

“Give me freedom or give me death”: education, freedom and democracy.

Prof RJ Balfour, DVC

Preliminary Remarks

Good morning ladies and gentlemen I am Professor Robert Balfour and on behalf of the Vice Chancellor Prof Dan Kgwadi of the North-West University, I am delighted to convey both our congratulations to the graduandi present today, and also our appreciation to the families and loved ones honoured as guests of the University and our students.

Goeie more dames en here. Ek is Professor Robert Balfour, en namens die Visi-Kanselier Prof Dan Kgwadi, is ek baie bly om u as graduandi ons gelukwense te gee vandag. Ek wil ook ons waardeering vir die ondersteuning van families, geliefdes en vriende, vir ons graduandi, uitspreek.

While this is a formal occasion in which we honour the achievement of graduating students, please feel most welcome to celebrate the occasion and the graduates as they cross the stage. We would be grateful if graduates and guests do not leave the hall until the last student has had the opportunity to cross the stage, as a gesture of respect and appreciation of their achievements. I would also like to welcome our guests present on the stage today:

- The Pastor, Dr Fazel Freeks, who led us in scripture and prayer and who will also conclude this ceremony with prayer.
- Dr Bertus le Roux representing the Registrar who will present the degree hoods;
- Prof Sonia Swanepoel, the Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences;
- The honoured Guest of the Faculty Prof Rene Skalk, from the University of Tilburg;
- Directors and staff of the Faculty.

Address to Meeting

I want to talk to you about the relationship between ideas of freedom and the purpose of education in a democracy. And, to illustrate a few points about the nature of education in relation to ideas of freedom, I'd like to begin by recalling a time that none of us remember, wars in which no grandfather, or their fathers before them fought, about children who were not lost to any mother or father here today, and in a place where few of us in this audience, including myself, have been. By taking as my beginning an example from a remote past, and a history of a foreign people, I describe to you, not so much the detail of that history, as the ideas that live through the past into our present day. Freedom, education and democracy are as elemental to human life, as earth, wind, water and fire, are to creation.

A little over 2400 years ago the Peloponnesian War was fought between the military state of Sparta and the democracy of Athens (Bagnall, 2006). Sparta and Athens were neighbouring states, but Sparta was governed by a military council at the head of which stood a King, whereas Athens was a democracy. The Peloponnesian War lasted close on thirty years, twenty-seven of which involved the siege of one city (Athens), by the Army of Sparta. At this time, Pericles the ruler of Athens, gave a speech in which he honoured the dead men who had given their lives to defend the city and empire. There are a few facts we need to know about this democracy of Athens because these are useful in understanding the role of education in relation to the modern democracy of South Africa. Although a democracy, Athens was also an empire reaching across modern day Greece into the Mediterranean, with colonies as far as Syria and Lebanon. At the time of its defeat Athens was a city of widows and orphan children, and its democracy dead.

In the democracy of Athens it was normal that only men of a certain age and class could vote. In order to vote you had to have completed your military service (Raaflaub, 2007, 112). Younger people, the poor and women were excluded from voting, and since Athens was an empire, those conquered people's (whether Greek or African or

Syrian) possessed few rights. Paradoxically, democratic Athens also had slaves, drawn from Europe, the Middle East or Africa, and these possessed even fewer rights, considered as they were as objects to be owned or traded as the need arose. Yet Athens was what is termed a direct democracy ruled by Pericles who defined it in the following ways:

(Our) administration favours the many instead of the few; that is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws they afford equal justice to all in their private differences...class considerations (are) ...not allowed to interfere with merit; nor...poverty...bar the way... The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our private life (Lowne, 2011, 10).

It is clear that in the Peloponnesian War, what was to be defended was not so much the city of Athens, as a way of life. What were the characteristics of Athenian democracy? First, the Athenians prided themselves on an administration that was civic in its focus. In other words, the well-being of society, rather than the power of the powerful, formed the basis for government. Elected officials remained in office for as long as they performed a good service to the people. Pericles liked to think that this government had as its purpose the promotion of the common good.

Second, the Athenian conception of democracy described and preserved from generation to generation a system of law in which few prejudices were admitted, and in which rights could be defended against encroachment or aggression by an appeal to justice served through law. For those defined as citizens of Athens, a social contract was in place in which a person who had been wronged could appeal to a judge and jury, for an independent assessment of the rights and wrongs in a case.

