



## TRIBUTE TO AMBASSADOR BILLY MODISE by the President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Thabo Mbeki



*“Time is divided into two rivers:  
one flows backward, devouring life already lived;  
the other moves forward with you  
exposing your life.  
For a single second they may be joined.  
Now.  
This is that moment,  
The drop of an instant  
that washes away the past.  
It is the present.  
It is in your hands.” Pablo Neruda*

**When the time comes to tell the stories of all those who made enormous contributions to our struggle for national liberation and the construction of a free South Africa, Billy Modise will be among the patriots who will be honoured in those narratives.**

If Time, as Neruda tells us, “is divided into two rivers,” then indeed as we look back at the past and the present, we will say that both the struggle for liberation and the new society we strive to build have been enriched by Ambassador Modise’s contributions. Of him we will say that we were fortunate that he always took the present into his hands.

Billy Modise took to the rivers of which Pablo Neruda wrote in 1955, when he joined the African National Congress Youth League. A student at Fort Hare University College from 1955 to 1959, he belonged among the outstanding galaxy of Youth Leaguers of those years.

The story that has yet to be told will speak of the new ground that Billy Modise and his young Congress comrades had to break, and the contribution they made to our struggle as a whole. By the time he left Fort Hare, Billy was the Regional Secretary of the Youth League, responsible for the whole region of Victoria East, and not just Fort Hare.

He had to leave South Africa following the post-Sharpeville police crackdown in 1960. Moving to Sweden, the demands of our struggle were such that, once again, he should break new ground. He therefore remained engaged in our struggle by working with the Swedish solidarity movement with Africa, which was started among students, to help black students from South Africa and Namibia to study in Sweden.

Partly because of his influence, Swedish students raised money literally with their own blood, by giving blood at clinics and donating the proceeds to the liberation movements. By the 1970s, a number of these students had also entered Swedish politics.

Notable among them was the outstanding friend of our people and supporter of our struggle, Olof Palme, a former head of the International Committee of the Swedish National Union of Students, who would become Sweden’s Prime Minister and was later cruelly assassinated.

In 1988, in recognition of the work he had done consistently over many years to mobilise the Swedish people to support our struggle

against apartheid, Billy was appointed the ANC Chief Representative (Ambassador) to Sweden.

This appointment constituted a crowning and fitting tribute to a patriot who had done invaluable work to develop a critically important pillar of our struggle, the world anti-apartheid movement. Thanks in good measure to his efforts, Sweden had emerged as one of the most formidable and unwavering participants in the global movement of solidarity with the ANC and our struggle as a whole.

But before this, Billy had, once again, been asked to break new ground, to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between the Namibian and South African people, by lecturing at and helping to administer the Namibia Institute in Lusaka, Zambia. Here he worked with others to help prepare many of the Namibian patriots who would assume the reigns of power when Namibia achieved its independence in 1990.

After 31 years in exile, Billy returned to South Africa, eager to continue to commit his energies, intellect and experience to the service of the people of South Africa during the challenging years from 1990 when we negotiated the end of white minority rule.

As Head of Matla Trust, once again he had to break new ground by doing what we had never had the opportunity to do before. He carried out extensive work throughout the country in the area of voter education, to prepare our people for our first ever democratic elections of 1994.

When freedom came, we reverted to him once more, to ask him to break new ground. This meant that, again, he had to leave his beloved motherland in 1995 to serve as the first black South African High Commissioner to Canada.

When he returned in 1999, he worked as the Chief of Protocol within the Department of Foreign Affairs, confronted with the task to establish a new protocol regime to service the largest diplomatic corps in our country’s history, and the most extensive system of inter-state visits that had ever taken place between our country and the rest of the world.

As the government of South Africa, we are indeed privileged to have benefited from his experience and expertise. In his leadership positions, most recently as the Chief of State Protocol, he has served the Presidency and the nation well. He has given the formalities of state protocols a more human

touch, which has brought a feeling of joyful welcome to the many friends from the rest of the world we have been privileged to receive to our shores.

His contribution to everything we had to do during half-a-century, to set our country and people on a new path of liberty and hope has been immense.

The example he set serves to inspire the new generation that now sails along the two rivers of which Pablo Neruda spoke, patriots who are passionate and enthusiastic about their tasks and share his great love for our country and our people.

We pay tribute to him as a comrade, a friend and a fellow South African of principle and of the steadfast patience of those who work to build a new civilisation, a lifetime defender of human freedom and dignity.

