

The Big Read: Meritocracy is still a myth

Oct 17, 2014 | Jonathan Jansen

I remember the moment clearly. It was my first visit as dean at a Pretoria university to my counterpart at a Dutch university.



*A HARD GAME: Springbok Teboho 'Oupa' Mohoje has had to battle prejudice
Photograph by: DAVID ROGERS/GETTY IMAGES*



*Jonathan Jansen. File photo
Photograph by: Times LIVE*

"We need to transform the gatekeepers rather than those at the gate"

His face was expressionless when he posed the unspeakable question: "So, did they appoint you as dean because you're competent, or because you're black?"

I had heard about the directness of the Dutch from their descendants back home, but this was a bit much. I looked at my clearly embarrassed Dutch friend accompanying me on the visit, and burst out laughing. "I don't know," I responded to my foreign colleague, "but how about you?"

This thing about merit is not going to go away soon. It hangs like a cloud over every black appointment, no matter how competent or trained or experienced the person might be. It lurks unsubtly in the questioning of Judge Thokozile Mapisa's ruling in the Oscar Pistorius trial. It dogs the talented loose forward Oupa Mohoje as he runs onto the field in a Springbok rugby jersey. It strains white nerves as the black co-pilot is introduced by the captain as the one who "will be doing the flying to Johannesburg this afternoon".

The reason the question of merit will always remain in the air with black appointments is because of a deep sense of racial superiority among some of our white brothers and sisters, a point made incisively by Eusebius Mackaiser in a recent column. In other words, the white man is always better, no matter what. But that is not the only reason. The fallback on merit is a psychological defence, a way of

justifying yourself when you do not get the job. How else do you explain to your friends, your family and yourself that the black candidate was better?

Of course, the merit argument is ignorant of history. We have generations of white South Africans, including those still in employment today, who got their jobs not on merit but on the very thing of which they accuse black people - skin advantage.

In my business, academia, I can prove without doubt that many older white men, especially, in all our public universities would not meet the standards of appointment for professor at any respectable university today were it not for those two simple advantages - being white and male.

Yet these are the loudest voices protesting black appointments as not being meritorious. Just a little bit of humility would not be out of place in the many heated debates on this subject.

It is, of course, true, then and now, whether under white nationalism or black nationalism, that merit has always had a bad name. We had undeserving white professors then and have undeserving black professors now. How do we break this cycle of non-meritorious appointments, given the burden of history?

I believe the time for affirmative action, by whatever definition, is over. There are enough talented black students, black managers and black rugby players to yield the justice and diversity this country needs.

The problem lies not at the point of appointment but in the opportunity structures available for the identification, nurturing and employment of talent.

If the black rugby player, for example, has the same opportunities to do well as any white rugby player, we become the normal society that Hassan Howa dreamed of within one generation. The problem lies with the decision-makers and not with the players - and that is true for every employment sector. Put differently, we need to transform the gatekeepers, not those queueing at the gate waiting for their chance to come in.

Merit, in such a context, cannot be read off a sheet of paper. A child with seven As from an upper middle-class school with the best libraries and laboratories is not more deserving of a place in medical school than a child with four As from a struggling township school. Merit, in other words, is a qualitative judgment in addition to the more standard metrics deployed to make placement decisions. But the convenient laziness of some of our universities to move beyond paper-and-pencil judgments leads to the kind of confusion in medical admissions we saw recently.

This is important because keeping the concept of merit neutral, as if it speaks for itself, benefits only the privileged.

This is where the former white universities get away with murder when it comes to cherished assumptions about what makes a good university - the measures used by global ranking systems - and what counts in a good professor.

In respect of the latter, the English universities even have a code for it: "cultural fit".
Those are often alibi words for race.

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