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# project X

*a different  
history lesson*



BELINDA MENDELOWITZ

# *Project X*

A DIFFERENT  
HISTORY LESSON

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HISTORY LESSON

**Belinda Mendelowitz**

**M**

Macmillan  
Boleswa



**Project X**  
**A Different History Lesson**  
*Lifeskills*

© Belinda Mendelowitz 1993

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**This book is dedicated to the youth of this country,  
who hold the future in their hands.**

## A NOTE TO READERS

There is a glossary at the end of this story, to help you with difficult words about voting.

Words that appear in **bold** type in the story are explained in the glossary.



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## CHAPTER ONE

# *A Different History Lesson*

Nomsa was rushing through the school gates to get to Mrs Mathibedi's history class on time. She liked these classes and knew that Mrs Mathibedi got very irritated when pupils dribbled, like leftovers, into her class. She had managed to stay in Mrs Mathibedi's good books for a record three weeks and wanted to keep it that way.

As she entered the classroom a bleep sounded. For a moment she thought it was the 'latecomer-detector' that Mrs Mathibedi had threatened to install. She caught her breath in fright, but suddenly realised that the bleep was coming from the small radio on her teacher's desk, and everyone's attention was focused on this small object as though it were about to perform a miracle.

'And now for the 8.30 news! The government has announced that a **general election** will be held in nine months time. All South African citizens over the age of eighteen will be entitled to vote. As we do not yet know how voters will be expected to identify themselves, we suggest that all adults make a point of getting their identity books in order. There will be a drive over the next few months to help people who do not already have **identity documents** to get these. So, if you are seventeen going on eighteen, or over eighteen and not yet in possession of an **ID** book, get to work!

'This is Flash Travis, Radio Africa . . . bringing you the news, hot off the wires.'

Mrs Mathibedi clicked the radio off and turned to face the class expectantly. However, they were not really aware of her presence, as the announcement had triggered off total chaos.

A heated discussion between Salie and Germay began to drown out the other voices, as usual.

Germay was saying, 'I don't know what all this excitement is about. There was a **referendum** in 1992, and not much changed after that.'

'That was different! All you had to do was say YES or NO to a question asked by the government . . .,' replied Salie, with that determined look she always got when she was getting ready for battle. Nomsa could almost hear her sharpening her verbal sword.

'And all you have to do in an election is vote for a representative who you never see or hear of again,' replied Germay abruptly.

'Let me finish what I was saying,' Salie said, turning angrily to face her opponent. 'The referendum was another "whites only" affair. This election is open to all.'

Tumi, the self appointed class joker, butted in with a *bleep* sound. 'And now for an urgent news bulletin . . . there has been another nuclear fallout in classroom 4a . . . all those in the immediate vicinity are in danger of contamination . . .'

The class roared with laughter at Tumi's comment, and some of the tension seemed to evaporate with the laughter.

Mrs Mathibedi took the opportunity to begin the lesson.

'Let's get back to the question that Germay asked right at the beginning of this . . . discussion. Why is there a lot of excitement about this election?'

'These are the first truly **democratic** elections in our history,' answered Palesa.

'What makes these elections democratic?' asked Mrs Mathibedi.

'Everyone can vote,' replied Paul, surprised that his teacher had asked such an obvious question.

'Okay,' summed up Mrs Mathibedi, 'so the fact that people of all race groups over a certain age can vote is one very important aspect of **democracy**. What else makes these elections democratic?'

Tom put up his hand hesitantly and began speaking in his usual tentative tone. 'Well, I suppose the fact that any party can stand in the election . . . that gives us more choices.'

'Exactly! And the fact that you have the freedom to choose whichever party you want is a very important aspect of democracy,' replied Mrs Mathibedi.

Mrs Mathibedi began to write the key words relating to democracy on the chalkboard.

As Nomsa looked at the board her face creased into a frown, a look which usually indicated that she was about to throw a spanner in the works.

'What's wrong Nomsa? You are looking a bit confused . . .'

Mrs Mathibedi asked.

'Yes, something is bothering me,' she replied. 'How do we know that once a party gets into power they will deliver all or most of their promises?'

