



The UKZN Griot. Of Rabbit Holes and Protocols

BY:

Keyan G Tomaselli

A response to my [Transformation and New Math](#) column drew forth this response from a dean at another university: ‘This is shockingly true! You have to chase rabbits as they jump out of the holes and chase them until a new rabbit appears which will take you in a totally opposite direction. If universities had to be self-sustainable they would not last beyond a couple of years!’

For universities there is no bottom line as they are public services that must deliver employable graduates to the market place. The unemployable graduates go into government and state-owned enterprise managements where they earn much higher salaries, benefit from huge perks, and do less work, without much accountability. Everyone is happy even if universities are bankrupt. That explains the differences when one visits some government departments where functionaries scowl, are sullen and rude, compared to organisations that have no public purse to bail them out where the customer is treated with greater respect.

Where else in the world would self-respecting graduates willingly want to associate themselves with bankrupt organisations operating literally in the dark ages like Eskom, SAA, SABC, PRASA and Telkom? They might offer good benefits but they offer lousy service and attract government bail-outs and never-ending mirth from their critics. Career pathing in such organisations is actually political pathing - it’s about the money and patronage; it’s not about changing the institution for the better, service delivery or sustainability.

A ‘better life’ can never occur while these dinosaurs of cadre deployment and rampant patronage wreck the economy. Get fired from one, draw your golden handshake, then go to another and do the same. Problem is, eventually there is no more money and no-one can ‘pay back the money’. Just ask the Greeks. These kinds of phrases are becoming increasingly characteristic of South African discourses, touched off some years ago by ‘Don’t touch me on my studio’, uttered by an exasperated White right-winger during a TV discussion.

Then there is that unique ‘All protocols observed’, which shortened by 20-60 minutes the tedious ritual genuflecting undertaken in official gatherings where everyone endlessly repeats what in the old days were called ‘Dank die Minister’ sycophancy. These, of course, are aimed at reminding those who imagine that they are VIPs that they are indeed VIPs deserving special treatment and special mentions. Whether articulated in the officious or shortened sense, the democratic world marvels at this indulgent ritual, the self- and mutual admiration and the time it wastes. The cost to the taxpayer must be immense when it can take half a day just to get a conference started.

And in good African presidential orature, the call and response is to trivialise serious issues by pronouncing ‘Nkandla’ in 10 different ways in Parliament. That takes one’s critics’ eyes off the ball (or the money). In pornography, ejaculation is called ‘the money shot’, so maybe we’re all masturbating to the EFFing tune hoping for better political accountability from those whose salaries we pay but who represent only themselves? Fat chance. Expulsion from the party and parliament are the outcomes.

Seth Afr’can English has been never more opaque. No wonder no-one understands us, and why American actors can’t mimic SA accents and why SA films have to be dubbed into American to get distribution there. Money shots don’t require any translation. Ditto with violence, that’s why American movies travel so well.

South Africa seems to operate on the basis of endless crisis management, which may explain the massive consumption of fake aphrodisiacs and high levels of violence, though individuals here don’t massacre people on campuses, in schools, theatres, military bases and churches as is the case in the US. Our preferred killing fields are the roads – tailor made for lethal weapons called vehicles being mishandled by rank amateurs who can’t read road signs and who have fake licences. Where the maniacs spraying gunfire in the US have selected purposive samples, South African killers behave in a more random manner.

That’s the problem facing deans. There are too many rabbit holes to jump through – ‘every which way’ - to cite Clint Eastwood’s memorable movie phrase: All we need now are special effects to get through the day.

Keyan Tomaselli is a UKZN Emeritus Professor and Distinguished Professor at the University of Johannesburg. Neither his PhD nor his driver's license are fake.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author’s own.