

Go for shared prosperity

OF all the human foibles, I believe patriotism and national pride might be the worst. I am, of course, being facetious.

Nevertheless, as South Africa veers like a drunk at the edge of a political economic precipice, we are called upon to pull together and help bring the country back from the edge.

We are asked to work harder, make greater sacrifices, pay taxes, be better business people, doctors, nurses and teachers, and keep a firm hand on our fiscal and financial policies.

We are asked to draw on our senses of patriotism and national pride. There are two things that clutter our senses of national pride – at least the way I see it.

We cannot be sure who or what we are fighting for in this quest to save South Africa.

It is true, of course, that it is up to every person in South Africa to ensure that the country is prosperous and stable.

Most citizens around the world share an interest in the safety of their countries, often

regardless of which party is in government. It is, also, generally true that the state is the servant of all its citizens – at least notionally.

However, we have joined a rather odious league of prebendialist states.

Prebendialism is a reference to the practice where elected officials and public servants believe they have a right to split government income among themselves and among their political supporters, ethnic/racial affiliates or extended kin.

In his ground-breaking study of 1977, Richard Joseph found that within two decades after independence, prebendialism had shattered all illusions of shared prosperity in Nigeria.

Reflecting on his study in 2013, Joseph recalled: “After the Nigerian civil war ended in January 1970, abundant oil revenues flowed through the institutions of federal, state and local governments. Countless infrastructural projects were launched, especially for the construction of major

roads.

“International companies responded to the shopping spree and imports flowed in... [In 1978] I compared the behaviour of many Nigerians to that of individuals who acquired sudden wealth.

“‘After a few years of dissipation,’ I wrote, ‘the money has been squandered, the physical and mental health of the nouveau riche broken, and the glorious future of unlimited possibilities constricted into a bleak vista of regret and re- crimination.’”

It is worth noting how, in South Africa, some of the highest-profile members of the ruling party and their families have become extraordinarily wealthy in the post-apartheid period, how inequality and instability has increased across the country, and, as Joseph

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wrote about Nigeria, how “the glorious future of unlimited possibilities” has been replaced by “a bleak vista of regret and re- crimination”.

Indeed, not done fighting with everyone who opposes them, ruling party members are, now, fighting among themselves.

The second problem is that when it suits us, the country belongs to everyone who lives in it, but when we feel hurt and let down, everyone who is not indigenous to the republic is asked to “get on a boat back to India” or wherever we believe people came from three centuries ago. Where, then, do we start when we think about saving South Africa?

I certainly believe that we have to make deliberative interventions to create employment and pay workers a living wage. We have to make delib-

erative interventions in education, healthcare (especially in early childhood development), in land ownership and agriculture (especially in food security), and we have to focus on community safety.

I believe in shared prosperity. I do not believe in patriotism.

The following may help explain my aversion to patriotism. Somewhere in the film, *Cabaret*, there is a close-up of a young man’s face when he starts singing in a most beautiful youthful voice.

The camera pulls out, slowly revealing the angular features of his face and neatly groomed hair. The camera opens wider, still, and along with his soaring voice, reveals his mustard brown shirt and scarf, then lower down, on his sleeve there is a swastika, the Nazi symbol of

national pride.

The song the young man sings, *Tomorrow Belongs to Me*, is the ultimate patriotic expression of Hitler’s Nazi Youth and it formed the basis of one of the worst nightmares of the 20th century –

the death of tens of millions of people.

I saw the film when I was a teenager. It helped influence my decision to join a group of high school pupils when we cut the cord and lowered the South African flag that hung above our school grounds.

After that, and a few other incidents, the police and military would be the bane of our lives for the next 10 to 15 years, their main charge was that we were unpatriotic.

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