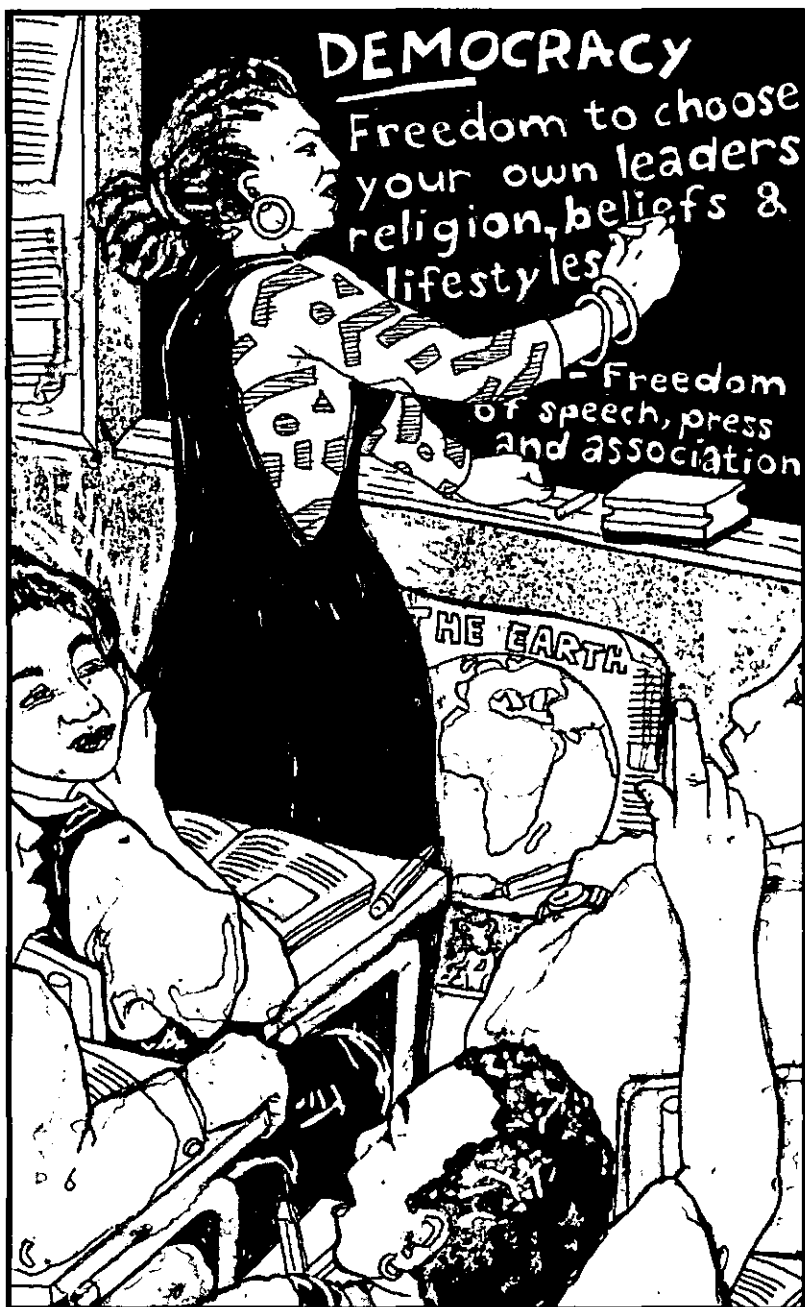
'We don't know for sure . . . but there are ways of almost guaranteeing that political parties are **accountable** to us.'

'A **constitution!**' someone blurted out.

'Yes, what about it?'

' . . . I think it tells the government how to govern . . . sort of gives them guidelines, and basic principles,' answered Pam.

'It outlines all the different jobs a government has to do, and it commits them to doing these jobs properly,' added Salie, who had been silent for a while.



*Mrs Mathibedi began to write the key words relating to democracy on the chalkboard.*

'Ja, so if the government does something really bad, like throw people into jail without a trial, there should be ways of stopping them,' continued Pam.

'That's why the law needs to be independent and separate from the government . . . and that can be laid down in a constitution,' continued Salie, regaining her old momentum.

'Well, if they don't stick to the constitution, I suppose we could always vote them out again,' commented Paul. 'That's what I like about democracy.'

Sipho, an active member of the PTSA, had been silent all this time, but now that the discussion was moving in the direction of his pet topic, he could hardly contain himself.

He said dramatically, 'We, as ordinary people, need to be aware of our rights, and must challenge any actions that infringe on those rights. We don't have to wait for people out there to take care of these things.'

'Ah, . . . the dictionary of political jargon has spoken,' piped up Tumi cheekily. Sipho took himself rather seriously, and was not amused by this comment.

'Good point, Sipho,' Mrs Mathibedi said. 'You need to be aware of your rights in all situations . . . even at school.'

Nomsa added, 'For example, if I was being naughty and Mrs Mathibedi hit me with a big stick, my parents would complain to the PTSA . . .'

The class laughed at this image because they knew that their teacher was vehemently opposed to corporal punishment.

'Yes, Nomsa, you are correct. I could punish you in ways that are acceptable according to the agreement between parents, teachers and students. But if I hit you, I would be answerable to your parents and the committee.'

'The relationship between a government and the people who elect it must also be a two way process,' pointed out Sipho.

'But how can a government find out what people think of it?' asked Tumi, quite mystified by now.

