

## FREEDOM DAY 2014

Freedom Day – on Sunday it will be twenty years since the elections which brought into office the first ever properly democratically elected government in South Africa.

What does freedom mean for us all now?

Twenty years ago it meant different things to the people of South Africa. For millions of them – of us – it was the culmination of a dream. Some had never ever dared to believe it would happen, and now it signalled a marvellous future of equality and opportunity. For others, the concept of freedom, equal freedom for all, brought anxiety and fear of loss – loss of power and influence, maybe even of safety.

Some of those fears subsided after Nelson Mandela was installed as President on 10 May 1994. The Government of National Unity was established, and it started the long and cumbersome process of undoing apartheid's laws – all that mass of race-based legislation designed to keep people apart and to protect white people's privilege. We were on the way to building a new society based on democracy and freedom.

It had been a long, hard road to get to that point. Many people suffered and died for it, many were detained, many went into exile, many lost opportunities for education and employment. It is sometimes difficult to remember what it was like, right here in Cape Town, to fight for freedom. I planned to tell you a story of one part of it – and then there was a picture of it in the Cape Times this past Wednesday.

You will know Greenmarket Square in town as a place where there is a craft market in the day-time, and all sorts of other activities in the evenings – open air concerts, the starts of running and cycling events, and a wonderful atmosphere of outdoor life. In the 1980s it was a place where political demonstrations and marches began. On 2 September 1989 there was a huge gathering there; it was brutally broken up by the police, with batons and water cannon. The water was stained with purple dye, and protesters ran this way and that to escape it, dashing into nearby shops to hide. The dye stained skin and clothes, so it was easy for the police to identify and arrest people for having been part of the protest.

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It was frightening, but many people were very brave. One young man climbed up on top of the truck that carried the water-cannon, and swivelled the pipe that was spraying out the dye, so that it poured away from the people, and onto the surrounding buildings. His act of defiance made people laugh and gave them courage. A few days later a big sign was sprayed onto another wall saying “The purple shall govern” – a pun on the words of the Freedom Charter which said “The people shall govern”.

We felt proud. But the next few days did not bring anything to celebrate. Just four days later (on the eve of the elections for the Tricameral Parliament) six people were killed in protests in Mitchells Plain, and there were many injuries all over the country.

We did not know it then, but change was coming, and the people would govern through the process of democracy. Just a few days later, 30 000 people marched peacefully through Cape Town, with no action taken against them. And five months later President de Klerk announced the beginning of the negotiations towards a new system of government that would represent everyone.

So we have freedom now, but what does it mean? Do the people really govern?

Freedom means the right to do things, and also the right to be protected from other things.

It means, for instance, the right to have a voice, an opinion, a say in how things are. To make use of this right people have to have access to information, to be allowed to join organisations or political parties, to have an independent press. And it means the precious right to vote in regular, fair elections.

It means the right to justice, to fair trials and a proper, independent judicial system.

We are very fortunate that we have these rights, and many others, and that they are protected by our Constitution, which is the supreme arbiter of justice and good government. We South Africans can be enormously proud of this.

Freedom also means the right to be protected from things that are wrong. This can be more difficult to achieve. We can expect a good government to make laws and put into place systems that protect us from unfair treatment and unjust discrimination. We can expect that it will maintain peace and provide for the best possible education and health care.

But can it protect all its citizens from poverty and hunger and homelessness? Can it make people share what they have? Can it make life better for everybody?

A government should at least try to provide what its people need. It will only do this if people hold it to the promises it makes. So freedom also, perhaps most of all, means the duty to make sure this happens.

Every single one of us, every single citizen, should be able to claim his or her rights and freedoms. And every single one of us should use the freedom we do have - to work for, and to demand the best possible system of government.

We should know all about our Constitution, and the values it stands for.

We should speak out against injustice, wherever we encounter it.

We should be brave, like Philip Ivey was brave when he turned the purple dye spout around.

We should be kind, and alert to the needs of others, so that they enjoy freedom too.

President Mandela said “My wish is that South Africans never give up in the belief in goodness... in human beings as a cornerstone of our democracy”.

If we can do all those things, we will be celebrating Freedom Day for many, many years to come.

Mary Burton,

Cape Town, 25 April 2014