

COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP CONVERSATIONS
An opening address to the IoD Annual Business Update
6 October 2011

May I commence by tapping into the wisdom of Robert J McCracken, who opines:

“The world is not perishing for the want of clever or talented or well-meaning men (people). It is perishing for the want of men of courage and resolution who, in devotion to the cause of right and truth, can rise above personal feeling and private ambition,”

I submit that this colloquium’s cardinal objective is to help move us from being merely “talented or well-meaning people” to “people of courage and resolution, who in devotion to the cause of right and truth” can help lift our political economy, our beloved nation onto a worthy, healthy, morally sound and prosperous cause. We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to posterity.

Before we engage in this discourse, I propose that we pause and reflect on the challenge and purpose of Courageous Conversations. It behoves us to answer at least three key questions germane to the theme:

Why courageous and what kind of courage?

Why converse, and converse about what?

Courageous conversations to what end?

First, a brief reflection on courage and its place in national, good-directed discourse. Courage is, as Winston Churchill observed, “the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all the others¹”. It is the supreme virtue because it is the sine qua non for every other virtue. Without courage, essential knowledge and wisdom cannot be brought to bear among the ignorant and ill-informed to realize the folly of their ways, particularly those masquerading as leadership.

We must also insist on moral courage. Moral courage, which In Samuel Goodrich’s considered view, is “a virtue of higher cast and nobler origin than physical. It springs from a consciousness of virtue, and renders (people) in the pursuit or defence of right, superior to the fear of reproach (or intimidation), opposition in contempt”. We submit that courage with no ethical base is bravado - wild, inimical to any good cause and characterized by bluster and swagger, Moral courage is not based on bravado but on knowledge, expertise and deadly competence.

Second, why the discourse, and conversations about what? Well, there is a great deal to discuss and compelling reasons for us to engage in serious discourse as conscientious, caring and committed citizens - both corporate and individual. As we look around what do we see? We observe, inter alia:

A nation with no clearly articulated compelling vision; a country with only a fuzzy sense

of destiny. Perhaps we had a vision of a united, tolerant, hardworking and innovative nation when the democratic settlement of 1994 was fresh. But the inspiration of those times has dissolved as the rich-poor gap in our society continues to grow, xenophobia stalks the land, and we face the threat of global recession. Have we become a rudderless, desperate nation? I wonder...and where is the courageous, human-centred leadership to rescue us from the morass?

Our political leadership's moral quotient is fast degenerating, with cabinet ministers embezzling/ wasting, misadministering and abusing their fiduciary duty with impunity, a leadership without compunction - no pricking of conscience. Even Gwede Mantashe, ANC general secretary, laments the painful reality that "we have allowed thieves and thugs to run the country". You cannot have good governance if you allow gangsterism to run riot in the institutions of the state,

Our national leadership bent on propping up mediocrity to the status of virtue. We observe putative national leaders who actively suppress excellence and brush shining professionalism aside with gusto, simply because it is at variance with their corrupt view of the world. The same questionable leadership is also preoccupied with the warped logic that would have us believe that the superior wisdom and expertise of independent institutions such as the judiciary is inferior to that of the party, fragmented, ill-informed and chaotic as it is,

In our "model" constitutional democracy- a model on paper- we observe the emergence of a strange breed of leaders, determined to subjugate the rule of law and override the constitution. This is not the accountable democracy for which generations suffered and fought. We are fast losing the checks and balances that all agreed were necessary to prevent a recurrence of apartheid-style

Against this political background, our business leadership is keeping quiet in case lucrative tenders are lost, but behind the scenes there is vicious jockeying for favours from politicians - in exchange, of course, for material benefits. Corruption needs both a corruptor and a corruptee, and we have both in plenty. While tenderpreneurship rules the business roost, business organisations are preoccupied with issues of racial turf. That everyone should have a voice in business deliberations and commit to transformation is vital, but there are pressing issues of corruption, nationalisation and transformation to be faced by all of us. We must pull together to turn the country back on course towards national development and global engagement.

We in the private sector see what is happening, but are we doing about it?

