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**THE 1982  
EDGAR BROOKES MEMORIAL LECTURE**

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**CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS  
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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**F. VAN ZYL SLABBERT**

**EDGAR BROOKES MEMORIAL LECTURE**

Delivered in the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg  
4 May 1982

**CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS  
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**FREDERIK VAN ZYL SLABBERT**

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of Academic Freedom has become a matter of much confusion and debate in South Africa in recent years. Dr E. G. Malherbe, first Principal and Vice-Chancellor of this University, put it succinctly when he described the concept thus:

**'Academic Freedom is the right of the individual student to see the truth and the right of the teacher to teach the truth.'**

Ladies and Gentlemen, the concept of Academic Freedom is a basic tenet of our University and one of which we should be justly proud. It is a concept which we must maintain and foster, protect and perpetuate, for without a firm belief in Academic Freedom this University, and we as individuals, are the greatest losers. It was in 1964 that the SRC conceived the idea of holding an annual lecture on Academic Freedom or a related topic, to be delivered to the students, staff and convocation of the University by a prominent personage.

So began the Edgar Brookes Academic Freedom Lecture.

The name Edgar Brookes was deservedly chosen for the title of these annual lectures for there are few men in our history who rendered larger, more scholarly or more devoted service to the study and advancement of Human and Academic Freedom than the late Edgar Brookes. He had a long distinguished and varied career — so varied, in fact, that he is one of the few people to whom nearly all the forms of address usually found on official envelopes could apply, jointly or severally — the Honourable, Senator, Professor, Doctor, Reverend. The late Edgar Brookes was, in the words of Donald Molteno QC (who delivered the first Edgar Brookes Academic Freedom Lecture in 1965), 'a great South African, an erudite scholar, an outstanding teacher and publicist and a Christian gentleman'.

On the death of Edgar Brookes in 1979, as a more fitting tribute to this

great man's life work, the SRC decided to change the title of the Lecture to the Edgar Brookes Memorial Lecture.

We are indeed proud to be able to pay tribute to such a man.

Tonight, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are honoured to have with us to deliver the lecture another great South African, Dr Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert.

He was born in Pretoria in 1940 and educated at Pietersburg and the University of Stellenbosch from where he graduated with B.A. Hons. cum laude in 1962. He remained at Stellenbosch for the next few years and in 1964 gained his M.A. cum laude and his D.Phil. in 1967. He has lectured in Sociology at the universities of Stellenbosch, Rhodes and Cape Town and was Professor of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1973. In 1974 he forsook the academic world to enter politics and that year was elected Progressive Party MP for Rondebosch. He was elected Progressive Federal Party MP in 1977, and in 1978 became the Chairman of the PFP Constitutional Commission. In 1979 he was elected leader of the PFP and is Leader of the Opposition.

He has held the Abe Bailey Travel Bursary, a US Cultural Exchange Grant, he has been a research fellow at Freiburg, West Germany, and Rhodes University. He played rugby for Southern and South African Universities and Western Province. He has co-authored a work entitled *South Africa's Options: Strategies for Sharing Power*. He is married and has one daughter and one son.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have the pleasure and privilege of inviting Dr Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert MP to deliver the 1982 Edgar Brookes Memorial Lecture.

MARK MANLEY

President

Students' Representative Council

## CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

With the exception of perhaps one or two, I have read all the speeches made on this occasion since 1970. To recall the names of those who delivered those speeches is more than eloquent testimony to the honour you bestow on me by asking me to be your speaker here this evening. I thank you for the opportunity.

It is always instructive to read the speeches that were given on occasions such as this one; if only because people feel that they have to be profound and sincere about what they believe in when commemorating the memory of a man whom they admire and to whom they wish to pay homage, as I wish to, when delivering the Edgar Brookes Memorial Lecture for 1982. Let me rather say that I hope to be sincere, if not profound, in what I have to say.

Two things struck me in these speeches. The one was an almost unqualified commitment to a common set of core values. They have been called civil liberties, so-called liberal values, or simply human rights. I refer, of course, to academic freedom, freedom of association, freedom of movement, freedom of thought, etc. etc. Let me say immediately that I share this unqualified commitment to the same values and I shall have a little bit more to say about my commitment and these values shortly.

### Some thoughts on change in South Africa

The one thing that one can safely say about change in South Africa, and, I suppose, elsewhere as well, is that whenever people talk about it, they almost naturally assume that it is the kind of change they would like to see happen, whilst that which they believe can become distasteful, unpleasant and threatening is not really seen as change but rather as something which has to be avoided at all costs. I think the first important point that has to be made concerning change is that things can become very much worse before, if ever,

they get any better — whichever point of view one may hold. The extreme case where anything, in a literal sense, is preferable to the present, is, of course, voluntary extinction, either for the individual or for the society, and the fact that suicide in either instance is the exception rather than the rule, simply proves that some changes are more acceptable than others.

