

Nothing is for free

**New year's resolutions – already fallen away?
...mmmmm. Rather try a**

New LIFE resolution!

Over the past few weeks I watched the 'Fees must fall' campaign unfold. University students rallied behind the call for a 'zero increase of fees for 2016'. Once the protest gained momentum the minister of higher education met with university vice-chancellors and declared a compromise: there would be a 6% increase instead of 10% which was originally planned. The students rejected this offer and the protests continued. A while later the president of our country made the declaration that there would be 'a zero increase of fees for 2016'. The students briefly celebrated their victory, but the protests continue. Students are now demanding that outsourcing of university staff be scrapped and all workers on campuses be permanently employed by the institutions. They also want free tertiary education which many claim was promised to their parents in 1994. I am guessing that this matter is far from settled and, as a concerned citizen, I felt the need to voice my opinion and provoke deeper reflection and hopefully some constructive input.

These are a few of my thoughts; but please consider that they come from an old man who could never afford to go to university; one who could not afford to pay for his older children to complete university; and one who is struggling to find a way to pay for his youngest son to complete university. So I am definitely in favour of helping to support the education of worthy, under-privileged students. However, I have learnt that nothing is for free in this world except the air that we breathe; and even that is perhaps only until someone finds a way to charge us for it. Everything on this Earth has a price: The good things we pay for first and enjoy later, and the other things we may enjoy now but we have to pay for it sooner or later.

No one should believe what I say here, but I challenge everyone to go and test the value of these words in the context of their own lives and I encourage everyone to do his/her own research on this matter before taking a stance. I am certain that we will soon return to the subject but until then, let's think about this:

- There seemed to be no real correlation between the announcements made by the minister of higher education and the president. To my mind the former offered a quick-fix solution to settle the matter by compromise, which did not work; and the latter then yielded to the students' demands. He must now find the money to pay for this promise, knowing that we do not have it and that the funds must be taken from something else - another form of compromise. The approach is

common: Let's borrow from Peter to pay Paul; so let's keep this promise knowing we have to break another. In the meantime, the students believe they have found a way to get what they demand if they shout loud enough. So, will they continue to demand more? Or what will they demand next?

- The price increase that started this furore now brings into focus all the other increases families must deal with; including most living costs: rates, electricity, travel costs, medical and in many instances basic education, etc. These inflationary factors play a huge part in widening the gap between the rich and the poor; which guarantees more social instability for the future and perhaps a 'meltdown' or 'breaking point' is imminent. This is another matter to deal with later; but in the meantime we must all give serious attention to the bad habit of increasing prices annually. We seem to live in a culture that does this almost instinctively rather than justifiably. I wonder how many of the price increases we put up with every year are morally justifiable.
- I believe that we must pay for what we get, and we must get what we pay for. So let's think about the high cost of educating our children today. What are we actually paying for? I am certain no one is bold enough to say we will be able to employ all (or most) of the students graduating over the next few years. And no one will dare say how many of these expensive degrees our students are completing will bring real value to the economy, or to society at large.
- We have seen our fair share of protests over the past few decades; unfortunately many are too aggressive in nature. This country loses a fortune every year through strikes and the unnecessary damage caused by a loss of control and mob-violence. So if protestors get out of control, who should account for the damage? The organisers of such protests may win a few battles along the way, but as a nation we are losing the war against poverty. There are so many more issues we must consider before we join such protests.
- The many strikes that we see indicate that the leaders of opposing interest groups cannot, or will not, speak to each other with enough empathy to resolve matters. We should all remember that this country (our New South Africa) came into being through praiseworthy dialogue. I doubt that there has been sufficient discussion to consider all sides of this situation in the 'Fees must fall' campaign.
- The ESKOM saga is just one of many other problems showing what we have to deal with as a nation. Our country is shedding jobs at an alarming rate, and much of it is due to ESKOM's inability to supply enough power for growth. Of course there are many other factors, so I do not put all the blame on ESKOM. I place the story here because this is part of the South African Reality: The idea of free electricity for some and special benefits for others have ended up costing the country immeasurable hardships. We have eventually ended up with more expensive electricity for all and less jobs for the people of our country.
- If you are protesting because you want to take the burden of high fees off your parents' shoulders then I admire you, but you must also consider finding a way to pay for your own tuition.
- If you are protesting because politicians made promises to your parents in 1994 and then failed to keep them, then you must learn from the experience. So before doing anything else, make sure that those you are following can deliver what they promise. And as a responsible person you must make sure that if your demands are met that it will not harm (or cost hardship) to others. Or that it will not harm other parts of our fragile economic and political structure.
- If you are protesting because you want to help poorer people who cannot afford

the high fees, then I admire you; but have you thought of other ways that you can help such students?

If you are a protesting student, please know that I admire people who stand up for what they believe, but you have now entered the political arena so make sure that you fully understand all the potential ramifications of your actions.

There is so much more to say, but I am running out of courage to say all that needs to be said. However, I am left wondering: Where are the people who are supposed to lead the dialogue with these students? Our students are potentially the future leaders of this country and they need to be briefed on all the related matters and, especially about the dangers of militancy. Surely, we cannot expect them to know better if we do not show them something better. Or are the leaders waiting for a more opportune time? Who will be brave enough to risk losing popularity (or potential votes) or by telling the truth – the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Where are the people who should be teaching our children about the dangers of this culture of entitlement that seemed to have such a powerful grip on our youth? They have been taught about their rights, but perhaps we have failed to teach them about their responsibilities. Who will teach them about having to deal with the consequences of their choices? Where are the people who must tell our youth that it is so easy to destroy things and so very hard to build, or rebuild them? Are there enough parents, teachers, preachers and other leaders out there emphasising that freedom gives no one the right to do as they please; and that freedom is only of real benefit to those who remain morally accountable? The reality is this: The Freedom we have in this country must be accompanied with common sense, integrity and accountability for it to be a blessing, otherwise it becomes a curse – an illusion and nothing more than false hope.

We live under enormous pressure to survive and make progress, and we are constantly tempted with offers to stimulate our every desire. These are packaged as easy-to-get and promise instant remedies for our woes. We succumb too easily! We must be wary of anything that is offered for free – such things are either paid for by others or in other ways, or the quality will probably not be what it ought to be.

South Africa has a tremendous wealth of natural resources but it remains an economic minnow, largely due to poor productivity. This nation will benefit greatly from a productive culture and we desperately need more upright leaders to show the way. A good place to start is best explained by quoting former American president John F Kennedy, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country!' Expanding on this idea we must set the direction as follows: Ask not what your school/college/university can do for you, but rather what you can do for your school/college/university. Ask not what your friends can do for you, but rather what you can do for your friends. Ask not what your family can do for you but rather what you can do for your family. Etc.

We therefore characterise productive people as those who:

- Produce more than they use
- Spend less than they earn (or earn more they spend)
- Give more than they take or at least show the willingness to give before they take

We are free to choose, but we must then live with the consequences of our choices. So

we can join in the many protests; or we may join in the non-protesting cliques that gather to complain privately. Or we can start making a serious effort to bring more respect and integrity into our lives, our homes, places of work and into our country.

To alleviate poverty we must share our talents and resources wisely, but this will come mostly from people who act in the interests of our country as a whole and not just for their own benefits, or just for the benefit of their own interest groups.

-Chris Lew Oct 2015

Challenge yourself with:

What can I do this week to get past the 1st four steps?

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