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'Effective Democracy, Civil Society Movements and Public Accountability'
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'Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time,' Winston Churchill famously claimed.[1] Yet, for all that there is truth in his tongue in cheek comment, if democracy is truly to be effective and achieve all it has the potential to be, more must be said about the particulars of the practice of democracy. In 1999 Mamphela Ramphele warned that 'democracy is a system that has yet to sink its roots in most African states because of the failure of most of Africa's people to move beyond liberation politics.'[2] 18 years after democracy came to South Africa, we must continue to ask how deeply those roots have sunk within our nation, and persist in doing all that we can to deepen them further.

Indeed, it is hard to know whether to be relieved, or appalled, that the Chief Justice, in a recent Constitutional Court ruling, felt it necessary to repeat an earlier judgement from Justice Albie Sachs, in which he wrote, 'The Constitution does not envisage a mathematical form of democracy, where the winner takes all until the next vote-counting exercise occurs.'[3] Those in whose favour the maths adds up should realise that it is actually in their interests, as well as the wider interests of the whole country, that this isn't so, but rather that the Constitution 'contemplates a pluralistic democracy where continuous respect is given to the rights of all to be heard and have their views considered.' Justice Sachs tells us why: 'The open and deliberative nature of the process goes further than providing a dignified and meaningful role for all participants. It is calculated to produce better outcomes through subjecting laws and governmental action to the test of critical debate, rather than basing them on unilateral decision-making…'

I shall consider how this 'open and deliberative process' is utterly vital in delivering a 'dignified and meaningful role for all participants', and in producing 'better outcomes' in the governance of our country. For both are essential if we are to achieve the sort of nation to which we have ostensibly signed up, in what has rightly been called one of the best Constitutions in the world. Civil society movements of various sorts, and the churches and faith communities with them, must be at the heart of this deliberation, holding government, and other actors, to account – and being held account in return – for the roles each plays in bringing this vision about.

An Anglican Perspective

As the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, my own engagement with these questions is fuelled from a number of sources. Contemporary Anglican approaches to politics are inevitably coloured by the Church of England's long experiences, good and bad, of establishment, and by the consequent ambiguous relationship between the spread of colonialism and missionary expansion. We also consciously draw on older roots, of Scripture interpreted in the light of tradition and reflective, prayerful, reasoning. For Anglicans there can never be any distinct division between public and private, political and personal, for, if 'the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof' (Psalm 24:1) then all creation and all human activity lies within the concerns of God, and hence those of his people and his Church. Therefore, with typical pragmatism, Anglicans have addressed issues of justice, righteousness and redemption, from the ethics of individual choice through to the grand sweep of

[1] Speech in the House of Commons, 18 April 1947 (see Hansard).
[2] Dr Ramphele is an active Anglican. The graduation speech at the University of Cape Town is available in edited form at http://ccrri.ukzn.ac.za/archive/archive/files/pra19991210047057_65410b1760.pdf
[3] In a judgement written by Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng, the Constitutional Court ruled that Parliament was unconstitutional in effectively not allowing individual MPs to bring forward bills: Oriani-**Ambrosini**, MP v Sisulu, MP Speaker of the National Assembly (CCT 16/12) [2012] ZACC 27 (9 October 2012), available at http://www.saflii.org/cgi-bin/disp.pl?file=za/cases/ZACC/2012/27.html&query= Ambrosini#sdfootnote67anc.

national and international politics and economics. And we have done so from within the corridors of power; in dialogue, partnership and pastoral care; or as critical outsiders – and often in some combination of all these – as circumstances have warranted.

