

The Big Read: Who killed Russel Botman?

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It is a subject nobody wants to talk about - the high personal costs of transformation. Speak to any "transformation officer" at a former white university, or a private sector firm for that matter, and you will often find a battered and disillusioned spirit. It is an impossible task.



GRAVE MATTER: Russel Botman was laid to rest at the DF Malan Memorial Centre on July 5.

Photograph by: GALLO IMAGES



University of the Free State Vice Chancellor and Director Jonathan Jansen. File photo. Photograph by: Sunday Times/Kevin Sutherland

" The voices of his persecutors are curiously silent, for now"

You work hard to change the numbers with respect to the dominance of white students on campus or white men in senior management, but change is painfully slow. You are hounded by some factions for changing too fast, and blamed by other factions for not changing at all.

Xolela Mangcu's account in the Sunday Times this past weekend of non-transformation at the University of Cape Town was deeply disturbing - not a single black African woman as full professor among 174 at one of our top universities, and with only 3% African staff and 22% African students. Surely excellence cannot be

defined outside of basic decency? Those are the numbers - but what are the costs to those genuinely trying to change intransigent white institutions?

When the first black vice-chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch died suddenly last weekend, the question commonly asked by academics across the country was: "Who killed Russel Botman?"

Others, including senior black colleagues at this century-old university, were more direct: "They killed him." The question implies there are different ways of killing a human being. One is through relentless pressure on a tender soul. Too harsh?

Read Marianne Thamm's trilogy of contributions through the online pages of the Daily Maverick detailing the final days before Botman's death. Those who do not read the Afrikaans papers would be blissfully unaware of the role of gossip, rumour, insult, intimidation, side-lining and sheer slander this gentle theologian had to bear for the past few years.

The more he pushed for transformation, the more he was mercilessly vilified by right-wing alumni, aided and abetted by the Afrikaans press, in blogger postings, in alumni associations, and in formal gatherings of the institution.

This must be one of the few universities where agenda items of a Council meeting are debated in the local Afrikaans newspaper before the meeting even begins. Worse, in the week leading to his death, there were reports that senior people at the university had lodged a formal complaint against him, including a vote of no-confidence and possible dismissal.

His crime? Pushing for more black students to enter the university. Introducing a more flexible language policy so black Africans can enrol in greater numbers. Asking that building names honouring white supremacists, like the first apartheid prime minister DF Malan, be changed to reflect the new country and the transformation vision that appears largely on paper. Desiring a Centre for Inclusiveness that could challenge the deeply racist, sexist and homophobic foundations on which this institution, and others, was built.

The well-attended funeral service, out of understandable respect for the family, pretended there was no storm. Until Botman's sister-in-law dropped a devastating one-liner expressing a measure of relief at his departure: "Dark clouds of evil were gathering around him."

Where I was sitting there were quiet nods all around; we knew what she meant, and no more words were needed in those moments of official mourning.

Some of the historically white Afrikaans universities have a perfect alibi for not transforming - Afrikaans. When the Potchefstroom campus of North West University or the University of Stellenbosch is pushed to enrol more black students, they take refuge in language rights protected by the constitution. Somebody must tell these campus leaders that in the wake of our horrific racist past, white-dominant campuses in this country are morally unacceptable, demographically unjust and educationally

dangerous. Afrikaans as a language is vital to our multilingual democracy, and must expand, but as the handmaiden of social justice, not racial exclusion.

Botman's death should give all pause for thought. The University of Stellenbosch community, and especially its collective leadership, should reflect on the circumstances leading to the death of its first black vice-chancellor. There needs to be introspection and, if this is not too much to ask, acknowledgement of their contribution to the immense difficulties the rector had to absorb as he tried to transform this rock-solid cultural monolith. The voices of his persecutors are curiously silent, for now.

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