The class started shouting out answers.

'Regular elections.'

'Referenda.'

'Freedom of speech . . . public meetings.'

'Freedom of the press.'

'About elections,' said Nomsa sounding a bit confused, 'How would someone . . . say me . . . choose which party to vote for?'

'I am glad you asked that question,' Mrs Mathibedi replied. 'One should always vote according to one's own beliefs and preferences. Be true to yourself. But, there are lots of factors that can influence the way people choose to vote . . . in some cases, it's obviously because they agree with the values and beliefs of the party. But . . .'

'It might also be influenced by the family you come from . . . ' added Salie.

'Or what your friends or youth group are doing.'

'Religion.'

'The tribe that you belong to . . . even maybe the region you come from.'

'These are just some of the reasons why a person might choose to vote for a particular party . . . as you can see it is quite complicated,' said Mrs Mathibedi. 'Remember what I said earlier. If you're not comfortable with the principles of a particular party, don't vote for them. No one can force you to vote. The final choice is yours.'

'For this reason,' she continued, 'I am giving you a project to do on the elections. Some of you are already eighteen, others are turning eighteen soon. You will be in a position to cast a vote, and I would like you to be able to make an informed decision.'

The class were silent and looked a bit suspicious. They were used to doing projects on 'The French Revolution' or 'The Discovery of Gold' . . . there was even that one on interviewing their grandparents, but where did this fit in? Undeterred by the silence and the sea of doubtful faces, Mrs Mathibedi continued enthusiastically.

'Yes, this project will be a little different from other projects that you have done. I want you to research at least four issues that people are thinking about, and how the various political organisations are planning to address these issues.'

Daniel broke the silence with his question, 'But what kind of research? Where will we find the information?'

'Aha! Now we get to the interesting part. I want you to have your eyes and ears open over the next four weeks. You can go to party offices and interview people about their vision. You can speak to people on buses, taxis, trains. You can listen to the radio, read the newspapers, collect pamphlets and posters and watch television, if you have one.'

'But what will we do with the information?' asked Tumelo, mildly panic stricken.

'You can present it in whatever form you want, as long as you analyse the different views about the issues you're looking at. That involves finding out what each party or organisation believes in, and what kind of changes they would like to make to our society.'

'I don't see how we can rely on the media for our information. It's all government propaganda,' declared Allyson, with authority.

'Allyson, some newspapers are more independent than others. You need to read a range of papers and read between the lines,' replied Mrs Mathibedi.

At this point Mrs Mathibedi starting handing out a project brief with a list of questions, which she had prepared in anticipation of the announcement of a general election.

Sipho stood up and said quite emphatically, 'I don't see the point in doing this project. I know which party I support and I object to being forced to have contact with other parties that I despise.'

Tumi blurted out in his usual spontaneous way, 'I thought you were supposed to be the ultimate democrat, Sipho.'

'I am,' said Sipho, looking momentarily as though he had been caught out. Then, regaining his arrogance, he added, 'Democracy means making choices. I choose not to speak to traitors.'

'Listening to different points of view is also important,' Tumi replied.

At this point Mrs Mathibedi intervened. 'Sipho, I think it's important that we start creating the kind of society where different people and parties talk to each other. Who knows . . . you might discover some interesting things through this project. Sometimes one needs to find out what one doesn't know.'

Mrs Mathibedi had that firm look on her face which indicated that the decision had been made and it was time to move on to other topics.

'Before the bell rings I want to put you into pairs for the project.'

The class moaned at this idea . . . they usually chose their own groups. Interpreting their moans correctly, Mrs Mathibedi said, 'I know that you usually choose your own groups, but it will be an interesting change for each of you.'

'*Interesting change!*' thought Nomsa. 'That's what she always says when she wants us to do something unpleasant . . . I just hope that I can work with Salie.'

Nomsa's thoughts were interrupted when she heard her name followed by Sipho's. She whispered to Salie, 'I can't believe that I have to work with him, of all people. He's so dogmatic!'

'Well, think of it this way, at least you won't have to look up any political terminology in a book . . . I mean he *is* the walky-talky terminology generator,' replied Salie, giggling in amusement at her own joke.

Sipho didn't look all that delighted either, but Nomsa wasn't sure whether it was the prospect of working with her or the project itself . . . or both.

As the bell rang, their teacher was saying, 'This project will demand quite a lot of your time, and you will probably get to know your work partner fairly well . . .'

Salie grinned at Nomsa mischievously, but Nomsa was not amused.

As Nomsa walked down the passage she heard someone calling her name. She turned round to see a sheepish-looking Sipho.



*'Let's exchange phone numbers,' Siphso said hesitantly.*

'Nomsa, seeing as we have to work on this project together . . . do you have a phone at home?' She nodded. 'Well, let's exchange phone numbers. Maybe we can start doing some research tomorrow,' he said hesitantly.

