

SA youth must be heard

LIKE many, I was brought up to believe that wisdom was almost exclusively linked to age. That it was only when you became older that you were wiser and could truly comprehend the complexity of life.

I believed that until then, you simply cruised by, did what you were told and hoped for the best.

I am embarrassed to admit that I, perhaps passively, previously held the view that the solutions to our nation's problems would only come from those who had walked a similarly difficult road before.

After all, their experience meant that only they had the know-how to navigate us through the turbulence in which we often find ourselves.

And so whenever that debate about the need for a so-called leadership generational mix arose in our political discourse, I was indifferent.

Fair enough, I sympathised when young people demanded an opportunity and the space to contribute their ideas. But it was not a call that struck a chord with me.

It did not help that whenever such a debate arose the drivers of the pro-youth campaign – at least in political circles – often pointed us to disgraceful souls like ANC Youth League president Collen Maine who seemingly still thinks it is permissible to flirt with the idea of necklacing po-

litical opponents.

The horror!
On Monday, my passive, long-held belief was shattered remarkably.

I spent much of the morning at the inaugural conference of the Youth Employment Enterprises and Skills Solutions (aptly abbreviated Yeess).

The invitation said the conference aimed "to bring together stakeholders with a can-do attitude and real solutions to face these (unemployment) challenges".

My immediate thought was "oh boy, here we go, another talk shop about jobs".

Attending were business folk and social activists of all ages.

But the stars of the show were the young men and women in the room.

There is something powerful about young people telling their own stories, detailing their hardships, solutions, their dreams and their desperation to be heard.

Their ideas are not far-fetched. They stem from their daily experiences which are not easily grasped by powerful policymakers who are on the other side of the class divide.

Take for example the often-

And Another Thing



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bandied-about concept of access to opportunity.

It is common cause that one in two young people in Nelson Mandela Bay is unemployed.

The causes of this are well documented – a limping economy, poor education, a lack of skills, you name it.

But listening to those young people on Monday, it soon became apparent that further compounding all the already stated challenges is something as simple as a lack of access to relevant, credible information where they live.

Mandela Bay councillor Andrew Whitfield calls it the geography of opportunity.

To emphasise the point, he tells the story of a young Motherwell woman who had to beg and borrow taxi fare (R26 per day) to come to seek help at the National Youth Development Agency offices in the city centre – only to be sent back home with no satisfactory answers.

It's an all too familiar reality for thousands of young people in this city.

And if you happen to live in Kwa-Nobuhle, such a trip to access a service only offered in Port Elizabeth

would set you back at least R60 a day.

It's insane.

It therefore boggles the mind that more than two decades into democracy, and despite numerous pledges to take services to the people, such basic opportunities are hardly available where the majority of those who need them live.

Government leaders would have us believe that budget constraints are the reason such services are not rolled out far and wide.

However, I am inclined to believe that in fact much of it has to do with a lack of vision, political will and a disconnect from the people they serve.

The list of challenges is endless.

Yet, despite these, on Monday I witnessed young people who had decided to take charge of their lives.

I listened to inspiring stories of those who refused to succumb to hopelessness.

They have had doors slammed in their faces, promises broken, chances taken away.

Because of their youth, they are frequently written off as reckless,

irresponsible or lazy.

Yet again and again, they continue to push themselves towards their destiny.

Indeed, there are many young people in this country who believe that their mere existence entitles them to a blissful life of prosperity without them lifting a finger.

But we must be careful to resist the temptation to classify an entire generation of South Africans as such.

On Monday, it became clear to me how so many of the solutions sought for our country's problems can only come from the very people for whom these problems are a lived reality.

It became clear how this country can no longer afford to place young people in leadership structures as a shallow cosmetic exercise void of any meaningful platform of influence.

Forget Maine and his cohorts, this country is filled with young people who truly believe in its potential.

They are not interested in burning things.

All they want is a foot in the door.

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