What I am therefore saying is that the word 'change' has nothing inherently negative or positive about it and that we should recognise this when talking about it.

The second point that I would like to make concerning change is that I believe it important to distinguish between change over which we have control or can have control and change over which we have very little control. Perhaps a better way of putting it is to distinguish between what I would call 'planned' or 'unplanned' change. Unplanned social, political and economic change is going on around us every day, very often without our even recognising it. Some examples of unplanned change are the rise and fall of the birthrate, the rate of urbanisation, fluctuations in the international economic situation, the level of production in agriculture, the rise and fall of the gold price. In all these cases, no special agent or body can be held responsible for these variations and yet no one can deny that these unplanned changes have a profound effect on the plans and strategies which we pursue in order to improve our opportunities and life-styles.

Planned change, of course, refers to our deliberate attempts to bring about a desired state of affairs in society. Here again, I wish to draw a distinction between two kinds of planned change. On the one hand, planned change towards an overall and uniform state of affairs that, it is hoped, will be right and suitable for everyone. There are many historical examples of this kind of change: Marxist Leninism in Russia in 1917, National Socialism in Germany in the thirties of this century, Fascism in Italy during the same time, Apartheid or Separate Development in South Africa since 1948. The common theme in all these master theories of planned change is the mobilisation of all the resources in society for the pursuit and realisation of some grand plan. The decline of colonialism in Africa has also produced its crop of grand plans for change — Political Humanism in Zambia, African Socialism in Tanzania and Nkrumah's political kingdom in Ghana. The failure of these experiments has not deterred Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Angola from pursuing their grand plans as well. The fundamental flaw in all these examples of planned change is the almost arrogant assumption that the government or agents in society have a sufficient degree of control over all the other unplanned processes of change which I have mentioned; that they or it can channel all

the available resources to pursue one kind of change to the exclusion of all others. I cannot think of any example in history where this has been successfully achieved and yet this fact alone has never served as a sufficient deterrent to prevent politicians and governments from still pursuing the impossible dream.

On the other hand, the second example of planned change as distinct from change which is believed to be right and suitable for everyone is the kind of planned change which tries to avoid what, through experience and knowledge, is known to be wrong and unworkable. It is the kind of change which enables people and governments to recognise mistakes and to try and create the conditions under which to avoid repeating them. It is open-ended change, flexible, and adaptable to new challenges and problems.

Now, consider the following – under which social, political and economic conditions is it more likely that a society is better able to cope with challenges from its own environment than where you have freedom of expression and thought, freedom of association, freedom of movement, etc., or where you do not have these circumstances in society? You will notice that I am back again at those values which I mentioned earlier. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that the existence of these values is a precondition for the advancement of knowledge or necessary for individual excellence in society. Great technological advance is possible under the most repressive social circumstances, as we know from Germany during and prior to the Second World War and the Soviet Union since then. It has been cynically observed that through centuries of tyranny and oppression in Italy, we have the most magnificent examples of literature and art, whilst through centuries of democracy in Switzerland, all that has been produced of significance is the cuckoo clock. Examples of individual excellence and achievement as the result of extraordinary circumstances will always be with us. However, despite the predilection of historians to record history around the whims and fancies of great personalities, society does not concern itself about individuals, but about people, in particular the average human being. What I am suggesting when relating these values to change in society, is that the ability of a society to adjust, to survive and to improve the quality of life of the average individual is far greater and more effective when these values are realised than when they are suppressed. Of course, what I am also saying and which is of far greater importance, is that these values have no self-emanating force or self-evident power of their own, no matter how eloquently they are phrased or how prominently they figure in declarations of intent. Their existence in society depends entirely on the strength and number of people committed



to their realisation. In other words, they have to be planned and worked for if all of us are going to benefit from our common commitment to them.

The third distinction I would like to draw about change in general is the difference between mobilising for a certain kind of change which is deemed to be desirable, and actually implementing the kind of change for which people have been mobilised. It is usually far easier to get people excited about the promises of certain kinds of change than to actually make those promises come true once one has managed to get them all excited about them. In our own society I can think of no better example in this regard than the presumed promises of Apartheid once fulfilled.

This may be a very self-evident distinction but I am afraid people do not very often take it very seriously. I, for example, believe it is far easier to achieve these liberal or human rights or civil liberty values that I have mentioned, if only one could get people committed to them whereas it appears to me far easier to get people committed to grand plan theories, such as Separate Development, National Socialism, Fascism, etc. than it appears to be possible to realise all these grand plans to which people so easily commit themselves. I am always amazed at the ease with which one can get people to reject the grand plan of Apartheid or Separate Development in South Africa by suggesting to them an alternative grand plan which may be even more difficult and costly to realise. Man's need for a secular religion in terms of which he can exonerate himself from the sins of the present, seems almost insatiable.

