

Speech delivered by David Knowles, Headmaster at St. Stithians College

“I wanted to spend some time with you today reflecting on the last two or three months we have experienced as a nation. Some commentators have called this the “post-Polokwane Syndrome”, after the events at the ANC National Conference in December, the outcome of which many have seen as negative.

Added to this negative feeling, has been the electricity crisis, now seen as a result of poor planning by the state and acknowledged as such by President Mbeki in his State of the Nation address in Parliament, where he apologised to the nation.

Also knocking us have been higher world oil prices; higher interest rates in SA and the start of a world wide recession, particularly in the UK and the US with their major housing crisis. Added to these have been the on-going crime situation and negative press articles.

So, it is quite easy to fall into the trap of feeling and thinking negatively about our country.

In 1948, Alan Paton wrote his famous book “Cry the Beloved Country” and that title is perhaps still appropriate today, 60 years on, for obviously different reasons. How do we as passionate South Africans, react to this mood of despondency?

Well I cannot speak for you or tell you what to think but I can give you my perspective.

First of all, I make no apologies for being passionately South African.

Let me share this with you – I was not born in South Africa, I was born in East Africa (I moved here at the age of seven), so becoming a naturalised South African was a choice for me. It was a choice I made in the mid 1980s – a terrible time for South Africa – the country was in turmoil; we had sanctions; very low economic growth; the country was bankrupt; civil war was looming; there were bombs in schools; riots in the townships; young men, many of them my peers, fighting and dying on our borders. During that time, I gave up a British passport for a South African one.

Some might call that foolish. So be it.

I have never regretted that decision.

Why not? Not just because South Africa is such a beautiful country – it was because I believed in the people of this country and I believed that God had a plan for us. This was proved right for me when the miracle of 1994 happened. And it was a miracle.

All of you sitting here, matrics and younger, were born either in the year Madiba was released, in 1990, or afterwards. And most of our Grade 8s are “born-frees” – born in 1994 or afterwards and what a privilege that is!

As a passionate South African, here’s what gets me mad:

- The levels of violence and crime that have touched many of us – and many of you sitting here.
- As an adult, on behalf of all adults, I believe that we need to apologise to our youth for not doing more to protect you.
- I get mad when I visit black schools and see how little they have and how poor some of the teaching is.
- I get mad that there is still massive poverty in our country and an Aids pandemic.
- I get mad that there are some instances of incompetence when it comes to areas of social and service delivery.

But being mad about these issues doesn’t make me any less passionate about South

Africa.

I especially get mad that some of our leaders lack moral standing – whether they be a judge, the top policeman or the top politicians.

To me the issue is not whether they are guilty in a court of law. For me, leaders should not be tainted by even a hint of corruption. Even that hint undermines a leader's moral standing – and one should do the honourable thing and resign, in my opinion.

You see, to be a leader means to be a dealer, a purveyor and a deliverer of hope.

And it is our job – yours and mine – to be deliverers of hope. Because we believe in this school that all can and will lead and because I believe in the talent and potential of the young men sitting before me – I believe in that hope.

So am I optimistic? Yes.

I cannot believe that, after all we have been through as a nation, that a future Zimbabwe scenario is God's plan for us.

Yes, I am optimistic because I believe that we have the people here in South Africa to overcome these challenges.

Stuart Pennington, author of the book and website "South Africa: The Good News" wrote last week:

"I am in awe of the thousands of South Africans who toil to help the less fortunate."

I would include in that statement honest policemen, hardworking nurses and teachers and all who work in community service projects, including all of you.

Yes, I am optimistic because I refuse to believe that we can continue to be held to ransom by a criminal minority.

Yes, I am optimistic because we are resilient and tough, as a people and a nation.

Yes, I am optimistic because I believe that the challenges ahead are surmountable, as we wage war against poverty and crime and corruption.

Let's look at some of the facts not always highlighted by the media.

As we know, the media often focuses on the bad news because bad news sells.

So, when it comes to the economy, let's remember that economies work in cycles – expansion; higher expenditure, the economy overheats and there is a readjustment (recession) which is normal.

It has happened before in South Africa – and has been worse – and will happen again. In 1989, the SA Government defaulted on its loan payments (i.e. was unable to pay its debts); the stock market crashed and the rand collapsed.

In 1998, interest rates hit 25%.

Are we better off now? – in a lot of ways we are.

- 1980s – 1% growth
- Early 1990s – SA was technically bankrupt – defined as when national debt is more than 3% of GDP – in 1994, it was 9%.
- During the Mandela years, we had 2% economic growth
- For the last seven years – 5%!
- Next year – 4% - despite world wide recession, oil prices, electricity crisis.
- JSE – 2001 – 8000 points and everyone was pleased; 2007 – 30 000 points (although it has lost some growth now)
- Platinum – up R5000/ounce since January

- Here's a thought – with cuts of electricity, less platinum comes out of ground but what's left is not going anywhere and while it stays in the ground, the price goes up!

