

OPEN SOCIETY LECTURE

BY

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**OPEN SOCIETY - INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY - EMERGING
DEMOCRACY**

Dr van Zyl Slabbert, Chairman of the Open Society,

Honoured Board Members of the Open Society,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

I am honoured to have been asked to deliver this year's Open Society lecture - not only because I find myself in the company of distinguished South Africans, like Justice Goldstone and Speaker of parliament, Frene Ginwala, who have preceded me in this role, but because this is an opportunity to explore an issue that is of fundamental importance to our emerging democracy.

I have read with great interest the views of Open Society founder, George Soros, and I can only - despite some disquiet and criticism by money, bond and equity market pundits of South Pacific Asian countries - express my admiration for an individual who is turning his phenomenal wealth into an international vehicle that is committed to continuing the transformation of changing societies world-wide.

I have been in law, politics of the liberation struggle and now I am in business. All three are vehicles that can assist or retard the transformation of society. In my speech today I will return to politics and business. But let me start by posing the fundamental question: **what is the essence of an open society?**

I concur with George Soros when he refuses to define this concept precisely. However, there is one element which underlines much of what an open society stands for. **And that is the freedom to choose.** Being able to choose from a range of options and live by that choice - that, for me, coming from a closed society, is the essence of an open society.

However, implicit in the ability to choose is the availability of genuine options. Put more succinctly, **an open society must celebrate both freedom of choice and the availability of choice.** If real as opposed to apparent choices are not available to citizens an open society is doomed to failure. Notionally, we can choose to be educated, rich, successful, etc. The challenge is to ensure that real choices in society are practically manifested. That is the ability to implement choices in a tangible and achievable manner for ordinary citizens. I will revert to this issue later in the body of my lecture.

Looked at from my viewpoint - the world of information technology - this raises an further question. **Does the new information age increase the freedom to choose?**

Like any good politician (and let me hasten to add that while I am no longer in politics some of my best friends are politicians!) I must hedge my bets. Yes and no, is my response.

Yes - for those who have ready access to the technology of the information age, the freedom of choice is phenomenal. For those who don't, in my view, there is possibly even less freedom of choice than

their grandparents had, taking into account the variety of choices available.

In one of his speeches, George Soros suggests that the Internet is a **“prototype of the open society”**. The Internet’s extraordinary ability to extend the free flow of information to every part of the modern, computer-connected world has certainly opened an unprecedented era of new options and opportunities.

And, if you will forgive a brief commercial, it has been made possible by the extension of the telecommunications network world-wide.

More than a century of work and many billions of dollars went into creating this telecommunications infrastructure. Today it is the basic infrastructure of the Information Age and the spearhead of the revolution which has changed the world economy from one based purely on transactions of primary and secondary goods to one in which the creation, transfer, processing and managing of information is the most important activity.

Information is the new, international commodity which those that have can use to gain wealth and influence. And the Information Age's most public and controversial expression is the Internet.

Is it then the Open Society in practice? For those who have access to it, undoubtedly.

However, I found it interesting to look at the profile of the typical Internet user. According to recent research done in the United States, this person is likely to be male rather than female, between the ages of 35 and 44, employed in a professional or managerial job and with a college education. The majority of these users also own their own homes.

I have no scientific basis for this, but I would wager that our typical South African Internet user is not very different from this profile. The fact is, the vast majority of South Africa's population is excluded from access to the Net. Thus, their ability to enjoy this "open society in practice" and exercise its choices is non-existent.

But while the Information Age has brought greater choice, more freedom, it has also, paradoxically, created the seeds of potential destruction of these very freedoms. With information now a

commodity like any other, it becomes possible to manipulate and control it. Yes, we are told it is not possible to control or censor the Internet. That is so - at present.

More than one social thinker is predicting that the millennium will see **“five to 10 corporate giants” controlling the world’s media.** That is, all the major newspapers, television and radio stations, magazines, recordings, film studios and electronic communications world-wide controlled by a few media moguls who will have the power to decide what goes into the public arena and what not.

I have no wish to chase up spectres that may or may not come to be. However, those of us who believe in the open society and in people’s freedom to choose, must be concerned about any risk to the free flow of information.

Democracies rely on open communication between citizens and the organs of civil society. Citizens in democratic societies make their choices of governments and representatives according to discussions on issues of relevance to them.

