‘I’m black, white and coloured!’

The more things change the more they stay the same, writes Pieter-Dirck Uys, 20 years on from our first democratic election

WE STAND 30 days away from the most important election in the 2000-year history of our place on earth. For the first time ever, young South Africans, born after we had our first democratic election in 1994, will vote.

Apartheid will never come back under the same name. But do not underestimate the inventiveness of bad politics.

Of course it will be back. It made money for a political elite then; it will make money for a political elite now. It won’t be the segregation of colour. It might be the segregation of language, of tradition, of culture. Of education. The toll gates of politics.

Democratic South Africa is 20 years old. Twenty years ago, two lives changed. Pieter-Dirck Uys and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. In 1994 at the age of 76, former prisoner 466/64 was already the most famous man in the world. I was 49 when for the very first time in my life, I was allowed to queue up with... everyone.

On April 27 millions of South Africans voted for the very first time.

The Rainbow Nation was born. A new national anthem was sung. Nelson Mandela freed me from my jail of my prejudice and fear: It was now no longer politically correct to be a racist. In fact, I was no longer just a white Afrikaner; I was now a citizen in a democracy. At last. Who said life can’t start at 50?

During the 1980s my work in theatre was inspired by the politics of what we all called our democracy: Blacks, whites, coloureds, Indians; English, Afrikaners; Jews, Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Muslim, Hindu, Scientologists; Xhosa, Zulu, Tsawana, Sotho, Venda, Chinese; Honourary whites; British immigrants, Rhodesian refugees: 27 million of us lived in South Africa; of which about 4 million were white; of which about 3 million had the vote; of which about 1 and a half million used the vote; of which about 700 000 voted for PW Botha’s National Party government in that 1981 general election. Only 700 000 out of 27 million?

That’s not a democratic government; that’s a small town council.

Even then some were wondering how a small political elite could rule the country on behalf of 2.5% of the population.

Not difficult – if you know how to censor your newspapers and media. Not difficult – if you are in full control of your state broadcasting corporation, radio and television. Not difficult if you have the support of the most powerful military force on the continent, being strengthened through secret arms deals. Not difficult if you have a compliant judiciary.

Not difficult if you have a loyal police force who shoot to kill because you have told them to – and they do. Then just ignore the corruption, the nepotism, the racist innuendo and the lack of service delivery.

And there you have the South African government – that ruled us from 1948 to 1994. Forty-six years is a lifetime, but at least the NP didn’t rule till Jesus Christ comes back. That we leave to the ANC. Although I doubt if the ANC would give Jesus a visa.

It wasn’t just the National Party who gave us the birth of a PW Botha, a Pik Botha, a Fanie Botha, a Bothaizeleni. There were also inspirations among those white South Africans who fought the system from within the system. Especially an unlikely freedom fighter called Mrs Helen Suzman. She showed what one woman could do, bravely trying as best she could to make her government accountable. For all those years – 13 of them alone – she sat in Parliament, the only member of a white opposition to the apartheid regime.

Helen had a legendary brittle sense of humour. She would challenge the apartheid regime with their own parliamentary rules. One of these rules allowed MPs to ask questions of the government who was obliged to answer those questions in Parliament, sight unseen. We still have to get there in our present democratic structures. To add injury to insult, Suzman asked the same question in Parliament each year, a question pertaining to the Population Registration Act, the foundation to all the worst apartheid laws: “Mr President? Would you please tell us how many South Africans were racially reclassified during the last year?”

Here is the answer she forced out of them in 1985: “In answer to a question from the PFP MP for Houghton, Mrs Helen Suzman ... nearly 800 South Africans officially became members of a different race group last year in accordance with the Population Registration Act:

518 coloureds became white
14 whites became coloured
7 Chinese became white
2 whites became Chinese
3 Malays became white
1 white became an Indian
50 Indians became coloured
57 coloureds became Indian
17 Indians became Malay
4 coloureds became coloured
1 Malay became Chinese
89 blacks became coloured
5 coloureds became black.”

You notice that no blacks became white? And no whites became black? They hated her for this!

“No sis, Mrs Suzman, why do you ask such an embarrassing question every year?” “It’s not the question that’s embarrassing, Mr Botha; it’s your answer!”

I suppose one expects this obscenity from an apartheid government in 1985. But remember the discomfort when, in the 197th year of our non-racial, non-sexual and in many ways, nonsensical democracy, that same bad smell returned.

With Census 2011. There was that question again: “What is your race? Black, white, coloured, Indian, Asian or other?”

I didn’t know what to fill in, as they did a DNA test on me for a TV show, which proved that I originated in the Congo. So obviously I’m black.

For 49 years my Book of Life assured me that I am white. Then I did some research into my father’s family background and found we had a great-great-grandmother who in 1791 plied her trade between Cape Town and Paard.

Her name was Wilhelmina Opklint. So that means I’m also coloured! I don’t know about Indian, Asian or Other; but hell, that’s three out of six. I’m truly South African!

This is an edited version of Uys’s speech at his UKN graduation ceremony this week.