

# Give the past the heave-ho

It is October. The year is almost over. In two to three months, we will be taking stock of the year that was and remembering the highlights and lowlights of 2015.

High among the lowlights (if one can say that) will be the horrible xenophobic violence that broke out in parts of the country this year; the break-up of labour federation Cosatu; the expulsion of Zwelinzima Vavi from the federation; and the many entertaining scenes from Parliament. There will be the charlatan pastors and the gullible victims. The travails of the economy and the escalating crime rate will be a dominant theme, as will the student uprisings on university campuses. Our reminiscences will be incomplete without reference to the president's thousand gaffes.

Among reasonably minded South Africans, the precious memories will hopefully include the majestic performance of an all-conquering Orlando Pirates in continental competition. Many will be teary eyed as they recall the exploits of Thabo Rakhale, Mpho Makola and Felipe Ovono during their amazing journey to continental glory.

Disturbingly, the increasing centrality of race in our national discourse will also feature strongly. In print, on the airwaves and in cyberspace, there will be lots of recounting of bitter debates about the fall of statues, ugly racist incidents and the lethargic pace of transformation. Even more disturbing is that this is a theme that will recur next year, with minimal prospects of it moving much further in the following year.

Lost in the maze of controversy and recriminations will be South Africa's story of the year. The story in question is the world's first penis transplant, carried out at Cape Town's Tygerberg Hospital. The operation, which was carried out on a young man who had lost the use

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of his member during a botched traditional circumcision, was up there with Dr Chris Barnard's first heart transplant and other similar medical breakthroughs. Not only did it enable the young man to properly appreciate Fashion TV, it fully restored his reproductive capacity. Within months of the announcement, it was revealed his girlfriend had another little Orlando Pirates fan growing in her stomach.

Professor Jimmy Volmink, the dean of medicine at Stellenbosch University - which collaborated with Tygerberg on research and the carrying out of the operation - declared at the time that the breakthrough showed "South Africa remains at the forefront of medical research".

Stellenbosch University's head of plastic reconstructive surgery, Professor Frank Graewe, said the "massive breakthrough" showed what could be achieved "through effective partnerships between academic institutions and government health services".

The transplant received international acclaim and the doctors were immediately inundated with enquiries from all corners of the globe.

In South Africa, we gloated for a couple of days. Corny jokes circulated on social media and elsewhere. Then we went back to our squabbles about the past. This week, we were again haranguing each other following the apparent hankering after the glory days of apartheid of

Dianne Kohler Barnard and friends. Compare the kilometres of copy and the amount of bandwidth dedicated to Kohler Barnard's cyberfart to that which was received by the stuff that should really get our attention.

Just a few weeks ago, Wits University's world-renowned palaeontology unit made a dramatic discovery that enhanced our knowledge of human origins. The discovery may have been about our distant past, but it has scientific import for our present and future. The nation's investment in the Square Kilometre Array (SKA), the world's biggest radio-telescope system, still being constructed in the Karoo, has also fallen off the radar. Although the SKA is one of the most exciting scientific projects in the world, hearts hardly flutter when government, media and academia try to get some hype going.

But just let there be a provocation about the past and you will hear the decibels. The conversation may be tedious and repetitive, but we find it so, so riveting.

This lowly newspaperman is by no means joining the "let's not get too hung up on the past and focus on the future" brigade. The point is rather that the past is such a big boulder standing in our way of inching forward. Each time we roll it out of the way, it rolls right back. We are stuck.

Our attempts to deal with our colonial and apartheid past just do not seem to get us anywhere. They end up being slanging matches that serve only to irritate and polarise. Once we are done with each round, we end up in a much worse position overall. Meanwhile, the world with which we have to keep up just goes on innovating, inventing things and devising solutions to complex problems.

The challenge for South Africa is to do one huge collective heave-ho and roll this boulder down the hill so that we can sprint forward and catch up with our global peers.

