

## INAUGURAL ADDRESS, 5 June 1987

*Prof GJ Gerwel*

I WISH FOR NOTHING MORE THAN TO BE ABLE TO PUT MY PRESENT POSITION AS VICE-CHANCELLOR AND RECTOR AT THE SERVICE OF THE FURTHER GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY AS AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING WHICH THE NATION CAN BE UNRESERVEDLY PROUD OF, ALSO THROUGH OUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATION OF WHICH WE ALL CAN BE PROUD, SHARING COMMONLY IN ITS VALUES, ITS SYMBOLS AND ITS INSTITUTIONS.

Chancellor, as I was nominated by my colleagues for this post in which you have just installed me and elected and appointed to it by the Council of the University, I need in the first place to express to them my thanks and appreciation for so honouring me with their trust. I can only reiterate the pledge made; that I shall strive at all times and to the best of my ability to protect and defend the rights and privileges of this institution.

The University of the Western Cape occupies a very special place in my life. There were only three years since first joining the university as a student in the early Sixties in which I was not attached to it in one or the other capacity. I saw, experienced and participated in its growth and development over the years; I was privileged to share in the process of its emancipation - an emancipation from the academic and intellectual deprivation of its origins as an ethnic college to being today intellectually one of the most exciting and charged institutions of higher learning in the country, daringly exploring new spaces and modes of academic and intellectual practice; emancipation from the political and ideological restrictiveness of its apartheid origins to being a place where the examination and pursuit also and particularly of progressive ideas are not only protected but actively encouraged.

But, Chancellor, it is exactly that impulse of a university to be, perhaps, more pronouncedly involved in the social processes of transformation and reordering than is perceived as conventional or traditional that has in recent times given rise in certain quarters to increasing questioning of, disquiet about, hostility and antagonism towards this and some other South African universities. Historical development within national life as well as within the universities have combined to produce a situation where our roles in the social and political life of the country are being foregrounded and highlighted, often overshadowing (if you will pardon the mixed metaphors) in the public and state perception the scholarly and

educational activities which unobtrusively still continue to be the bulk of what we are occupying ourselves with at universities. There have in the recent past been threats of closure directed against this university and there is presently again widespread speculation about impending state curbs upon certain universities. It is in a general sense being suggested that the universities concerned are, under the pressures of overt ideological commitments, defaulting their tasks of being objective and scientific searchers after Truth. The suspicion, and often expressed accusation, is that our emphasis on radical and revolutionary change-seeking relevance has compromised our essential identity as 'disinterested' searchers after Truth.

My Vice-Chancellor colleagues at the other universities thus implicated, do not need me to speak on their behalves. I can only speak for myself and interpret my understanding of the university which I serve. I cannot even pretend to speak for my university because a university shall never have a corporate opinion. I have however in the 21 months since the announcement of my appointment quite often written, spoken and given interviews about my vision for and understanding of the historical role of this university, expressing views which at the least were never repudiated by Council of the university and were in fact, when presented in the form of a letter to the Minister of National Education, endorsed by, the Council. And it may be appropriate, Chancellor, to briefly present to this congregation a synopsis of those views. Allow me then a few minutes to address, also apropos of my introductory remarks, the topic of 'Truth, transformation and the university', obviously with specific reference to the University of the Western Cape.

In spite of our genuine commitment to free scholarly discourse and research every South African university has a dominant ideological orientation which describes the context of its operations. This is not necessarily as restrictive as it sounds for the university can dynamically and critically interact with its context and need not be encapsulated by it. And where different ideologies exist, operate and contend in a society it is as well for the society that a university interacts in that way and establishes a discourse with ideology.

I would further suggest that the ideology to which a university relates has a correlative in some organized political movement; the university is thus linked to some ideological establishment. This is demonstrably true of both the sub-sets of historically white Afrikaans-language and English-language universities. The Afrikaans universities have always stood and still stand firmly within the operative context of Afrikaner nationalism, networking in a complex way into its various correlative institutions,

whether it be educational, cultural, religious, economic or political. Equally the English-language universities operate within the context of anglophile liberalism, primarily linking and responding to its institutional expressions as in the English schools, cultural organizations and importantly big business.

