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Keynote address by Mr. J.D Thibedi, Acting Premier of the North West Province, at the Premier's Excellence Awards event, Mafikeng, 11 December 2008.

Date: Thursday, December 11, 2008

- Programme Director:
- Honourable MECs and MPLs
- Our Director-General and Heads of Department
- Our Beloved Staff Members the Public Servants of the North West Province Public Works
- Distinguished Guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Tonight's event is one of those you attend with joy, anticipation, and a sense of achievement, much like the graduation of your child.

Two days ago, at the celebration of the International Anti-corruption Day, I referred to the fact that the Public Service Commission had declared our Province a leader in compliance with anti-corruption measures. The Province, we dare not forget, is not something inanimate. It is the men and the women we call the public servants, and it is the masses they serve that we call civil society.

It is therefore those people's servants – and their integrity – that the Public Service Commission saluted. It is their honesty and commitment to good governance that the Commission appreciated and congratulated.

The Province is an organic and material being which is sensitive to the proverbial scorching suns, lashing rains and blustery winds that do no one any good. It is a sentient being which feels and responds to pain. Handled sensitively it can grow and be a source of life to many, and a provider to most. Our Province's capacity to develop and be a source of life to its inhabitants is best explained in the words of the English poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, where he says out of nothing can come much, out of much can come more, and out of more can come much more.

Over the years, including this one, out of much has come more in our Province, and out of more has come much more.

That, in no small measure, is due to our public servants, who have proven the anonymously written words that:

Excellence can be obtained if you:
... care more than others think is wise;

... risk more than think is safe;
... dream more than others think is practical;
... expect more than others think is possible.

It is a proper and appropriate tribute to these special men and women – quite often unsung heroes – that we meet here tonight. I, for one, am humbled by the experience of having to speak in honour of people who are visible but often go unseen, who can talk but often go unheard, and who serve but often go unrewarded.

We all know that the lot of a public servant is often one of thanklessness, where blunders are pounced upon with speed and condemned but good deeds are often unnoticed and seldom acknowledged.

We are here to say we have eyes, and we can see; we have mouths, and we can speak; that we have seen the selfless work of our public servants, and we can speak about their dedication. We are here to recognize higher levels of service delivery, innovation and excellence in our Public Service.

Many a man and many a woman in the Public Service could be serving elsewhere and enjoying perquisites beyond ones afforded and offered by government. Many could be in the private sector where little or no complaining is heard from clients and stakeholders on a daily basis.

They remain here, however, staying true to their commitment to national service and nation-building; daily turning the intangible concept of Batho Pele into a tangible life-changing experience for our people. They continue to make the philosophy of ubuntu/botho a lived, and living, reality.

I speak of people who represent high levels of service standards, quality and dedication to the work of government; who symbolize total selflessness and commitment to the work of building a better South Africa, and the North West Province in particular; who exemplify the best of our values of human-centredness; and who function in tandem with others in a team spirit and approach. Indeed, I speak of men and women who have earned the respect of their colleagues, as amply attested to by their being nominated by those very colleagues for recognition here tonight.

Their colleagues have recognized their excellence in the same way that other seagulls recognize the excellence of a fellow seagull, Jonathan Livingston, in a book of the same name, and they said to Jonathan:

Jonathan, you are pretty well one-in-a-million bird. Most of us came along ever so slowly. We went from one world into another that was almost exactly like it, forgetting right away where we had come from, not caring where we were headed, living for the moment. Do you have any idea how many lives we must have gone through before we even got the first idea that there is more to life than eating, or fighting, or power in the Flock? A thousand lives, Jon, ten thousand! And then another hundred lives until we began to learn that there is such a thing as perfection, and another hundred again to get the idea that our purpose for living is to find that perfection and show it forth.

Indeed, the colleagues of tonight's achievers have learned that there is such a thing as perfection, and that our purpose for living is to find that perfection and show it to our compatriots.

We are here to say we know that some among us are role models, trailblazers and pioneers whose work ethic and behavioural ethos are an inspiration to colleagues and an enhancement to the work of government and its service to the people of the North West Province. Even as we talk of various categories, including project teams, programs, directorates and departments, it is ultimately people that we are talking of – people to whom jobs in government are no jobs but, indeed, public service to deliver public value to the people of our Province and our country.

You are a personification of excellence, turning that esoteric concept into something tangible and challenging your fellow employees into pursuing goals farther ahead and ideals higher up. You prove Ralph Marston true when he says, "Excellence is not a skill. It is an attitude." You are living symbols of transformation and the rewriting of our country's history from the violation of human rights to the restoration of human dignity.

Your colleagues have seen you go beyond yourselves and travelling the proverbial extra mile in your quest to deliver quality service to your people. From that they have found extra motivation and inspiration, and for that they thank you, and in recognition of that we congratulate you here tonight.

You have shown respect for our programmes and priorities as a Province, including those, on gender, affirmative action, and HIV/AIDS, relating to the socio-economic reconstruction of our society. Internally you have demonstrated the meaning of customer-centredness, and externally you have practised community service and involvement.

Indeed, you started at the level of your daily chores and rose to challenges beyond the everyday, in the process giving credence to Colin Powell's observation that "If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception. It is a prevailing attitude."

You are an embodiment of what we mean when we speak of the best, and you are walking examples of excellence. We use that word in relation to you, then, because you have taught us its meaning, and we believe that you shall continue to represent its highest level of meaning.

It is our pleasure to host you all here tonight. It is with pride that we point at our Province's public servants and say they represent the noble practice of putting their jobs, their people and their nation first. We have, because of our public servants doing ordinary things extraordinarily well, and therefore demonstrating excellence in the eyes of John W. Gardner, earned the respect of the rest of our country as a Province which delivers on the mandate of the national democratic revolution to exploit state resources to progressively ensure the socio-economic development of our people.

It is ultimately you who are, indeed, doing it for the people, and so you can join the African American poet, Margaret Walker, in her famous prose-poem, "For My People", and each one of you say what you are doing is for your people, and say it in the following words:

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the gone years and the now years and the maybe years, washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching dragging along never gaining never reaping never knowing and never understanding....

It is for these ordinary people that you are in the Public Service. And it is because of your loyalty and commitment to them that we are here to thank you tonight. It is on their behalf that we recognise your excellence here tonight. And it is because of that excellence and the awards that it has brought you here tonight that we salute and congratulate you.

Let achievement, even beyond tonight, continue to define you and your work.

I thank you

