

# Black elite sows new seeds of interracial conflict

We need more solidarity – the kind women displayed in 1956 – to fight against divisive politics of race, writes **Jonathan Jansen**

**I**n political photography, it is probably one of the most riveting pictures from our past: that steady, united and determined march of the women, frozen on the steps of the Union Buildings 50 years ago.

Like the memorable still of Mandela and his fellow prisoners in the Robben Island courtyard, or the unforgettable horror on the face of Antoinette Sithole as she hurried alongside a dying Hector Pieterse in 1976, this image of South African women will remain etched in our memories forever.

It is a picture worth studying. Five women occupy the centre of the photograph: Sophie de Bruyn, Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph, Lillian Ngoyi and Lillian Diedericks.

This must have been arranged, an artefact of Congress politics at the time – white, Indian, coloured, African. Its message of solidarity was an important statement in the face of the divisive politics of apartheid.

It is the kind of solidarity that would not again be seen in such demonstrable form for almost three decades, with the formation of the United Democratic Front.

What a powerful message such inclusion would have conveyed against those Afrikaner patriarchs who shamelessly propagated their perverse ideas about race.

We need those symbolic images of interracial solidarity in South Africa today – standing together against poverty and injustice; standing together for compassion and inclusion; standing

together against any attempt to reassert the divisive politics of race into public discourses. The Native Club would not stand a chance.

I am deeply concerned that we are beginning to sow the destructive seeds of interracial conflict.

Who would have thought that a presidential spokesman would dare to declare in public that the ruling party distributes benefits to “black people in general and Africans in particular”?

I agree that those who make decisions about things like the allocation of jobs must be conscious of the layers of oppression and privilege that divided us in the past and haunt us in the present.

But why should such distinction be officially pronounced, in racial and ethnic terms? And why now?

Why provoke senseless debates about whether the corrupt homeland African leaders were more oppressed than the coloured squatter in the Winterveld?

Or whether Indians in the colourless flats of Chatsworth were less oppressed than exiled Africans enjoying middle-class lifestyles in Western Europe?

Why set up the African working classes against the coloured working classes – a dangerous pastime of the elites?

Behind this use of race as political manoeuvre lies a vested interest in the resurrection of racial hierarchies on the part of the African elite.

Put plainly, there are more real material benefits in being able to claim one is black – your class status being irrelevant – than for those carrying the politically



□ Standing as one: Helen Joseph (centre) leads a march by more than 20 000 women to the Union Buildings on August 9 1956. On her left is Lillian Ngoyi and next to Ngoyi is Lillian Diedericks. On her right are Sophie de Bruyn and Rahima Moosa.

assigned tags “coloured”, “Indian” or, heaven forbid, “white”.

As old privileges disappear, new ones reappear.

I was on the Grand Parade in Cape Town on the day Nelson Mandela was released from prison.

I remember how my heart sank when this great man invoked the language of the 1960s: that the new government would provide for “Africans, Indians, coloureds and whites”.

Why bring back these hated terms, these apartheid fictions, on the eve of our liberation?

It took me a while to realise that for Mandela this otherwise anachronistic language expressed a genuine politics of equality and a sincere desire for reconciliation.

My neighbour’s son is a young white Afrikaner boy, a gentle soul with great enthusiasm for a country whose past he did not create.

His parents work hard to put bread on the table, and they retain faith in

their country despite being repeated victims of violent crime.

All his life, this youngster desired to be a plastic surgeon. With buoyant optimism he made his way to an academic hospital to express this desire to the gatekeepers. “We do not take whites,” was the swift dismissal. I have heard these stories so often from non-Africans without a political axe to grind, that I do not believe such dismissal is uncommon.

I would be the first to say apply a quota in which 80% or more of the new trainees for plastic surgery are black, but why must the pursuit of correction mean the negation of conciliation?

Why must a young man’s dreams be shattered on the altar of racial self-interest?

Take another look at that picture of five strong women in 1956. We could learn from them today.

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