

**REMARKS BY H. E. SIBONGISENI DLAMINI-MNTAMBO AT
SOUTH AFRICAN MISSION'S FREEDOM DAY CELEBRATIONS,
OTTAWA, 20 JUNE 2019**

The Honourable Minister Joyce Murray, president of the treasury board

Honourable Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

The Honourable Parliamentary Secretary of Foreign Affairs

Ambassadors and High Commissioners

Senior Officials from the Government of Canada

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Special guests, Ladies and gentlemen,

Sanibonani, Good evening, gooienaand, bonsoir.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

— Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

In 1859 Charles Dicken's made this observation in his book "*A tale of two cities*". However, his sentiment would have resonated with the history of my country South Africa - looking back at the apartheid era to this day, twenty five years after democracy.

The worst times are behind us. The unfortunate three hundred years of racial discrimination and institutionalised apartheid policies by one race over another, which resulted in human rights violations were just the epoch of incredulity. The age of wisdom came when our country

transitioned from a repressive and regressive state to a constitutional democracy which protects human rights.

RECALLING OUR PAST

Today South Africa and its people have gone through the worst and best times, through the season of light and that of darkness, through the epochs of belief and incredulity and of course through the emotions of hope and despair as alluded to by Charles Dickens. Ladies and gentlemen, we have been part of many big dramatic changes in our country. As a South African, I am incredibly proud that the celebration of the past twenty five years has brought us many of the positive big moments.

Perhaps as a prelude to the twenty five years of freedom it makes sense to start four years earlier on 11 February 1990 when the former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, walked out of Victor Verster Prison. The whole country and the world stood still.

Four years later, in 1994, for the first time in our country all adult South Africans, black and white were able to cast their ballots in our founding democratic elections of 27 April 1994, leading to Mandela's inauguration as the country's first black president. Again the world stood still.

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

Today, 25 years later, South Africa has moved away from the dark days of foolishness, the age of institutionalised racism; an era when the South African government disinvested in black people and policy-wise put minimal effort, into developing the pockets of land in which black people were moved to.

Government spending on educating a white child was up to ten times more than that for a black child. Bantu Education – whose main goal was to humiliate the minds and cripple the future of black children was introduced.

Today as we navigate the age of wisdom, we have dramatically expanded access to education – from early childhood development through to school and to university and college. Today, more than 9 million learners now attend no-fee schools, with an equal amount allocated for each child.

We have moved away from a whites only health facilities and today seven in ten South Africans make use of the country's network of primary health care, clinic and hospital facilities either entirely for free or for a minimal fee.

We have moved away from paying unequal social grants based on race and now more than 17 million social grants are paid to poor and vulnerable South Africans each month regardless of race or gender.

On the economic front, while there is a lot to be done, over the last 25 years, our economy has doubled in size and the number of people in employment has increased by 8 million. Our natural resources; the climate; our oceans; the rich soil; the breathtaking landscape; the infrastructure and; our people all present us with the potential for growth.

A spring of hope was ushered in by the recently elected President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa when for the first time in the country's history; he unveiled a cabinet that is gender-balanced.

Regardless of these strides we do not delude ourselves into thinking that we are living "happily ever after". We are keenly aware that we have been on shaky ground lately, partly going through the age of foolishness.

We continue to face immense challenges of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. However, we will continue to tackle these and other challenges every day. We still have the unequal distribution of land ownership to address; we are addressing corruption – and as you

know there are two sides in any corrupt practice – the corrupted and the corruptor and we are going after them; growing our economy has become very urgent and of course racial unity is work in progress.

But this evening we want to recognise that – despite these challenges - we have managed to carve a society that constantly strives to improve itself. Yes, we have passionate debates at time, but more often than not, we are able to work together to unite a previously divided nation.

