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HATE CRIMES BILL WELCOMED IN SA

SOUTH Africans from different walks of life have applauded the decision by Minister Malusi Gigaba and the Department of Home Affairs this week to prohibit Pastor Steven Anderson and 17 of his associates from visiting this country.

This bold move is a clear stand against hate and prejudice, and strengthens our commitment to building a just and humane society where dignity, respect and equality are afforded to all.

The views of a visitor like Anderson, whose abhorrent rants, in addition to denigrating women, Africans and Jews, are transphobic, homophobic and, clearly, not welcome in a country still healing from the wounds of its oppressive past.

The prohibition against him will be implemented in terms of section 29 (1)(d) of the Immigration Act, which allows the department to disallow a foreigner into the country who is “a member of or adherent to an association or organisation advocating the practice of racial hatred or social violence”.

Anderson clearly falls into this category. Barely a day after members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex community were gunned down in an attack on an Orlando nightclub earlier this year, Anderson said: “The good news is that there are 50 fewer paedophiles in this world”. He has referred to Judaism as the “synagogue of Satan”.

The decision to bar his entry is indicative of the government’s recognition of the dangers inherent in hateful language directed against any community in our country.

Discriminatory speech not only diminishes the dignity of those it is aimed at, but also damages the fabric of society, tearing apart

MyView

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South Africa’s delicate social cohesion, creates division and promotes ignorance.

Similarly, hate crimes, “identity crimes” which send a message to the larger group the victim is seen to represent, traumatise not just the victim but the community.

These acts of bigotry generate an atmosphere of suspicion and insecurity, making nation-building in a country such as ours with a deeply fractured past almost impossible.

History has taught us that what begins with words often ends in action and that hate directed at one group does not end there. Words have power.

As we saw during the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda and even during apartheid, a society where people are dehumanised creates a space where human rights can be infringed, democracy retreats and, ultimately, atrocities can unfold.

The move against Anderson is also a positive sign of progress in the seriousness with which issues affecting vulnerable minorities in South Africa are being addressed.

Civil society’s voice was taken seriously, and the power of grassroots and community lobbying to create change was highlighted.

There is hope that the social dialogue around this issue builds momentum for increased hate crime awareness, education and legislation.

A Hate Crimes Bill, such as

the one proposed, would not only improve the policing of, and judicial response to, acts of hate but would also establish societal norms in which hate would be intolerable.

Bodies such as the Hate Crimes Working Group are leading efforts to effectively monitor hate crimes and use the data in lobbying for comprehensive legislative measures to combat hate.

The legal process under way needs to be carried out alongside tolerance and diversity programmes that explore the repercussions of discrimination and dehumanisation, transforming perpetrators and bystanders to upstanding citizens.

Amid the celebrations at South Africa’s stand on Anderson’s visit, we must seize the opportunity for a deeper national conversation, interrogating our own personal and embedded prejudices and examine ways in which the structural inequalities and intersection of oppression can be addressed.

More than two decades into democracy, South Africa remains a society divided, facing critical challenges and widespread social unrest. Freedom of expression is of the utmost importance in a democracy, but this right has important limitations.

It is a tragic and unacceptable truth that despite having one of the world’s most progressive



Pastor Steven Anderson is well known for his outlandish statements.

constitutions, the situation on the ground for many members of the LGBTI community in our country is one of “daily atrocities” and persecution based solely on their identity.

In a country such as ours struggling with a legacy of racism and brutality, we need to take a stand against hate.

For the LGBTI community and other vulnerable groups, such as the refugee and asylum seeker community who bear the brunt of

xenophobia, every South African has a moral responsibility to put the constitutional values and principles of the Freedom Charter into practice and make the dream of a non-racial, non-sexist, truly free South Africa a reality.

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