

BLACK, WHITE JOINED IN MARRIAGE OF NO RETURN



PRINCE
MASHELE

IN THE midst of our polarised racial discourse, owing in no small measure to a disintegrating political centre, those who were once inspired by our promising start in 1994 are now despondent.

No one in the modern history of our country has surpassed Thabo Mbeki's conceptualisation of what it means to be South African.

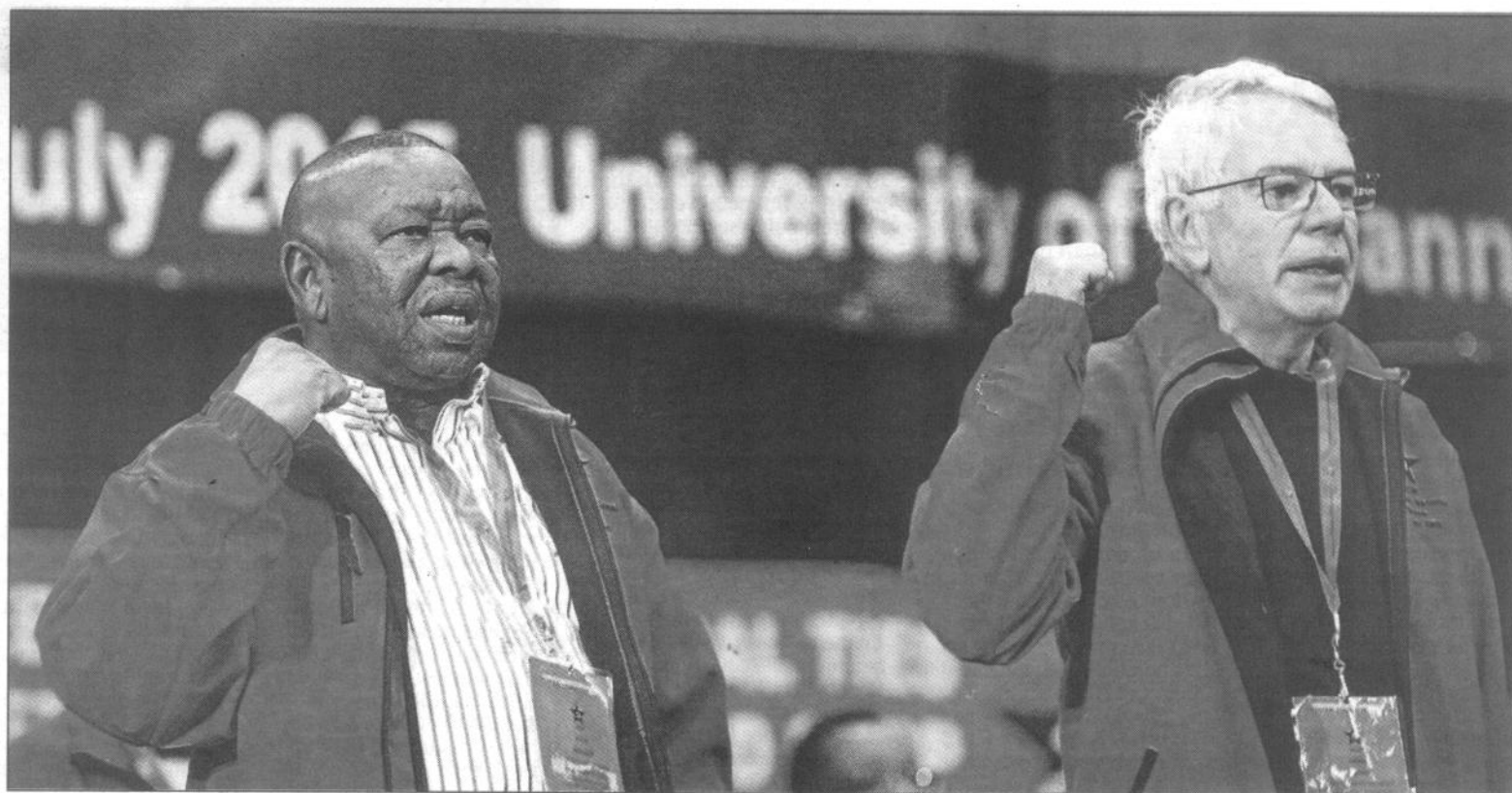
In a single speech – I am an African – Mbeki managed to decry the brutalities of our racist past and, at the same time, embrace the unchangeable reality that black and white people in South Africa are equally African.

"I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still part of me," Mbeki the realist intoned.

Practically this means that, whether they like it or not, the blood of Penny Sparrow and that of Ntokozi Qwabe at some point do confluence. Their different colours do merge permanently to form a de facto South African nation. What both black and white South Africans must accept is that, regardless of their attitudes, history has joined them together in a marriage of no return.

Whatever their mood, husband and wife have to share a bed, for there is only one bed: the land-mass called South Africa within which both black and white people cohabit. Although he himself approached the 'native question' from a standpoint of white supremacy, Jan Smuts, Mbeki's white intellectual peer, understood that ultimately racial cooperation is the only option we have.

In his own historic speech (The South African Spirit), delivered in March 1935, Smuts was apposite: South Africans' "differences of language, race, origin and tradition make this effort at cooperation all



COMRADES: Minister for Higher Education Blade Nzimande and SA Communist Party deputy secretary general Jeremy Cronin during the party's third special congress in Soweto last year

PHOTO: VATHISWA RUSELO

the more necessary and all the more difficult".

Without what Smuts calls "necessary" and "difficult" cooperation, how else could we hope to co-exist in our diversity? There is a greater national goal than mere co-existence, though.

Co-existence means acknowledging and tolerating you as you are without necessarily regarding you as part of me.

Mbeki's idea that our identity as black people is "formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land" means that black South Africans are not complete without whites and, equally, whites are incomplete without blacks.

This is no mere co-existence. It is an intricate connection whose depth reaches the blood – meaning

that, a white South African can die for his black compatriot, and vice versa. Many have wondered what is it that white people in South Africa can or should give to convince black people that they now accept them as equals.

It is not money. It is an inexpensive thing called language. For some reason, almost all white South Africans cannot speak African languages, but the majority of black people can string intelligible sentences in English or Afrikaans. The Afrikaners have been using the fact that the majority of Afrikaans speakers are black to defend the use of Afrikaans as a teaching medium at some of our universities.

If Afrikaners are proud that blacks can speak Afrikaans, why can't they make black people

proud by speaking isiXhosa, isiZulu, seSotho, and so on?

African languages are not difficult. We have been told historically that whites are more intelligent than black people. It should therefore be easier for whites to learn African languages than for us 'unintelligent' blacks to learn white people's languages.

The fact that for centuries white South Africans have not learnt to speak black languages means that they do not see black people as part of them. It is a fact that black people love a white person who speaks their language – Athol Trollip is a darling of black people in Eastern Cape, simply because the man speaks fluent isiXhosa.

Don't be surprised if he becomes mayor of Nelson Mandela Bay municipality. On the other side,

you have people like Jeremy Cronin, Rob Davies, John Jeffery and Andries Nel, who have been in the ANC for ages, yet they can't speak a single black language. They pretend to be on the side of blacks, but they believe in the superiority of white languages.

Before we can settle the complex matters of ideology, land, mines or banks, what makes it impossible for half of South Africa's white population to speak an African language? Why should we blacks believe that whites see us as part of them when they hate our languages? Nation building is not about fancy phrases, pretentious politeness or polished poetry; it starts with learning each other's languages. By the way, this columnist can write in Cronin's language – English.