The one ideological formation under-represented, or not at all represented in a similar way within the South African university community is that of the more radical Left. Such political descriptions are not precise, but in essence with the South African Left one is collectively referring to those people and institutions seeking and working for a more fundamental transformation of the old settler-colonial dominated order which is the present South Africa. The major thrust is towards a non-racial and majoritarian democracy, reflecting itself not in the mere form of multi-racial political arrangements but more fundamentally in the social reorganization of power and privilege. Organizationally this finds political expression now in the extra-parliamentary democratic movements.

The University of the Western Cape, like the other predominantly Black universities, did not in its beginning years have any organic relationship with an ideological context. It was created by and for the purposes of an ideology which was fundamentally antagonistic to the community it was to serve. For reasons and through a process which we need not deal with here tonight the University of the Western Cape, more so, even unlike, any of the other Black universities managed to extract itself from the ethos of its creator ideology. Undoubtedly the most important factor in that process was the student body who through its dissent, protest and activism against Apartheid, and specifically the Apartheid-created and reproducing institution which they were forced to attend, established the counter ethos for the university. With the renaissance of open extra-parliamentary protest politics in the Black Consciousness movement of the Seventies the student body of this university fully and vitally participated, in fact representing one of the strong growth points of that movement. Equally with the resurgence of Congress politics, partly flowing from the Black Consciousness movement of the Seventies the student body strongly reflected and continues to reflect the movements and tendencies of national extra-parliamentary politics. Coupled and in response to this formative presence of the students was the Vice-Chancellorship of Prof Richard van der Ross who with his liberal anti-apartheid background gave recognition and space to this counter ethos which the students carried from their community life and experience into the university, and gradually built it into the dominant orientation of the university.

This university is therefore historically placed, in fact faces the

historical imperative, to respond to the democratic Left, to be an intellectual home for the Left. We are an open but predominantly Black university drawing our students from all the statutorily defined Black groupings. It is through our students and the community from which they come that we are presented with the ideological formation with which we interact in the way that I suggested for the historically White universities.

There is therefore an internal imperative for this university to develop a critical alignment with the democratic movement as the dominant ideological orientation describing our operative context. The integration of academic and intellectual life with and the development of it out of the reality of people's social experience and world is essential both for the order of our functioning and, more importantly, for the vitality and quality of our intellectual environment. I remain convinced that without that perceived and experienced nexus with a real and shared-in social world, a university is emasculated and intellectually anaemic.

But, to be quite frank, there is also and importantly an external political imperative for that route. If I plead and work for this university to provide an intellectual home for the left it is not merely out of managerial expedience thinking that it would be good for the university's orderly functioning. Universities, and education generally, reproduce the social order, but it can, alternatively, educate towards and for a changed society. And I cannot in conscience, in Truth, educate, or lead education, towards the reproduction and maintenance of a social order which is undemocratic, discriminatory, exploitative and repressive and stands universally recognised as such. While a university may never have a corporate opinion our university, at least, can never condone or live comfortably with Apartheid in any of its mutations. And the democratic Left stands as fundamental opposition to Apartheid in all its dehumanizing aspects.

To repeat what as Dean of Arts I wrote to my colleagues some years ago: one need not spend emotional and intellectual energy arguing the fact that our society is in the throes and traumas of transition, or on the nature and length of that transition period. What seems to be beyond argument is that what I previously called the settler-colonial dominated social order - in its most latter stages manifested as Apartheid - faces its terminal crisis. We could as an educational institution either be oppositional to the historical movement of our society or be a facilitating agent for it while at the same time retaining what is essential to our definition of being a university.

