

**ADDRESS OF THE PATRON OF THE TMF, THABO MBEKI, AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH BUSINESS SCHOOL "KNOWLEDGE  
MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE": BELLVILLE, JANUARY 16, 2012.**

*"The Democratisation of Knowledge: the Role of Knowledge in the Betterment of Society."*

**"The known is finite, the unknown infinite: intellectually we stand on an islet in the midst of an illimitable ocean of inexplicability. Our business in every generation it to reclaim a little more land, to add something to the extent and the solidity of our possessions."**

**(Thomas Huxley: "On the Reception of the Origin of Species", 1887.)**

Director of the Stellenbosch University Business School and Director of Ceremonies;  
Chancellor, Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of Stellenbosch and other Members of the University;  
Premier of the Western Cape and other Leaders in our various spheres of Government;  
Distinguished visiting Professors, academics and esteemed foreign guests;  
Fellow South Africans in all our ranks;  
Dear delegates and participants;  
Comrades, ladies and gentlemen:

Since we meet so early in 2012, an important year for us as Africans, because it is the historic Centenary of the African National Congress, the very first modern liberation movement on our Continent, I am honoured to welcome all participants at this important Conference and especially our foreign guests to our country.

I say this to highlight the fact that for over three centuries, the struggle to define what South Africa should be has, in addition to the deadly dialogue of arms, consisted in a contest among different schools of thought, and therefore a clash of ideas.

Obviously, in the past, this happened in the context of unequal circumstances, which made it impossible for the contradictory ideas to contend on an intellectually even playing field.

Happily, today we are a democratic country, which nevertheless battles, still, to mould all of us into one nation, sharing a common identity and a shared patriotism.

This surely means that it is in the vital interest of all our people that the historically inherited and contending understandings of "knowledge", which contestation continues to this day, should be given free reign, each to establish its place in our society through open dialogue as "the truth", and therefore a legitimate player in the formation of the new South Africa which is still in its infancy.

Basing myself on the announced purposes of this Conference as they appear on the website of the Stellenbosch University Business School (USB), I would like to congratulate the Business School, USB, for taking what I am convinced is a daring and timely initiative.

I am convinced that the Conference you begin today is daring because, in my view, it must necessarily address the fundamental issue immanent in all philosophical discourse, from ancient times, to date – what is knowledge!

I believe that, in this context, the USB initiative is also daring because it poses the interesting task that you must consider the thesis that it is possible to have "undemocratised knowledge", and therefore that you should discuss the challenge to achieve "the democratisation of knowledge".

The convening of this Conference is also timely because it is self-evident that 'knowledge', regardless of the philosophical debates about its meaning, and indeed because of this, has established itself as a critical driver with regard to the human objective to achieve what the USB has described as "the betterment of society".

I believe that in this context, the theme of this 'Knowledge Management Conference' presents the distinguished participants and delegates with the challenge, among others, to answer the questions:

- is there an objective social existence described as "objective reality", which exists independent of and outside individual human consciousness and cognition, and is therefore, in principle, freely accessible to all who seek to access "knowledge";
- in reality, does everybody have the "freedom to access" this "knowledge" about this supposed "objective reality"; and,
- does the possibility not exist that some in society could have such control over the ways and means and possibility to access this "knowledge" so that

they determine both who knows what, and what society in general knows, which it would believe constitutes an accurate appreciation of the 'objective reality' to which we have referred.

In the context of everything I have said I must assure the Conference that I will not venture into the various interesting and contentious philosophical debates relating to matters of epistemology and gnoseology.

I say this to acknowledge that what this Conference is about is the management and use of knowledge in the contemporary global setting, specifically to examine its "democratisation" and its role "in the betterment of society".

Obviously this is a subject that is close to our hearts as Africans.

This is because we have to confront the urgent and difficult challenges to eradicate poverty, underdevelopment and gross social inequality as quickly as possible, and to achieve lasting and equitable social and national cohesion and the continuous improvement of the life conditions of all our African people in the context of growing and transforming economies.