As Neruda reminded us, at particular moments the two rivers of Time may be joined, presenting those who make history with the opportunity to seize the time. In his quiet and insightful way, Billy Modise has played his part in ensuring that we do possess the future and that indeed our destiny lies in our own hands. As he takes his leave from the Foreign and Public Service, let us ensure that his future path is strewn with laurels.

I have no doubt that in his own inimitable, humble and thoughtful way, he will continue to be a true servant of our people.

For history has demanded of us, in the words of Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that “we combine our muscle and our brains in a new direction”, and that we work together “in those tasks which increase the sum total of humanity”, addressing “new problems, which demands true inventions.”

I have no doubt that even in his retirement and as he takes on other roles, to break new ground, he will continue to shape the new direction we have taken as a nation and add value to the building of our country.

Billy Modise will continue to help channel the movement forward, and remain among the valued patriots who have, during the centuries, dared to take the present into their hands and thus invent our future.

**I thank him for everything he has done for the nation, and wish him every success in his retirement.**

## TRIBUTE TO AMBASSADOR BILLY MODISE

by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Africa,  
Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma



**At times like these, it is hard to describe the full extent of the invaluable contribution made by Billy Modise from his early youth to the present in our struggle for freedom, in helping to lay the foundations of the new South Africa and in playing a pivotal role in projecting South Africa in the international arena.**

I am reminded of the words of Ben Okri in *A Way of Being Free* when he writes that:

“The only hope is in the creation of alternative values, alternative realities. The only hope is in daring to redream

one’s place in the world, a beautiful act of imagination, and a sustained act of self-becoming”.

For Billy Modise, every step he took from the time he was a student, to the long period he spent in exile, to his return, was motivated by a desire for change, for building a new democratic, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa characterised by justice, equality and a human rights culture.

As a student he held positions in the ANC Youth League and in various leadership structures that actively campaigned against the introduction of separate education between black and white at South African universities.

His life in exile showed the importance he placed on the international mobilisation of youth against apartheid. His participation in the solidarity movement in Sweden helped many students from South Africa and Namibia to study there. His participation in the Namibia Institute in Zambia further helped to assist students in receiving an education.

Later as the ANC Chief Representative to Sweden, he successfully played his part in internationalising the South African struggle and in popularising the aims of the liberation movement.

He worked extensively with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the United Nations (UN) in his efforts to help bring about a free South Africa.

Within his quiet and calm demeanour, resides a great strength of character and resolve that comes from decades of work in the international arena and in creating aware-

ness and support for our freedom struggle as well as playing a valuable role in preparation of South Africa’s first democratic elections, especially through his work in the Matla Trust.

When apartheid ended, the South African Embassy in Canada was restored to the status of a High Commission and it received Ambassador Modise as its first black envoy in April 1995.

In recent years, in his role as Chief of State Protocol, Ambassador Modise has spent long and exhausting hours working towards the goal of achieving our foreign policy objectives. He executed his duties as a planner and officiating officer of Presidential ceremonial activities with excellence. He has performed his duties with insights and creativity to show the world that we have embarked on a new path. In this regard, it would perhaps be fitting to describe his role also as one who brought to the job a certain people-centredness and an understanding that we are projecting to the world a new nation that is also more caring and more humane.

I believe that through his work as the Chief of State Protocol, Ambassador Modise played his part in nurturing an environment that was sustaining and opened up the way to greater co-operation between our international counterparts and ourselves.

In his quiet and unassuming way, he helped to lay the foundation for a different reality and projected the values of our new country.

Our department has indeed been blessed with the presence of a good, gifted and humble man. He is indeed a

remarkable personality who firmly stamped a new identity on the work of the Department and infused new ideas and analytical vision with the aim of improving our international relations.

Throughout his intellectually and politically rich and varied life, he has displayed this eloquence and passion in the domestic and international arenas alike.

I am sure that he is leaving behind a team that has benefited from his astuteness and experience as a hard-working and tireless diplomat. He officially left public service on 30 April 2006.

His passion is not only evident in his work, but also in his love of life itself. His love for golf is well known. Let it also be said that he was not shy to be the first to grace a dance floor with his presence!

Let us thank his wife, Sis Yoli, and his daughter, Thandi, for their support of his rather busy work schedule and for understanding the importance of all the travelling that this required which took him on so many occasions away from home.

I know that Ambassador Modise looks forward to a much less hectic work schedule and to spending more time with his family doing the things that he has been unable to do in all these years.

