

Launch of National Arbor Week 2005
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Kliptown, Soweto
29 August 2005

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen

More than 50 years ago now, a seed was planted here at Kliptown. Almost half a century later, that seed has grown into a beautiful tree that casts its protective branches over all who live in our country. The seed was the Kliptown Charter, which called for the freedom and equal treatment of all South Africans. The tree is our Constitution, which guarantees our rights as equal citizens of a just society.

The people who helped plant the seed of freedom here so many years ago probably didn't know how much tender care and how many sacrifices would be required to allow it to grow. But they gave what was required, and against the odds, their diligence paid off. The tree of democracy has grown strong, and it grows stronger each year.

It is no accident that the Constitutional Court in Braamfontein, which is not far from here, chose a tree as its symbol. Like a beautiful tree, our Constitution casts its protection over all. What is more, trees grow over time, and become stronger each year, provided that they are taken care of. Like a tree, the Constitution stands as the living testament to the actions of those who planted the seed so many years ago.

So it is fitting that we return to Kliptown today, to plant trees. Of course, I have to admit that we're cheating a bit. You will have noticed that many trees have already been planted during the last few days, and that we're taking a shortcut by planting strong, growing trees instead of seeds or seedlings.

I am told that within a few months this place will have been transformed into a beautiful park with 640 indigenous trees – a place of physical beauty that mirrors what it stands for. Like those other planters half a century ago, what we do here today will echo through the generations. Long after we are all gone, the trees we plant here today will still stand in our memory and in the memory of that other seed that was planted here.

I think you will agree with me if I say that when you sit under a tree, you benefit from the past. But when you plant a tree, you invest in the future.

This Arbor Week, we will be calling on all South Africans to help us invest in our future by planting indigenous trees throughout our country.

Indigenous trees are essential to the protection of the environment. We are an arid country, and we are particularly prone to droughts and erosion. Indigenous trees play an important role in stabilizing our topsoil, safeguarding our water table, and even purifying our air. In addition, indigenous trees are an integral part of our ecosystem, providing food and shelter to hundreds of species. Finally, trees are beautiful and, in a place like this, it is good to be reminded of the fact that our world is a beautiful place.

This year's Arbor Week is a particularly important one in the history of forestry in our country. It comes at a time when the forest sector is poised for growth and where the opportunity within the sector exists to contribute to broad based black economic empowerment is being tackled. The Forestry Charter process that I initiated in April this year is progressing well. I have tasked the steering committee to provide me with a draft charter by the end of the year.

Arbor Week is also the time when we acknowledge the contribution that the forestry sector plays in the economy of our country and it also allows us to showcase how forestry contributes to the national priorities of poverty alleviation and job creation, especially in the deep rural areas of South Africa, where the greatest need exists. My Department has adopted a vision for forestry that takes into account the need for forestry to grow our second economy. We have a vision of forests that are managed for people, and we need to create an enabling environment for economic and social development through sustainable forestry, especially at the local level.

We would be having numerous events around the country during the week that will showcase how my Department and stakeholders are seeking ways to ensure that our vision is being implemented.

I would like to thank all of you for joining us here today, and helping us add to the beauty. We particularly appreciate the assistance of our sponsors, the High Commission of Great Britain, the Danish Embassy, Total South Africa, Mercury Media and the various media houses, in making this day possible.

We are also deeply thankful to Johannesburg City Parks for offering to take these trees under their protection, to make sure that they receive the loving care they deserve.

Thank you.