



**South African Association of Rhodes Scholars
Scholars' Bon Voyage
Thursday 17 September 2020
Keynote by Justice Edwin Cameron (South Africa-at-Large & Keble 1976)**

It's a privilege to speak with you today.

Two of the greatest joys of my life were being part of the Rhodes Scholarships selection process and working at the Constitutional Court. This was because in both I met and interacted with, and sometimes got to know, brilliant, inspiring, highly motivated and gifted young persons like yourselves.

I have fifteen minutes, and in them I want to ask some questions:

- What does the calamity of the pandemic of Covid-19 mean for our lives?
- What does it mean right now to have a Rhodes Scholarship, with all the moral shadows and complexities that brings?
- And how do the pandemic and the Scholarship shape our commitment to the future?

My answers to these questions are modest, even prosaic – that the pandemic offers us a profound challenge; and that we have to submit to the demands of moral complexity in our history, in our own lives, and in the lives of others – to seek perfection or sainthood is a grave mistake.

I start with the wonderful essay by the novelist and activist Arundhati Roy, “the pandemic is a portal”. Her message is that, historically, pandemics have forced humans “to break with the past and imagine their world anew”. So she sees this pandemic as “a gateway between one world and the next”. Its significance is that it “*has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could*”. In this, she says, lies both a challenge and an opportunity – since “nothing could be worse than a return to normality”.

How does that affect you, a freshly-minted Rhodes Scholar, as you leave for Oxford?

To answer that, I invoke a place and a person.

The place is the Constitutional Court. It was created together with our new democracy in 1994. Ten years later, it moved to a beautiful new building on Braamfontein Hill, right next to Hillbrow, the largest and most densely diverse accumulation of African people in our country.

The court building is light and airy and open – devoid of all grandiose pretensions and pomposity. But that is not its most important feature. This is: that it was built inside the foundations of a pass law prison.

The pass laws were amongst the most iniquitous features of apartheid repression. Outside a mere 13% of South Africa’s land area, they made Black people aliens in their own country. Passes had to be presented on demand at any time or any place, day or night. Many millions of Black South Africans were arrested in degrading conditions, terrorised, manhandled, driven around for hours in police vans, locked up and then processed through the pass law courts, where they were sentenced to short terms of imprisonment – all for the crime of being Black in their own country. The pass law prison on Braamfontein Hill was one of the most notorious. Men were stripped naked, lined up and systematically humiliated – all for the vision of a racially pure autocracy.

It is this site that Mandela’s first appointees to the new Court chose for its location.

Constructed within the bowels of injustice, the court building and particularly the court chamber use the site, they encompass the foundations of the prison, to tell an important story – as story about history, and memory, and how we employ them in creating our future. As the judges sit on the bench, deliberating what the Constitution means for our national aspirations, the 19th century red bricks from the prison curve around them. UCT’s Vice-Chancellor said this week that we must “erase all traces of the past’s injustices”.¹

My point is simple, even prosaic: we cannot. Not only that we cannot – we should not. The past is there not as history, but as present. It challenges our present complicity in injustice – by reminding us of what others, but also we, are capable. To know what this means I turn from a place to a person.

The person is Bram Fischer. He was a brilliant young man from an elite Afrikaner family, elected a Rhodes Scholar less than thirty years after the Boer War, in 1931. The Afrikaner aristocracy from which he came had lost power, wealth and position because of the colonialist war the British had cruelly waged against it. Cecil John Rhodes, our Founder, was an instigator of that war.² Bram Fischer grew up in the dark shadow of that war. His outspoken commitments were “avowedly anti-imperialist”.³ So it was nothing less than astounding that he applied for the Rhodes Scholarship – and that he accepted Rhodes’s money when he was elected. Yet – for reasons cynical or calculating or instrumental – he took that money and associated himself with Rhodes’s name.

¹ The new UCT will “erase all traces of the past’s injustices, assured Vice-Chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng”, speaking at UCT’s final virtual Vision 2030 staff engagement session on Tuesday, 15 September 2020 (see <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2020-09-16-vision-2030-initiating-change>).

² See the most up-to-date assessment by Rhodes Scholar Robert Calderisi, *Rhodes: Fallen Hero* (forthcoming).

³ Clingman.