We will certainly miss him greatly, his support and his comradeship. And we will treasure the friendship that we will still share in the years to come.

**We thank Ambassador Modise for his outstanding and unique contribution.**

## TRIBUTE TO AMBASSADOR BILLY MODISE

*by the Director-General of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Africa,  
Dr Ayanda Ntsaluba*



**In the book, *The Black Jacobins*, CLR James points out that “Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make.” Much has been said about Ambassador Billy Modise’s contribution to this country.**

But what remains unsaid is the extent to which the Ambassador in his various roles has understood the workings of history and how South Africa is located in a broader historical reality in which we have to perform our duties and make progress. I think that this makes him one of the great men of our history to grace the Department of Foreign Affairs with his presence and his valuable insights.

It is precisely these insights coupled with sound knowledge and experience that in the years have helped to keep this Department on course and that have assisted the transformation processes. Part of his strength has come from his ability to represent what many might see as a more true reflection of the sentiments of our people. He deserves high

tribute for what he has done for this country and as a Department, we salute him in humble gratitude as a star on our national firmament.

He has enriched our lives with his ideas and the lives of those who have worked closely with him because he is so intellectually stimulating. The respect and admiration that has been showered on him following his retirement says something about the extraordinary personality of one who would wish to call himself an ordinary and humble man.

During his years in the Foreign Service, Ambassador Modise emerged as one of the finest among the Department leadership, who could grapple with ideas, make credible interventions and also excel as a formidable debater. We see him as a man of courage and conviction and who has also been well loved by all.

I think it would be true to observe that Ambassador Modise exudes the cool air of thoughtful authority. Over years of experience, his judgements remain sound, insights profound and motivation high. As a Chief of State Protocol, he has managed to dignify every room or occasion and has made dignitaries and leaders feel comfortable and cared for even under the most formal and trying of circumstances.

Our senior officials and those of a younger generation look up to him, not only for what he has accomplished, but for who he is and for what they can learn from him. Many are overwhelmed by his very warm, genuine, enthusiastic, vibrant and magnetic personality and his indomitable spirit. I think that he has been a brilliant teacher, a professional and an excellent communicator who has inspired staff and left a valuable institutional memory, so that others can continue in his footsteps.

We are especially pleased to have been associated with a person of his outstanding and extraordinary talent, one of the Great Men in the history of this Department and a leading light as our new country has entered and forged

a path for itself in the international arena.

**We thank him and we salute him and wish him a well-deserved retirement.**

## TRIBUTE TO AMBASSADOR BILLY MODISE

*by the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps  
Dr Abdullah Abdussalam Alzubeidi*



**To be the Chief of Protocol of the New Republic of South Africa is a complicated job that demands global sensitivity. It is a daily challenge that affects all levels of the South African government and its international guests. Thousands of diplomatic staff and international organisations’ personnel here make up a global village in microcosm requiring meticulous attention of the Chief of Protocol.**

For the past six years, this gruelling job has been handled by none other than Ambassador Billy Modise. Only he would accept such a hazardous occupation involving intricate protocols and diplomatic niceties expected by diverse people from all over the world, people shaped by different cultures and political systems and inevitably

have different expectations. How has Ambassador Billy Modise fared? You will be the judge.

Ambassador Modise was recalled for the job from his diplomatic posting. Upon return, he took charge of only two dozen foreign missions and correspondingly small staff. But with the institutionalisation of the new political dispensation, his new job gathered the momentum of a tsunami. There were suddenly thousands of official and ex-official visitors, conference and other diplomatic occasions. Handling protocol assignments inside and outside the country became a heavy responsibility indeed.

