



**R**ACISM. The ugly debate rages across the country, spreading like wildfire and flaring up on social media platforms.

Twenty-two years after our transition from authoritarian rule to a miraculous democracy, the rainbow nation is still in the shadow of hate and bigotry.

South Africans are in shock at the recent outbursts of repulsive vitriol on Twitter and Facebook. First Penny Sparrow referred to black beachgoers as “monkeys allowed to be released on New Year’s Day”.

Then, despite the Human Rights Commission’s plea to not “fight racism with racism”, Velaphi Khumalo called for the cleansing of white South Africans. “We must act as Hitler did to the Jews”, he said.

We might have walked the long road to freedom, but the events of the past week have made it clear again that South Africa’s transformation is incomplete.

Experts have pointed to many reasons for the boiling over of racial tension – from the uncertainty of recent political upheavals and divisive discourses around the #ZumaMustFall campaign to the frustration of born-frees on key issues from service delivery to unemployment.

One thing is certain: the deep-seated socio-economic and structural inequalities in our nation need to be urgently addressed alongside the entrenched attitudes of bigotry.

## MyView

**Alana Baranov**



Despite making great strides building a culture of human rights, racism and other forms of prejudice remain a grave problem and need to be addressed with the seriousness they deserve.

Indeed, the Human Rights Commission noted an increase in hate speech over the past year and hate crimes are a daily reality our most vulnerable communities face.

While hate speech is not directly classified under South African law, the Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act protects against words that could “reasonably be construed to demonstrate a clear intention to a) be hurtful; b) be harmful or incite harm; c) promote or propagate hatred”.

Hate crimes, defined by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe as “a criminal act committed with a bias motive”, remain a scourge in our country.

Hate crimes are also known as “identity crimes”, actions directed at the identity of the victim. Like hate speech, hate crimes not only harm the individual they are directed against, but also serve as a message to the larger group the victim is seen to represent.

Racist, sexist or homophobic speech not only diminishes the dignity of others but damages the fabric of society.

Hate harms society by engraining chauvinism and perpetuating suspicion, fear and insecurity.

Nation-building and social cohesion, so desperately needed in a country with our fractured past, becomes impossible. In short, hate demeans us all.

Progress is being made to address hate speech and hate crimes in our country. The Hate Crimes Working Group, a multi-sectoral network of NGOs that works to spearhead advocacy and reform initiatives pertaining to hate crimes in South Africa, was formed in 2009.

Through this initiative, efforts are being made to effectively monitor hate crimes and use the data in lobbying for comprehensive legislative measures to combat hatred.

A hate crimes law in South Africa would not only improve the policing of, and judicial response to, acts of hatred; it would also establish societal norms in which hate would be unacceptable.

These legal processes need to be

carried out alongside education and awareness programmes on the repercussions of discrimination and dehumanisation, as this is the only way to truly change hearts and minds.

Working with the youth on issues of diversity is essential if we hope to have a brighter tomorrow. It is only by learning the lessons from our past that we can build a better future.

History has taught us that what begins with words often ends in action and that hate directed at one group does not end there.

Genocide and violence begin with dehumanising and “othering”. As we saw during the Holocaust, and on our continent in Rwanda in 1994, a society where people are called less than human creates a space where unspeakable atrocities can take place.

While it is crucial for us to distance ourselves from the outrageous comments of Sparrow, Khumalo and their kind, and to participate in initiatives that combat racism, it is also vital that each of us reflects on our bias and undergoes our own truth and reconciliation process.

Individuals from across racial, gender and religious lines sacrificed their lives in the struggle against apartheid and fought for a free South Africa.

It is now up to each of us to do all we can to shape this country into a land where unity in diversity is appreciated and dignity is afforded to all.

We must stand up in our own

communities, workplaces and families – have the courage to call out a racist joke or sexist comment, speak up if someone is being treated unfairly and, in the words of Gandhi, be the change we wish to see in the world.

Amid the shouting of slurs and unhelpful reactions, an important, nuanced and reasoned conversation must be had about racism and tolerance in South Africa today.

If only we could all stop talking at, and start listening to, each other we might be able to move forward with a better understanding of perspectives, experiences and world views different from our own. We might even learn something new.

South Africa’s transition continues. We must speak out and stand up against all forms of intolerance, whether sexism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia or xenophobia.

Hate has no place in a country still healing from its wounds. If we build bridges between communities, respect our differences and celebrate our similarities, we can return to the fundamental principle of the Freedom Charter and ensure South Africa “belongs to all who live in it”.

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