What else is up?

- Business confidence (until January)
- Employment is up
- Number of houses built – up
- Tourists visiting – up
- Car sales:

20 000 per month in 2001 – everyone was pleased!

30 000 per month in 2007

Look at our budget, announced by Trevor Manuel on Wednesday. Tax income has gone from R188bn in 2000, to R660bn in 2007!

At the same time, he has cut personal tax and has not borrowed any money. The Americans are so envious of us.

Individual tax cuts - i.e. money given back to tax payers

2006 R12bn given back to individuals

2007 R8.4bn given back to individuals

2008 R7.2bn – in a supposed-to-be recession

This is a major achievement, particularly as in 2000, there was a R25bn deficit on the budget and for the last three years we have not had a deficit on the budget.

Money for housing for the poor has gone up

2000 R9bn

2007 R51bn

And we have built 2.6 million houses since 1996.

Yes, we have challenges:

Eskom is one of them and there is now a 2c levy on every kilowatt hour. But think about this

- Electricity was cheap, now we are paying more
- We had electricity cuts before. In 1981, there was no power in the whole country for 18 hours
- We are not the only country to have power cuts – New York; China – over Chinese New Year this year – 12 million people were left stranded.

There are other challenges

- The world oil price has gone from \$60 per barrel in 2007 to \$90 now and it is not coming down.
- We may be heading for a situation like the UK where they pay R15 per litre.
- HIV/Aids is another major concern, as we see fit to spend R17bn on the World Cup but less on handling this pandemic.

So what am I saying?

Yes there are concerns and challenges BUT there are also many positives.

There are no easy answers or solutions and 2008 will be tough.

However, we have had it tough before and we handled it and boom years will come again – such as in 2010.

So what do we do?

Emigrate? An option for some I suppose and I am always sad when I hear about people leaving.

But where to? Is it guaranteed that it will be all cherries and rose blossoms on the other side of the fence?

Or do we toughen up, get creative and get active, as the “new” South Africans?

By “getting creative,” I mean this – there are massive opportunities here and we will be more aware of issues, especially financially and environmentally.

Two thoughts by way of example:

- Next time there is a power cut and you can't read e-mails, play computer games or watch TV – celebrate – you can instead talk to people – your family or colleagues.
- With regard to the environment, here is an example of being creative: water availability is always an issue in SA – did you know that the average house has 120 000 litres of water running off its roof every year in the form of rain water?

By “getting active,” I mean thinking about what we can do – like Trinity House holding their march on Tuesday; or writing letters; or petitions; or getting involved to help fix it.

Here is an excerpt from “African Wisdom” by Lanette Hattingh and Heinrich Claassen entitled The Ostrich Wisdom: Where is your head?

When confronted with a setback you have two choices of action: you can bury your head in the sand like the ostrich and hope the problem will pass by, or you can stand tall and face the problem head on.

“We have one freedom inside us that nobody can take away, the freedom of reaction/attitude in any given circumstance.” (Viktor Frankl, the psychologist & concentration camp survivor.)

Our reaction to a setback will determine if we are going to stay with our heads buried in the sand or look up and do something about it.

When storms of life pour down on you, it's what happens within you that will determine what happens to you.

You have Mr Positive and Mr Negative doing constant battle in your head. Guess who wins? The one you feed the most! If your head is in the sand you can only see the dark and Mr Negative will thrive. To see the light, you must look up.

“When you are knocked down, be sure to land on your back, because if you can look up, you can get up.” (Nelson Mandela)

If you are an ostrich and have never faced a setback, you need to learn these facts about solving problems first:

- Face it! Confront the problem and get the picture clear.
- Rake it! Work through your denial, aggression or depression around the problem.
- Make it! Look up, stand up and take action.

This is important because just as the sun hardens mud and softens wax, trials can either break us or make us.

Finally, here is my resolve and my truth:-

- To be positive
- To stop whingeing
- To stop blaming
- To ignore the doomsday jokes sent out by people who want you to feel as bad as they do.
- To read the Good News website regularly

- To join the “stop crime, say hello” campaign
- To find goodness in people
- To commit, regularly, to this beautiful country of ours
- To believe in God’s plan for us

I know this – that if I do not work to create the life I want, I will have to endure the life I get.

One final thought:

Matthew Lester writes a column in the Sunday Times Business Times Money. He is Professor of Tax Education at Rhodes University and an advisor to Trevor Manuel.

Yesterday he had this to say:

“South Africa is my life, it always has been and it always will be.”

Amen to that.

A Prayer for the Country (taken off the www.sagoodnews.co.za website)

Our Father in Heaven

You know exactly how much we need You right now

Please let the Leaders of our country act under your influence

We ask that You will hold your hand over us and our country

And bring relief from the crime and other difficulties we are experiencing.

We are proud and privileged to live in this beautiful country

Look after us and bring us peace and prosperity”.