

# NELSON MANDELA

NOBEL LAUREATE AND FORMER PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

8 september 2000 melbourne convention centre



**This Press Club luncheon, attended by many VIPs and 1000 guests, was held in conjunction with ISIS Communications on World Reconciliation Day. The format included an interview with the president of the Melbourne Press Club, Neil Mitchell. Mandela was introduced by the master of ceremonies, Ian Henderson, a club vice president.**

**Ian Henderson:**

This is a great honour for us all. When the definitive histories of the 20th century come to be written, the struggle of Nelson Mandela and the South African people for a true non-racial democracy will be genuinely one of the stand-out stories. Ten years ago, I was privileged to be in South Africa for the ABC to witness Mr Mandela's release, after 27 years in gaol for sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the apartheid State.

I was struck then, as now, by his personal magnetism, his powerful oratory, the absolute adoration which he inspired in his people, but most particularly by his complete absence of malice or bitterness, despite the indignities and harsh treatment meted out, not just in gaol but, indeed, over a lifetime.

Even more awe-inspiring back then was the task ahead of him to heal the wounds of decades of systematic repression. Many doubted that transition could be made peacefully. But it's now history that it was, through the agency of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and a leader who eschewed retribution and moved beyond mere consensus to tap into the reserves of good will in black and white South Africans.

Mr Mandela concludes his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom – a great read – by saying there's still much to be done, and his long walk is not yet ended. Indeed, just last week he was still hard at work, clinching a framework for peace in strife-torn Burundi. His is a busy, committed and remarkable life. We're richly flattered that he's taken the time to be with us today.

He'll be talking with our Press Club President, Neil Mitchell, about the latest steps on his long walk to freedom. Please accord an Olympic welcome to one of the true champions of our time, Mr Nelson Mandela.

**Mitchell:**

Sir, thank you for talking to us today. You have a magnificent affinity with children; a magnificent feeling, you can see in your face, when you deal with young people. Are these young people...is that your inspiration, now?

**Mandela:**

Well, every human being, young or old, is an inspiration to those who want solutions to problems, national and international. You can get a lot by listening carefully to what they say, sharing with them intimate feelings. But children of course I have not seen for twenty-seven years, and when I came out I had to pay more attention to them, because, as you know, children are the most important asset in any country. Any country that does not care for its children is not worth to be called a country.

**Mitchell:**

Sir, millions of people around the world regard you as their hero. Who are your heroes?

**Mandela:**

Well, my heroes are men and women, to whatever station in life they may be, who are committed to removing some of the most serious socio-economic issues that affect the common people: poverty, which is the greatest challenge facing human beings in this century; illiteracy; hunger; starvation; terminal diseases like HIV/AIDS, cancer. These are the people who are my heroes, whatever station in life they occupy.

**Mitchell:**

Will we...you describe an unfair world. Will we ever, do you think, get a fairer world to live in?

**Mandela:**

There is no doubt about that. As long as there are men and women of calibre who are sensitive to the suffering of the common person, this world will eventually be what we want it to be. In all continents there are capable men and women, experienced, who are rising to the challenges which are posed by the numerous problems that affect humanity, and I am confident that this world one day will be the type of world we all deserve.

**Mitchell:**

The World Economic Forum meets in this town on Monday. Some people believe the globalisation they advocate is a danger to humanity. Do you agree with that?

**Mandela:**

Just repeat that?

**Mitchell:**

The World Economic Forum meets here; are the philosophies of that group a danger to humanity, as some people argue?

**Mandela:**

I don't think so at all. As far as I understand, the Economic Forum attracts very top business people and decision makers from almost all over the world to encourage every country to be part of the global village and to deliver services so that humanity can improve in almost every sphere.

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**Mitchell:**

Sir, the film, the reports of you at the time of your trial before you went to gaol, you seemed an angry young man. Years later, you walk out as a serene, dignified statesman. Why? As I asked Rubin Carter, why no bitterness, why no hate, after all those years?

**Mandela:**

If you spend twenty-seven years in gaol where you waste your life, the flower of your life, you have no time to be negative, to be pessimistic. You select a target which you feel will enrich you if you strive to attain that target. If you are going to do that, there is no time for bitterness. You must mobilise everybody who has the skill, the talent, to enable you to reach your target. And therefore you have to treat every human being as one with impeccable integrity and honesty. Because if you do so, that is how people are going to relate to you and will support you in all your endeavours.

**Mitchell:**

Reconciliation has been a crucial discussion in this country for years. Allowing for the enormous differences between the two situations, what can we learn here from the South African experience in moving towards reconciliation?

**Mandela:**

Well, reconciliation, generally speaking, takes place where there are two or more contending parties to an issue. It is normally the more powerful part in that dispute that takes the initiative. In South Africa we had the advantage, the oppressed, of a just cause; numbers, in comparison to the ruling minority; we have the support of the international community and everybody. When we returned from exile, emerged from underground, came out of prison, there was no doubt that this was the future government of the country.

We destroyed the white supremacy as the liberation movement, but we could not effect a peaceful transformation without talking to our enemy, addressing their fears as a minority and the trauma of losing power. It was under those circumstances that reconciliation took place in South Africa.

Here, the situation is different. The Aborigines are a minority of about two million – if I'm not mistaken – in a population of about ten million. They are not in the advantageous position in which we were in South Africa. We would therefore expect the ruling majority to take the initiative to ensure that the feelings of that minority are addressed, and that programs of upliftment are made available to them.

**Mitchell:**

In such a position of conflict, of tension, is an expression of regret, an apology, necessary for things that have gone before?

**Mandela:**

Well, in South Africa, that has been the thing, that the previously ruling minority should apologise. And some of them did so. Others did not. I am not qualified to speak about the position in other countries. Whether there's going to be an apology or not is something that should be determined by the leaders in this country...in that country.