A fourth and final point I would like to make concerning change relates to violent or peaceful change, or, to put it differently, the difference between revolutionary and evolutionary change. If ever there is a need to clarify the whole question as regards 'change towards what?', it is when we discuss these two options. I believe all the distinctions that I have just mentioned should always be kept in mind when considering the advisability and/or possibility of either of these two options. When considering, for example, evolutionary or revolutionary change, three crisp questions should always be kept in mind:

- 1 To what extent have we, as human beings, got control over all the unplanned forces for change?
- 2 To what extent is a grand plan for change, that we have in mind, possible of implementation?
- 3 To what extent can we make true the promises in terms of which we mobilise people's commitment to change?

It is when I confront myself with the answers to these questions in a very

straightforward and honest manner, that I find myself committed to work, wherever I can and for as long as possible, for the achievement of peaceful evolutionary change, rather than support or consider violent or revolutionary change.

I suppose people will accuse me of a conservative bias in saying this, but it is my honest conclusion that, when relating declared strategies for change to the declared, desired outcomes, then comparatively and historically speaking, violence has shown itself to be a very unpredictable and unreliable instrument for change. Revolutions are notorious for devouring their most illustrious sons and daughters. Nothing I have said so far should, of course, give any false comfort to anyone that violent or revolutionary change is not possible or likely. All I am suggesting is that the outcome is not necessarily going to be as beneficial as some would like to believe.

With these preliminary remarks about change, let us consider some of the more popular statements that are made by people who are very often concerned about the values to which I hope we will dedicate ourselves once again here this evening. Some say that: 'Because things are so bad, they simply cannot go on'. My blunt response to this kind of observation is 'Why not?' Conditions of stable repression have lasted a very long time in other societies and there is no reason why they can't last here as well. The 'Hour of Reckoning' kind of argument I find misleading and futile; so also the argument that runs: 'The rising tide of black anger cannot tolerate the injustices of the status quo' — again a facile and simplistic argument. A collective sense of injustice is never a pre-condition for bringing about the desired state of affairs, no matter how understandable that sense of injustice may be. Another kind of false historical optimism sounds as follows: 'Whatever happens, history is on our side'. My response to this is that history belongs to no man, not even to those who very often help to shape it.

I say these things very deliberately, not because I do not care about values such as democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of association, academic freedom, etc., but precisely because I do.

This brings me to the second aspect of my talk tonight. The first concerned some observations on change, the second relates change to these values.

### **Some observations on human rights in South Africa**

When we consider the possibility of extending and entrenching these values in South Africa, then, as a simple matter of historical fact, I believe that Whites, as the privileged and powerful dominating minority at present in

South Africa, must bear the greatest responsibility for doing this. In no way am I implying, by saying this, that Blacks or Coloureds or Asians have no interest or are not concerned about these values. But I do believe that it is correct to state that, as part of their heritage and their contribution to the socio-political development in Southern and South Africa, Whites, generally speaking, have expressed the greatest degree of concern with values such as freedom of association, freedom of speech, academic freedom, freedom of movement, habeas corpus, etc. I think it is fair to say that, looking back on what is generally known as Western culture, these values represent to a very large extent, the culmination of social, economic and political developments that have taken place in Britain, West Germany, France — Europe in general — over the last few centuries. If one can talk about any kind of commendable heritage of the period of colonialism, then the existence and importance of these values would be the most important contribution that could be made to the political, social and economic life — not only of colonial society — but of any society. Those who are given to flights of fancy as far as cultural imperialism is concerned, generally like to refer to these values as civilised standards of behaviour in society. That is why I say that Whites in South Africa, if not in Southern Africa in general, bear the greatest responsibility to see to it that these values become relevant and acquire meaning for everyone who lives in society with them.

Therefore, if we talk about the possibility of evolutionary peaceful change in South Africa, it follows that, insofar as Whites happen to be the dominant group politically and economically in this society, they should be seen to make it their business to create the situation where these values are not only their special preserve, but become part of the social, economic and political conditions of life for all the people in society. This would seem to me to be the barest minimum condition under which these values could possibly survive.

For the last eight years of my life, as an active politician, I have tried to make exactly this point in white politics and, I must confess, without fail I have come across the most extraordinary paradox in this regard. I have addressed meetings of varying size in different parts of our society and in all these areas and towns and villages and cities, without fail, I have emphasised the importance of democracy, of involving people in the government that rules over them. Without fail, after having done so, I have been confronted with the question which I regard as one of those mind-stopping paradoxes so typical of our South African situation. It goes more or less as follows: 'I want to ask you something — what do you think will become

of democracy in this country if we give everyone the vote?’