If government is to rule according to the consent of the governed, then the citizens must be granted the opportunity to know all they need to about the civil society issues facing them. In the days when the world was small and centred around village communities, this was done by holding a meeting for all citizens in the local hall. Now the media fulfils that role of communicating the issues of the day to huge cross-sections of people.

Whether the media does this well or poorly is not at issue here. That it does it, is vital. That there are a variety of media out of which one may gain a variety of perspectives to inform a decision, is important. That this freedom of information flow may be controlled by a few anonymous "information lords", is of great concern.

Having emerged from a society that was closed to most of its people, an open society and the freedom of choice upon which it is predicated, is very precious to South Africans. At the same time, the ability to create an open society and the freedom of information and choice that goes with it is extremely demanding for any nation. **For us South Africans who are a developing nation with a democracy that still has a long way to go to reach maturity, the achievement of an**

open society will require great determination, strong belief in ourselves and an optimistic vision towards which we strive. Can we really achieve it? That is the issue and I would like to explore some thoughts around it.

Ladies and gentlemen, thinking on this challenge reminded me of what historian Arnold Toynbee once wrote about the ability of nations to progress by tackling their challenges as they develop and change.

“A young nation is confronted by a challenge for which it finds a successful response, he wrote. It then grows and prospers. But as time passes, the nature of the challenge changes. If that nation continues to respond to the changing challenge in the same way, it faces decline and eventual failure.”

What this says to me is that an open society is not a challenge once met and achieved forever. It is an ever moving target, continually requiring new responses to changing challenges.

But the nature of the challenge also depends on the nature of the society. Theoretically, the tenets of an open society should be the same for all. But I question whether this is at all possible.

In a developed society with a mature democracy, a sophisticated majority and educated population, a culture of civic responsibility and a high level of individual economic independence, the open society can attain its fullest expression.

However, in a developing nation such as ours, I do not believe we can achieve the same level of "openness", in the short to medium term.

The uneven spread of our resources, the low level of learning and education among a majority of our people, the weakness of the democratic imperative and the culture of dependency it has engendered - these all limit our ability to install what I might call the classic open society.

The fact is, without a minimum of resources, the freedom to choose alternatives and options is limited among most of our people and many remain caught in the same constraints they grew up with.

The fact is, we are also an integral part of Africa, a continent still trying to break from a past that has dumped large parts of it in what African scholar Ali Mazrui calls **"Afropessimism"**.

In other words, Mazrui says, there is a deep level of pessimism and helplessness among Africa's people about the economic malaise they find themselves in and their apparent inability to break the cycle of poverty and oppression.

In such an environment, an open society is not possible. Another African scholar, Professor Ayitteh, originally from Ghana, wrote about this many years ago when he said that **Africa as a whole will not achieve true freedom until its individuals reach a level of personal liberty that allows them to make basic choices.** During the 1980's when he wrote, Africa was still caught in a morass of cliques that kept individuals in bondage. This had to change before an open society could become even an option, he believed.

Are we, then, also caught in this despondent culture, unable to aspire to an open society? No. Ayitteh's conclusion serves to contrast our situation in South Africa. We have taken the first steps along the road

to individual freedom by putting in place the institutions that will structurally support it. I refer to a constitution that protects individual liberties, a parliamentary democracy that is built around transparency and inclusion and a constitutional court that is independent and progressive.

In other words, we have begun the journey towards that open society. We do have more individual liberty than we had in the past and more people than ever before have the possibility to make choices

But our challenge is that this freedom to choose is not equally spread. An educated , urban professional person with his or her own home and access to the tools of the information age has got many more choices than a rural person, caught in a remote area without any modern facilities.

Yet, even as greater freedom to choice does open up within our developing democracy, there is a new challenge - **the need to accept the consequences of this freedom.**

In other words, the obligation to accept responsibility and accountability for what one chooses.

Regretfully, we as a nation sometimes fall down in accepting this responsibility that accompanies our freedom to chose. And this is where I sense a flaw in our ability to move smoothly towards an open society in even a limited way. There is another, old-fashioned term that describes it - a lack of discipline.

Let me lift it out of a merely South African context because it has universal application. A few years ago, Nedcor and Old Mutual commissioned a scenario plan which looked at all aspects of our society and where we were heading. In this was a section dealing with education and it looked at the situation in the US. What it found was most revealing..

Despite all the money and intellectual energy that had been expended over the years to improve the education and self-image of children in the ghettos, the trend had continued downwards - with two exceptions. These were the black Muslim and Catholic schools.

