

REQUESTED BRIEF MESSAGE FROM PROF RAYMOND PARSONS, A FORMER NATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND LABOUR COUNCIL(NEDLAC) OVERALL BUSINESS CONVENOR, DELIVERED TO THE NEDLAC 29th ANNUAL SUMMIT MEETING, SANDTON, FRIDAY 6 SEPTEMBER 2024

Thank you very much for the privilege of sharing a few thoughts with you on Nedlac's 30th celebration of social dialogue and planning for the future. It has in any event been a great pleasure to again associate with old and new friends involved in the Nedlac process - and to catch up with everyone. A landmark birthday is as significant for an institution and its participants, as it is for a person, and provides a focal point for interaction and discussion. One hopes that the 'old guard' will also be in the 'vanguard' of today's proceedings and outcomes!

For Nedlac - as the apex institution of social dialogue in SA - it is not only a time for celebration; it is also clearly a time for contemplation about the past, the present and future of the institution. There is much to ponder. Over its lifetime of three decades we should not be surprised that Nedlac, in seeking to implement its mandate, has had both its big successes and regrettable failures. Its performance has inevitably reflected the well-known 'ups and downs' and crises in our young democracy over the same period.

Indeed, my predecessor as Overall Business Convenor - Bobby Godsell - has often referred to the extent to which in past decades South Africa has frequently looked right over the edge of the abyss, but has always been able to draw back in time! As an important player in the national scenario this also been Nedlac's experience from time to time - but it, too, has always also realised what ultimately was at stake for SA. It has then often been able to act as a valuable 'shock absorber' to negative events.

I make bold to say that, on balance, although Nedlac does not govern the country, its negotiations and agreements over the years have helped to keep the country governable. If Nedlac had not been co-founded with the advent of democracy in 1994 we would probably have had to invent it! In the short time available, however, may I compress the past, present and future of Nedlac and its constituents into a brief three-part message?

Firstly, the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu once wrote 'we in SA too often sell ourselves short'. Although he recognised the huge socioeconomic challenges the country faced, he felt the world had much to learn from our largely peaceful transition to democracy in 1994. Not least was the founding Nedlac legislation being among the first to be passed by the new democratic Parliament. Nedlac was seen as providing the socioeconomic dimensions to the reconciliation and nation-building to which the new democracy was committed. Your documentation for this meeting sets out some future directions for Nedlac - we should not in the process sell Nedlac's paramount role in social dialogue short either.

Secondly, seen through the prism of SA's pressing socioeconomic priorities Nedlac's 30th birthday is also an opportunity to reassess the mandate, leadership and organisational structure of Nedlac. It has been

said earlier today that Nedlac 'has a huge job ahead'. Government and the social partners need to satisfy themselves that Nedlac indeed remains 'fit for purpose' for the next decade in what are changed economic and political circumstances. We need to 'reinvest' in the fundamentals on which value-adding social dialogue is based, which are reinforced in the documentation and addresses available today. The steps to 'modernise' Nedlac through new legislation must be welcomed.

Thirdly, there has been much debate about a comprehensive 'social compact' for SA. In a nutshell, I would only suggest that a combination now of the existence of the GNU, the declaration of intent, and the updated National Development Plan should create new space for 'social compacting' - please note the plural! Nedlac is still the appropriate structure to tackle this challenge. It needs to see what more is now feasible and practical to find common ground in the 'social compacting' sphere under new circumstances.

Finally, to conclude - I wish Nedlac all the best for the future! To succeed, Nedlac and its social partners will need to be relentlessly optimistic about the prospects of changing South Africa but remain brutally realistic about the socioeconomic challenges that remain. The focus must be on how effective social dialogue can help to identify necessary common ground to act - and actively secure tangible differences in outcomes.

The attitude we must take in addressing SA's challenges is best summed up by a prominent historian and scholar who identified one cross-cutting key characteristic he believed shaped the fortunes of nations and institutions:

'In the world, the optimists have it, not because they are always right, but because they are positive. Even when wrong, they are positive, and that is the way of achievement, correction, improvement and success. Educated, eyes-open optimism pays; pessimism can only offer the empty consolation of being right'.

Let Nedlac then tackle its future agenda with the right mindset to help fix the future!

Thank you

Ends