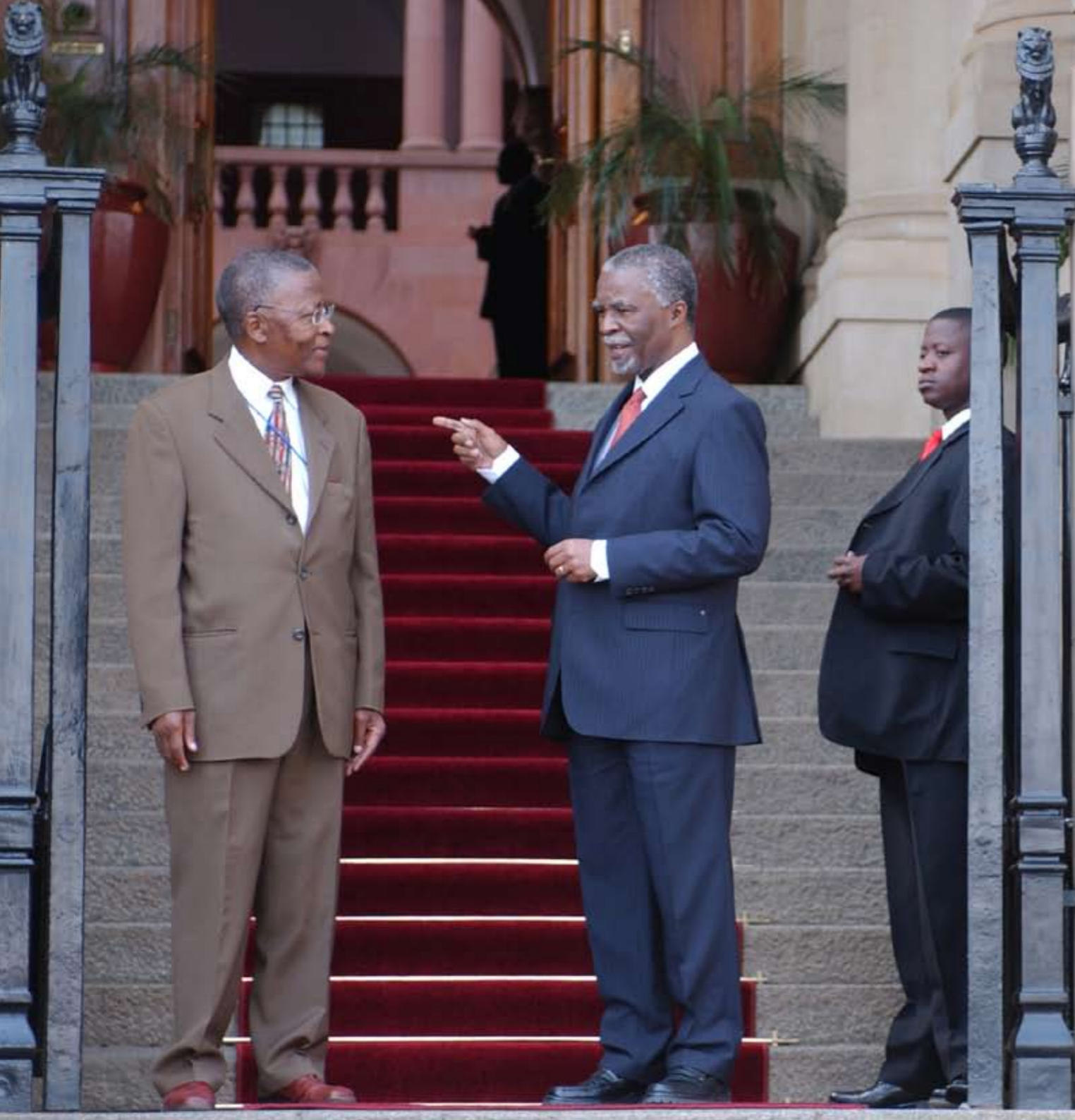
A typical day’s programme for Ambassador Modise could have involved talking to a counterpart thousands of miles away, travelling to meet another somewhere in Johannesburg or at Airport, giving a speech at an official occasion, advising various government Departments on what to do during an official visit of a foreign dignitary. When you phoned Ambassador Modise, he might have answered you in the middle of the night somewhere thousands of kilometres away.

As a go-between the South African government and the diplomatic corps, Ambassador Modise was endowed with a remarkable capacity to find acceptable solutions. What started off as ‘no-go’ situations soon melted into ‘maybe’ and, ultimately, into ‘win-win’ compromises. Ambassador Modise’s sense of humour was a catalyst in these processes but, more than this, his African warmth cemented lifetime friendships.

**Ambassador Billy Modise will sorely be missed.**













“

...praises of a job well done.