My personal involvement in the intersection of faith and politics began as an assistant priest at St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg, when, in April 1993, our Dean, Godfrey Henwood, agreed we would host Oliver Tambo's funeral, providing an unashamedly Christian service. Nelson Mandela and his 'cabinet in waiting' filled the front pews, avowed communists among them, to the shock of some church people. Most joined in the Lord's Prayer, and all shared in silent reflection on the life of this man, who, whatever else, had been instrumental in ensuring the transition to democracy avoided bloodbath even after Chris Hani's assassination a few weeks earlier, and for this we thanked God. Today I am also conscious of the examples of many of my predecessors at Bishopscourt. For example, Geoffrey Clayton, Archbishop from 1948 to 1957, saw the draft bill that would have prevented people of differing racial groups from worshipping together as completely unacceptable. He wrote his famous letter, saying, 'This is not of God.' After signing it, he collapsed and died at his desk. The legislation never saw the light of day. More recently, Archbishops Desmond Tutu and Njongonkulu Ndungane kept up this tradition of outspoken engagement on contemporary issues.

The Task Before Us

It is from this perspective that I approach the question of promoting effective democracy within South Africa. The enormity of the task before us should not be underestimated. Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng made this clear as he continued in the judgement:

> The need to recognise the inherent value of representative and participatory democracy and dissenting opinions was largely inspired by this nation's evil past and our unwavering commitment to make a decisive break from that dark history. South Africa's shameful history is one marked by authoritarianism, not only of the legal and physical kind, but also of an intellectual, ideological and philosophical nature. The apartheid regime sought to dominate all facets of human life. It was determined to suppress dissenting views, with the aim of imposing hegemonic control over thoughts and conduct, for the preservation of institutionalised injustice. It is this unjust system that South Africans, through their Constitution, so decisively seek to reverse by ensuring that this country fully belongs to all those who live in it.

We must learn from our history, and move on from our history. One key message from the Constitutional Court is that democracy does not mean the replacement of a narrow elite representing a minority and exercising self-serving discriminatory powers, by another elite, which, while representative of the majority and enjoying close to two-thirds support at the ballot box, similarly exercises power in self-serving discriminatory ways. Democracy means engaging in wholly different practices of governance. Yet these do not come automatically to those who have never experienced any other political system, who may not find it easy to grasp what is now being asked of us as a nation. There is a major educative task to be undertaken. Those who pursue the best of what our Constitution offers must deliberately conduct their praxis so as to express and model clearly how these processes operate, and tangibly contribute to both human dignity and meaningful participation, and to superior outcomes.

In other words, everyone with leadership or influence in any area of society has a primary responsibility to promote in words and demonstrate in practice what it means to work for the fullest realisation of the vision of democracy encapsulated within the Constitution. For the challenge that all of us face – from those in elected political office, to every elector, every South African – is to work out how best to implement constitutional democracy so that the promises it contains become a reality for every single citizen.

As the former UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan, has said, 'No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime.'[4] We will be helped by being honest that we are still learning. It is especially true that those of us who stood together in the past are still feeling our ways into the new relationships appropriate to constitutional democracy. Whether we are from government, political parties, the private sector, academia, the media, civil society, faith communities and so forth, our task now is to explore and shape the distinctive and separate contributions each of us has the potential to make to the life of the nation as a whole. Each of us has particular responsibilities to shoulder, and legitimate and specific perspectives to hold. None of us can see the whole picture. We need the creative engagement that comes from us all contributing the best, from our own distinctive expertise and experience, so that the fullest and best picture can be drawn of our whole society and its needs, and how to achieve them.

The Constitution – Our Touchstone

The Preamble to the Constitution provides us with the comprehensive vision towards which such efforts are to be directed. It is worth repeating in full:

> 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;
> - to lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
> - to improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person;
> - and to build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.
>
> May God protect our people...

The National Development Plan 2030 recommends that the Preamble be displayed in all work places, and that all school children learn, and regularly recite, a pledge based on it.[5] I heartily endorse this proposal, and hope that those of us who are long beyond school might also take it upon ourselves to learn this. For the more that it is embedded in our national psyche, the more it can become an unconscious yet automatic part of our mental framework. The more deeply it is rooted within us, then the more likely we are to understand what our democratic system aims to provide, and so use it as our primary touchstone against which to judge – and so hold accountable – the formulation and delivery of policy and practices, first by government at every level, but also by all other actors within our country and its communities. Cultivating this approach as normative is the best way of achieving our stated goals.