Third, ideal Athenian democracy allowed for people from lower classes, or conquered people, to rise up within the society, through merit, whether in the form of industry, philosophy (for which Athenian scholars such as Aristotle and Socrates are famous examples), education, or military skill. Citizenship could, according to Pericles, thus be earned by recognition of a contribution to the State itself. Confidence in this system made Athens powerful because the philosophy upon which Athenian law was based allowed for differences between people to be expressed within a system of justice which was relatively inclusive. Either you were born a citizen, or you earned the privilege through merit and work. The idea of inclusion was based on an assumption that every citizen of Athens belonged there; that by belonging your choices were more, and your opportunities better. The critical issue was how you defined belonging in Athens. Pericles defined belonging as a social consensus: in theory that you contributed to Athenian society enabled you to participate in being there. It did not matter too much whether you were black from Egypt, or coloured from the Sahel, or white from northern Europe; what mattered in an Athenian democracy was that you accepted and upheld the ideas for how to live together.

Of course, there were several problems, then as now, with these ideas. The most obvious challenge was the notion of dealing with conflict itself. For example, in the case of the Peloponnesian War, there was no justice to which Athens as a State could appeal, against the War with Sparta and her allies. The War was created outside of the legal system of social obligations between citizens, and thus itself could be viewed as a threat to the freedoms defined by Athens, but which were denied by Sparta. This fact also made it possible for Athens to be an aggressor, as well as the victim of aggression. Second, even within this democracy whole sectors of the population were denied rights; slaves first, women and conquered peoples second, and the working class, third. No matter how excellent Athens might have been in terms of education, philosophy or its commercial success, many sectors of the population had no invested interest in preserving the Athenian State. Education because it was limited to citizens served a limited purpose: to enlighten the citizen, to describe the rights of citizens and non-citizens under law, to provide the framework in which punishment could be effected and justice served. But not everyone was free.

Just over two thousand years later another conception of freedom was articulated in relation to democracy on the eve of the establishment of the United States of America. The famous words "Give me liberty or give me death" were said by Patrick Henry in 1775 (Lowne, 2011, 123), as a means of describing alternatives for settlers in the British colonies in North America, as they revolted against the arbitrary rule of governors and arbitrary taxation imposed by a British parliament. At this stage in history, the American colonies formed part of the British Empire in which, like Athens, there was a limited form of democratic participation with a long established Parliament presided over by a king. Henry's definition of freedom as being the opposite of death is worth some reflection here. Freedom was connected to the right to be represented by someone chosen by the community, and for

representations to be heard by authority. Thus a new idea about freedom in a democracy was born. For the founding fathers of America: taxation without representation was death. In this idea the fact that you worked and contributed to the community, entitled you to be represented democratically, and furthermore, that that authority as constituted of representatives to govern, ought also to account to a constituency. But, as with Athens, the idea of freedom for the Americans was exclusive, and thus similarly weak (Holt, 2004). What is amazing is that even after two thousand years of human development and advancement, sectors of the population were excluded – in America it was slaves and women. It was only later and through a civil painful war (1861-1865), and the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King, that Black People gained civil liberties in 1960.

In South Africa, the idea of freedom has a more recent history, but from the Boer Republics of the 1800s to the Act of Union in 1910, ideas of freedom were similarly exclusive (Elbourne, 2002). Although slavery might have been abolished by most colonial powers by 1865 (Drescher, 2009), it was only in 1994 that all peoples living in South Africa could vote to be represented. In South Africa human rights have been described to show how we exercise our freedom as defined in our *Constitution* (1996). Education is one such right and its relationship to other rights, to freedom and ultimately to the exercise of freedom on a democracy, needs explanation, within the context of the 2600 years since Athens fell to Sparta. Patrick Henry provided us with some basis for comparison when he said, “I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging the future but by the past” (Lowne, 2011, 121).

First is that despite accelerated advances in human knowledge, science, engineering and inventiveness, ideas concerning democracy have taken a great deal of time to root down in the popular imagination. For example, it was only as recently as 1981 that Mauritania abolished slavery. In ancient and modern democracies there has still been the tendency among people to exclude some and empower others, whether on the basis of race or gender. In South Africa, as in Eastern Europe the democratic project is still new. In other places, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and China, democracy has yet to be established.