We need to pursue an in-depth discussion of and investigation into what university teaching means and involves in an historically transitional period and situation like ours. We shall have to examine afresh for our-

seives the definition of 'the university', to determine for ourselves what is essential to that kind of institution which can rightly call itself 'university', to see how we can replace where necessary that which is non-essential with features necessitated by our context and circumstance; and, more fundamentally, to contemplate and execute the adaptation of the identified essentials of 'a university' into real life concert with our historical locality.

How does one translate this commitment into academic and intellectual practice? And would one in the process be defaulting on your commitment to Truth and to Science?

The question of translation into practice of these commitments is one which is and has for some years been occupying the minds of academics at this university. This renewal and transformation will be a complex process the nature and content of which shall differ from discipline to discipline. Already much which is new and innovative is being done at this institution. It is recognized that such renewal will involve various levels: what we teach in terms of contents, but also how we teach, within which structural context and towards which goals, what we research and how we disseminate our research results. Also that while teaching, research and community service are the three defined functions of a university we may in our situation have to take that third function of community service even more seriously than is traditionally done at universities. We have to comprehend more deliberately the content and meaning of 'community' - what is that community that we wish to serve? - and have our other two functions also been informed by that definition. While for other universities, relating to more established social order, the content of 'community' may be more of a given, in our orientation we are involved in the creative conceptualization of a future community beyond the destructiveness of an Apartheid order.

And as for the second question, whether one will not perhaps in this process be defaulting on your obligation to Truth and Science. I would perceive it, grounded as it is in scholarship and discourse, to be exactly the opposite. They are suppressed social realities which through discourse-censorship, and research-resistance as a manifestation of discourse-censorship, are largely unattended to in scientific discourse.

I did not want to indulge in the academicist practice of quotations tonight, but just this one: 'We have to consider the unconscious self-censorship of scientific discourse. The fact is that discourse-censorship controls "educated thinking", or more precisely, the process of research itself. By controlling the research process it produces in generative sequence both the ... corruption or learned thinking and the subsequent suppression of "unlearned thought". Thus it is not by accident that the

corruption of "learned discourse" leads to the suppression of "unlearned thinking" (Wolf Schafer). What I am then suggesting is that we could in fact be broadening the scope and horizons of Truth and of Science at the same time through our academic practice and scholarship empowering the suppressed social constituencies which we serve. What we are or can be involved in here is not a disregard for Truth and Science but rather a social reconstruction of science.

We touch here on old issues of the sociology of knowledge and science, the issues of so-called untamed and unlearned thinking. An education in science always contains a strong disciplining of thought - the repression of 'uneducated thinking' - which at some points in history can be at great costs. I do not wish to go into that except to remark that the concept of 'people's education' which emerged as one of the most creative finds from the educational crises we have been experiencing since 1976, is to be taken seriously - and is being taken and explored seriously by a growing number of academics on this campus. It provides a rich and suggestive concept for educational renewal towards a changed society, and it is deserving of the attention of scholars that it is increasingly receiving.

Chancellor, in summary then: I can with every bit of conscience and honesty declare to this congregation that this university remains true and committed to the values and the vigour of critical scholarship. If opposition to us is based on political and ideological grounds and formulated in those terms, I am happy to face that criticism and to confront it and answer to it as scholar and educational administrator.

We cannot and do not wish to deny that there are deep and serious tensions in and strains upon university life as we reconnoitre this road of educational renewal. The leisurely contemplation which had been the hallmark of university life until recently is a product and function of a specific political culture. As an increasing number of students not sharing in that political culture, or feeling themselves alienated from that culture, enter the universities the reproduction of that style in university life is inevitably going to become less automatic than it has previously been. The old problem of the connection between theory and practice will be carried as a real problem into universities: students feeling themselves intimately and directly involved by the practice of social and political discrimination will, one can expect, continue to seek to divert their academic and intellectual life to action related to those aspects of their lives. And this does pose problems and challenges to the university.

These are challenges to which some of us as universities have responded in the most constructive and creative way that we find ourselves compelled to as institutions of higher learning. The easy authoritarian reflex is

challengeable on a number of grounds. If the university has the broader educative function of transmitting also through example the democratic culture, then authoritarianism, even in the face of provocation, will be a denial of its own character and function.

