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# New names keep us on democracy's path

It is easy to lose arguments to your children. Because you love them, you are emotionally vulnerable in debates that deal with sticky issues on which you have opposing views. And so it was when my 15-year old daughter spoke to me about name changes.

A peaceful Sunday morning drive along a major airport route from one of those interminable "sleepovers" (a misnomer if ever there was one) was broken by a shrill: "Look, daddy, the name of the airport has changed." Yes it has changed. It is now OR Tambo International.

"I feel so proud," I ventured, my tired eyes hoping for quick agreement on the matter.

"Who was he anyway?"

A moment to reflect upon our history, perhaps, but there was more than a hint of irritation in her voice.

"Oh love, he was a great South African, and the country should feel honoured to have the airport in his name!"

"Well, they could have used that money to feed the poor."

This was not intended as a rational discussion on how to divvy-up the State budget; this was pure, sweet provocation.

I also knew that a spontaneous

lecture on the importance of symbolic reparations was not going to work this early in the morning. I went low.

"Listen, if it was not for Oliver Tambo, you would not be studying at Girls' High and I would not be teaching at the University of Pretoria ... in fact, you'd probably be living in a shack."

My teacher's intuition told me I had just lost the battle; I was reacting emotionally.

How could this child not know about the contribution of one of the most gentle and humane leaders in the struggle against apartheid?

How could she not know that this was the man who kept the liberation struggles alive in exile while Nelson Mandela and others were imprisoned?

Did she not know that this man wept when he heard of the atrocities his fellow comrades committed in ANC camps? Or that Tambo was a devout Christian who condemned mindless violence by whites and blacks alike? Does she know anything about our terrible past?

"I know about apartheid ... we learned about it at school," she muttered, as if reading my mind.

"You have no idea what apartheid was really about," I arrogantly insisted, working on the assumption that she probably got

the PW Botha version of apartheid: nothing more than "good neighbourliness" in which whites and blacks voluntarily decided to live in their own peaceful suburbs.

"Well, I still think they should have used the money to feed the poor."

I went lower.

"Okay, by that logic, why don't we use the money we saved up for your

matric ball and dedicate those funds to feeding the poor as well?"

You have to see the face of a smirking 15-year-old to know just how foolish you look, that glint of

victory in their eyes, that recognition that they pushed you over the edge: game, set and match.

These are strange times. Tambo has an airport named after him and an audible section of the South

African community is up in arms with suggestions about how the money could have been spent, about not giving political names to public spaces, about the insignificance of the man.

Botha dies and I have to read in both the English and the Afrikaans Press that he "broke the back of apartheid" and was really a courageous reformer who removed evil

laws from the statute books and paved the way for the release of Mandela.

We are as a society in danger of losing moral clarity about the past, inventing political lies in the present, and undermining social justice into the future.

It has become routine among the new political elites that when an agent of apartheid dies, to describe the person as some great reformer (like Botha) or, worse, as a freedom fighter (as in the case of Allan Hendrickse).

Botha did indeed break backs, but it was the backs of activists struggling against the injustices of apartheid.

Hendrickse shamelessly participated in Botha's tricameral parliament - the last white attempt to imagine a South Africa without black Africans.

Botha helps me understand why I respect Adriaan Vlok. In Botha we had a man who, until the end, refused to accept responsibility for the evils of apartheid.

It is his arrogance, his racism and his contempt that constitutes his legacy to South Africa. Our children deserve to know at least that. **Professor Jonathan Jansen.** University of Pretoria