Accordingly, for very practical (utilitarian) reasons, we need access to such "knowledge" as would indeed accelerate our advance towards the achievement of the goals I have mentioned.

This poses the challenge to distinguish between what we as Africans 'know', which is therefore the 'knowledge' we would use to change our condition for the better, and what is the 'objective truth', which might very well be at variance with what we know as the 'knowledge' at our disposal.

This raises the important issue of epistemology with which you are familiar, of the distinction between what society 'knows' and assumes constitutes 'knowledge', and what can logically and independently be established as 'the truth', and therefore 'objective reality', regardless of whether we know it or not.

This posits the thesis that it is possible for individuals and societies to share an understanding about various processes and phenomena which would constitute their bank of 'knowledge', while such 'knowledge' would be different from, and even contrary to the 'objective truth' relating to these very same processes and phenomena.

Thus it becomes possible for action to be taken, intended to achieve 'the betterment of society', based on what we can characterise as 'false knowledge', because it is at variance with 'the objective truth'.

As many in this hall will know, this obliges us to refer to the contentious question relating to what is called the 'criterion of truth', which bears on the philosophical question – is there an objective measure that can be used to establish what is 'true knowledge' and what is 'false knowledge'!

Obviously, this obliges us to revert back to the fundamental question of epistemology and gnoseology – what is knowledge!

In this context, in his "Memoir" entitled "*Known and Unknown*", the former US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, says that at a Press Conference he said:

*"Reports that say something hasn't happened are always interesting to me because as we know, there are known knows: there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns: that is to say there are some things [we know] we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tends to be the difficult one."*

[Donald Rumsfeld: "*Known and Unknown: A Memoir.*" Sentinel, Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2011. Author's Note, xiii.]

Rumsfeld wrote that he made the comments we have cited to raise "*a larger point about the limits of human knowledge*".

In summary, in his 'Memoir', Rumsfeld, an important member of the ruling establishment in the United States for at least four decades, makes five (5) critical points.

These are that those who want to succeed as rulers, and therefore decisive players in shaping society, must:

- understand the critical importance of 'knowledge', relevant to the process of governance;
- act on the basis that government should make its interventions based on extant 'knowledge';
- prepare options to give the rulers the necessary flexibility to respond to developments which might not be foreseen, given the limitations of extant knowledge, but whose outer perimeters are known, but are not part of the reality which requires an immediate response;
- 'think outside the box', and therefore prepare for potential eventualities which are not based on any realities whose understanding can be derived from

observable and probable developments, or extrapolations from these, and thus position themselves to respond to any and all 'surprises'; and,

- therefore that, at all times and in all circumstances, bearing in mind the inevitable variability of these circumstances, they have to influence all the 'knowledge' that reaches the people, so that these masses sustain their confidence in the rulers they would have elected.

All this relates directly to the purposes of this Conference to the extent that it has set itself the objective to discuss "the role of knowledge in the betterment of society".

Those among us who are familiar with the United States media will know of the debate which erupted when, towards the end of this past year, one of the standard-bearers of US conservative opinion, *The Weekly Standard* (TWS), challenged the objectivity of various US "fact checking" media outlets.

In its December 19, 2011 edition, TWS carried a lead article written by its Editor, Mark Hemingway, entitled "*Lies, Damned Lies, and 'Fact Checking': The liberal media's latest attempt to control the discourse*".

In this article Hemingway wrote:

*"While it was always difficult in practice, once upon a time journalists at least paid obeisance to the idea of reporting the facts, as opposed to commenting on "narratives" –...Let alone being responsible for creating and debunking them.*

*"But today's fact checkers are largely uninterested in emphasizing the primacy of information..."*

*"What's going on here should be obvious enough. With the rise of cable news and the Internet, traditional media institutions are increasingly unable to control what political rhetoric and which narratives catch fire with the public. Media fact-checking operations aren't about checking facts so much as they are about a rear-guard action to keep inconvenient truths out of the conversation."*

On December 22, 2011, Glenn Kessler responded in *The Washington Post* to these charges in an article headed "*The biggest Pinochios of 2011*".

