

# United in our exaggerated fears of one another

**M**ANY black and white South Africans agree on one thing across the racial divide: both have an exaggerated fear of the power of the other.

Our past has bequeathed us many handicaps. But none may be as crippling as the racial attitudes many of us carry in our heads, often without knowing it. Many whites still instinctively believe themselves to be superior, many blacks have come to believe the myth that they are inferior: white refusal to acknowledge progress and black defensiveness cloud debate. But the events of the past few weeks suggest that another obstacle to progress is a deep-seated belief on both sides that the other is immensely powerful and deeply threatening.

Many whites “know” that young whites are being thrown onto the streets as blacks hog the jobs despite, for example, a recent Human Sciences Research Council finding that 99% of white graduates find jobs while only 74% of their black counterparts do.

The past 15 years is often portrayed as a period in which blacks have grabbed all the goodies at the expense of whites despite overwhelming evidence that whites have done better out of the post-1994 economy than any other group.

But this — spurious — sense that blacks have attained an economic power they still clearly lack is perhaps only a symptom of a more deep-rooted fear, which remains buried beneath the surface: a belief that black



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**Blacks, whites make the same mistake — they overestimate the power and desire of the other to do them harm**

violence against whites is an ever-present threat. Crime is thus still seen often as evidence of white victimhood, despite most victims of violent crime being black.

It is this instinctive sense that “they” are powerful and capable of great harm that has created and enlarged the myth of Julius Malema’s popularity and power. Malema is routinely assumed to be immensely popular among the “unemployed and uneducated” black masses.

The stereotype is obvious — there is a seething mass of ignorant and angry people out there waiting for the right demagogue to come along and tell them to harm whites. And yet Malema may not even enjoy majority support among members of the ANC Youth League: when he was elected, seven of nine provinces disputed the result. There is no

hard evidence that he is popular among anyone outside the charmed circle of political insiders — the claim that grassroots black people of any age admire him may tell us more about the demons inside our heads than about political reality.

It is fear of Malema’s power that leads some to demand that we erode democracy — by, for example, insisting that the Constitutional Court not be given the chance to pronounce on what is hate speech — despite the lack of evidence that he has the power to get anyone to do harm to anyone else.

Black political leaders return this compliment by harbouring exaggerated fears of white power and potential to inflict pain. How else to explain why President Jacob Zuma delivered a special radio and television broadcast in response to the murder of a man whose support among white Afrikaners was so low that he only ran in an election once, when he was soundly rejected by white voters? Is there another country whose president would take to the airwaves to describe as “a man of standing” someone so clearly on the political fringe?

Five years of grassroots protest have not persuaded Zuma to schedule a special broadcast; neither, if white fears are at issue, have farm murders. Clearly he felt Eugene TerreBlanche had widespread support despite the fact that the vast majority of whites want nothing to do with him and his organisation.

It is this mirror image of white fear — the

sense that there are still many whites with the will and the power to do violence — which explains why, in the 1990s, many in the ANC saw the threat supposedly posed by whites seeking to derail the transition as a far greater priority than making peace with the Inkatha Freedom Party, despite the fact that the KwaZulu-Natal violence was clearly visible while the white-led coup existed only in people’s heads. And it also no doubt explains why government priorities are often more about dealing with white attitudes than the needs of the voting majority.

These phobias obviously make progress to a vigorous democracy and a just society more difficult. Yes, we are a racially divided society and recent events have not created new divides, they have simply highlighted those that have existed for centuries.

But, as the events of the past few weeks have also shown, that does not mean that either side is available for a race war. Inventing racial problems we don’t have makes it harder to deal with those we do.

The fears that prompt us to see nonexistent demons are real. But they are also deeply destructive. Those who harbour them will help themselves and our society if they reflect on them and try to adjust to what exists rather than what they imagine.

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