Whatever one thinks of the specifics of the National Development Plan – and I and my church broadly support its ethos and objectives – there should be little dispute over the 2030 Vision Statement's description of a country in which 'we hold the Constitution … as the covenant guide to a fair society … [and] now we live it.'[6] Similarly laudable is the goal to which learning the Preamble is intended to contribute, namely the development of an 'active citizenry', since 'making the plan work

[4] Statement at the opening of the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, 8 August 1998, available at http://www.un.org/events/youth98/speeches/sgyouth2.htm.
[5] Our Future – make it work: National Development Plan 2030, Executive Summary, p.26 – hereafter referred to as NDP-ES.
[6] NDP-ES, p.8

will require a complex interplay of actors and actions,' given that 'neither government nor the market can develop the necessary capabilities on their own.'[7]

A Changing Role for Government

This interplay must extend to robust debate, and it is welcome that the Commission goes beyond acknowledging that 'an unintended outcome of government actions has been to reduce the incentive for citizens to be direct participants in their own development.' It further says that 'to prevent this practice from being entrenched, the state must actively support and incentivise citizen engagement' which should include 'hold[ing] government, business and all leaders in society accountable for their actions.'[8] The Plan then indicates 'numerous avenues … beyond elections' which legislation provides, for the pursuit of this 'active citizenry and social activism' which 'is necessary for democracy and development to flourish'. These include everything from school governing bodies to community policing forums, and the drafting of local government plans. Again the Plan is brutally honest in acknowledging that 'despite these avenues, there is growing distance between citizens and the government' with considerable 'frustration not only over the pace of service delivery, but also concerns that communities are not being listened to sincerely.' Part of the remedy is that 'better communication, more honesty and a greater degree of humility by those in power would go a long way towards building' the society we seek. It is not all the task of government, since 'citizens have a responsibility to dissuade leaders from taking narrow, short-sighted and populist positions' and 'robust public discourse and a culture of peaceful protest will contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges facing communities and reinforce accountability among elected officials.'

These are fine words, not least in their frankness that government action has been the prime cause of citizens becoming disengaged from the processes and practice of thriving, healthy, democracy. It remains to be seen whether government, and the governing party as a whole, will pay more than lip service to reversing their attitude towards the role not only of citizens as individuals or community members, but also of civil society bodies, which get rather less attention in the Plan as actors within the democratic space. But organisations have also suffered from exclusionary attitudes and actions since 1994, and the country has suffered in consequence. Mamphela Ramphele has warned cogently against the development of an 'authoritarian political culture' which exhibits 'ambivalence towards civil society' and 'seems to [have] a view that the government has to be seen to be in control.' She points to a 'systematic demobilisation of the massive NGO infrastructure in order to make room for the government to exercise state power and entrench itself' in the early days of democracy, when 'the new elites felt anxious to establish their authority over the state.'[9] Negative consequences include the loss of skills and services from the civil society sector, and the marginalisation of these voices in debate around policy making.

The apparent conflation within the minds of many within the ANC of party, government and state, remains a major concern, to judge from such statements as that of President Zuma during 2007's ANC leadership campaign that it was the right of the ANC to 'rule until Jesus Christ comes again.'[10] Though we might allow for some hyperbole in the heat of electioneering, such attitudes are also sadly evident in more measured public statements. Thus, for example, in his eulogy at the funeral of struggle veteran Sister Bernard Ncube on 8 September 2012, Zuma welcomed the role of the churches in response to the killing of the Marikana miners by police and acknowledged that 'we cannot achieve

[7] NDP-ES, p.17.
[8] NDP-ES, p.27.
[9] Mamphela Ramphele, 2008, Laying Ghosts to Rest: Dilemmas of the transformation in South Africa. Tafelberg, CapeTown, pp.118-20.
[10] At a rally in Zwide, Port Elizabeth, on 18 November 2007, see http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/anc-to-rule-until-the-son-of-man-comes-back-1.379370. He has repeated this sentiment on various occasions from 2004 onwards.

transformation or sustainable development working alone.'[11] However, in continuing by saying 'we are therefore encouraged by the support of the faith-based sector as we continue to build a truly non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous society,' he begged the question of how far he views the appropriate role of faith communities, and indeed all other actors in the public space, as effectively subservient to, and merely in automatic support of, a task of governance and nation-building that is solely to be directed by the ruling party.