'Well, I was planning to go to the flea market with one of my friends . . . but we can speak,' she replied, surprised at his suggestion.

They exchanged phone numbers and moved on to the next class . . . maths! Definitely no chance of anything controversial.



## CHAPTER TWO

# *On The Picket Line*

That afternoon, walking home from school, Nomsa and her brother Tshepo chatted a bit about their day . . . or rather, Tshepo chatted enthusiastically and Nomsa was mostly silent.

'I had a double science lesson today . . . What a bore! And when we tried to convince Mr Dube that discussion about the elections was more important than atom molecules . . . guess what he said? "When you have a new government you will still need to know about molecules!"'

'I had the opposite problem today,' Nomsa replied drily.

'What happened?'

'Well nothing really. Just, we spent our history lesson talking about elections . . . it was confusing.'

'If you bothered to come with me to any thought-provoking community meetings, you might have an idea of what's going on,' he answered condescendingly.

'You and your meetings. You think the world begins and ends with them . . . there's more to life than meetings. Anyway, I have to do research into the things people are concerned about, and how the various political parties or organisations are planning to deal with these things. It's for this history project . . . and I have to work with Siphso.'

'Siphso Nkosi?' he asked with a mixture of horror and amusement in his voice. Then, as an afterthought, and only the way a brother can, he asked, 'He's not your new boyfriend, is he?'

'No,' she protested. 'I didn't have much choice in the matter. Mrs Mathibedi put us into pairs.'

'He will brainwash you . . . next thing you will be wearing T-shirts with militant slogans, you will go on marches, attend mass rallies,' he said, half protectively and half amused.

'What do you take me for? Don't you think I've got my own mind?'

'Well, you admitted that you were confused!'

'At least I know what I don't know.' She silently thanked Mrs Mathibedi for providing her with such a sharp answer in her moment of need. 'Unlike some people, who think they know everything.' She looked slyly in his direction.

For once, Tshepo was silenced . . . although Nomsa knew it wouldn't last long. She seized the moment of triumph to add, 'Anyway, what's the difference if I get "brainwashed" by your ideas or Siphso's?'

'I think it will be healthier for you to be "re-educated" by your own brother,' he answered authoritatively, and, looking at his face Nomsa wasn't sure whether she had really seen his lip curl into a partial smile.

During supper time, conversations were drifting past Nomsa and she thought about the only two things that were cheering her up a bit: 1) they were eating curry, her favourite, and 2) it was the weekend and she was going to the flea market in town . . . and she could forget about the overwhelming prospect of this project.

'Nomsa, catch a wake up! It's your new boyfriend on the phone, he's desperate to speak to you!' Tshepo's voice interrupted her private world of thoughts. Her father looked up, as if to express his disapproval, but realised quickly that Tshepo was teasing his sister yet again.

Pretending to ignore her brother, she strolled unenthusiastically to the phone, wondering what he wanted.

'Hello,' she said coolly.

'Hello, Siphon here. There's a **picket** outside Basil Stores tomorrow morning at ten. There should be some interesting workers and leaders around . . . maybe a speech or two. I thought it would be useful for our project.'

'But we haven't even decided what we want to look at,' she answered, unable to hide her irritation at his assumption that she would just go along.

'Well . . . yes, I know that, but I happened to hear about this, and . . .'

'All right. Where should I meet you?' Nomsa asked abruptly.

'I can come past your house and we can get a taxi together,' he suggested.

A horrible image of Tshepo making a rude comment on seeing Siphon, or even worse, Tshepo grinning slyly from the doorway, prompted Nomsa to invent an excuse to meet him there . . . outside Basil Stores.

'So, are you going out with him?' asked Tshepo when she returned to the table.

She kicked him under the table and replied calmly, 'We are going to attend the picket outside Basil Stores tomorrow. I would hardly call that going out.'

Nomsa's father, no longer amused at his son's teasing, was about to remind his daughter of his strict rules about boyfriends and about politics, but fortunately the phone rang again, and it was for him.

That night Nomsa had a terrible dream . . . she met Siphon at the fun-fair. The fun-fair was packed with people . . . it was hard to move without bumping into them. Siphon grabbed her hand and led her towards the ghost train. At first it seemed like a mad, funny adventure, but as she moved into the dark tunnel, she was overcome by fear.

As the ghost train weaved around a dark corner, politicians leaped out, looking weird and grotesque . . . calling 'vote for me . . . I'll solve all your problems.' Then Siphon started shouting 'liar . . . liar!'

**BRRRRRRRRRR!**

For once, Nomsa was pleased that the alarm clock had disturbed her sleep, but the feeling of relief disappeared when she remembered that she had something on. Something that she didn't really want to do. 'Oh no! I've arranged to meet Siphso at the picket. What a way to spend a Saturday morning when I could be having fun.'

