

Stellenbosch University assumes custodianship of an historic South African flag,

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Address by Professor Russel Botman, Rector and Vice-Chancellor, SU

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening, molweni, wamkelekile, goeienaand, and a warm welcome to Stellenbosch University (SU). It is a great honour to have you here with us on this historic evening.

Tonight we receive a valuable fragment of South African history that almost flew out the country – if not for the selflessness of a patriot and alumnus of this university – a national flag used during the birth of the new South Africa, and which bears the signatures of former President Nelson Mandela and his two former deputies, Messrs FW de Klerk and Thabo Mbeki.

What a memorable day 10 May 1994 was. Those of us who did not make it to the Union Buildings to witness the inauguration of former President Mandela first-hand were glued to our television screens for the live broadcast of an event that brought the whole world together.

I think you will agree that one of the day's highlights was the moment when four Air Force helicopters flew past, not with guns or bombs, but each with a huge national flag fluttering beneath its belly. It was a powerful symbol of the pride of a nation reborn – a nation that had not only thrown off the chains of oppression, but had earned the world's admiration for doing so relatively peacefully.

For this we owe a debt of gratitude to you, Mr De Klerk [present in the audience], as well as to Messrs Mandela and Mbeki and everyone else who took hands across sharp dividing lines and showed us what we are really made of.

We were still getting used to our new, multicoloured flag when it passed overhead that day, pulling together – as it does – the different political forces that had shaped this country at

the southernmost tip of Africa. That famous fly-past entrenched our new flag as a fitting symbol for the world's "Rainbow Nation" (to borrow a phrase from Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu).

In that single moment, millions of South Africans were united. Racism and discrimination had been overcome, the will of the people had triumphed and a better life for all beckoned.

As fate would have it, one of the flags that so inspired us that day ended up at an auction house in London, capital of South Africa's erstwhile colonial ruler, the UK, earlier this year.

Now you may ask: Why the big fuss? Is it not just another flag? No. There is an old tale of birth in Africa. When a child is born, it must be held up to be introduced to the people, but also to see the sun and catch the light. This is why this flag is important. As one of our first flags it caught the light of the first sun in this beautiful country of ours. It reminds us of our rebirth.

This flag is a national treasure that belongs at home, not overseas. And that, I am sure, is what Mr Giuseppe Ciucci felt when he heard the flag was about to be auctioned off. Mr Ciucci is the chairman of the Stonehage Charitable Trust, which was established in recognition of a corporate responsibility to reinvest in society. And it is in this capacity that he stepped in and negotiated the return of this flag of democracy to South Africa.

Giuseppe, thank you very much. You have done us proud!

The government is the recipient of the flag on behalf of the people of South Africa, and Stellenbosch University – Mr Ciucci's alma mater – has been entrusted with the responsibility of acting as custodians of this national treasure for the next 10 years. Ladies and gentlemen, let me assure you that we are up to the task. The flag will be on display here in the University Museum for all to see.

Stellenbosch University is a national resource. Our mission includes benefiting the community, and our vision being relevant to the needs of South Africa and the rest of the continent. To this end, we recently launched Stellenbosch University's HOPE Project, a set of development goals aimed at tackling some of society's most pressing needs.

Like a message in a bottle, this flag reminds us of the ideals we cherished for our fledgling democracy 16 years ago. How is the baby that we gave birth to with so much expectation doing? It won't mean much if in 10 years' time we say: "Look, this extraordinary flag was preserved, but what has become of the baby?"

In his inauguration speech, former President Mandela said: "We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity".

Let us do some soul searching as a nation to see if we can tick off the items on the to-do list outlined by former President Mandela that day in his inauguration speech. Is there "justice for all"? Is there "peace for all"? Is there "work, bread, water and salt for all"?

If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we might have made *some* progress, but not nearly enough. Honest introspection is necessary in this continued pursuit of the better life that this flag helped usher in 16 years ago. May this continue, and may we never give up the struggle to make the world a better place.

Again, welcome here, and enjoy the rest of the evening.

I thank you.