A Changing Role for Civil Society

There is important learning to be done on the part of civil society also. Having often spoken of ourselves as 'critical friends' of those in government, we are still working on how to get the balance right between being critical, and being friendly. Perhaps we were far too patient and forgiving, for far too long, when faced with failings ranging from increasing accusations of nepotism and corruption through to shortcomings in service delivery, the loss of a public service ethic, and intolerance of critically constructive questioning – unwilling to believe that those with whom we had struggled, shoulder to shoulder, for so long, should pursue such a course. The weight of the dilemma was forcefully foregrounded in 2008 by Tinyiko Maluleke, UNISA theologian and then President of the South African Council of Churches.[12] This conveys the levels of shock, even betrayal, felt by the religious sector at the ways the ANC government and its wider networking had developed, and to some degree a shock at ourselves too, for having allowed ourselves to be sucked so far into this morass.

That said, I like to think that my own predecessors have provided good leadership in this respect. Barely three months after Nelson Mandela's election as President, he and Archbishop Desmond Tutu were at public odds over the new government's decision to continue manufacturing weapons, and over the parliamentary 'gravy train'. The Arch has hardly remained silent since, on almost any issue you care to mention! Though less flamboyantly, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane was equally outspoken, particularly on poverty, HIV and AIDS, and the arms deal. Yet our synods and bishops have also praised the government where praise is due, such as over the National Development Plan, and in aspects of health care. Perhaps we are fortunate, in being able to draw on Anglicanism's long history of public engagement, in which 'establishment' and dissenting voices often exist side by side.

In today's South Africa, therefore, civil society bodies and religious communities need continual reflection on where we should stand in solidarity, and where we should voice disapproval. It is fair to say – and we would all be helped by acknowledging this – that both we and those within the political sector are still learning how to deliver and how to receive criticism that is constructive. We are also still learning what it means to hold and exchange legitimately diverse perspectives. But what is not negotiable is that we must all support and even encourage these exchanges, and respect one another's rights to speak freely and frankly.

So it will not do, as sometimes happens, to label all criticism of the ANC and its government as 'anti-revolutionary' or as somehow against the struggle and everything it sought. It was a great ANC stalwart who taught me not just the value, but the necessity, of constructive criticism. Ma Albertina Sisulu was someone to whom we often went for advice, when I was a student at Wits, and she was not slow to tell us when she thought the ideas and plans emanating from our hot young heads were flawed. She gave us forthright criticism, but it was criticism we needed, in order to build us up and point us in a better direction. I learned that none of us should be discouraged from entering debate, and of speaking 'truth to power', as it is often said. We must not be put off when threatened with legislation that serves to conceal what ought to be known. Instead we should follow Ma Sisulu's lead, and say what needs to be said – for the good of our leaders and our country. She knew the power of Jesus' words, that 'the truth will set us free' (John 8:32).

[11] Available at http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=6724
[12] Available at www.uwc.ac.za/usrfiles/users/1/Desmond_Tutu_Lecture_2008.pdf

Speaking Truth

'Speaking truth to power', a phrase with Quaker origin, has become something of a cliché in South African political discourse. This risks underplaying the basic fact that truthfulness and transparency, especially in the public arena, are amongst the most effective tools we have for building a just and free society. As Professor Anton Harber has put it, 'The cacophony is part of the price we pay for openness and accountability. It is silence, when those who should speak out do not, that we have to be scared of.'[13] Open and honest debate will combat all that threatens to undermine the vision of our Constitution. Truth is the currency with which civil society groups must deal, in this public engagement. Truth is also a corner-stone of trust, without which the different sectors of society cannot work well together, as we need to do, each of us taking responsibility within our own spheres of action. Truth helps open up all the dimensions of the issues at stake, so no perspectives – including those of the marginalised, powerless, voiceless – are overlooked, and so we can best find our way forwards.