Among other things he wrote:

*"Fact checkers are under assault!..."*

*"Fact checking is a complement, not a replacement. Good beat reporters obviously are well placed to analyze issues and spot falsehoods, and that's an*

*essential part of their jobs. But, especially in a political season, it is difficult to analyze every claim and counterclaim while also writing day-to-day stories about the news. Fact checkers, by contrast, can dig deeply into an issue or even a single statement. We can help explain, at length, how a politician justifies his or her assertion and whether there is much of a factual basis for it.*

*"In other words, the information we provide adds to the rich menu of choices that readers of The Washington Post find when they come to our Web site, in addition to sustained political coverage, beat reporting and various blogs. Sometimes you may choke on the meal we serve, but each day the food (for thought) will be different."*

I have imposed on you what appears to be a localised debate relating to the US media to make a few points which I believe this Conference must discuss.

One of these is that this debate, immediately between the US publications, *The Weekly Standard* and *The Washington Post*, makes the statement that different political agendas necessarily signify different and conflicting bodies of "knowledge".

It also makes the statement that this "knowledge" disjuncture will necessarily result in different national government policies, depending on which "knowledge" faction has access to state power.

Similarly, it makes the critically important point that it matters who has the capacity and ability to persuade the public about which "knowledge" is "true", and which "false"!

It affirms the fundamental proposition of this Conference that "knowledge" is a fundamental driver in the process of social transformation, and therefore, ineluctably, a critical player in terms of the objective to achieve "the betterment of society".

In 1880, reflecting on Charles Darwin's seminal treatise, *The Origin of the Species*, the British biologist, Thomas Huxley, wrote: **"It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and to end as superstitions...Against any such a consummation let us all devoutly pray: for the scientific spirit is of more value than its products, and irrationally held truths may be more harmful than reasoned errors."**

Later, in 1885, he said: **"Science...commits suicide when it adopts a creed."**

I am also certain that Albert Einstein was absolutely correct when he said:

*"Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods."*

I am insisting on what I have said to emphasise four epistemological propositions that the assertions are correct that:

- (i) there exist "objective truths" which help to govern human behaviour;
- (ii) however, human cognition described as science, does not allow for "absolute and permanent truths";
- (iii) this is because all known scientific "truths" are inherently capable of falsification, because;
- (iv) the universe and all forms of material and human existence are infinite in terms of their expression, and thus the discovery of "the truth", and therefore the accumulation of "knowledge", constitute an unending journey of discovery of the regularities of this objective material and social reality, which exists independent of individual human cognition.

I have made these comments to underline the reality that though this Conference might correctly avoid issues that relate to epistemology and gnoseology, these should nevertheless remain 'at the back of our minds'.

I would like to believe that what I have said surely means that this Conference must address a number of vitally important questions.

Some of these are:

- in the contemporary global context, especially as it relates to Africa, given that this Conference is taking place on our Continent, what does "the betterment of society" mean;
- what "knowledge" do our decision-makers need to inform them as they strive to achieve such "betterment";
- who will produce such "knowledge";
- who will ensure that this "knowledge" reaches the decision-makers;
- who will act to ensure that these decision-makers do not act on the basis of what, in this context, as we have been alerted by the debate between *The (US) Weekly Standard* and *The Washington Post*, we can characterise as "false knowledge";

- what possibility is there to guarantee the independence of the “producers of knowledge”, such as the Universities, so that they enjoy the freedom to produce the objective “knowledge” all social development needs; and,
- what should be done to ensure that such “objective knowledge” is propagated, including through the mass media, while necessarily allowing that all other alternative “knowledge”, even though it is not part of “what is generally accepted”, is allowed unrestricted freedom to express itself, able to challenge “established and generally accepted truths”, including through all the available media.

