



## MY VIEW

# Conditioned

## like rats by the bells of the old world



By Jennifer  
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**I** WOULD like to raise a few issues for thought, the first centring on the rebirth of culture in South Africa. Culture/art has often moved like a neglected prophet in a desert – songs not heard, stories misunderstood, pictures unseen.

Only in the comfort of retrospect do we understand the power behind the messages;

appreciate the clues that were dropped like pebbles to guide us into a world more humane and generous; a world where we seek to comprehend our failings rather than reject them; a world where we join in the creating of life that gives the dignity of shape to our joys and pains.

The artists in this country stand worthy of acknowledgement for the work they did in the dark age of the first republic. The establishment of a Ministry of Culture is a symbol of such acknowledgement. But we face a danger in the structural bureaucracy that inevitably comes into play as a more powerful force than people.

In a situation where people are afforded positions out of courtesy or strategy in areas where they have little or no experience, vital decisions are shifted into inaccessible compartments in the hierarchy and the ensuing chaos spills itself in the messy pages and comments of the media.

If the ministry is going to play any kind of meaningful role and if we aspire to honesty in government, let us lay personal differences, ego and ambition aside, admit to what we have yet to learn and repledge ourselves to a rigorous process of democratic consultation.

Cultural workers are the chameleons of the new South Africa. They can fit in anywhere and produce ideas and work that can bridge the abyss of separate compartments of society. Apartheid is a powerful mindset – a way of thinking that has amputated aspects of life into lonely capsules that operate in lethal ignorance of each other. "We have been conditioned like rats," says playwright Athol Fugard, "to respond to the bells of the old world."

A television series called "The Line" was almost banned recently because it took the courageous position of naming a terrible reality that existed in our not too distant past – the train massacres. It committed itself to a position of interpretation and everyone around it trembled. The television heads vacillated while actors received death threats.

Our past is being reduced into a Newspeak that is terrified of historical reference and the bell rings and it's good old censorship and the suppression of truth. How are we to forgive if we have never understood? If what happened is never given the dignity of acknowledgement? How do we learn to start again out of nothing?

Let our memories not be as short as toilet chains. Let the storytellers sing their songs, lament their losses, mourn their dead, pledge their tomorrows, celebrate their todays.

In a time where little is sacred the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is a dream, a vision, not only of restructuring and developing but of a process of the restoration of dignity, one that began on election day. What made the crippled, the deaf and the blind go and vote? What is that subtlety of human spirit that has kept this country so vital and essentially humane?

In the allocation of funds, however, the South African National Defence Force receives R10,6 billion. In name alone it is symbolic of the assumption that there will always be wars. Its research programmes suck away millions of rands into the arms race that has not ended.

We claim to aspire to a people-centred society. Why do we not reconceptualise defence as peace? Why instead of armies do we not take the leap of establishing youth brigades that will take unemployed adolescents off the street, give them the dignity of a discipline and training and use them as direct conduits for RDP programmes?

What does this kind of leap in consciousness entail? Imagination and conviction and the realisation that the enemy is not out there, but within the termite tunnels of the bureaucracy.

I have learned more about my job as an MP on the road between Johannesburg and Cape Town than in parliament. In an alleyway in the Eastern Cape I get confronted with questions about the amount of money we're earning and what we have to show for it. Daniel, who lives with his wife and very little else in a shack in Rini, wants to know when he is getting his house. He has only his alcohol and his hope. Some 500 of the 700 inhabitants of Nieu Bethesda are unemployed because the train doesn't pass there anymore.

What happens between that base of need and this manifestation of power that assumes the ability to transform and yet limps, heavy and turgid with the baggage of a bureaucracy performing in the largely incomprehensible language of white paper, blue paper committees, protocol, shaky hierarchies of power and the scrambling for it?

We have to find new ways out of this parliamentary building. Out there people are at the gate; their need is great. We cannot afford to forget where we come from – where we dream to. We need to be vigilant for the bells that elicit the conditioned response. We need to know each other.

There is a great work to be done. Now, more than ever, is the time.

*Jennifer Ferguson is a musician and ANC member of the National Assembly. This is an edited version of her maiden speech to the assembly.*