who predicted that there would never be a peaceful change in our country, that any attempt to bring about changes would engulf South Africa in rivers of blood. We were able to prove them wrong because we were able to change ourselves, first and foremost. And anybody who wants to have an impact on society must start from himself or herself...

Almost every country [in Africa], with a few exceptions, has now democratised, and these are developments which give us hope that, whatever problems we have – and we have many and some of them are very serious – we nonetheless have men and women who are highly gifted and capable of rising to the challenges that face the continent.

You will again excuse me ending up by telling a story, which I have told several times. A young lady of five came to my gate in my house, and security said: 'Look, there is a young lady here outside who wants to see you.' I said: 'Let her in.' They said: 'Mr President, she is very



TO NELSON MANDELA: A TRIBUTE

*That straight walk from the prison to the gate –
that walk the world saw, and which changed the world –
it led you through to life from life withheld,
from broken stones with your unbroken heart.
To life which you imagined and then lived,
which once we shared in your imagining
but soon shared in the present that you shaped:
the life which gave each human hope its chance
of turning into truth and staying true;
the life which understood what changing takes;
the life which showed us we become ourselves
in part by watching you becoming you.*

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cheeky,' I said: 'Precisely for that, let her come in.' And indeed, she was quite a lady. I was sitting in my lounge. She just stormed in, without knocking, and the first question she asked was: 'How old are you?' I said: 'Well, I am very sorry, I can't remember. But I was born long, long ago.' She said: 'Two years ago?' I said: 'No, much longer than that.' Then she changed the subject. 'Why did you go to jail?' I said: 'I didn't go to jail because I wanted to. Some people forced me to go there.' 'Who?' 'People who don't like me.' 'How long did you stay there?' I said: 'I can't remember but it was a very, very long time.' Again the question of two years came in. And when I couldn't answer her question, she said: 'You must be a very stupid old man!' And having said that, she continued talking to me as if she had paid me a compliment.

Ladies and gentlemen, I tell this story so that if you feel that I have not risen to expectations, please be a little more diplomatic than that young lady! ■

For more about Nelson Mandela's visit, see www.lsealumni.org

Photographs: Nigel Stead