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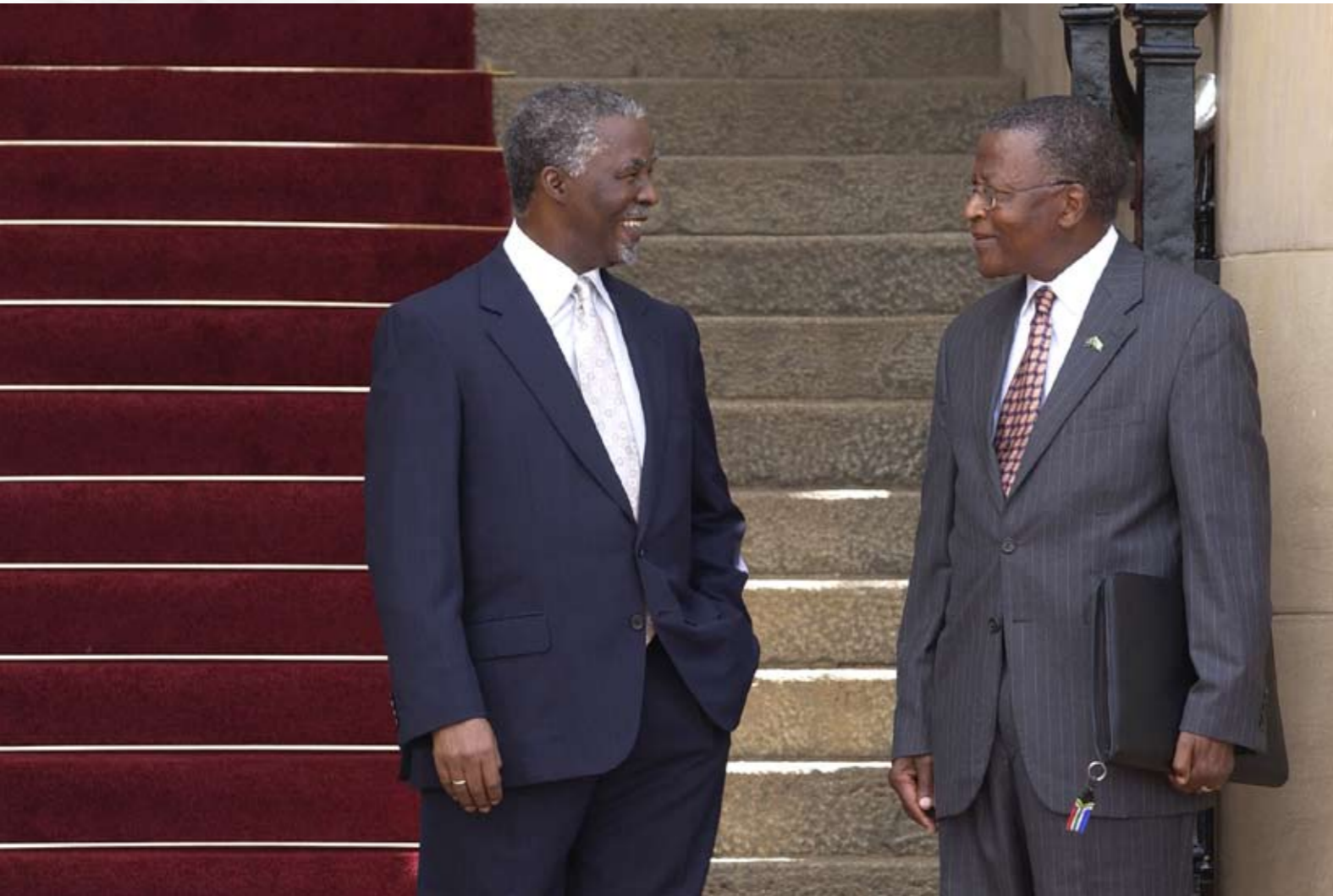
Thus the saying: *Modisa o gorositse...*







