

# Light the way in a darkling SA

Jun 5, 2015 | Jonathan Jansen, An educated guess

**From a tent meeting in Emalahleni (Witbank) to a school hall in eThekweni (Durban); from a synagogue in Parktown to a church funeral in Port Elizabeth, I find a strain of concern, an urgency that was not there before.**



Jonathan Jansen. File photo  
Photograph by: Times LIVE

**"What can you do? Run towards your problems and do something before it is too late"**

Our people are worried. They are black and white, middle class and struggling. It is a depth of despair I have not seen before in doing the rounds of town hall meetings with parents, teachers, religious leaders, young people and the aged. They know something is wrong, desperately wrong.

It is not the clownish performances of our politicians that disturb them or even the open-faced lies trying to justify where their tax money goes. Nor is it the unpredictable load-shedding schedules with their devastating impact on small businesses. It is not even the "race to the bottom" in school quality as once again South Africa appears second from bottom in the annual science and mathematics rankings of an international agency. No, they have seen these disasters before. What worries people is that they cannot see forward any more.

Any traveller on a long-haul flight knows there will be moments of turbulence at various points along the route; now imagine you are stuck in severe turbulence and you have no idea when it is going to end. That is scary. Even in the darkest days of apartheid we knew that Nelson Mandela would be freed one day. But this time the future is no longer what it seemed to be, as the saying goes.

The questions are getting more anxious. "Do we have the leadership, professor, to solve these problems?" Or, in the words of a gentle old lady: "How long do we still

have to wait? Do you really think there is hope, or should we leave?" Then the most disturbing of all, from a parent on the verge of deciding on home schooling: "Should I still keep my child in a government school?"

You see, when Eskom dims the lights, hardworking people ask questions about state capacity, not about generators. When small bands of black youth at some of our elite universities suddenly discover anger, denounce whites and hail Hitler, ordinary people ask: "Who is the next scapegoat?" - even as we try to keep the lid on the latest round of xenophobic attacks. When normal citizens find that five million out of 51 million people pay personal income tax and 16.5 million are grant recipients, they can do the political maths.

My first popular book was titled *We Need to Talk* followed by *We Need to Act*; I was tempted to name the third in the trilogy *We Need to Run*. By which I mean "run towards" these problems and do something before it is too late. This is what we can do.

One, change the narrative. We can talk ourselves into depression or talk up the things that work, such as the hundreds of non-governmental organisations leading change in every part of the country, or the unwavering corruption-busting stance of the public protector.

Two, do something. Whatever your skill and interest - in housing or health or education. Join a development group and solve a problem whether it be giving part of your salary to bursaries for poor students or to volunteer services in a township clinic.

Three, challenge your government. Support an activist organisation, such as Equal Education, and demand the delivery of quality services or better schooling or basic provisioning.

Four, use your vote. Do not vote in the same people over and over again then complain when the job does not get done. Your vote is a powerful weapon against impunity.

Five, broaden your thinking. If your concern is only for yourself and your children, then of course the choice is easy - run away or hide. But this is not an option when you realise that there are thousands who depend on those who have skills and resources to offer light and hope in an increasingly hopeless situation.

We are not victims. We make the future through action and activism. And don't be cynical about pressure; if Sepp could go.

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