Apart from the fact that this question, more than anything else, demonstrates that we do not have a democracy in this country, the real issue is quite simply what is going to become of democracy if we continue to withhold an effective vote from the vast majority of people in South Africa. It is the glaring lack of awareness of the implications of this paradox on the part of the average white voter, which presents one of the greatest threats, I believe, to the continued existence and support for these values. This paradox can be extended to other areas as well. For example, one has heard politicians argue the case that detention without trial is, in fact, necessary to preserve the rule of law in South Africa. Think carefully about the arguments that are often offered in defence of a system of influx control such as we know it in South Africa and relate these arguments to the principle of freedom of movement of the individual. It then becomes quite apparent that Whites are far more free to move than Blacks in this respect, and therefore, Whites should not be too puzzled if they do not find the same degree of concern amongst Blacks when white freedom of movement is threatened. It is not uncommon to hear top businessmen and industrialists wax eloquent on the virtues of a free enterprise economy but, for a long time, many of them have remained silent and unprotesting when laws were made and implemented that limited the freedom of movement and mobility of the factors of production such as land, labour, capital and entrepreneurial talent that are so vitally necessary in order to keep a free enterprise economy going. Again, this is a case where Whites are far more free to pursue enterprise and the benefits of the market economy than Blacks.

I believe there is a very real danger in South Africa of the validity of these values being questioned and that they will eventually be rejected, precisely because their existence and the way in which people benefit from their implementation has such a clear racial connotation. The test is a simple one – compare the relative freedom which Whites and Blacks in South Africa have with regard to speech, association, movement, etc. It soon becomes clear that when these values are threatened from time to time as a result of government action, for example threats to act against the freedom of the press, that there is a far greater concern about this expressed by Whites generally speaking, than by the other population groups. I believe this is so for the simple reason that the benefits of these values are enjoyed to a far greater extent by Whites than by the other population groups in South Africa. At the radical extremes of the polarisation process, one is already hearing points of view put forward where these values are attacked and

dismissed as being irrelevant. The extreme right wing simply argues that these values are liberal luxuries that cannot be tolerated in a society with a conflict potential such as South Africa, whereas arguments on the extreme left are that these values are nothing but bourgeois rationalisations and legitimations for a system of exploitation. To the extent that the process of polarisation gathers momentum, I believe these values will become increasingly threatened in South Africa.

I wish to state emphatically and clearly that I believe the only kind of society worth striving for and worth working for, is one where these values are accepted and supported by all as being part of our social, political and economic life. I also believe, wherever one finds oppression, wherever one finds totalitarian dictatorships, the struggle is waged there to reassert these values because, essentially, human rights are about the individual liberty of the person and for that, the battle is one that never really ends. There may be times in a country when these values are suppressed and down trodden but the human spirit is such that it will always reassert itself and demand the right to be free. It does not matter whether it is in Poland, in Latin America or in South Africa.

That is why I also believe that one of the greatest indictments that the future can bring in against a privileged white minority in South Africa, is that it did not use the freedom it enjoyed and make it part of the freedom of all who lived with it in the country. In order to escape that indictment, I believe it is necessary that we do far more than meet annually at events such as this and commemorate the importance of these values.

The preservation and extension of these values is, in the final analysis, a political issue — a very real and important political issue. And fundamental, political issues involve all aspects of our life — economic, social and, of course, political. It is in these different spheres that we will have to persuade a privileged white minority that it is not only in their interests, but in the interests of all in this country, that human dignity and freedom be enjoyed by all without discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity. Therein lies our historical responsibility and also the basis of the judgement of future generations as to the nature of the contribution we have made to a new South Africa.

Tonight we honour Edgar Brookes. One of the speeches delivered here by Peter Brown refers to him in the following words: 'Will the holocaust come and, with it, the destruction of everything that Edgar believed in? I don't know. All I do know is that had it come in his time and had he survived it, he would, at the end of it all, have picked himself up off the ground and

started to fight once again for those great freedoms we honour tonight and which his great faith told him must, one day, triumph.'

May this spirit affect us all in the challenges that lie ahead.

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## CONCLUSION

I think there can be little doubt that this University has been greatly honoured to have a man of the standing and the moral courage of Dr Van Zyl Slabbert address us tonight.

We have heard Dr Van Zyl Slabbert maintain that values such as that of Academic Freedom are vital to enable society to adjust and to improve the quality of life of the individual. But he has gone further than this, Ladies and Gentlemen; he has issued us a challenge and the challenge is to use the freedom we enjoy as a privileged white minority to ensure that through our work such freedoms become the right of **all** South Africans.

It is with a sense of pride that I thank you on behalf of the students of the University of Natal Pietermaritzburg for delivering the Edgar Brookes Memorial Lecture of 1982.

Long may the students of this university take up the challenge you have given us tonight and long may we join you and the late Edgar Brookes in the fight for the great freedoms.

I thank you, Sir.

SEAN MOLONY  
Vice-President  
Students' Representative Council

