



MINISTRY OF FINANCE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ADDRESS BY TREVOR A MANUEL, MINISTER OF FINANCE

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Freedom is a word that remains central to the body politic in South Africa. The very word defined our struggle for democracy, now it continues to give content to the responsibilities of governance.

In the campaign for the Freedom Charter in 1955, the call was clear. The pamphlet inviting participation read, "We call the people of South Africa Black and White – Let us speak together of Freedom". The adoption of the Freedom Charter in June 1955 provided a distinct rallying call to and an impetus for the struggle that intensified thereafter.

Our Constitution, adopted a decade ago, is a celebration of that very word Freedom. Its Preamble sets the backdrop. It reads

*We, the people of South Africa,
Recognise the injustices of our past;*

*Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and
Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.*

We ,therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to

- *Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;*
- *Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is protected by law;*
- *Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and*
- *Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.*

Exciting as these words were at the time of the adoption of the Constitution, the more important question is the value of these commitments as the pages of the Constitution yellow with age.

An important measure is the State of the Nation Address delivered by the President each year. What distinguishes our State of the Nation addresses is that they are a report of progress against the benchmark of commitments made in the Preamble to our Constitution. Further, the Bill of Rights also commits to a progressive realisation of second-generation rights – and in a democracy, the people are entitled to know.

In the compilation of the Budget, we are confronted with exactly the same set of questions. How do we value our freedom? Can we provide for further steps in the progressive realisation of rights? Are we in a position to generate resources on a sustainable basis? What steps are we taking to safeguard our freedom?

Since the challenge to us relates to the value we attach to our rights and freedoms, the discourse on the Budget has to be about the constitutional imperatives, as much as it is about the numbers and the allocations.

This process tends to take the Finance Minister beyond the pigeon-hole which he/she is meant to occupy with a raft of accountants, economists and statisticians.

Events that occur elsewhere have meaning, since they assist us in evaluating the content of our democracy and the value of our freedom.

As we were finalising our budget over the past few weeks there were two sets of elections that we could use as reference points.

The first of these was held in Palestine on 25 January, with Hamas winning 74 of the 132 seats in the Legislative Council. Undoubtedly, the result came as a surprise to many for whom Fatah and the PLO had come to represent the face of the Palestinian struggle. There were outside observers of those elections – former US President Jimmy Carter said the elections were “completely honest, completely fair, completely safe and without violence.”

I think that we should therefore accept then that the Palestinian people have spoken. Yet some are unhappy with the result. The Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, said, “We cannot promote democracy, then lament the result of democracy or object to the result.” But this overwhelmingly plain and rational argument fails to persuade some of the powers that be. The US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, this week told a senate committee that the US government will not give aid to a Palestinian government led by Hamas. The house backed the Secretary of State with a resolution thereafter.

So, what is the value of democracy in Palestine?

An election was also held in Haiti earlier this week. In the process of counting, a series of curious events arose. By Monday evening we learnt that Rene Preval was just short of the 50% mark, and his nearest rival was at 11.2%, with all the votes cast. That was until a huge pile of smouldering ballots was found at a rubbish dump in Port-au-Prince. A “deal” was subsequently done to declare Rene Preval the winner with 51% of the vote. Of course, that was after the poor had vented their anger, to the extent that Archbishop Tutu had to be airlifted out of Port-au-Prince. But there were many other monitors, certainly including a large contingent from the USA. I have yet to hear their expression of outrage at the theft and destruction of ballot papers cast, but not counted. In fact, the “deal” to declare Mr Preval as President-Elect was brokered by the US Charg’ d’Affairs and is premised on the fact that there will be no charges against others for vote fraud. But, what do the silences mean for the prospects of financial aid to the Western Hemisphere’s poorest country? Has the legitimacy of the elected government been compromised by the “deal”, or does that matter at all? What value can Haitians attach to their freedom? What prospects exist for the progressive realisation of rights and freedoms?

These kind of observations are central to the choices we exercise in the Budget. I raise them more to explain their import on the democratic decisions in South Africa, than as a commentary on the duplicity of large powers elsewhere. For us as a country, the progressive realisation of rights is inextricably bound to what we can afford.

Of course, we are exceedingly mindful of the both the achievements of the past twelve years and what remains to be done. The numbers of houses built, connected to the electricity grid, linked in to water reticulation speak volumes. Similarly, the percentage of young people in the education system is exceedingly impressive, we can count the number of visits to clinics and hospitals and feel good about it. We must celebrate the provision of free basic services as a major

innovation that measurably improves the quality of life of South Africa's poorest. But, we remain humbled by what remains to be done both in respect people who have yet to benefit from these services, and the very necessary improvements in quality which, from our perspective, are not happening fast enough.

As South Africans, we must talk about these matters because they answer the imperative of the progressive realisation of rights and freedoms. We must do so because we understand that by improving on the quality of life, we will free the potential of all our people. It is this that consciously informs the choices we make. More importantly, it is this that safeguards our democracy.

The values in our Constitution also provided the framework against which we could develop a national response to this terrible debacle surrounding the publication of the cartoons purporting to be of the Prophet Mohammed. In his response to the debate on the State of the Nation Address, President Mbeki spoke at length on this matter. He said

Our Constitution entrenches the right to freedom of speech. I am certain that all of us in this House, and our people as a whole, respect this right and would do everything possible to protect and defend it.

At the same time, our Constitution also entrenches the freedom of religion, belief and opinion, which I am equally certain all of us in this House, and our people as a whole, respect this right and would do everything possible to protect and defend it. With regard to freedom of expression in this context, it says that the right to freedom of expression “does not extend to Advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.”

The President also cited an editorial in The (London) Independent, which read

While we defend Jyllands-Posten’s right to publish, we also question its editorial judgement. It is not a decision we intend to emulate. And

There is no merit in causing gratuitous offence, as these cartoons undoubtedly do. We believe it is possible to demonstrate our commitment to the principle of free speech in more sensible ways.

This city saw one of the largest marches since the dawn of democracy. This march of well over 30 000 people, protesting the publication of the cartoons was also incredibly peaceful. The main reason for this is that the marchers themselves found refuge in the Constitution and knew that it unequivocally protects their rights to believe without intrusion.

We should never take these Constitutional values and rights for granted. They define the content of our freedom. They may be tested from time to time, but I have no doubt that they will repeatedly prove their value.

In a world where freedom and democracy can be as easily diminished, as demonstrated by the examples of Palestine and Haiti, nations need an anchor – ours is the Constitution. And, in a world where decision-makers, be they in the newsroom, the Boardroom or the Cabinet room, are faced with apparent contradictions of freedoms or choices, a touchstone is needed. Ours is the Constitution. And when, the poor of this country ask, “What about us”, again we look to the Constitution to explain both the obligations we have and why their living standards are not improving as quickly as they hope for.

This is the value of our freedom. Let us celebrate it together. Let us share its joys with others.

Thank you.