I am certain that this requires that we descend from the possibly abstruse world of high philosophy to confront the challenges indeed of the ‘democratisation and role of knowledge in the betterment of society’.

I am certain that when we have sought to consider these issues as ‘activists’ of one kind or another, surely we must have arrived at very disturbing conclusions about the actual global contemporary reality of the management of “knowledge” relative both to the ‘democratisation of knowledge’ and the use of knowledge ‘for the betterment of society’.

I would like to suggest that, in important respects, “knowledge” has become ever less ‘democratised’ and even more compromised as an instrument for the ‘betterment of society’.

I say this being perfectly aware of what seems to be the general view that the “social media” enabled by the Internet constitute a defining intervention which both ‘democratises knowledge’ and facilitates its use ‘to better society’.

However, the questions I believe you must answer are (i) whether all this truly represents the ‘democratisation of knowledge’ and (ii) whether such ‘democratisation’ correctly defines the ‘role of knowledge in the betterment of society’!

I believe that all this raises the challenge to answer a question I raised earlier – what is “knowledge” and, consequently, relative to the theme of this Conference, what “knowledge” are we talking about, and who ‘manages’ it!

Accordingly, I would suggest that in the context of the challenging themes of this important Conference, you take some time to inquire into such specific matters which relate to ‘the betterment of global human society’ as:

(i) the obligations of the developed world towards Africa, in the context of what the influential British magazine, *‘The Economist’*, in an ‘illustrative’ cover page in May 2000, characterised as *‘The hopeless continent’*;

[The false '**knowledge**' about Africa arising from such prejudiced reporting has, inter alia, discouraged investors from making their capital available for the development of Africa, thus serving as a self-fulfilling prediction.]

(ii) the 2003 war against Iraq;

[The false '**knowledge**' was propagated that Iraq possessed 'weapons of mass destruction', which was not true, but was used to launch a war which has generated immense problems both for Iraq and, at least, the wider Middle East region.]

(iii) the 2011 activation of the concept of the "responsibility to protect" relating to the enforcement of the so-called "no-flight zone" concerning Libya;

[The false '**knowledge**' was advanced that the Khaddafi regime was about to slaughter millions of civilians. This was used to justify the imposition of a 'no-flight-zone' over Libya, which served as a cover to overthrow the Libyan Government and impose a regime approved by the Western Powers, in their interest.]

(iv) the behaviour of global financial capital, which led to the 2008 financial and economic crisis, from which the world economy has not yet recovered, and which resulted in the impoverishment of millions throughout the world;

[Financial capital communicated false '**knowledge**' especially about US mortgage loans, the so-called sub-prime lending, which nearly resulted in an more punishing global economic depression.]

(v) the role of the international Firms of Accountants in the context of Corporate governance;

[Major global Accounting Firms communicated false '**knowledge**' about then major firms, such as Enron, which resulted in the loss of billions of dollars by honest investors, including workers' pension funds.]

(vi) successive scares about world health;

[The Council of Europe has asserted that false '**knowledge**' was propagated during 2009, which resulted in billions of tax-payer dollars being spent in many countries to respond to a fictional 'swine flu epidemic', which benefited the globally dominant and highly profitable pharmaceutical companies.]

(vii) the year 2000 Y2K scare.

[The false '**knowledge**' that the world would seize-up because of an end-of-century computer mal-function proved to be unfounded, having no scientific basis.]

I mention these particular instances only as examples, and most certainly not as a comprehensive catalogue of instances which illustrate the grave challenge all humanity faces to confront the critical issues that are the subject of this important Conference, of the management of knowledge in the interests of genuine human advancement.

