

**Address to the Gala Dinner at the “ *Know the Past, Anticipate the Future: History, Memory and Human Progress*” Conference
Rotunda, Bay Hotel, Camps Bay, Cape Town
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A Finance Minister is a curious choice to speak to you. Partly because I work in a place populated by economists. Economists, as you know, hate being reminded of History, especially the history of their forecasts and pronouncements. For example in 1929, the Harvard Economic Society reassured its subscribers days after the crash that ‘a severe depression is outside the range of probability’. (I can’t help thinking déjà vu).

But then, we’ve thankfully been shaped by our experiences other than that of Economic Historians.

Part of our learning is from questioning.

*The young Alexander conquered India – was he alone ?
Caesar beat the Gauls- did he not have even a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down – was he the only
one to weep?
Frederick II won the Seven Year war – who else won it?*

*Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for victories?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?*

*So many reports.
So many questions.*

From “Questions from a Worker who Reads” by Bertolt Brecht

The writing, the reading, the learning and the teaching of history is surely about asking and answering the same questions as Brecht poses.

Let me share with you briefly, one of the questions and draw a thread (a tiny one, a fine strand in the history of South Africa) which has defined me – my upbringing, education, political activity and associations.

Let’s start drawing this thread. The thread is spun out in part by Frank Welsh who deals with the first Afrikaners in his book, ‘A Short History of South Africa’.

He writes.

‘Van der Stel should certainly be regarded as one of the founding fathers of Afrikanerdom, the first famous ‘Afrikaner’. Holland was not,

as it happened, van der Stel's homeland. He had been born in Mauritius, of Dutch and Indian stock (his maternal grandmother was one Monica, of Coromandel, and van der Stel was therefore what would have been classified as 'Coloured' and as such banned from any office and even denied the vote.

Bang! The *Herrenvolk* theory destroyed 1679! How much longer did it hang on?

Draw this same thread further through Ian Goldin's book entitled, 'Making Race'- where he describes that by 1880 there was no definition of Coloured. The colonial rulers who'd been influenced by debates around Social Darwinism in Europe, used this same logic and found an instrument for divide and rule. So, in order to counter resistance in the Eastern Cape, Zululand and in the emerging proletariat here in Cape Town created a new category, stealthily between one census and the next. Thus, a new category, a new race, if you wish was born.

Now, against that backdrop we can interrogate the complete destruction of Nama language, culture and land rights.

The same strand can be drawn through Gavin Lewis's book "Between the wire and the wall" which documents the history of coloured politics – much of it a history of resistance.

Acquiescent? Collaborative?

We can continue along this path and track the same strand differently through Wilmot James' and Mary Simons', "The Angry Divide".

Track it through the "Eiselen-de Vos-Malan Line" which defined the Eastern boundary of the coloured labour preference area.

And then we can start to unravel some present-day trends.

Might this explain the politics of the Western Cape?

Be alive to the fact the apartheid regime had profound difficulty in defining this "race group" in the Population Registration Act – it was essentially the non-descript remainder. Why does this social construct linger?

A letter in the Cape Times this morning draws parallels between the eerie silence at "Ground Zero" where the World Trade Centre stood and the scars where District 6 once stood.

The story is not of race, but of domination. A domination constructed around the fiction of a race group, the fiction was supported by the most profound system of social manipulation.

The fiction collapsed with the arrival of democracy. Or did it?

“So many reports, so many questions.”

Perhaps more importantly, we should pause to explore so many aspects of the economy – ownership, skills and control.

What of this tiny thread do we need to communicate? What will shape our collective understanding? How will this contribute to nation-building? How does it weigh against other similar threads? What is worth learning?

“So many reports. So many questions.”

This is a phenomenally important task. It is a profound tragedy that 8 years on, we have still not tackled this head-on. Our leaders have agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit to embark on a campaign of Education for All. The measure has to be more than just the enrolment numbers. The education we seek has to be relevant to building the kind of economy and the kind of society we deserve. Our past is essential to this. But history must find its place in the wider challenge of transforming the education system.

We have made great strides in stabilising the construction of a single education system. We must now commit to the detail of curricula reform, of more targeted funding: of the adequate resourcing of all aspects, including the currently under-funded learner-support materials; and we must improve on the overall management of our education resources.

The tasks are of nationhood – a people, a culture and an economy. Engage with yourselves, and engage with us.

Even the economists might own up to history soon. The reason economic forecasting gets it wrong is that it speaks of the probabilities and possibilities of numbers. It does not tell the story of human behaviour, of choices, personalities, geography, climate and politics, of greed, compassion, love and disease. This is your terrain.

Let's combine skills to more successfully focus on the future together.

Thank you.