

from
**MASAKHANE—LET US BUILD
TOGETHER**
1996

Nelson Mandela

In April 1994, South Africa held its first election in which both black and white people could vote. In this election, Nelson Mandela, the leader of the African National Congress (ANC), defeated F. W. de Klerk and became the first black president of South Africa. Although the election did not solve the deep problems within the country, it signaled the beginning of change. In the following speech, Mandela described his vision of a democratic, multiracial, and prosperous society, with its citizens working together for positive change.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Summarizing

What are the “founding stones” of Mandela’s new South Africa?

Racism is a blight on the human conscience. The idea that any people can be inferior to another, to the point where those who consider themselves superior define and treat the rest as subhuman, denies the humanity even of those who elevate themselves to the status of gods.

The millions of graves strewn across Europe that are the result of the tyranny of Nazism, the decimation of the native peoples of the Americas and Australia, the destructive trail of the apartheid crime against humanity—all these are like a haunting question that floats in the wind: why did we allow these to happen?

It seems to us that, as the ordinary people of the world came to understand the real nature of the system of apartheid, they decided that they would not permit that their response to that question should be to hang their heads in shame. We take this opportunity once more to pay tribute to the millions of Britons who, through the years, and like others everywhere else in the world, stood up to say: “No to apartheid!”

Our emancipation is their reward. We know that the freedom we enjoy is a richly textured gift handcrafted by ordinary folk who would not allow that their own dignity as human beings should be insulted. In the acceptance of that gift is contained an undertaking by our people that we shall never again allow our country to play host to racism. Nor shall our voices be stilled if we see that another, elsewhere, is victim to racial tyranny.

But above all else, we believe that our charge is to fulfil the wishes of all humanity, including our own people, to ensure that the enormous and sustained

universal effort that translated into the defeat of the system of apartheid, achieves its related purpose of transforming South Africa into a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, peaceful and prosperous country.

No society emerging out of the grand disaster represented by the apartheid system could avoid carrying the blemishes of its past. Had the new South Africa emerged out of nothing, it would not exist. The being it has assumed, dictated by its origins, constitutes a veritable school of learning about what needs to be done, still, to end the system of apartheid.

The Jeremiahs lie in wait ready to blame the present for its past and, seeing the ghosts of the past that still stalk our land, believe these ghosts represent the failure of the new reality. These Jeremiahs represent a breed that has convinced itself that we cannot build the beautiful South Africa that we and millions of others had dared dream of. Yet, had we not had that capacity for success, South Africa would not be where it is today.

The first founding stone of our new country is national reconciliation and national unity. The fact that it has settled in its mortar needs no advertising. If it were not so, the blood in the streets would trumpet it loudly that we had failed to achieve acceptance of the need for all our people, black and white, to live together in peace, as equals and as citizens bound together by a common destiny.

Our second founding stone is the establishment of a democratic system which ensures that all citizens have an equal right and an equal possibility to determine their future. It prohibits the option of tyranny and dictatorship, and it guarantees the fundamental human rights of all our people.

Within that broad framework, like other nations, we continue the struggle to find ways and means to involve the citizen as intimately as possible in the system of governance, cognisant of the historical process that is redefining the role of the politician, taking away from these professions the powers conferred by the notion that they, exclusively, have a special ability to govern.

Furthermore, recognising the diversity of our society, our new constitution provides for the establishment of a Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities. This will ensure that our people have an additional instrument to enable them to avoid the emergence of any situation in which ethnic and other tensions might drive us back to apartheid solutions or to an imitation of the cruel example of Bosnia.

Our third founding stone must surely be that we end the enormous race and gender disparities in wealth, income and opportunity which we have inherited from our past and whose continued impact necessarily subtracts from the achievement of the goals of national unity and reconciliation. Here we are confronted with a protracted struggle that is intimately bound up with our fourth founding stone: the rebuilding and modernisation of our economy and setting it on a high, sustainable growth path to end poverty, unemployment and backwardness.

None of us can underestimate the complexity of the challenge that faces us with regard to the laying of these latter two founding stones. At the same time, relying

on our own resources and people, and as a part of the world community of nations, we have every reason to be certain that we will succeed.

In this context, we must refer to the mood of the masses of our people who correctly expect that freedom must be attended by a better life for all. But because they are poor, these millions understand the effort and time it will take to graduate from walking barefoot to the comforts of a truly decent existence.

What they expect is not a great leap forward, but a steady and visible advance in the improvement of the quality of their lives, with them participating actively in the process of determining the pace and direction of that advance, and not merely waiting passively to be recipients of benefits that will be delivered by an authority from which they are otherwise alienated.

It may be difficult to understand the enormous creative force released among the people by the fact that, for the first time in centuries, they have a government which they can correctly claim as their own and whose very reason for existence is to serve the interests of these millions; and that they are builders of a society in which the individual is by law protected against any tyranny from the state.

It is from this well of hope, engagement and confidence in the future that ordinary citizens are appropriating the concept we have laid before them of *Masakhane*—a Nguni word that means “let us build one another together”.

As important a founding stone as the rest is the fact that we are an African country. With all our colours and races combined in one nation, we are an African people. The successes we seek and must achieve in politics, the economy and social development are African successes which must be part of an African renaissance. They are integrated within a process that must lift and banish the clouds of despair which continue to cast a dark shadow over our continent.

Had we the peremptory powers, long would we have proclaimed: *lux fiat!* It is perhaps in this regard that our presence here today might, as we have said, symbolise the closing of a circle which, for us, has been two centuries in the drawing. For centuries an ancient continent has bled from many gaping sword wounds.

At an earlier time it lost millions of its most able sons and daughters to a trade in slaves which defined these Africans as fit for slavery because they were African. To this day we continue to lose some of the best among ourselves because the lights in the developed world shine brighter.

An ancient continent disgorged into the hands of foreigners what lay in its bowels and in the fertility of its soils, seemingly so profusely that it had to send scouts here to ascertain whether it was true that the streets of London were paved with gold!

The continent bleeds still, struggling to service a foreign debt it can neither afford nor afford to repudiate. The louder and more piercing the cries of despair—even when that despair results in half a million dead in Rwanda—the more these cries seem to encourage an instinctive reaction to raise our hands so as to close our eyes and ears.

Both of us have been part of this unfolding tragedy, watching, waiting, troubled, not knowing what beast born of this superhuman suffering slouches towards

Bethlehem to be born, to borrow the words of an Irish poet. But this we must know: that none of us can insulate ourselves from so catastrophic a scale of human suffering. In the end, the cries of the infant who dies because of hunger or because a machete has slit open its stomach will penetrate the noises of the modern city and its sealed windows to say: am I not human, too?

To close the circle, let our peoples, the ones formerly poor citizens and the others good patricians—politicians, business people, educators, health workers, scientists, engineers and technicians, sports people and entertainers, activists for charitable relief—join hands to build on what we have achieved together and help construct a humane African world, whose emergence will say a new universal order is born in which we are each our brother's keeper.

And so let that outcome, as we close a chapter of two centuries and open a millennium, herald the advent of a glorious summer of a partnership for freedom, peace, prosperity and friendship.

Source: Excerpt from “*Masakhane—Let Us Build Together*” by Nelson Mandela, published in *New Statesman*, July 19, 1996, pp. 20–22.