He went to Oxford; he qualified as a lawyer; he became one of South Africa's leading Queen's Counsel. He was retained by the mining houses as their go-to counsel. He lived in the comfortable northern suburbs of Johannesburg and made a lot of money. At the very same time, Bram Fischer was a deeply committed communist. He later became the secret leader of the banned SA Communist Party. He, together with Mandela and the Rivonia trialists, plotted the destruction of the apartheid state, while using the edifice of the law to help achieve that goal.

A few years ago (2015), I gave the Bram Fischer memorial lecture at Rhodes House.⁴ I reflected on the moral complexities of Fischer's life – his moral pliability, the sometimes questionable ethical choices he made – and how, nevertheless, he is regarded, rightly, as a great South African hero.

How can this be?

The answer lies in the fact that none of us is perfect, that life and history are terribly imperfect, that Fischer achieved greatness despite being imperfect. We are all flawed, soiled by moral compromise. Our hands, every one of us, are grubby from questionable moral choices, from our indecisiveness, from our greed, from our yearning for comfort, from our overweening egos, from our lack of purposeful commitment.

But here's a more important point. It is that this did not disable Bram Fischer from joining the struggle for a more just South Africa. It did not disable him from committing high treason while he wore the silk cloak of a Queen's Counsel in defence of Nelson Mandela's life. Of course I am saying something about the Cecil John Rhodes and the Scholarships he endowed. And I am also saying something about your own lives. What Bram's life vividly shows is that in seeking our heroes, it is impossible to separate villains from saints.

More importantly, it shows how misleading and distracting the search for sainthood – in ourselves or in others – can be. We are all burdened by our own moral failings and complicit in the conditions of our time, where there is no moral purity but only the grubby complexity of ordinary life. Not one of us leads a life of moral perfection – and we should not want to, nor ask it of others.

Our task as Rhodes Scholars is to seek justice and improvement in the world not because we are beyond moral reproach – nor because Cecil John Rhodes and his legacy are morally unblemished. Our task is to seek justice and betterment in this world *despite* our own failings, despite the blemishes of Cecil John Rhodes, and despite the failings of all those who offer us opportunity to create change. But that we all have moral failings should not comfort us. They do not afford an excuse for inaction. Instead, they challenge us.

Specifically, Bram Fischer's life demands that we ask what his acts of courage, what his acts of moral compromise, what his life of moral imperfection says about our own lives and our own capacity for action?

⁴ "Fidelity and Betrayal under Law" 2015 Bram Fischer Memorial Lecture, (2016) 16 *Oxford University Commonwealth Law Journal* 346-360.

Let me bring this personally to you, here.

In her essay, *Stop Trying to Save the World All by Yourself*, Naomi Klein warns against “the real dangers of being brilliant, sensitive young people”. One of the dangers, she points out, is “the danger of taking on too much”. Trying to do that she calls a manifestation of an inflated sense of our own importance. This is her call to collective solidarity and action.

For, even in a terrible epidemic of uncertainty and fear, each of us here have enabled lives. We are each of us privileged with resources and opportunity and natural talents. All these offer us the opportunity to do things, perhaps important things. Covid-19 has upended our world. For many, the pandemic has been an event of biblical proportions. A moment of discontinuity that provides the opportunity to break from the past and start anew. Though it has drawn our gaze to exceptional sites of suffering, and exposed the deep structural inequalities of our world, it has also exposed our own lack of imagination.

For such a great beast, for such great suffering and disruption, our reactions have thus far been anti-climactic. We’ve managed the virus with too much banality, invoking the tools that produced the very insecurity that afflicts us today.

In South Africa, we created new crimes; we deployed the military; we relied on incarceration and evictions; we saw shocking spectacles of police violence, even murder. We’ve been so focused on the magnitude of the threat that we’ve failed to consider the inappropriately accustomed tools with which we’ve tried to defeat it. Our resources and privileges – yes, our Rhodes Scholarships – enable us to conceive and plot and walk a different path.

What does Arundhati Roy mean by calling the pandemic “a portal, a gateway between one world and the next”?

The pandemic has brought us closer to death, to think about our own mortality – our own precarity. It’s a call to imagine a new world and to carve new tools to build that world.

We can choose, she says, “to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it”.

**That is your burden – and also your joy and opportunity – as Rhodes Scholars.
Thank you.**