

JONATHAN JANSEN: Dear white people - a good dose of humility would help you engage in the land debate

BL PREMIUM

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If this simple fact about dispossession eludes you, then stop reading this article; no amount of education will help you.

Therefore, in the heat of the land reform debate, do not make silly arguments like “my parents worked hard for their land” (everybody does, if they have land) or “I was not there personally” (you benefitted and are better off as a result) or “we bought the land lawfully” (because others could not given those same laws then).

The same thing happens on my social media pages; incredible rage. Most of all I noticed that white friends and strangers had no idea about how to talk about land reform without getting angry (which kind of short-circuits any capacity for reason) and making silly arguments. So I wanted to offer a few suggestions about how to respond to the demands for taking your land, as you see it.

First of all, you might not have noticed but South African politics has become really good at slogans like “white monopoly capital” or “decolonisation” or “radical economic transformation”. Like all political slogans, there is an element of truth in these words wielded in public but mostly they are intended for purposes of political posture (“I am more radical than you” as with the EFF) or political distraction (“Please ignore state capture as I blame whites” per Jacob Zuma). Rarely do these slogans lead to meaningful change. So too with “land expropriation without compensation” (let’s shorten this to LEWC).

So first of all, relax. You are not going to lose your land even if some of the Afrikaans newspapers carry scary headlines on the subject to boost their sales. The ANC has to sound radical on land reform as a way of neutralising the EFF which, smartly, saw the land issue as the opportunistic next step for its political spectacle now that Zuma is no longer available for parliamentary sport.

The truth is, if the ruling party were really serious about land reform it would have happened at pace somewhere in the last two decades of democracy. And you might not have noticed that the Constitution offers some fairly strong protections against the reckless and random expropriation of private land. Listen carefully to President Cyril Ramaphosa — not the headlines (LWEC) but the fine print — land reform will happen without disrupting agriculture, the economy and food security for the nation.

Then, it would really help if you acknowledged the past. From before the Native Land Act of 1913 to the Group Areas Act of 1950 blacks lost their land on a massive scale in favour of whites. We are not even talking about the systematic conquest of native peoples under waves of Dutch and English colonialism. In other words, the fact that whites as a demographic minority own so much of land and impressive housing across the nine provinces, and most blacks live in poverty and ramshackle housing, is not an accident. It is a consequence of a past that favoured whites over blacks.

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A good dose of humility would help you and advance the debate. It would also enable you to listen to the other side and to respond in a responsible way.

It is a good idea to invite dialogue and spring into action. I have met farmers who share their land with workers who lived on those properties for decades. But they do not only give land, they provide equipment and training, and assist in raising capital. We know that simply giving people land — or land back — hardly deals with the problem of poverty.

That is why when given the option, poor people would often take the money than the land with the result that the original problem (land reform) remains unresolved. The point is that by taking an active and considered role in land redistribution yourself, you prevent government from doing this, under pressure, and with predictably negative consequences for all.

Most importantly, do not underestimate the hurt and humiliation that reside in the hearts of black people because of the dispossession of their land. It pains me to see how young white students are given a R4-million flat in Rondebosch or Claremont by their parents while they study at the local university.

Not too long ago that land belonged to black people who were shifted to the windswept Flats. You would do well to remember that, before you fly off the handle at the next debate on land reform.