Nomsa hadn't been to Bazil Stores for ages, and she wasn't sure exactly which street it was in. But the taxi driver told her where to go, and as she approached the store, she heard singing and saw a row of people standing at the front, holding different placards and banners. The placards gave Nomsa some idea of what the meeting was about, but she still wasn't one hundred percent sure. Some of the placards read: 'Reinstate our workers' and '20 workers unfairly dismissed'.

From a table in the distance, she saw somebody waving at her as though he knew her quite well, beckoning her to go over there. As she started walking in that direction, she realised that it was Siphso, wearing one of his colourful 'Workers Rights' T-shirts. She was suddenly quite pleased to see him.

'I got here a bit early and Jonathan asked me to help out at the petition table for a while.'

'Petition for what? . . . what is this all about?'

'These workers have been on strike for a week already. They want to force management to reinstate three of their comrades who were unfairly dismissed. We want to get as many signatures as possible to put pressure on management.'

'What has this got to do with our project? . . . What does this have to do with the election?'

'Everything,' said Siphso. 'These workers are really worried about their future. We can learn a lot from their demands. We can find out who they're planning to vote for . . .'

Jonathan, Siphso's companion, took the opportunity to give Nomsa an introductory lesson on 'workers'. 'Workers have very little power. They work very hard and earn meagre wages. They have to challenge bosses' power and assert their rights.'

'And the bosses take most of the profits . . . buy fancy cars, big houses, while the workers struggle to survive, to feed and clothe their families,' Siphso added.

'Workers have nothing to offer but their labour,' Jonathan continued. 'And they have to accept the wages that they are offered, especially when there are not a lot of other jobs available.'

'Do you think this picket is actually going to help the situation?' asked Nomsa, whose voice reflected her doubts.

'This picket is just one of many actions initiated by the workers in our community,' replied Jonathan. 'All our strikes, protests and meetings add

up to a major challenge not just to bosses and factory owners, but also to the political system as a whole.'

'But I'm still not entirely sure how we can relate this to our election research project,' challenged Nomsa, a familiar sense of impatience rising within her.

'Don't be so impatient! I was about to get to that,' Jonathan replied in a teasing manner. As if it were his project, thought Nomsa angrily.

'Our party recognises that workers have a raw deal. We believe that we need to create a society where factories, machines – all the things that create wealth – belong to the people.'

'And if there is no private ownership of things, everyone will be equal. Nobody will be very rich or very poor,' added Siphso.

Nomsa snorted rudely. 'We will all just be equally poor.'

Before they could answer Nomsa, there was a sudden increase in the number of petition signers, and Siphso and Jonathan moved to assist them.

'Oh well, I guess that's the end of my lesson on workers' rights. Now what am I supposed to do?' wondered Nomsa.

Nomsa strolled around for a while, and gave a couple of loose coins to a woman who was vigorously shaking a collection tin.

'Thank you,' the woman said. 'Every cent counts.'

'Do you earn a salary while you are on strike?' asked Nomsa, curiously.

The woman looked at her as though she was mad. 'No, of course not.'

'Then how do you survive? . . . I mean where do you get money from?'

'It is a very difficult time for us. We do collections . . . sometimes people donate things to us. It's a sacrifice that we have to make,' the woman stated fatalistically. 'There are so many people without jobs, at least I have a chance of keeping mine once this protest is over.'

'But why? What are you getting out of this?'

'Solidarity with my fellow workers. We need to take a unified stand against bosses when, for example, they unfairly dismiss our fellow workers, otherwise next time it may be me . . . or my friend over there,' she said, pointing in the direction of a man wearing a placard that said 'No to worker exploitation'.

Nomsa noticed that although the woman's face was quite worn and tired, there was also a light in her eyes and a sense of strength that became more apparent as she spoke. They exchanged names – Nomsa learnt that the woman's name was Siphwiwe.

'Siphwiwe, is this kind of protest going to solve these problems?' Nomsa asked, feeling a lot more open than she had in her earlier discussion with Siphso and Jonathan.

'Yes, I feel that it is the only way to move forward . . . how else will we get rid of these inequalities?'



*'Thank you,' the woman said. 'Every cent counts.'*

'But if you work hard, won't you eventually improve your situation?'

Siphiwe looked at her sadly and said gently, 'You are still young so you don't know that if you are born poor, you stay poor, for the most part.'

Later that morning, as Nomsa and Siphso walked towards the taxi rank, she thought about her conversation with Siphiwe and felt quite inspired by her courage, and strength. And the courage of all those others who were part of the strike.

Siphso broke the silence to ask Nomsa, 'So are you pleased that you came to the picket this morning?'