Truth, about how difficult this task of nation-building is, and about what can realistically be achieved – rather than inflated promises designed primarily to win votes – will help our politicians to be the people we need them to be, doing the job our Constitution asks of them. Truth about the nature of the problems we face will help us find practicable and workable solutions that are rooted in the reality before us. Truth around financial and commercial dealings – everything from tender processes to wage settlements – are the necessary first step to defeating the scourge of growing corruption; and also to overcoming the corrosive effect that suspicion increasingly has, even where due process is followed. The humourist and playwright Noel Coward said 'It is discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty, how few by deceit,' and while we might laugh, we cannot afford to sit so lightly to truth-telling that this becomes a valid description of the new South Africa.

Truth is thus the oil in the wheels of genuine democracy, which allows the voice of every citizen to be heard, and treated with dignity and respect. Truthfulness in debate is what will rebuild relationships across the chasms that have opened up around Marikana, and the wider mining sector; and truthfulness before Judge Ian Farlam and the Commission of Inquiry will help free us from the ignorance about what happened, about what went wrong, and about how we can do better in our employment practices, in our policing and in our dealings with disputes. Truthfulness, and the trust it can bring, are needed for spanning the gulfs between service providers and those who have a right to these services. Truth about our economic practices is also the starting point for reversing increasing inequalities between rich and poor, and in ensuring that the wealth of this country is made to serve those who are in greatest want. Truth is what will touch our hearts, change our minds, and shape our actions – so we can walk the path the Constitution sets before us. Truth is the bridge across which we will have to walk if we are to meet with one another again, and find common solutions to the ills of our nation.

And though truth puts an uncomfortable spotlight on those areas where we are failing, truth is to be welcomed, because truth truly does set us free. We must never fear truth – even if it may be painful to hear at first. Because truth can take us forward to a better life: through the telling of good news stories, of what is being achieved by so many people even with such few resources; through reassuring us we *can* make it, with hard work, with effort, with commitment, with perseverance, with cooperation and collaboration. Truth encourages us to follow examples of triumph against the odds; of generosity of spirit; of communities uplifted; of courageous men and women, young people and old, who have stood up for what is right and seen good win the day. Truth tells us that we need not despair, and that we are not condemned to lives of uselessness in a failing society. Truth is the signpost to a better future.

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[13] Jennifer Crwys-Williams, Ed., 2008, The Penguin Dictionary of South African Quotations, 3rd edn, Penguin Books, Johannesburg, p.101.

Speaking Out

Speaking truth to power requires not just pursuing the truth, but the courage to speak it. The Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution (CASAC) is right to warn that 'A complacent citizenry remains the greatest threat to our Constitution. As responsible citizens we should assert our right to actively campaign for the realisation of rights enshrined in the Constitution.'[14] Complacency allows the flourishing of those attitudes and behaviours that most put at risk the vision enshrined within the Constitution, for the counterparts of transparency and truthfulness – dishonesty and the concealment – gravely threaten effective democracy. As the 18th century Irish politician and thinker Edmund Burke rightly put it (in the gendered language of his time), 'All that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.' Failure to speak out is equally perilous. Its dangers confront us in those whose primary concern is the apocryphal Eleventh Commandment, 'thou shallt not be caught out', and who believe that one can sit lightly to the law, interpret it elastically at best, and so freely plan to get away with as much as possible. They confront us in corruption, at whatever level it occurs. They also confront us where a job is done poorly or service is slip-shod; when we are served with lies, or half-truths, or the truth we have a right to know is distorted or concealed.

It should therefore go without saying that the so-called Protection of State Information Bill remains an affront to our democratic aspirations, particularly in its inadequate provision for public interest disclosure. Of course every country has information that it must legitimately protect, but this should be quite narrowly drawn, and not impede the rightful accountability that is at the heart of effective constitutional democracy and good governance. Reports that a 'secret' Cabinet document, warning that poor service delivery poses 'a security risk',[15] raise far-reaching concerns about whether this might provide justification for politicians and government servants at every level to withhold all manner of information that ought to be wholly within the public domain, including concealing everything from inefficiencies and 'embarrassing' failures through to corrupt practices. Yet at the same time, those who bring such information into the open, where it belongs, or even just receive and retain it, may well render themselves subject to punitive jail terms. More recent assertions of 'secrecy' around what appears to be unconstitutional and probably also corrupt spending related to the President's homestead at Nkandla are similarly worrying.

