Andrew Feinstein: After the party

I have just read Andrew Feinstein’s book, After the Party, a very honest book, its honesty unveiling a deep pain, the pain of loss, loss of comradeship, of political career, of home and country but most of all the loss of an exuberant dream. Those who voted for the first time on 27 April 1994 carried that dream in their hearts and minds and will identify with that loss. It was a dream of democracy and while Nelson Mandela was President it didn’t seem like an illusion; it seemed to be within the grasp of the nation.

What Feinstein’s book does is confirm for me that democracy like ubuntu, like freedom, is just a word, nothing more. Like ubuntu, like freedom, it is a word that we bandy about but have no conception of what it means. We think it means being able to vote and not being discriminated against on the grounds of race and colour. But that is a limited understanding. In the old definition democracy is government of the people, by the people, for the people. So far we have government of the people, but until we have government by the people and for the people, we do not have democracy. When we vote we give consent to being governed and that fulfils the notion of government of the people. But the system for which we have opted where we vote for parties and NOT for our representatives means that there cannot be government by the people. What we have is government by the party, for the party.

That is not democracy and it is not very different from apartheid where one group of people held dominion. They did it by not giving the majority the vote; but today the majority has the vote but it is not a vote for democratic government, it is a vote for party rule, where the party is conflated with the state and where democracy changes its meaning according to the personality of the President. When people cannot influence government, there is no democracy. The people, who toyi-toyi because they have no homes, no water, no electricity and no jobs, know that they have no power. All they know of ‘democracy’ is the might of the law that turns them out of makeshift homes, that fires rubber bullets into their midst when they protest and leaves them living under inhumane conditions. No country that tolerates poverty can call itself a democracy.

Andrew Feinstein sets out ways in which democracy can be established and he deals mainly with the question of accountability and ways of ensuring accountability. He suggests that a mix of proportional representation and the electoral system will ensure that all people have representation and the ability to influence decision-making. Feinstein believes that this is a way to give minority groups a voice. But I do not see the virtues of proportional representation. If we look at the minority parties in parliament, with the exception of the ANC all parties are minority parties, they are race/ethnicity-based groupings and they keep alive the racist ethos of the past. Some of them are purely opportunistic groups, forcing their way into government with no real agenda and becoming sycophants to the ruling party.

South Africa’s party-led proportional representation system lends itself to centralisation and control. Add to this the patronage benefits of being the party in power – not necessarily bribery or corruption, but appointment, retention and opportunity
within government and possibly business – and one has the ingredients of a dangerous political brew. (150)

The consequence of these institutional and personal factors, as Pregs Govender suggested in her Ruth First Memorial Lecture in April 2004, has led to the ANC’s tradition of collective and open debate being reduced to group think, with its naïve and unquestioning acceptance of the leader as infallible. (150)

But this was not the tradition of the ANC before it came into power.

The ANC has, since its early years, been home to a wide range of perspectives and ideologies, an eclectic grouping with a tradition of robust internal debate. Thabo Mbeki’s personality and politics do not sit comfortably with this tradition. (149)

The ANC as a liberation movement understood its purpose – to bring down apartheid – and it could not afford to neglect any views that would help to achieve that objective. As a governing party, however, the ANC is in a different context. It is in a multiparty government competing with other parties, no matter how small and ineffective, where retention of power has become the driving force and the original purpose of the liberation movement, the creation of a democratic society, has been forgotten. As long as the ANC has a two-thirds majority in parliament, what need is there for debate? All other parties are irrelevant. And where there is no effective debate, can there be democracy?

The opposition in Parliament vilified Mbeki for his stance [on AIDS] but their electoral weakness and lack of credibility neutered the criticism. (138)

In fact, the ANC’s main opposition comes from its own party and its Alliance partners but these internal wrangles are more like power struggles than debate about policy and implementation.

In the Mandela years there was vigorous debate because we had a leader who truly understood and practiced democracy. Should our system be dependent on the chance factor of an incorruptible leader? And how long must we wait before another Nelson Mandela comes along? Feinstein points to corrupt leaders around the world and makes clear that Nelson Mandela is unique, as unique as Mahatma Gandhi, and such men come along once or twice in a century. Perhaps Barack Obama is the new man of integrity. He has just signed into law a health care bill that extends benefits to the poor of his country. But he is not our President.

We have a democratic constitution but a constitution is only a blueprint, it does not guarantee democracy. It is only a guideline and the beginning of a process. We can only discover what democracy is when we begin to build it and implement it. As we cannot foresee all the ramifications of our policies and actions, creating democratic governance remains a
work-in-progress because. There is, however, a tendency of ideologues to believe that only their beliefs and policies are valid. Our multiparty system, I presume, was meant to overcome the limitations of partisan understandings. Forging a democracy requires negotiation and consultation. And the kind of democracy that we create, and it has to be created, depends on the degree to which we cherish liberty, fraternity and equality. Establishing the means for democratic governance requires ingenuity and patience but most of all, integrity and commitment. It is hard work, fraught with perils like Frodo's journey in The Lord of the Rings; it is much easier to renge, to succumb to the enticements of power. Even Frodo finds it difficult to resist the power of the ring and when the ring of corruption presented itself to our leaders in the form of the arms procurement deal, they succumbed.

To put it politely, the South African government was taken for a very expensive ride by the arms industry. All the usual tactics were on display: create inappropriate relationships with those you think might influence a deal, persuade the boys that they need far more toys than they actually do, blind even the clever with economic nonsense about offset benefits, involve your most influential salespeople, especially if they happen to be your Prime Minister, charge more than the goods are worth and smile all the way to the bank as the country realises it paid too much for armaments it doesn't need, with no economic benefit to anyone other than the arms companies. (233)

But our leaders speak of corruption in abstract terms, not in terms of arms deals or the denial of ARVs to poor people.

We cannot [allow] a permissive environment for corruption to flourish. Corruption is detrimental to long-term sustainable development. Corruption costs and grand corruption costs even more. Corruption is inimical to development; it perpetuates inequality ... It reproduces conditions of underdevelopment and poverty. It is morally wrong and offensive; it is illegal and it can no longer be tolerated. We collectively must dedicate ourselves to its eradication. (Minister of Public Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi at African Forum on Fighting Corruption, March 2007) (248)

Corruption in all its forms and manifestations, constitutes a process that negates the democracy and development the ordinary people need to transcend the boundaries of their world of poverty, underdevelopment and disempowerment. (President Thabo Mbeki at 5th Global Anti-Corruption Forum in Sandton, April 2007.) (248)

When a political party becomes entrenched, it knows that it can rule by fear, intimidation and bribery while it continues to pay lip service to democratic rights and values.
In South Africa, we do not have a culture of democracy. It wasn’t there before 1994 and it still isn’t here in 2010. Ours is a culture of corruption and crime. According to Richard Dawkins, society is evolving towards more and more civilized norms and values. If arms dealers control the world and prey on vulnerable governments, seducing them into criminal behaviour, we cannot look to leaders for the kind of evolution that Dawkins envisages. If our leaders do not have the political will to create a democratic culture, then the future is indeed bleak. We see already the huge problems that have developed in the provision of basic services, in the public health system, in the public school system, in unemployment and there is little that ordinary people can do about them as long as we continue to live in the reflected glory of the past rather than ensuring that our country becomes a real, not a sham, democracy. We have to become freedom fighters.