

# Native Club a dangerous move to deflect attention from state failings

**I**F IT was not the month of May", quipped a friend on hearing of the Native Club, "I would have thought it was an April Fools' joke." The heated debate that has flowed in the wake of the launch of this morally offensive project is the one encouraging sign that the idea of a Native Club will not be tolerated within our broader political culture; in fact, I predict that it will fade into oblivion. What should trouble South Africans, though, is that this idea could have been mooted in the first place.

Some time ago I made the point that under the Mbeki presidency, race is back. And it is back in a crude way that would simply have been inconceivable under Nelson Mandela's leadership. The letter of invitation to the "natives" betrays both clumsy grammar and political origins: "The Native Club is the Presidential project . . ." Such hypersensitivity to race glares from so many presidential statements on matters of the economy, Aids, trade and everyday life that ordinary South Africans have become nervous about what such signals portend. We are not out of the woods with respect to the building of a strong and unified, non-racial democracy.

In my political science classes I learnt two simple lessons about the state and democracy in the Third World. First, that as the state fails to deliver to the masses economically, it becomes more and more authoritarian. Second, that as frustration mounts about this failure to deliver, they begin to turn on their fellow citizens, invoking divisive identities such as race, ethnicity, religion or nationality.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the more anxious responses to the Native Club have come from white South Africans, some with impeccable activism histories. But for the critique to be effective, it has to come from black intellectuals themselves, and this is where thinkers such as Vukani Mde, John Matshikiza and Siphon Seepe have made invaluable contributions in demonstrating the dangerous exclusionism that underpins this anachronistic idea of a native club.



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**Professor Jonathan Jansen**  
says rhetoric ignores special promotion of black academics

I always find it strange when those in power — that is, the black political and economic elite — cry the loudest about their disempowerment. The parallels between the Afrikaner Broederbond and the Native Club are too powerful to ignore, the one fuelled by white nationalism, the other by black nationalism. Both gained political prominence when their race held political power and have fuelled support through explosive rhetoric about racial marginalisation. Like the Broederbond, the Native Club has direct encouragement from, and connections to, state power. Herein lies its danger.

It is easy, within such contexts, to whip up emotionally charged sentiments about the racialised "Other", to punt extreme examples about racial prejudice in boardroom appointments and university promotions, and to point to racial favour in the distribution of economic opportunity.

No doubt, some of these concerns are valid and need to be redressed. But let's take a closer look at one of the publicised complaints. It has been charged that black people are denied promotion to senior positions in academia while whites with lesser credentials readily find access to professorships. I have worked as an academic and leader in both black and white universities in South Africa and sat on countless promotion boards. I cannot think of a single example, at least since 1994, where this claim is true.

It is alleged by one of the natives that a white man with an honours degree received a professorship but a black academic with a PhD could not achieve this status. On the face of it, outrageous; until you find

out the white person so scandalised is one of South Africa's most prominent media intellectuals who, on the basis of his achievements, would walk comfortably into a professorship at the Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard.

What this example does, of course, is to conceal the fact that a host of black academics have been awarded professorships in the employment-equity freefall. This damages the strength and sustainability of the academy and repeats the kind of mediocrity visited on Afrikaans universities under the affirmative action efforts of white nationalists.

There is this relentless demand, and unspoken assumption, that by virtue of being black, corrective action applies in university promotions in the same way it applies to working your way up the employment ladder in a canning factory. When the five or six serious universities in South Africa put a clamp on this behaviour, it provokes the kind of anger spread at places like the Native Club.

Where, in this racially charged environment, does the responsibility of the black academic lie? Since the '90s, there has been a huge volume of funding, national and international, that limited resources strictly to what is still called "capacity building" for black researchers. Universities, in a lack of imagination, borrowed language like "growing your own timber" to signal their own investment in the accelerated growth of black scholars.

Since the '80s, tens of millions of dollars trained hundreds of black postgraduate students in US universities, most of whom returned home. Yet, to this day, white males are singled out as the problem, a maligned group that continues to produce more than 80% of the research output of this country.

This is the kind of cannon fodder on which the Native Club builds its legitimacy, deflects responsibility and fuels the fires of racial animosity in a still-fragile democracy.

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