'Yes, it was quite interesting,' admitted Nomsa reluctantly.

'You don't sound very sure about this,' probed Siphso.

'Well, I especially enjoyed talking to one of the picketers . . . Siphiwe. I found her quiet inspiring.'

'And talking to Jonathan?' Siphso asked.

'Interesting, but a bit like a lecture. Anyway I don't think he liked me very much,' Nomsa replied, trying to sound disinterested.

'Not at all. He actually said to me that your critical mind would be an asset to our movement. He wants to know when you're joining us.'

Nomsa looked at Siphso's face carefully to see if he was joking. He was smiling, but there was a warmth in his smile that she had never noticed before. They both started laughing, and each decided that the other was not so bad after all.

'I suppose we must decide what other issues we want to research,' suggested Siphso.

'And I think I should have a say in this one . . . seeing as the last one was democratically dictated to me,' teased Nomsa.

'Okay . . . your wish is my command. What is it to be?'

As they approached the taxi rank, Nomsa caught sight of a poster advertising a debate: 'The role of youth in the future South Africa'.

'That debate,' she said eagerly. 'It's on Monday night. We should be exposed to loads of ideas there! We'll get all the different points of view from the panel, and we'll hear what the community thinks!'

'Um . . . Okay, I'll come with you. But I don't know how helpful . . .'

Without waiting to hear his reservations, Nomsa said, 'This taxi's going my way. We can discuss it at break on Monday . . . or after school. Bye.'

Siphso was amused. He'd never really noticed her before; he'd never taken much interest in the girls in his class. But he thought that Nomsa was really interesting. Perhaps they would be friends by the time this project was over.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Debate*

Nomsa was sitting in the kitchen making some notes about her morning's research, before it flew out of her head.

'Tshepo, have you heard about the debate on "youth in the future South Africa" on Monday night . . .?'

Tshepo was engrossed in some book or other, and, as usual, pretended not to hear her.

'I think he's deaf . . . we must take him to the ear doctor one of these days,' Nomsa said half to herself, hoping to get a reaction.

'HMMMMMMMM?' he replied.

That was Tshepo's infuriating way of letting Nomsa know that the sound was penetrating, but it wasn't important enough for him to stop what he was doing. She repeated the question with a definite tinge of irritation.

He put his book down and said, 'I can tell you everything you need to know . . . but you can come with me if you want.'

'Actually, I'm probably meeting Siphso there,' Nomsa said casually.

'Interesting place to meet your boyfriends. I thought a rap concert was more your scene,' Tshepo noted with amusement.

Then he added smugly, 'I'll bet you a spicy chicken take-away that he will try and get out of it. I can't imagine him tolerating the views of so many different people.'

'You might be wrong for once!' Nomsa replied sarcastically. She was getting tired of his snide comments, especially about Siphso. She had started changing her mind about Siphso. He really wasn't so bad after all.

But as always, Tshepo managed to sow a seed of doubt in her head, and she made a mental note to double check with Siphso that he would definitely meet her there.

And as for the 'meeting boyfriends' part of it . . . she remembered the warm smile that had passed between them when they had said goodbye earlier, and suddenly felt a twinge of excitement at the thought of seeing him again, especially outside of school hours. She was glad that her father had not heard this conversation, though.

On Monday, during break, Nomsa tracked Siphso down.

'So, are we going to the debate together tonight?'

Siphso looked at her blankly. 'What debate?'

'Remember, we spoke about it on Saturday . . .' Nomsa said, feeling the exasperation she usually reserved for her brother.

'Oh yes. Now I remember. I'm sorry . . . something else has come up. I have another meeting this evening. I have to be there.'

'Can't you come afterwards? This is really going to be important for our project,' Nomsa said quite earnestly.

'I suppose I can meet you there,' he said reluctantly.

'Let's meet there at about seven o' clock . . . I think it's at the Ezulwini Community Hall,' replied Nomsa.

'Okay,' he agreed, but in a very absent, distant way.

Nomsa felt a sudden twinge of disappointment. She was upset by his indifference about the debate, and she wondered if he had changed his mind because he didn't want to be seen with her. Now she would have to go with her brother. Maybe Tshepo would win the spicy chicken out of this debate, after all.

Tshepo and Nomsa arrived early at the Ezulwini Hall. There were a couple of people milling around, but mainly organisers of the debate, and nobody Nomsa recognised. Tshepo was very chatty on the way to the debate, but as soon as they arrived, he acted as though he hardly knew her, and immersed himself in an intense conversation with somebody.

There were a couple of people selling posters and giving out pamphlets. She recognised Jonathan behind one of the tables. She was pleased to see a familiar face, but at the same time didn't really feel in the mood for another lecture about the workers.

'Hello. Still collecting signatures for the petition?' enquired Nomsa.

