



Ministry of Finance

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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**ADDRESS TO THE OPENING OF THE CAPE TOWN BOOK FAIR
INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE, CAPE TOWN
16 JUNE 2006**

TREVOR A MANUEL, MINISTER OF FINANCE

Director of Ceremonies,

Dear Friends

Let me welcome the Book Fair to Cape Town as an additional stimulus to discussion and debate, but more importantly to the extension of literacy in our country.

If it were true that a nation becomes what it reads, then a scan of the list of bestsellers has me rather worried. The top sellers in South Africa are the Platters Wine Guide; the Brett Kebble story; Branson's "Screw It, Let's Do It" and the ubiquitous "Da Vinci Code". What does this eclectic mix of titles suggest about us – at face value, perhaps, a nation in need of debauchery and ready to unravel the time-tested mysteries of the church? Some of these titles feature uniformly across the English speaking capitals, with the Da Vinci Code a particular favourite. Further, the New York Times fiction list is headed by a novel entitled, "The Husband". But we should leave those musings on titles to future historians.

Indeed we can, because books provide such an incredibly strong link between nations and across generations. Books also guide what we understand of the past. So we believe that amongst the great contributors to global civilisation were the Romans – there are books and an entire Latin language to prove that. Yet, there is the following account of Julius Caesar at Alexandria

It is often said that the Romans were civilised but their most famous general was responsible for the greatest acts of vandalism during antiquity. Julius Caesar was attacking Alexandria in pursuit of his archrival Pompey when he found himself about to be cut off by the Egyptian fleet. Realising that this would leave him in a desperate predicament, he took decisive action and sent fire ships into the harbour. His plan was a success and the enemy fleet was quickly aflame. But the fire did not stop there and jumped onto the dockside which was laden with flammable materials ready for export. Next it spread inland and before anyone could stop it, the Great Library itself was blazing brightly as 400 000 priceless scrolls were reduced to ashes. As for Caesar himself, he did not think it important enough to mention in his memoirs.

There is no link between this account and the fact that the New York Times best Sellers advice section is headed by a book entitled “Cesar’s Way”. What we recall of antiquity is what books allow us to recall. Differing with the established views on these matters raises the temperature, as President Mbeki recently discovered after his “Inaugural Lecture of the Parliamentary Millennium Project”. He argued,

What past and present information is available on Africa? Who gathers and disseminates such information? Who interprets events and processes in Africa? From what point of view are these interpretations made? Whose views dominate the daily discourse in our country and the rest of the continent? In other words, what is the world outlook of those who present news to us, those who analyse

events and those who interpret processes taking place on the continent? Whose ideas drive our societies!

In the discourse that followed that lecture it was clear that there were some who, in a different era, would have been ready to burn Thabo Mbeki at the stake. How could he be so impertinent? Now, perhaps there would have been less debate if Caesar had himself recorded the razing of the Royal Alexandria Library – Africans do not know these things, or if they do its impertinent for Africans to raise such sensitive issues.

In his lecture President Mbeki highlights the fact that Africa is home to some of the world's greatest civilisations – Egyptian, Nubia, Aksum, Mapungubwe, Ghana, Mali, and Great Zimbabwe. He notes,

The Malian Civilisation reached its pinnacle when Timbuktu became the intellectual and trading hub between the 14th and 16th centuries.

Timbuktu was a confluence of ideas, languages and cultures. We are proud that today we are in a partnership with the government of Mali...to preserve and restore the thousands of manuscripts of Timbuktu which tell a story of a great civilisation and a centre of learning.

However, this period was also particularly a time of great expansion for Islamic empire which by the eighth century included much of North Africa, parts of West Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, India and Indonesia. With Baghdad as its intellectual capital, this empire regarded information so highly that it offered traders a book's weight in gold for every book put on sale.'

Books, those threads that bind past, present and future are so exceedingly important. It is no accident that we open this Book fair on the thirtieth anniversary of the Soweto uprising. We celebrate the day now as Youth Day in honour of the

phenomenal sacrifices of young people. The spark for the uprising was in education – ostensibly about the compulsory teaching in Afrikaans. More importantly, it was a battle about the book. In the 1973/4 fiscal year, the apartheid government spent R 483 on the education of every white child as against R 28 on the education of every black child. The R 28 bought no book! More importantly, the Bantu education system was premised on denial. In 1953 already, the Minister of Native Affairs, Hendrik Verwoerd, explained to parliament,

There is no place for (the Bantu) in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour.. For what reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim the absorption in the European community. What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?

The cruelty of apartheid, as evidenced both by Verwoerd's statement and the mowing down of young learners thirty years ago today, is that the thread that binds past, present and future was severed. We are learning about just how difficult it is to reconnect – how, when education had wiped out successive generations of mathematics learners and teachers do you suddenly reconnect? How do we re-establish the great intellectual traditions obtained here in South Africa? We have set ourselves the monumental task of developing our eleven official languages – this task will not succeed without many writers, publishers and readers. Achieving this within the context of nation state also demands that we can cross reference and cross-pollinate to prevent the skewed development of eleven different tribes. So, we need books – and we need readers.

Education remains the single largest category of spending on our Budget. In the 2006/07 fiscal year we have budgeted to spend R92,1 billion rising to R 110,3 billion in 2008/09. Over the three year period we have added some R 565 million in the form of a conditional grant to provincial governments for the further funding of community libraries.

Sadly, none of this is adequate unless together we can generate the appetite for reading. The forces arraigned against such endeavour are many. We might need to change our definitions. Apparently many students are engaged in the battle to define what a book is – “the book is also both meaning and the vehicle by which it is conveyed” writes one, while another argues that “the book is a practice – a collection of social, economic and artistic activities – not an object” We can deal with that discourse – we need to adapt as our forebears adapted from papyrus scrolls to paper, and through various evolutions of lithography.

Our collective responsibility is to increase the love of reading. I trust that this Book fair will make a huge contribution to that responsibility we all share.

Thank you.