In Australia here, I have confidence in both population groups that there are competent and able men and women with experience who are able to resolve their problems, and to know how to resolve them.

**Mitchell:**

Has the apology, as it has come in South Africa, been constructive, been helpful?

**Mandela:**

Well, when somebody comes out and say that this is what I did, I apologise, you have nothing to say. If you are a nation builder you will use that man, or woman, precisely because he or she is ashamed of what they did and has apologised. That becomes a perfect recruit for the progress of reconciliation and national unity.

**Mitchell:**

You mentioned HIV/AIDS. What is the future of Africa with the devastation of HIV/AIDS?

**Mandela:**

Well, this pandemic is a source of great concern. In our country, according to the statistics, ten teachers a month die of AIDS. In one university, ev...a student dies every week. And in a neighbouring country, three cabinet ministers have died of AIDS. Therefore, this is a serious crisis facing the continent of Africa, and especially our region. But efforts are being made to address the question, and the fact that there is no cure available at the present moment is a source of great concern, because a pandemic of that nature can only be sufficiently tackled if there is a cure.

But that's not the only solution. A campaign, a vigorous campaign of education to get rid of the tendency to discriminate against people with HIV/AIDS. They are ordinary human beings with illnesses like all others, except that this one is terminal. But they're ordinary human beings who are entitled to receive the support and sympathy of the rest of the population.

**Mitchell:**

Sir, we talked earlier about heroes. Was Mohammed Ali a hero of yours?

**Mandela:**

Well, naturally, as far as boxing is concerned, and what he has done, he was my hero, just like Rubin here, this is my hero.

**Mitchell:**

What did you say to him when he told you he loved you?

**Mandela:**

Well, I was paralysed, because he made my day. And...

**Mitchell:**

Sir, what leaders of the twentieth century do you admire?

**Mandela:**

Well, I've answered that question. It's not the question of a leader, it's a question of a human being who does something to make an ordinary individual to feel, I am a human being, and I have a future, and I can go to bed feeling strong and full of hope.

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**Mitchell:**

Chairman Mao said power came from the barrel of a gun. How do you relate now to the armed struggle of other groups around the world such as the IRA?

**Mandela:**

The methods of political action, which are used by the oppressed people, are determined by the oppressor himself. If the oppressor uses dialogue, persuasion, talking to the other, the oppressed people will do precisely the same. But if the oppressor decides to tighten oppression and to resort to violence, what he is saying to the oppressed is, if you wanted to change your method, your condition, do exactly what I am doing.

So, in many cases, those people who are being condemned for violence are doing nothing else; they are replying, responding, to what the oppressor is doing. But if you want more from me, you have to discuss each individual case. But, generally speaking, it doesn't mean that a person...because a person believes that freedom comes through the barrel of a gun, that person is wrong. He is merely responding to a situation in which he and his community finds himself or herself.

**Mitchell:**

Could I ask you of a specific case then? Yasser Arafat.

**Mandela:**

Well, Yasser Arafat is a very courageous man with a vision. He decided, for example, when almost all the Arab states, to recognise the existence of the state of Israel within secure boundaries. For that, he was condemned by some of his colleagues in the PLO, and by the...a greater part of the Arab world. But he insisted. And I respect him.

In fact, only the other day...when I came out of gaol...I was telling people, when I came out of gaol I met Arafat and embraced him. The Jewish community inside the country and outside were very offended by what I did, and they almost cut friendships with me. But I said to them, one day you'll have to speak to Arafat, and that's what they are doing now.

**Mitchell:**

Sir, your wife has described you as being unbelievably stubborn. Is that your only weakness?

**Mandela:**

Well, that is something I would have liked to discuss with my wife here.

Please, I don't want to...that wonderful lady to abandon me if I say anything which will come to her through the media.

**Mitchell:**

What is ahead for you in the next few years?

**Mandela:**

Pardon?

**Mitchell:**

What is ahead for you in the next few years?

**Mandela:**

Well, I do not know, except that the people of South Africa and the people of the world are striving to better society. There are organisations in the world like the United Nations, the Non Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth of Nations and regional organisations like SADC in our area, all of which are striving to bring about peace and stability in the world, and as long as those organisations exist, we have a role to play through them.

**Mitchell:**

Our Prime Minister has told the United Nations the Olympics, beginning next week, the Olympics are a positive thing and should help unity; the Olympic Games should help unity. Do you agree with that?

**Mandela:**

No, just repeat that again. Just remember, I'm a hundred, and I don't hear difficult words. I hear simple ones.

**Mitchell:**

Are the Olympic Games a positive thing still for unity?

**Mandela:**

Oh, there is no doubt about that, as I've said just now. The Olympic Games are one of the most powerful instruments to bring about international unity and solidarity, and also to expose young people to challenges which, when they go back with their respective countries, will make them sensitive to those challenges which must be solved in their respective countries.

**Mitchell:**

Sir, finally, there are...this is a live television coverage; there are possibly millions of Australians watching you who idolise you. You can influence them and the way they think. What message would you give now to those people in Australia?

**Mandela:**

Well, the Australian people have already influenced me; I don't know if I can influence them. I have found a great deal of warmth and generosity amongst them, and I would like them to know that we respect them. They are our heroes and heroines, and I would sincerely think...hope that the problems they have, especially the relationship with the indigenous community, will improve, and that in the near future the Aborigines themselves will say, we now feel that we are part and parcel of Australia.

All the opportunities are open to us, and for that I am sure that there are leaders amongst Australians who themselves are striving for this goal, and who do not have to be lectured by a retired and unemployed old man like myself.

**Mitchell:**

Ladies and gentlemen, Nelson Mandela.

**Convenor:**

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Nelson Mandela.