'Yes, and collecting donations for the strikers,' he said shaking a collection tin around.

'And what are you doing here?' he asked. 'Looking for Siph?'

'Yes, I'm meeting him here . . . we're doing more research for our election project.'

'Oh. Well he's over there,' Jonathan said, pointing to a crowd gathering near a mealie vendor.

Siph was with people she did not recognise. She tried to catch his eye, by smiling and waving, but he didn't seem to notice her.

She started to walk over to greet him, but there was an announcement that the meeting was starting, and the crowd, which had suddenly swelled, started moving into the hall. And Nomsa was swept along with them. She ended up sitting on her own, silently cursing both Tshepo and Siph.

It took a while for the audience to settle down. The chairperson opened the meeting, saying, 'I would like to welcome you to this evening's debate. I have chaired many meetings and debates, but it is seldom that I get the chance to chair a meeting with such a diverse panel of speakers . . .'

She proceeded to introduce each speaker. There were representatives from the 'X Party', the 'Y Party' and the 'Z Party'.



The chairperson continued, 'People have many different hopes and dreams for creating a better society. I have spoken to many different people about their hopes and dreams and the issues that keep on coming up are the hopes for jobs for everyone, decent housing, electricity, running water, and access to health services and sanitation. And, of course, in order to have access to these things we need to have access to education which will empower us to obtain jobs with fair wages . . . and so the cycle continues. And as you can see we can't have one without the other.'

'We don't have all night and I don't think our speakers will be able to address all these issues. So we have decided to focus tonight's discussion on those who hold the future in their hands – the youth. How do each of these political parties plan to deal with youth development, education, and job creation? Over to you.'

Each speaker gave a short overview of the changes their parties planned to make if they won the election. Then came the most interesting part of the evening – questions from the audience.

A woman stood up and said angrily, 'My son was forced out of school two years ago and has been wandering the streets since then, unable to get a job anywhere. What are you going to do about this youth unemployment problem?'

She couldn't ask more, as her voice was drowned out by people in the audience who all had things to add to this question.

The speaker from the 'X Party' replied. 'We already have a range of youth development programmes in motion. And in the future we plan to set up colleges, to enable those who have been prevented from completing their schooling to obtain the equivalent of a school leaving certificate.'

Another person in the audience butted in. 'It's all very well to talk about all this extra education, getting certificates etc. But what about the fact that there are no jobs available? What are you going to do about that?'

The 'Z Party' speaker replied, 'One of our first priorities is to set up job creation schemes . . . for example public works programmes. We are committed to stopping retrenchment.'

A young parent stood up and shouted, 'You have been speaking about what you are going to do for those who are already out of the school system. What about those who are in the early stages of schooling? How will you change the school system to meet their needs?'

The 'X Party' speaker replied, 'We are committed to the provision of a minimum of ten years of free and compulsory education . . .'

The 'Y Party' speaker added, 'One of our priorities will be to improve teacher training and at the same time to teach students useful skills . . . so that we have young people who are equipped to enter the job market, and to deal with the world out there. In this way we can prevent another generation of dropouts.'

A loud booing and hissing came from the back of the hall.

‘They are not dropouts. They are force outs.’

Nomsa turned to the back of the hall, and saw Siphos and his friends standing up and yelling. She was embarrassed, and was suddenly pleased that she was not sitting with him.

The ‘Y Party’ spokesperson looked confused. The expression on his face read, ‘What did I do wrong?’

The chairperson jumped up to save the situation, and called for order.

Siphos stood up and said forcefully, ‘How dare you refer to the youth as a generation of dropouts? Those who leave school have been forced out for lots of reasons beyond their control. . .’

Before Siphos could complete his point, several members of the audience butted in.

‘We have to earn money to help our parents . . .!’

‘And school fees and books cost so much!’

‘There are too many kids in my class! How can we learn this way?’

The panic-stricken speaker replied. ‘I did not intend to offend anyone with the term dropout. It’s a term we use to refer to people who leave school prematurely. But I do apologise if I offended anyone.’

There was a tense moment, and a murmur from the crowd. The chairperson took the opportunity to redirect the discussion, and there was a new flow of questions.

After the meeting, Nomsa found her brother. He asked, ‘Where did you disappear to?’

‘I was about to ask you the same question. I landed up sitting on my own,’ she remarked angrily.

‘Shame,’ Tshepo said mockingly, ‘what happened to your classmate?’

‘I don’t know and I don’t care . . .’ she retorted.

She tugged his arm and said, ‘Let’s go.’

Tshepo was either preoccupied with his own thoughts, or for once sensed that she was not in the mood for any more brotherly teasing.

As they started walking home, Nomsa thought she heard someone calling her name, but she ignored it and carried on walking.

