

Put Me With the Coolie, Professor

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In reading Professor Makgoba's rendition of why he has excluded me from applying for a post at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, I have felt a peculiar mixture of outrage and boredom. The outrage is easy to understand. Makgoba uses the truth like my diabetic aunty Ivy used sugar in her last days; sparingly. Give either of them too much of their own unique poison and it is quite disconcerting to watch their reasoning cloud over and intemperance begin: an intemperance that leads them to say the most shameful things. Noam Chomsky has dementia. His South African detractors are a bunch of Indians or ultra-leftists. Makgoba has said so much that is untrue and simply illogical, that to compose a list of his outrages would be boring, and I don't intend to be. But it is exemplary of the man that with the juice from the calamari steaks he ate when the two of us met at Simply Fish at the Pavillion on 7 February 2006 still drying on his lips, he proclaims 10 days later that the last time we met was in 2004. The richer of the two of us by far, Prof. Makgoba paid. With a credit card. There is thus a paper trail, if anyone cares to follow it. It is one of many trails revealing that Makgoba either tells very silly lies or has worrying lapses of memory for a man tasked with running a University.

When I have, two weeks ago already, taken up his challenge to make the agreement between UDW and myself public, when he and my lawyer have been quoting from it and debating its interpretation in the very newspaper whose Board he heads and which he presumably also reads, Makgoba alleges that I am holding it back. It is simply astonishing that he could have missed the fact that the agreement's confidentiality had long been waived when he wrote his last article.

Aunt Ivy had to take her insulin or else she became quite barmy. Professor Makgoba appears to need truth serum. For, if indeed he is an honourable man, then one must begin to seek answers and cures from within his own field of anatomical pathology, for the unhealthy divergences between the facts of this affair and Prof Makgoba's fictions.

There is a sinister edge to what Prof Makgoba has to say about me that demands a specific reply. He insinuates that the recommendations of the Gautschi Commission make my employment undesirable. Let us be clear, the since discredited Gautschi Commission recommended that certain allegations be pursued against me and other union leaders in disciplinary and criminal charges in 1997. That was its function. It made no criminal or disciplinary findings. The State quickly and decisively declined to prosecute, indicating that there were no prospects of success. Three-quarters of the way through my disciplinary hearing, UDW made an offer to settle the matter. I would resign. My future presence on campus would be regulated by the Vice-Chancellor and I would be paid R250,000 in lieu of lost earnings, my huge legal costs and in order to withdraw a defamation suit I was pursuing against the then Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Balinthulo. After deductions and fees, I received what for Makgoba would be less than a months' salary.

For the record, I decided to leave UDW not because the University was succeeding in their case. They were represented by senior counsel and it is inconceivable that the UDW management, then, would have agreed to let me off the hook if their lawyers thought they had sound substantive reasons to fire me. Escalating legal fees played a role but I agreed to resign mainly because, during my suspension, I had begun organising with social movements in townships around Durban. I left teaching sociology because the world outside University seemed to contain ideas far more interesting than those being produced within it, and I was determined to learn more about this world before trying to lecture or write about it again.

Interestingly, shortly before my troubles, Makgoba was embroiled in disciplinary charges of his own at Wits University. Unlike my charges, which flowed from political acts, his revolved around alleged personal acts of dishonesty: namely embellishing his CV and theft of private documents. In this regard, I found Prishani Naidoo's recent M&G article enormously interesting where she explained how Makgoba agreed to go quietly in order for charges against him to be withdrawn. I have many faults. These are well known on the campuses of the thriving metropolis of Ethekwini. But no one can accuse me of going quietly from UDW. The charges against me were thoroughly aired in a disciplinary hearing that took weeks and weeks. Unlike my case, the details of Prof Makgoba's offence and defence were never aired in a legal forum. Who knows what really happened? Whatever the case, since my accusers have had an opportunity, albeit unsuccessful, to try to make their allegations stick, for Prof Makgoba, who abandoned his supporters and slunk off in his own saga to raise the spectre of "serious" allegations as some sort of disqualification for appointment at UKZN, is simply hypocritical.

I am more convinced than ever that Professor Makgoba is using his institutional powers to exclude me from UKZN and that the language of process and procedure is a mere ruse. What is most worrying about his attack is that he has hauled out his very well worn deck of race-cards and *ad hominem* insults to try to get his way. In the past, when he sensed that white academics were rightfully sceptical of some of his restructuring plans, he labelled their aloofness racist. He went on to compare them to baboons in a widely slated piece that he still plaintively tries to convince real social scientists is a sociological masterpiece.

Progressive forces never really warmed to him either. Perhaps they remembered the day that, without irony and in an fit of *gat-kruiping*, he described a speech by President Thabo Mbeki, politician and then still Aids-denialist, as being equal in import, when history does its final reckoning, to the discovery by Einstein of the special theory of relativity. When African workers led the recent 9 day strike at UKZN, he, flippantly or not, resorts to ethnic explanations ("mindless Zulu boys"). Unknowingly on speaker-phone to an African union leader during the same strike, he asks why he is "being used by the curry-people". Of the twenty or so academics and writers who have written things in support of my candidature, he notices that four are of Indian extraction and, by so singling them out, imputes racist motives in their support. And then, lastly, those who question his ideas of the transformation of UKZN into a seat of African scholarship are, we are mysteriously told, ultra-leftists.

There is a racist pong hanging over UKZN. But it is not all Makgoba's fault. This is because, but for the fact that Makgoba is African and deploys this quality as a pre-

emptive cover for his mismanagement of the institution, he would have been laughed off campus long ago. In this academics, trade unions, council members and other stakeholders are all complicit. They have allowed themselves to be cowed by naked race-baiting and the spurious deployment of the language of transformation to reactionary ends. And all of this by a person whose autobiographical writings are drenched in an egoism that is frankly embarrassing. Makgoba may affect a dashiki every now and again but happily signs papers evicting poor African families living undisturbed on a corner of UDW campus for ten years now. Makgoba may install himself in a lavish ceremony bedecked in Africanised frippery but his admission policies disproportionately hurt students from poor, rural African backgrounds. Makgoba may be all for affirmative action but it is as often used to install a crony or yes-man as to give an opportunity to a deserving candidate. And should the crony be white or Indian, equity is waived faster than a person can say “designated group”. Perhaps this is best exemplified by his choice of Brian Leslie, notorious for voting as an assessor for the hanging of Robert McBride, as his adviser. Makgoba has often stated this his model for university transformation is Margaret Thatcher. In this instance it appears that he is, for once, telling the truth.

In all of this, though, one should not make the mistake of individualising the problem. The almost comprehensive hi-jacking of the discourse of liberation to empower a narrow elite is a broader social problem. It was controversial to say so in 1996 when I was suspended from UDW, but there is greater acceptance of this idea and overwhelming evidence of it ten years later. We must not all end up like the white liberals of the apartheid era who all too easily went with the flow of the empowerment of a minority because it was dressed up in cultural and nationalist language and was enabled by law. Yes, transformation needs to occur and damn fast. But, if this is the transformation of the kind envisaged by the likes of Makgoba, full of name-calling, profoundly elitist and protective of state and corporate interests then you can count me out. But if it is the transformation imagined by the likes of Fazel Khan, a UKZN lecturer who has stood shoulder to shoulder with people living in squatter camps both on and off campus, and who Makgoba scurrilously includes in his list of Indian supporters of mine just because of his race, then I say, put me with the coolie, Professor.