An effective free media, which is unafraid to give voice to civil society and citizens and promotes the ability and capacity of all to speak truth to power, is indispensable to successful constitutional democracy – though it too must work to build up, not to break down, and must use its influence wisely. I am proud to have been part of the Press Freedom Commission, set up under the chairmanship of Justice Pius Langa, to review best practice and regulation within the print media.

Yet corruption does not only happen on the scale of national government and big business, arms deals, and tenderpreneurs. The number of South Africans who acknowledge having offered or having been offered a bribe at some point in their lives is also shocking. In some places it seems to be so much part of the fabric of daily life that it has its own jargon in township slang, in such words as 'lyatchesa' and 'ilegintsa'. Sometimes the 'currency' isn't money, but dishonesty about work done or left undone, corners cut, dockets mislaid, fines disappearing, friends helped to queue-jump, and so on. This too undermines effectively operating society, hampering our ability to overcome the destructive legacies of the past, and, as the Constitution's Preamble puts it, 'free the potential of every person'.

Public accountability must also, therefore, be seen in terms of us, the 'public', holding one another to the standards of the Constitution. Here too civil society in its broadest sense can play a significant role, with organisations cooperating and coordinating to create a climate in which any form of sharp dealing becomes unacceptable, an offence against nation, community, neighbour, colleague, friend, family member. CASAC, Corruption Watch, the Open Society Foundation, the Red Card

[14] Available at http://www.casac.org.za/?page_id=12
[15] See, for example, http://mg.co.za/article/2011-12-09-service-delivery-is-a-security-issue.

Campaign and others are doing significant work, not least in helping citizens recognise the forms corruption takes, and to see that, beyond being illegal and immoral, and beyond lining the pockets of the undeserving, when money is misused, its potential to be utilised in constructive and helpful ways is lost – and generally lost in areas which most benefit the neediest communities.

Furthermore, when those who ought to be leading by example, instead engage in, or turn a blind eye to, such behaviour, or become embroiled in untruths and cover-ups, the rot spreads. When those whose lives are most difficult because of joblessness, homelessness and long histories of being disadvantaged, see and read about unchecked and unpunished corruption by those who are in positions of power and influence and wealth, by those who claim that they are leading the country in overcoming the legacies of the past, why should they not draw the conclusion that this is the way forward for all South Africans?

Religious leaders in the Western Cape have thrown their weight behind civil society movements, signing a pledge 'From Witness to Action: A Call to End Corruption' and undertaking to oppose corruption in our teaching, preaching and worship; to stand in solidarity with, and highlight the plight of, those most affected by corruption; to keep our own institutions corruption free; to commend and encourage honest people and practices, and support and protect whistle-blowers.[16] We hope this initiative will be taken up across the country.

Maturing Debate

Maturing democratic debate requires us to educate ourselves in what are often more subtle arguments than in the past. Rarely are issues so clearly fully right or fully wrong as they were in the bad old days. And so there may be times when it seems we are both 'for and against'. Thus, churches may work closely with the Department of Health in promoting primary health care in a great range of ways. Yet we should also feel free to voice our concerns about the current health care system which is neither cost effective nor just. One the one hand, the under-staffed, under-skilled and under-resourced government sector provides inadequate services to the great majority of the population. On the other, since 1999, the profits of private health care funds have escalated, as have premiums, though levels of coverage have fallen, as they increasingly answer to share-holders, not members. While proposals for a National Health Insurance scheme seek to address such appalling imbalances and injustices, it is unclear that the current plans are capable of delivering the required just outcome.