Why? To quote one example from the study: "In the Chicago ghetto today the only institutions with a record of consistently getting people

out of the underclass are the parochial schools. They pay their teachers much less than public schools, they screen their applicants for teaching posts and the principals have the power to hire and fire. In addition, they can and do impose many rules on both students and their parents.”

If one examines the rules under which they expect their students and even parents to operate, they appear draconian. Expulsion for relatively minor misdemeanours. Parents must visit the principal each month to get a report card for their child. Homework is given every night and must be signed by the parents. Hard work and discipline throughout the school is the norm. And the more the rules are tightened, the longer the waiting list gets for those waiting to get in, according to the report.

What these schools are expecting is for both parents and children to take full responsibility for their own development. And it creates conditions to ensure this happens. When the students emerge - given the fact that these schools also produce some of the best results in the US - they are ready to become the components of an open society, able to handle the consequences of their choices.

I want to take this further and mention a specific school that has achieved outstanding success by applying this recipe. It brings out the particular emphasis I believe is essential for an open society - **freedom with responsibility.**

Providence St Mel is a black private school on Chicago's west side, an economically depressed zone with a high crime rate and a community ravaged by all the social problems of inner cities - divorce, joblessness, drug abuse.

In the late 1970's the school was a small private institution funded by the Catholic Church. Because of the Church's financial problems, this school was scheduled for closure until a few parents and dedicated teachers took over.

Through grit, determination and a philosophy of taking responsibility and sharing it, parents, teachers and students re-opened the school. But what struck me most of all was the vision or mission they created to lead their revival.

I would like to read it to you, and I quote:

- We believe in the creation of inspired lives
- Produced by the miracle of hard work.
- We are not frightened by the challenges of reality,
- But believe we can change our conception of this world and our place within it.
- So we work, plan, build and dream - in that order.
- We believe one must earn the right to dream.
- Our talent, discipline and integrity will be our contribution to a new world.
- Because we believe we can take this place, this time and this people,
And make a better place, a better time and a better people.
- With God's help we will either find a way or make one."

Why do I mention this credo or a far away school? Because I believe it has something to say about how we should go about creating our own open society in South Africa.

In the past, the oppressed majority did not have to exercise choice. They were told what they could do, where they would live, what work they could do. This reinforced a sense of dependency and an attitude of helplessness. In many cases, the sense of self-pride and even self respect was damaged.

Then came political liberation. So far so good. But economic liberation, the other side of the coin, demanded more than slogans and a desire to be free. It demands competitive spirits, a willingness to make decisions and an acceptance of the consequences of these decisions.

The notion of entitlement - that past disadvantage requires special treatment and a lowering of standards to make up - does not have a future in a world where being able to compete globally determines success.

Unfortunately, we are carrying a culture of entitlement and a reluctance to accept accountability within our national psyche. It can be explained, maybe. But it cannot be condoned. Africa's colonial past has cast a shadow - yes. Our apartheid past has cast a shadow and done

enormous damage - yes. Can we use it as a bargaining chip to gain us advantage in a world charging towards the millennium? No.

When we gained our liberty and democratic constitution, we entered the world stage, cheered by those who admired our political miracle.

Maybe this gave us a false sense of our importance. For a country that has been cosseted by isolation and buoyed up by its natural resources, the era of open, international competition presents a new challenge - which demands a new response!

Decades ago, the author, Arthur Keppel-Jones, noted that **“South Africa tended to advance politically by disasters and economically by windfalls.”**

That era, thankfully, is gone. But has the attitude it created - namely, that somehow economic growth and prosperity will happen without vision, hard work and creative entrepreneurship - is still around. That a job will be created for me just because I have my matric, or even a degree. And if it does not come my way, do I fall into a form of that Afropessimism?

What has this to do with the creation of an open society? Everything. It poses pertinent questions. Should we be aiming for a classic open society? **Do we have the right mix of determination, democratic culture and understanding to develop it?** Is it not something that should wait until we get our basics right? Is an open society not too exalted a goal to aim for in our still very young democracy?

Uncomfortable, even controversial questions. Perhaps the great stresses we are finding within our society at present are the results of ill-advised attempts to move too fast on too many fronts. Perhaps we are over-reaching our capacity to handle the full implications of democracy. Perhaps we should be more modest in our reach.

Is this heresy? No. It is an expression of my concern and my care because I want South Africa to be an open society. But I want an open society that serves all its people, not a few who can afford it because they have the access to all the resources.