In my view, all these instances confirm the timeliness of precisely the two important themes of this Conference, certainly in their macro-social implications, that "**knowledge**" should be 'democratised' and should be used to 'better' the human condition.

At the same time, they illustrate the destructive potential of the abuse of "**knowledge**" by those who exercise preponderant power, to propagate their version of "**knowledge**" for selfish ends, as exposed in the example we cited earlier, relating to the contest between *The (US) Weekly Standard* and *The Washington Post*.

Thus the question arises organically – does it not stand to reason that the '**knowledge**' generally available to society to effect its own 'betterment' is in fact such '**knowledge**' as the preponderant powers would permit to be 'available', in their own interest!

I say this because of the frightening reality contemporary society faces, of the capacity of a small but powerful minority of humanity, to determine what society should 'know', which passes as '**knowledge**'.

The world community of nations has also accepted the notion that there are various elements of '**knowledge**' to which should be attached private proprietary rights, thus making such '**knowledge**' a profitable commodity for those who can legitimately claim ownership of such 'intellectual property'.

This is without regard to whether such '**knowledge**' is required urgently to achieve the 'betterment of society', overriding the concerns of a few to exploit such new '**knowledge**' as they might have developed, to accumulate for themselves whatever financial gain.

In this regard, the distinguished delegates will be familiar with the debate that has raged for many years concerning the 1994 WTO "*Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights*", TRIPS, especially relating to affordable drugs and medicines for poor people, the majority of humanity.

As happens in all democratic countries, during our years in Government, naturally there was always a lively debate in our country about the policies of the Government.

In part this was naturally driven by different political and ideological perspectives.

However, in part, the various debates arose from differences about 'knowledge', and specifically 'knowledge' about various elements of South African social reality.

To give just one example of this, we had people who argued that apartheid ended in South Africa in 1994 when we had our first democratic elections.

Others, including the ruling party, argued that these elections had indeed ended white minority political domination, but that the socio-economic legacy of colonialism and apartheid remained the defining feature of our reality.

The response to this was that by insisting on the fact of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, we were 'playing the race card', directly contrary to the Constitutional directive to create a non-racial society.

Thus the two contending factions sought to achieve the hegemony of their respective presentations of 'knowledge' about South African social reality, arguing for the use of their respective representations to determine national policy in many critical areas.

Naturally, each claimed that its body of 'knowledge' about the country was what was needed to achieve 'the betterment of our society'.

This limited example about the importance of 'knowledge', in this case in our specific context, emphasises the critical relevance of this Conference and the topics it is scheduled to discuss.

Everything I have said underlines the need for the democratisation of knowledge precisely to ensure that knowledge, the collective output of human thought and inquiry, and therefore the property of humanity as a whole, is readily available to better the human condition, and is used for this noble purpose.

The questions remain to be answered:

- in what should the vitally necessary democratisation of knowledge consist?;
- what should be done to create and maintain the necessary space for the production of new knowledge and the free propagation of all knowledge, which must be underpinned by the existence of the political order freely to engage in

intellectual inquiry, and therefore the contest of ideas, and the unrestricted propagation of all knowledge?;

- what should be done to help ensure that everybody who is a role-player in the struggle for the betterment of society, including government and civil society, has access to the required knowledge? and,
- what should be done to empower these role-players so that they do indeed use this knowledge for the betterment of society?

I would imagine that when you discuss these matters, you will have no choice but to reflect on such important and relevant matters as:

- the financing and empowerment of Universities to serve as excellent and autonomous centres of learning, research and communication of knowledge;
- the expansion of the cadre of young intellectuals empowered to create new knowledge;
- investment in research and development in mathematics, the natural sciences, engineering, technology and the social sciences, including through innovation centres;
- attracting back to Africa, and other developing regions, the domestic intelligentsia which has emigrated to the developed Western countries;
- the establishment of Centres of Excellence in regions such as Africa, to ensure that our poor countries pool their limited resources rather than spread these thinly and in an unaffordable manner in too many countries;
- the reinforcement of the democratic setting to enable the free communication of knowledge, including the space for the propagation of contending ideas;
- consideration of the ways and means by which this can be achieved, including through the democratisation of the media and the development of alternative media especially to liberate the communication of knowledge from the imperatives which affect the commercial media, contrary to such strange practices as “embedded journalists”, as happened during the Iraq War; and,
- developing such public thirst for knowledge as would constrain and limit the capacity of the most powerful in contemporary society to dictate to society what should be known.