The second point is that notions of freedom, whether ancient or modern, seem to depend on context in two ways. The first of these is that the quality of effective democracies seems to depend on the population being educated so that people are able to participate equally by contributing labour and profit to the common good. In a democracy the role of education for children is not to enable commercial or military success. Education enables us to grow in confidence in the systems (whether law or administration) whereby services can be guaranteed for the upliftment “of the many, rather than the few” (Pericles in Lowne, 2011). In that context of trust and confidence, democracy can grow and its many benefits follow. The second way in which freedom is context dependent is that freedom within a democracy has to be defined first in terms of obligations necessary for people living in a place, to make the place safe, prosperous, habitable, and functional. Once a place can be lived in without fear of aggression, or starvation, or unemployment, or oppression, rights become possible to live as a reality rather than as an idea. It is mistaken to suggest that rights are universal. Rights if they are to be real depend on the abilities of people to put self-interest second to the common good. In Africa, the philosophy of Ubuntu (Seepe, 2004) is closest to this idea of freedom. The individual becomes possible through the group. Anyone who can contribute labour, or abilities, or gifts to the group, has a right also to be represented in that group. Contribution makes the right possible.

Thirdly, wherever democracy has been established on the basis that portions of the population are excluded from participating in it, revolution and instability have followed. Given that the idea of freedom is a context specific idea, we must acknowledge that the moment a group excludes other groups, on the basis of their difference: for their being women, or foreign, or poor, or black or white, that is the moment that democracy’s fragile existence is threatened. It is for this reason that freedom must be the idea for which we struggle, and as Nelson Mandela (1995) said, it is an idea for which we ought to be prepared to die. Education thus has a special role in the preparation of young people to assume responsibility for their freedom, and to contribute to a society in which such freedom is protected. Education is the soil in which our freedom grows, and it is the soil that keeps us connected.

In the conclusion of my talk today, I want to come closer to the recent past in South Africa. In the last eight weeks North-West Province and even areas of Gauteng have been disturbed by service-delivery protests and protests against the elected officials of the Province. It was just yesterday that the Premier of the province went into early

retirement. Issues concerning service delivery, whether in terms of the ailing provincial health system, or corrupt local authorities and municipal authorities affect those who particularly defenseless against the state: the poor and the uneducated. Education is critical as a means of guaranteeing our ability to contribute to South Africa as a place in which we can live in freedom. When we fail to deliver on our commitment to make South African schools excellent, our hospitals functional and caring places, we place our security as adults, and the security of future generations of adults to live freely, at risk. We know from experience, the experience of the last two thousand years, that freedom is not just an idea easily discussed or easily established. Freedom grows from the work of many for the common good. To exercise our freedoms is to give our labour, our abilities and gifts, so that our rights to freedom are safe in South Africa. Thus when standards or services are compromised in South Africa, the ability to live our freedoms are threatened, and then the rights to education, safety, welfare and support, are also threatened. Today at this ceremony in which we celebrate the completion of your studies, and your evident commitment to excellence in service, and we guard against the neglect of service to our people.

Your achievement at this time in South Africa is recognition of your potential to make a critical and necessary contribution to our democracy. This is a precious opportunity for the few gathered here, for the many. I thank you.

Concluding Remarks

Ladies and gentlemen we come now to that part of our celebration today where we confirm the degrees, diplomas and certificates awarded to our students present and so I would like to announce the following:

“By the power vested in me, I hereby confirm the following degrees, diplomas and certificates, on the candidates whose names appear in the programme”.

Presentation of Graduandi

Vote of Thanks

Following such a tremendous recognition of the achievement of our graduandi today let us remember the dedication of our students to their studies, the long nights and weekends spent studying and preparing to improve their qualifications and lives. Let us offer one round of applause again to our students here.

Let us also remember the parents, families and loved ones, friends and support-teams for our graduandi and without whom the achievement celebrated here today would not have been possible, and so let us offer to them a special round of applause.

Finally, to the staff of the faculties and schools of the North-West University who worked with the students, guiding and enriching their lives through the sharing of wisdom and knowledge let us offer to them to a special round of applause. Enjoy your day and may you travel home safely after this ceremony.

Before closing I call on the Pastor to conclude this presentation ceremony with a prayer and then we shall stand to sing the National Anthem of South Africa.

Prayer

Stand for the singing of the South African National Anthem

“By the power vested in me I hereby dissolve this Congregation of the North-West University”

End

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