Many years ago, J K Galbraith, the American economist and commentator, made a perceptive comment about the need to face issues squarely. The essence of leadership, he said, was the ability to

articulate the deepest anxiety of a people in their time. Leaders who lose this touch with the environment of their times - he used the examples of Pandit Nehru of India and Winston Churchill of Great Britain to illustrate the point - inevitably lose the support of their people.

If there is one thing I have learnt in law, politics and business, it's to try and always work from the basic facts. But never to be limited by them. George Soros made two points in speeches that he has given over the years that underpin this view. One was that "truth (or the necessity of facing reality and not kidding ourselves) is one of the most fundamental values we need to think about".

The other, is that we need some belief to guide us through life.

"Staying within the limits of reason alone will not help us to cope with our world", he said.

Both raise issues I would like to touch on because they lead out from the questions I posed. Then I would like to give my vision of what sort of open society I believe we should be aiming at.

First, the issue of truth. Soros is quite right. If we kid ourselves as a nation, we do ourselves a great disservice. It behoves the leaders at least to face reality and tell it like it is. That is why, while I believe firmly in an open society, I must question our ability to achieve it in the way I like to understand it, namely, **freedom of choice and all that goes with it for the majority of our people.**

Yes, I believe an open society is our destiny and our goal. But let us not fool ourselves about the size of the challenge to achieve it.

Then, the issue of belief. Belief in ourselves and in something much greater.

A dangerous effect of Afropessimism is its insidious destruction of the African's belief in himself. It depletes the energy to change and reinforces a culture of "I can't do it". We in South Africa need to make sure that this never takes hold here because it will destroy our ability to boldly embrace the challenges of our new era.

We need to foster a national belief in ourselves alongside a realistic assessment of what we need to achieve our goals.

So, having raised issues and queries, what is the way forward?

As I've indicated, **I believe an open society can exist at different levels within different societies, depending on the level of development within that nation or society.** I say this because I see that development can happen at three levels.

At its most basic, **it is merely the transfer of resources**, similar to providing aid or giving a man a fish. At a deeper level, development also means the **transfer of skills** - in this case, teaching a man to fish, something far more important than merely giving resources . But at its deepest and most meaningful level, development means **transferring values** - an understanding of, and willingness to embrace, entrepreneurship, integrity, responsibility and a high standard of care and excellence in all he does. If you like, this is akin to giving a man the ability to fish in different waters and to understand how to husband his fishing resources.

Forgive me if I seem to be fishing in the waters of deep philosophy! But I mention this because I believe the level of development which is most

dominant in our country will decide just how far we are towards an open society.

Personally, I do not think we are even properly into the second level of development in South Africa. If that is so, we still have a way to go to establish the basis of a truly open society which, I believe, will exist when we are moving into the third level of development.

My view is that we should be aiming to **instil five values** into our national culture which will give us the foundation of a truly open society in our developing democracy. These are:

- **integrity**, or a focus on *what* rather than *who* is right
- **realism**, or an acceptance of ourselves and our shortcomings without being at all pessimistic
- **optimism**, or a positive belief in our ability to rise to whatever we set our collective sights on
- **accountability**, or a willingness to take on responsibility for our own growth and development
- **global outlook**, or a focus on enthusiastically embracing our role in Africa and on the world stage and accepting our need to compete

internationally at the highest level - that is what I refer to as the **conscientious globalist**.

I go no further than mentioning these qualities as a basis I would like to see established within our national culture. If these do begin to take root, then we are seriously becoming an open society.

One of our recurrent problems is an **over-emphasis on the past**. I am not downplaying the need to put the past in perspective and take all we need from it. But too much of it can focus too much energy on analysis and not enough on finding **creative solutions**.

We need creativity. It stimulates all the qualities I have mentioned and it focuses us on new action rather than reaction.

As Karl Popper, the author of "The Open Society and its Enemies," wrote: "**Neither nature nor history can tell us what we ought to do. It is we who introduce purpose and meaning into history.**"

In other words, we do not have to be the victims of history, or Afropessimism. We can take history and change it, as the community

of Providence St Mel did, if we have boldness and belief in ourselves. If we have these, we will also have no problem accepting responsibility for our choices.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been a great pleasure sharing some thoughts with you. May the Open Society Foundation for South Africa continue to be the great inspiration and stimulus for our own unique open society.