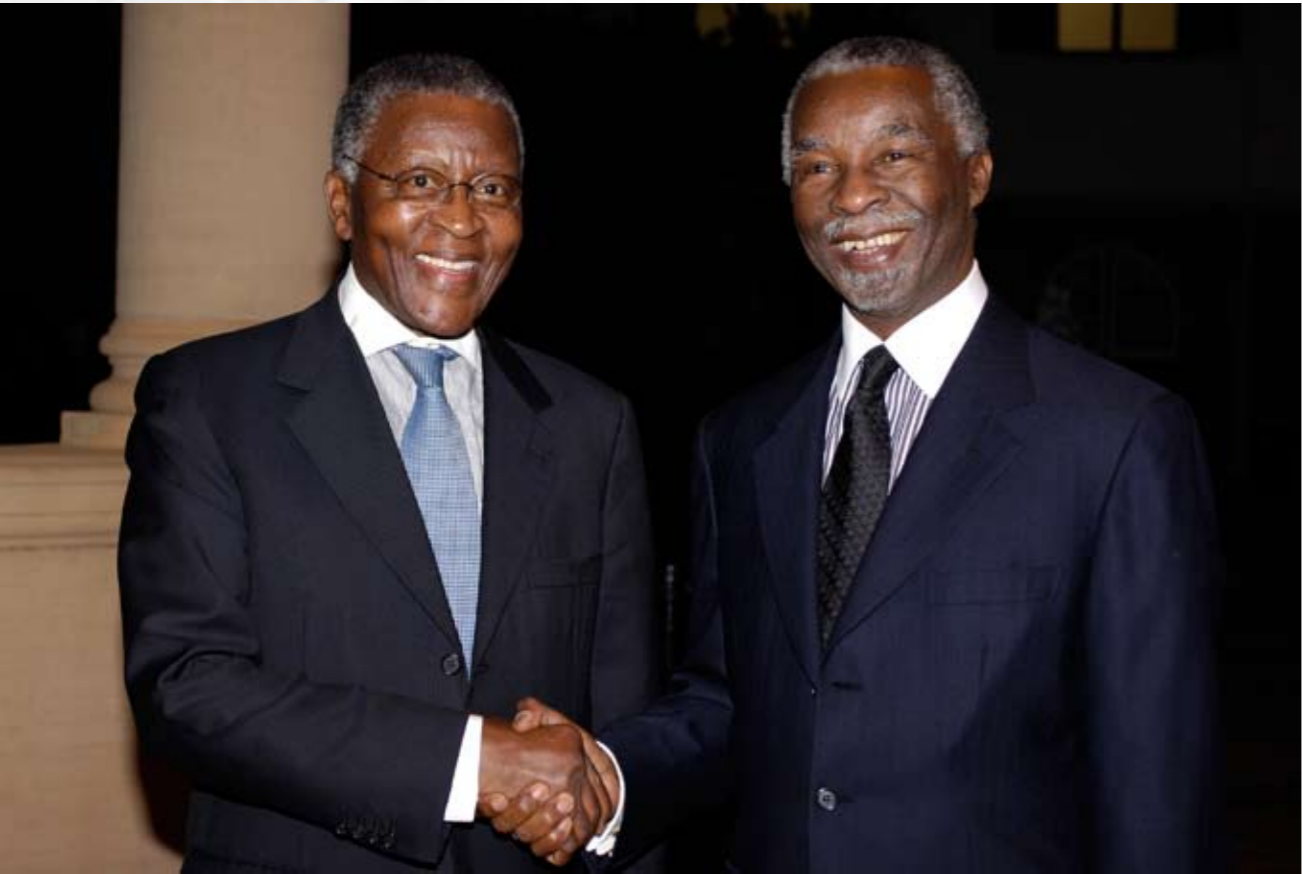
“ ...providing guidance to our key Principals ”





“ He provided direction and leadership... ”











“ ...you deserve *“letlalo la nkwe”* – “leopard skin”... ”

THE PRESIDENCY

DIE PRESIDENSIE





“

...an admiration and  
acknowledgement of a job  
well done ”















“ South Africa is proud of you! ”



“ Sincere thanks goes to you and your family ”



## *With Compliments*

### **Dear Ambassador Modise**

BMW South Africa would like to take this opportunity to thank you for all of your valued support during the last years. It has been an absolute honor and privilege working with you and getting to know you. Your strength and knowledge is and will continue to be an inspiration to all of us.

We wish you, your wife and family all of the best as you take on this new journey.

**From**  
**All at BMW South Africa**



### **Dear Ambassador Modise**

Eskom extends its gratitude for your invaluable support and for the role you have played in creating an enabling environment for us as we ventured into markets outside of South Africa. As the Chief of State Protocol, and through your diplomatic savvy, you have been instrumental in ensuring that South Africa acquires its international obligations with distinction. You have indeed been a loyal patriot and of great service to the country.

Enjoy your retirement. Please take with you our earnest wishes for your continued health and gaiety for many years to come.

**T.S Gcabashe**  
**Eskom Chief Executive**



PetroSA recognizes the significant role played by Ambassadors in developing oil and gas business opportunities for PetroSA. Their invaluable contributions are critical to our strategic objectives of growth and expansion into the African continent and beyond. On this occasion of bidding farewell to the Chief of State Protocol, the honourable Ambassador Modise, PetroSA reiterates its appreciation of the support that we have been, and continue to be getting from our Ambassadors around the world. We salute the honourable Ambassador Modise for being part of a dispensation that facilitates business opportunities for South Africa. We hope to continue relying on the ambassadorial fraternity for opening doors and providing business referrals.

**From**  
**PetroSA**