This example illustrates how constructive engagement in debate requires us to take seriously and honestly the complexities of much of contemporary democratic life. Often we are confronted with situations to which there are no easy answers, or where all options have both positive and negative consequences. The stands that we take must therefore be explicitly rooted in realistic assessments of the true situation. Achievements must be acknowledged, and strengths promoted; and it will not do to demand unachievable outcomes. At the same time, we expect politicians to be realistic in their presentations to the public, and not make promises that cannot be delivered. Sound-bite rhetoric, though grabbing headlines, often does a disservice to the issues at stake. So too does polarised speech that paints situations, parties, even individuals as wholly right or wholly wrong; or which merely criticises and aims to undermine, without offering plausible alternatives. This is cheap politicking.

Civil society must also avoid justifiable complaints of naivety, if we fail to do our homework properly around the subjects we address. Hence it may sometimes be better to focus on the issues of Constitutional or ethical principle at stake in particular situations, rather than trying to outguess the experts on matters of detail. It is not our job to do government's (or any other sector's) work for them. But we should always be ready to support good government and good governance across the

[16] See, for example, http://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/2012/08/religious-leaders-call-to-end-corruption.html, and http://www.vocfm.co.za/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=5995:2012-08-20-10-46-00&Itemid=131

board, through making contributions in our own areas of expertise. This should include promoting more mature debate around moral questions, and helping develop frameworks and processes within which those at the sharp end of policy formulation and delivery can weigh their options more wisely and with the benefit of whatever perspectives and insights we can offer.

This requires civil society to practice what we preach. For example, we should all take on the sort of best practices that are found within the King Reports, suitably adapted for our own organisations. We can only promote good democratic practices and good citizenship, if we are prepared to uphold them ourselves. Additionally, faith communities, and others engaged in any aspect of education, should be more intentional in modelling and promoting what we desire for our nation, in how we raise and equip young people to be responsible citizens, able to handle the challenges of adulthood, through knowing how to assess whatever situations they may face, and to discern how to respond wisely and well.

Human Flourishing and the Common Good

Weighing policies and actions against the Constitution can help us recognise where we should speak out, and what arguments are potentially most effective. The Preamble, with the Bill of Rights, provides a particularly valuable touchstone in its depiction of flourishing individuals within flourishing communities. All regulatory legislation must serve this broadly drawn vision. It is a vision of honour and respect, of freedom, of a unity that comes with valid and valued diversity.

Therefore, wherever flourishing is impeded, wherever poverty – material, or any other form – goes unchecked, wherever legitimate diversity is stifled, wherever policies enrich some but impoverish others, wherever the vision of the Constitution is hindered, here civil society must direct its efforts and raise its voice. We should point out where weaknesses, failings and omissions lie; and why, from a constitutional perspective, they are so grievous. Of course the Constitutional Court must ultimately decide on the precise interpretation and practical application of the Constitution's provisions for human flourishing, but this should take place within the context of free, robust and comprehensive debate.

This overarching approach guides faith communities' engagement in democratic processes. For, unlike many NGOs and other civil society bodies, which address particular issues or interest groups, our concern embraces the whole of life. (If anyone thinks that Christians and churches should 'stick to religion' and not involve themselves in the public sphere, let alone questions of governance and accountability, I would invite them to read their Bibles, which call for us to make a positive difference throughout society, being the 'salt of the earth' of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount!) From the Christian perspective, the description of human living offered by the Constitution, particularly in its commitment to 'free the potential of each person', comes close to echoing God's purposes of freedom and flourishing inherent in creation and salvation, and the 'abundant life' which Jesus promised (John 10:10).

The Constitution thus provides powerful encouragement for Christians to align themselves with other faith communities, civil society and all people of good will in wholeheartedly supporting the fullest possible expression of constitutional democracy, as one very concrete way of promoting the genuine 'common good' of individuals, society and indeed wider creation.

Building up, not Breaking Down

Asking what constitutes our common good or human flourishing, and posing questions about poverty and impoverishment, can not only focus our engagement in the public arena, but, importantly, direct us towards creative and constructive dialogue. For it is not enough merely to criticise shortcomings. It is easy enough to pass judgement, given the great challenges facing the country. It requires far more of us to provide a tangible contribution to nation building.