So, today we celebrate our rich diversity, a population of about 55.9million comprised of Black Africans, Coloureds (or mixed race), Whites, Asian or Indian; a country with *eleven* official languages. We are a society which holds various religious beliefs viz. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. Citizens are free to join any political party and they freely exercise their democratic right to elect a party of their choice.

CASTER SEMENYA

Ladies and gentlemen as we continue to build our country, we are keenly aware that there is a need to be vigilant, to highlight human rights abuse regardless of where they seem to surface. Be it in sport, in the economy, the work place, at home etc. Today South Africa has again been shaken to the core by what seems to be blatant abuse of human's rights.

To place this in context, I need to tell the story of Sara Baartman. Ms Baartman was a Khoisan woman born in South Africa in the 1770s. During her life, her physical appearance was considered so different from traditional European women that she was taken to England, where she was displayed at county fairs, became a subject and an object of study in finding the missing link between man and animals. The French enslaved her and the scientists obsessed on her genitals and following her death, her body parts were extracted, her genitals were placed in jars. And her remains were shown at a museum in France. Eventually, in 2002 -

about 230 years after her birth – Ms Baartman’s remains left Europe and were returned to South Africa for a dignified burial.

We may think that the body of a black woman is now safe from such prodding and scrutiny and public humiliation. But last month South Africa was shocked to learn that the Swiss-based Court of Arbitration for Sport has ruled against South African runner, Caster Semenya. The Court’s ruling found – and here I paraphrase - that Ms Semenya’s naturally high testosterone provide her with an unfair advantage and that for her to be considered a “proper” woman, she would need to take medication to lower her testosterone levels to standards deemed acceptable for a woman. As the South African government, we have always maintained that these regulations trample on the human rights and dignity of Caster Semenya and other women athletes.

I had to use this opportunity to express our disappointment with this outcome. Women come in different shapes and sizes and races and strengths. We do not need to be squeezed into neat definitions of womanhood. We do not need to be gawked at in museums or county fairs or Courts of Arbitration.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development rightly highlights sport’s role, singling out “its promotion of tolerance and respect” and contributions “to the empowerment of women and young people, individuals and communities, as well as to health, education and social inclusion”.

I have recently taken a telephone call from the Honourable Minister Duncan, who passed on Canada’s support for Ms Semenya. We are pleased that we can continue to count on Canada as a friend and ally.

We need support as we fight for the dignity of Ms Semenya. We should not wait for 230 years and then speak about how she was abused or try and immortalise her in one form or another. The time is now let us walk the talk.

It is not everyday that you are presented with an opportunity to change the world but we are now presented an opportunity to make the change we want to see, even if it is with one person.

SOUTH AFRICA AND CANADA

Indeed, ladies and gentleman, over the years South Africa has known that we have a friend on this side of the world. But, ultimately the strength of our relationship will require people to people interactions.

We appreciate the programmes we are currently putting together with some of your universities to address South Africa's education challenges. We appreciate your efforts on many other projects and programmes but I know there is a lot more we can do together.

To help build a stronger South African and Canadian relationship, we have brought representatives of a wide range of South African giants here this evening.

This evening's co-sponsor, South African Tourism, is here and they can help you understand why over 10 million people chose to visit one of the most beautiful countries in the world last year. If you need help getting there, South African Airways has kindly provided two flight tickets that will be given away later this evening. If you cannot wait to experience South Africa, then feel free to sample the best wines ever, a mix of South African wine, proudly provided by Wines of South Africa. And if you want to know how wonderful Canada and South Africa go together, try sampling some Nando's made with fresh Canadian chicken and Southern African spices.

CONCLUSION

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been a remarkable and overwhelming twenty five years of transformation, making mistakes along the way and still learning but not giving up.

Indeed ladies and gentlemen, for South Africa, it has been the “best of times, the worst of times, the age of wisdom, and the age of foolishness” But there is light, there is hope for the rainbow nation.

I am therefore encouraging Canada business to engage with South Africa and be part of this incredible story.