Currently we are witnessing a fall-out between the ruling elite and civil society over issues such as the information bill and the Arms Deal. The Public Protector is overworked by complaints from civil society and underappreciated by a government which ignores her rulings. When it is blatantly obvious that governance in state institutions has been abused, and the evidence is made dear, the President should be morally and legally obliged to take action - but rulings appear to be ignored, perhaps in hope that they will simply go away,

Meanwhile, the visit of an innocuous but inspirational Nobel Peace Prize Awardee, to celebrate the birthday of a fellow Laureate, is obstructed by trip. No satisfactory explanation

has been given but the government insults our intelligence by treating the matter as one that requires “patience” while an explanation is concocted. Of course, we suspect that China is calling the shots of our foreign policy. We have a new neo-colonialist power to answer to! This manifests a leadership out-of-step with its followership who fought for human rights and who see South Africa as a symbol of freedom and democracy for all the world.

Leadership should commit itself to listening: listening to its own heart and head, and listening to the appeals of the followership. I call this Attuned Leadership. I have written a book on the subject in which I explore the relationship between Africa’s philosophy of Ubuntu, and the principles of good governance. In my view, good governance is first and foremost a human rights issue. It cannot be otherwise, since only a moral leadership committed to the good of stakeholders will wholeheartedly commit itself to clean, accountable, responsible practices. Good governance is attuned leadership in action,

But instead of this approach - instead of seeking attunement and fostering consensus- you have Chief Whips In Parliament spitting adversarial venom. You have a deleterious, ill-considered and vexed nationalisation campaign that corrodes economic confidence and deters foreign direct investment.

All these issues and more demand attention and deserve serious discourse by this country’s citizenry, particularly the intelligentsia, and particularly the leaders of business those who make up the well-informed sector of South Africans. We must move from being learned and well-meaning to being men and women of courage and resolution who, In dedication to the cause of right and truth, can rise above the mere pursuit of personal wealth and self-aggrandisement, National duty calls. Citizens of goodwill, both corporate and individual, must give a resounding response.

The political temperature in South Africa is heating up: anyone can feel it. The voices are more shrill, the sense of impending danger more immediate. Racism, which we thought had been buried, has resurfaced in virulent forms. When our first President, Nelson Mandela, in his swearing in at the Union Buildings pronounced that “never and never again” I would the country permit the oppression of one by another, we heaved a collective sigh of relief. And yet now the threat looms again as national leaders set out to weaken state institutions and impose their designs whether or not they accord with the wishes and the destiny of South Africans.

Third, and finally, “Courageous Leadership Conversations” -the title of this event - to what end are we to have these conversations?

There can be no gainsaying that the integrity, health, socio-economic soundness of and prosperity of South Africa is the collective responsibility of all of us as its citizens, corporate or individual. We therefore, have a duty to build and develop this nation and to call to book the putative leaders who, due to sheer incapacity, to deal with the complexity of twenty-first century governance and leadership, or naked corruption and moral decadence, cannot lead.

We have a duty to insist on strict adherence to the institutional forms that underpin our young democracy, A duty to help define and clearly articulate our national vision based

on rigorous analysis - a compelling sense of destiny that will serve a national rallying point for our pursuit of excellence and prosperity. It behoves us to show depravity and to diligently promote a nation built on moral values. We are duty-bound to guide, teach, develop and imbue our youth with a sound and wholesome value system, We must stop creeping kleptocracy dead on its tracks.

Above all, following rigorous analysis and robust discourse, we must seek to help develop a comprehensive national plan designed to combat ignorance, ill-health, poverty and unemployment and to promote abiding respect for ethical behavior, a sense of efficacy, a powerful work ethic, and active pursuit of excellence as we build our nation. As we implement all of these, we must bear in mind that without courage even supreme wisdom will bear no fruit.

There is tremendous depth and courage in this society. We have come through so much together. What we do now will brand us as soldiers of conscience rather than cowards and quitters.

There is courage in defiance. But let us dispense with bitterness and believe, with Mandela, that because we are all human we can sort out problems together.

There is courage in patient, sensible and sensitive argument. There is courage in demonstrating that there is a better way than following the mob or forcing solutions down everyone's throats. There is courage In taking the steps that business needs to take to truly transform our productive lives. We cannot simply feather our own nests. We have to consider that overcoming poverty is the highest challenge facing us today. Youth are marginalized, the unemployed are desperate: there is indeed a revolution in the making unless we pull together. We must pay living wages, curb executive greed# improve the skills basis of the undereducated, seek new ideas and markets, serve our stakeholders honestly, and rise to the challenges of corporate citizenship. That is what our conversations need to be about.