But we may also, as Vice-Chancellors and as citizens entrusted with an important civil responsibility, put counter-demands as demands are placed on us. The functioning of our institutions and our own functioning are impacted upon by the political situation of the country, something which is not of our making or under our control. I consider that I may rightly ask, or that I have the duty to ask, that those in power attend urgently and fundamentally to the political crises of the nation through the creation of the conditions for legitimate democracy: the abolition of apartheid laws which is at the basis of our societal crises and which we in our universities are therefore also continuously called upon to manage; the release of political prisoners to allow them to participate in the democratic reconstruction and healing of the nation; the recognition of organizations like the African National Congress as integral and essential to any solution of the country's problems, and their legal admission to the political processes of the country. If legitimate government by consent is established there will be greater justification for censuring us as university Vice-Chancellors for not containing adequately the conflicts and tensions in our universities.

Chancellor, I must conclude and thank the university for the honour and the challenge of this position offered me. But I think it will be ungrateful and ungracious if I end without giving recognition and paying tribute to just a few of those many people and instances who can rightly claim part of the honour you have bestowed upon me.

At the risk of sounding sentimental: to my parents whom I hope would, had they been alive, have found some reward in this evening for their unstinting efforts. They, like other parents of their generation, represented so much of the spirit that I perceive in this university. With minimal education themselves, farm-labour peasants, they represented something of that underrated 'uneducated thinking' referred to earlier. They started a little farm school which opened on the day their eldest child turned six; out of their meagre earnings they helped keep and maintain the school until their deaths; they provided each of ten children with a post-secondary education or training.

To my brothers and sisters who participated in our parents' scheme that you are educated with understanding - and my father made us sign a rudimentary contract! - that you would on qualifying contribute to the education of the others. And I did tax your contributions.

And my wife and children. Phoebe for her support and for having to bear up to pressures that none of us anticipated when we innocently fell in love on this campus twenty years ago. To my adopted daughter Jessie, for letting me know that there will always be somebody loving me no matter what happens. And my son Hein for keeping me sane with his debunking kind of love.

Chancellor, there are friends and family too many to mention. Thank you for your support and encouragement. Colleagues - academic, administrative, workers: I do not know that I have earned your respect, but your frequent warm expressions of it encourage me to try to deserve it. I have already referred to my predecessor, Dick van der Ross. But I must mention him as friend and as a mentor. And the man who had blazed the trail and laid the true foundations for this university. The Chairman of Council particularly and Council as a whole. No Vice-Chancellor can hope to ask for a more supportive governing body than I have found you.

I also want to particularly say to friends and associates in the democratic organizations how, even in these few months in my post, I have found your support, your advice, your willingness to listen and to help, a source of great sustenance. You have in times of difficulty given me an exciting insight into and feeling for what it could be like being a university vice-chancellor in a new South Africa. And made me appreciate and understand what the institutional support networks may mean for my colleagues at the other universities.

That then, Chancellor, is the end of my catechism, as Fallstaff put it. I hope that I might have left with this congregation some understanding and acceptance that what I endeavour at this university is informed by a very basic concern and love for this country,

I have a very special guest here tonight, a citizen of the other country I feel near to my heart - Ireland. And I steal from the words of one of the many patriots whose graves adorn that little island, Robert Emmet, who said amongst other things: 'Let no man write my epitaph ... until my country takes her place amongst the nations of the world.'

I am still far, I hope, from the epitaph stage but I beg that for a final evaluation and judgement of my Vice-Chancellorship. This is a great country. We should have been the leading partner in a cooperative commonwealth of states in the sub-region. Our voice should have held sway in the deliberations of the Organization of African Unity and in the Movement of Non-aligned Nations. Our seat should have carried the weight of our human and material potential at the tables of the United Nations. I and others like me continue to educate in the faith and conviction that through our scholarship and educational leadership we can and shall realize the great potential of our nation.