As this learned gathering knows, in 1961, as he was about to relinquish power, then President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, spoke out against the concentration of illegitimate social power in what he described as the "*military-industrial complex*".

Among other things he said: "*The total influence (of this complex) - economic, political, even spiritual - is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government...The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist...*"

*"Akin to, and largely responsible for the sweeping changes in our industrial-military posture, has been the technological revolution during recent decades. In this revolution, research has become central; it also becomes more formalized, complex, and costly. A steadily increasing share is conducted for, by, or at the direction of, the Federal government.*

*"Today, the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop, has been overshadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and testing fields. In the same fashion, the free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity. For every old blackboard there are now hundreds of new electronic computers.*

*"The prospect of domination of the nation's scholars by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present and is gravely to be regarded."*

The danger to which Eisenhower drew attention, fifty years ago, about the deleterious effect of the national security state and the military-industrial complex on the freedom to generate knowledge, and the use of this knowledge for the public good, has not abated.

To the contrary, it has continuously worsened, compounded especially by the related centralisation of power in the hands of a few both through the economic, political and social role of financial capital and a global media controlled by very few, among others.

In this context, relating also to the challenges we have mentioned concerning developments in the field of the development of drugs and medicines, I would also like to cite a statement made by Dr Marcia Angell, a former editor-in-chief of the eminent medical journal, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and later Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

In a May/June 2010 article in the *Boston Review*, she wrote:

*"Medical centers (in the US) increasingly act as though meeting industry's needs is a legitimate purpose of an academic institution. In addition to grant support, academic researchers now have a variety of other financial ties to the companies that sponsor their work. They serve as consultants to the same companies whose products they evaluate,...agree to be the listed authors of articles ghost-written by interested companies, promote drugs and devices at company-sponsored symposia...Many also have equity interest in sponsoring companies...Increasingly, industry is setting the agenda in academic centers, and that agenda has more to do with industry's mission than the mission of the academy...Conflicts of interest in academic medicine have serious consequences, and it is time to stop making excuses for them."*

I believe that convened here today, at this important Conference hosted by the Stellenbosch University Business School are eminent thinkers who are as determined as President Dwight D. Eisenhower was to liberate the production of knowledge from stultifying control by big public and private power, thus to defend the perspective which Thomas Huxley advanced in 1887 when he said, regarding the expansion of the frontiers of knowledge:

*"Our business in every generation it to reclaim a little more land, to add something to the extent and the solidity of our possessions."*

The Stellenbosch University Business School and you who are gathered at this Conference are absolutely correct that given the immense contemporary global challenges, including as they affect the poor of the world, knowledge must be democratized and must be used for the betterment of all humanity.

The difficult question you will have to answer through your deliberations is whether you dispose of the courage to speak out as Eisenhower did, and as Marcia Angell has, to assert the sanctity of the development of new knowledge and the free propagation of knowledge, daring to point the way forward about what should be done in this regard.

As I began this presentation, I mentioned the fact of our celebration, eight days ago, of the Centenary of the ANC. As we, the Africans, enter into our Second Century of the existence of an organized modern movement for national liberation, we would surely do well to join you, the African and international progressive intelligentsia, to give practical meaning to the famous Chinese saying:

*"Let a hundred flowers bloom: let a hundred schools of thought contend!"*

I am honoured to wish your Conference success.

Thank you.