

## Politicians must stay out of it

Jonathan Jansen | 12 July, 2012 00:01



Prof Jonathan Jansen

**On any given school holiday, in the middle of Masiphumelele, you are likely to find a group of older white youth helping talented black pupils to prepare them for matric examinations and the beginning of university.**

Lying between the middle-class suburbs of Fish Hoek and the colourless flats of Ocean View, "Masi", as some visitors call it, is a tough neighbourhood. Yet the library in the heart of the township is a hive of learning - of everything from mathematics to drama - for some of the smartest kids I've met.

The bond between these deeply committed white youth and their younger black counterparts is something to behold.

This is one of the many places where I discover the practice of social cohesion daily in our talkative country.

We should be very nervous when politicians call conferences on social cohesion. Such platforms are little other than opportunities for political grandstanding.

We should be even more perturbed when those politicians start to dish out history lessons. And so it was. One told us our problems started in 1913, neatly absolving us of what we have not done since 1994.

Another ventured the rather novel insight that the problems of the Western Cape derived from the past. And not a few pointed the familiar finger of accusation at "the racial other" as we witnessed South Africa's favourite non-racial pastime, self-declared victimhood.

More than one rehashed the tired analogy of sitting on time bombs. Talk, talk, talk.

There is a lot of social cohesion happening in integrated schools, in the new mega churches, in schoolboy rugby, in everyday work relations where ordinary people work hard to find each other, away from the media spotlight on the political gyrations of the powerful.

It happened in the rural Free State, where a black physiotherapy student, as part of his practical work, overcame the racial fear of atannie in a home for the elderly and gave her the best therapeutic massage of her life (her words).

It happened with a farmer who gave away some of his land and cattle, and provided training to emerging black farmers to ensure they maintained productive farms for themselves and their families.

It happened when a black man jumped out of his car to help a blind white woman cross the road as he saw her repeatedly knocking her white stick against the pavement.

It happened when a white woman accepted the threat of estrangement and disinheritance from her conservative family and went right ahead and married her black lover.

These are not fictitious examples. These are events I've witnessed among ordinary South Africans.

It would help enormously if, between talk shops on social cohesion, politicians did not sing threatening and demeaning songs from the past to provoke white people.

It would be helpful if black politicians showed up at the regular funerals of whites murdered on their farms and in their homes.

It would advance the cause of social cohesion if white corporate leaders launched a public manifesto of their commitment to social justice in the workplace.

And it would make a huge difference if the right-wing parties did not try to recreate apartheid by labelling themselves as "white minorities" on the verge of extinction by a black majority.

In other words, it would advance social cohesion if the politicians stayed out of the way. There will not be another Nelson Mandela who wields the powerful symbols of state and the example of a statesman to demonstrate how we can be and work together for the cause of social justice.

What amazes me about the youth of Masiphumelele is how these new recruits lived through the first semester of university.

All of them boast a bag of distinctions in difficult subjects. They are without the racial bitterness so easily observed in angry students. They are optimistic about their futures and live, learn and love so easily among those with lighter skins.

In that library in "Masi" they learned not only to do well in their academics but to relate well to their white brothers and sisters who loved them and taught them despite the failings of the schools in the area.

The other day I popped in at the Masi library. I found my current students working alongside their white mentors from previous years.

"Please come and meet my mother," said one of them. "She would be so proud."