There has been much recent debate about whether, in private conversation or the public space, we are 'talking South Africa down'. When this accusation comes from those on the receiving end of criticism, a little scepticism doesn't come amiss. But, even in the face of the crises around the mining sector, the sliding rand, or wider issues of poverty and economic struggle, I want to argue that we need to be wary about pessimism, and speak up for hope, though for different reasons than those generally offered by our political leaders. My concern is this: we have a wonderful Constitution which outlines for us a society that is full of hope, a vision that is achievable – or certainly one that we are capable of increasingly instantiating.

But this requires us to keep the vision at the centre of our national, communal and individual consciousness. For we know that what we focus our minds on, shapes our speaking, behaviour and the lives we create. When the positive vision is central, it becomes a magnet that draws us forward. When we become preoccupied with problems, they drag us down. This is not to diminish the difficulties we face. But keeping the Constitution's vision centre-stage puts them in the right context, and directs our attention towards how to deal with them. We best overcome our problems when the ideals of the Constitution, our highest hopes and dreams, shape our words, actions and policy-decisions. The key issue for effective democracy is the extent to which our contribution in debate, in action, can further the loftiest values and aspirations of the Constitution. Daring to do this will bring the necessary courage to tackle such crucial issues as the dehumanising poverty which still afflicts the majority of our population. Always to focus on our own or others failings, is to risk instead being mired in despair or hopelessness. This is not the future we desire. It is not the future for which so many strove so hard, for so long, even at the cost of their lives. It is not the future their legacy deserves.

Conclusion

The English 18th century political theorist Thomas Paine, offered the following description of effective constitutional government: 'When it can be said in any country in the world, "My poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want; the taxes are not oppressive; the rational world is my friend, because I am the friend of its happiness" – when these things can be said, then may that country boast of its constitution and its government.'[17] It may be somewhat utopian, but its principles reflect those underlying the Constitution, whose ideals we must keep before us, and keep striving to attain.

For the conclusion that we must draw is that faith communities and civil society have a clear and essential role to play in the effective operation of any democratic system. If we fail to put our shoulder to the wheel, we too become 'part of the problem' for our country. Our greatest ally in this task is the Constitution itself – which calls us to be its faithful supporters, advocating and working for the fullest realisation of all it stands for and all it promises.

Sometimes we may weep that they have not yet been realised, and that too many see democracy as providing access to power, influence and authority merely to enrich themselves, their families and friends, and so betray the inheritance of our struggle heroes. But we should not lose heart. Ours too is a vision that delights our hearts and lifts our spirits. By working together, each playing our part within the broad democratic space that is open to us all, we shall be enabled most fully to realise this hope before us. Pessimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy, but so too is optimism. So let us encourage one another to grasp the opportunities before us, and live them out with hope.

The Future – Going Forward

[17] Antony Jay, ed., 2006, Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations, 3rd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.302.

'Where there is no vision, the people perish', we read in Scripture (Proverbs 29:18). I want to end with a word of joyful encouragement to faith communities and civil society organisations, with the media, academia, business and all who share our desire for a strong, fully functioning, democracy in the service of all South Africans. The invitation lies before us. Let us with confidence respond by being intentional in persistently upholding the vision of the Constitution, of speaking and acting to educate our own constituencies and all with whom we deal about what it means to be effective citizens, effective civil society, effective democracy. Let us not be shy of holding one another to account, and modelling robust dialogue, constructive criticism, and all other aspects of maturing democratic life – so that we may also insist that politicians, political parties and government, at every level also abide by the highest standards of democratic practice, and declare in word and action how this should be done, for all to see. The future is ours to shape – will we grasp the opportunity, or let it slip through our fingers? Too many have waited for too long for the benefits of democracy to extend from the ballot box through to the upliftment of their daily lives. We cannot let our people perish. We need not let our people perish. The vision of the Freedom Charter, the vision of the Constitution, lie before us – let them light the path, and let us choose to walk the way ahead together.