

Educating for democracy a tough challenge

The theme of dreams and visions for a future democracy begun by Nelson Mandela on the opening night of the conference confronted harsh reality the following day when the director of the Centre for Human Values at Princeton University, Prof Amy Gutmann, spoke of the need for education for democracy.

"A principle requirement for democracy is education, education in opposition to oppression, discrimination and authoritarianism... We need to be armed with a vision, but one that moves beyond opposition to a positive vision."

Non-repression, she said, requires that schools teach toleration and a broad respect for other views. However, they should not toe a political line.

"Many South African schools may deny a fair hearing for leftist thought today, but these schools could deny a fair hearing to other views in the future... Schools must be insulated from the prevailing political pressures from the left, right or centre," she said.

Legacies of racism could not be overcome by teaching from a book. Students needed the direct experience of recognising the value and potential of their peers and therefore an economically and racially integrated classroom environment should be encouraged.

Acknowledging the huge task that lay

ahead Gutmann said: "A scenario of change that includes democratic education may be difficult to implement, but one that excludes democratic education will be far more difficult to endure".

Just how large the task is was emphasised by Stellenbosch University academic Dr Amanda Gouws whose analysis of black and white South African student attitudes showed very low levels of tolerance and limited understanding of what tolerance meant.

'Tolerance needs to be recognised as a democratic value'

She said 270 white and 270 black students she had interviewed, all subscribed to a belief in civil liberties, yet when asked whether the groups whom they listed as "least liked" should be accorded the rights of freedom of speech and association there was a flat refusal.

"The majority said their 'least-liked' groups should be banned... This kind of intense intolerance is higher than intolerance found in Israel," she said.

Gouws said one predictor of tolerance was education - people with higher educa-

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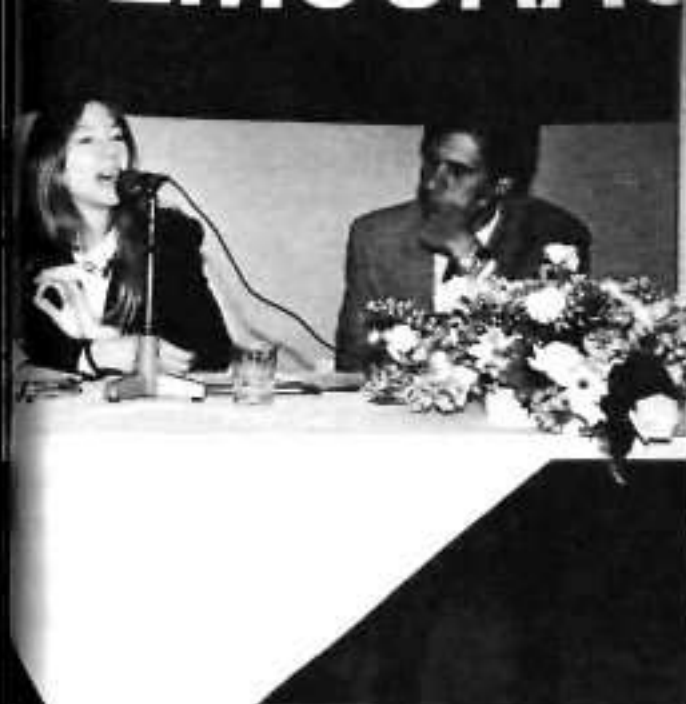
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Seshi Chonco, Amanda Gouws and
director of Idasa.

for democracy was the experience and expectations of jobless youths.

"The 17 or 18-year-old youngster in a township with no job, no home, no security, needs to be convinced that the struggle for democracy makes sense in terms of their escape from the ghetto. We cannot wait for a democratic government before we transform the education system. We must begin now."

Programme director for the Institute of Multi-Party Democracy Dr Seshi Chonco echoed similar sentiments.

He spoke of the difficulty of making democracy a concrete experience in the townships and squatter camps around the country when what people most needed and wanted were basic amenities such as toilet facilities.

He said a process of deliberation should be promoted to question and debate and arrive at a common understanding of what constituted democracy. The institutions of schools and political parties were essential to this process. □

Vote must empowerme

Offering some thoughts on the future of democracy, Nigerian academic Claude Ake suggested that the most appropriate democracy was not one which dealt only with constitutional rights, but one which united political and economic rights – a social democracy.

"There is no freedom in abject poverty and no freedom in ignorance. If we talk of the future of democracy in Africa we must think of producing enough surplus [wealth] to support it."

Ake said there was a danger of people using civil society tautologically to define democracy. Civil society was an effect of democracy not a precondition for it.

He suggested that civilian defence against state power in Africa came through the development of associational life. Communal life and ethnic or cultural groups were not a problem in themselves. It was the political exploitation of cultural identities that caused problems.

"We must take community, collective and cultural rights seriously. If we don't we will repeat the mistakes of history," he said.

"People identify with these groups because it is useful to do so. The state must not denounce ethnicity, but must dis-

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