The next night, Tshepo and Nomsa were washing the dishes, and arguing over who should wash the pot, which looked as though it was permanently engraved with the evening’s meal. Tshepo answered a knock on the door, and by the amused look on his face when he came to call Nomsa, she knew exactly who it was.

‘Tell him I’ve got nothing to say to him,’ she said angrily.

‘He says he would just like to talk to you for five minutes.’

‘Well, I don’t want to talk to him.’

Tshepo’s patience had run out and he said irritably, ‘I’m not prepared to be your messenger. Go and sort out your own problems.’



*A loud booing and hissing came from the back of the hall.*

So, it was either a matter of leaving Siphso stranded at the door, or swallowing her pride.

Siphso was standing outside the door, looking shy. There was a long awkward silence. At last, Siphso said, 'Look, I'm sorry about last night.'

'What about it?' she asked in a hostile tone.

'Well, I know we were supposed to meet outside the hall . . . but I got there late, and it was really crowded, and I couldn't find you.'

'I called you and you pretended not to see me,' she said accusingly.

'No, honestly, I didn't see you.'

'Well, you didn't seem to be looking very hard. Anyway, the way you shouted that one speaker down . . . Don't you believe in free speech? I would have been embarrassed to be associated with you.'

This was not completely true. Part of her felt real admiration for the way Siphso stood up for his beliefs with such conviction and confidence. But she was not going to tell him that.

'The whole point of these meetings is to debate, and challenge different ideas. Anyway, I thought our response to that speaker was pretty mild compared to other meetings I've been to.'

He looked away from her, and said awkwardly, 'I've enjoyed . . . working with you so far. I hope this episode isn't going to mess it all up.'

She wasn't sure what 'it' referred to, but whatever he was trying to say, she felt reassured that they were still friends.

'Let's make some notes about the debate,' she said. 'We may as well do it together seeing as you're here. At least the research is getting somewhere.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Visitor*

Two weeks later, Nomsa and Tshepo were watching television before doing their homework. To their delight, their parents had hired a television set to follow the build up to the elections. Nomsa was munching and immensely enjoying the chicken that Tshepo had promised her. He tried to wriggle his way out of the bet, but Siphso had been at the debate, even though he had ignored Nomsa.

Nomsa was concentrating on the news. As usual, Tshepo was giving a running commentary.

‘Stop it, Tshepo. I’m trying to listen,’ Nomsa said irritably.

In the midst of their squabbling, there was a knock on the door. There might have been knocking for a while, but with the television blaring and Tshepo shouting sporadically, it was hard to hear what was going on outside.

Tshepo was expecting a few neighbours to come round and watch TV with them. Since they had hired this TV set, their popularity in the neighbourhood had soared, and their house was always full of people. To his surprise, he opened the door to a stranger holding a briefcase. ‘Another travelling salesman,’ Tshepo thought. ‘What will it be this time?’

‘Good evening,’ the man said politely. ‘I hope I’m not disturbing you. My name is Ron. I work for a voter education programme, and I would like to share some information with your family about election procedures and voting, if you are interested.’

Tshepo looked at him suspiciously and said abruptly, ‘Which party are you canvassing for?’

‘I don’t represent any party. I am an election education officer. My job is to educate people about elections, but not about who to vote for.’

Tshepo still looked suspicious, but invited the stranger to come in anyway. Ron followed Tshepo inside, and was introduced to Nomsa.

‘I’m in the middle of a school project about the elections. It will be nice to have someone to answer a few of my questions,’ she said.

‘I’ll do my best,’ Ron said, and then asked, ‘Are you planning to vote in this election?’

‘I think so,’ replied Nomsa, ‘although I’m still confused about who to vote for and how to go about voting.’

‘Neither of us has an **identity book** yet, but nobody seems sure whether we need one or not. I hear one thing on the radio, something else on TV,’ Tshepo said, exasperated.

‘We’re not yet sure how voters will have to identify themselves, but it’s a good idea to apply for ID as soon as possible. To qualify as a voter, you

have to be eighteen years or more, and you need to have some form of ID.'

'I'm nineteen and my sister will be turning eighteen soon,' Tshepo said.

'Good. Then you'll both qualify as voters.'

'Why do we need to have ID?' Nomsa asked.

'There has to be a system for controlling and monitoring the voting. If each voter has an identity document, we can be sure that each person only votes once.

'In some countries,' he continued 'there is a **voters roll** . . . a record of people over eighteen who have registered to vote.'

'Why can't we do the same here?' asked Nomsa.

'There are too many people who need to be reached in very isolated areas. We don't have enough time to do this before the election. If we did have a voters roll, those people might be excluded from voting just because they were not registered in time.'

'How will ID prevent people from voting twice?' asked Tshepo.

'When you vote, your identity book will be stamped, so if you try and vote again the election officer will immediately know that you have already voted,' Ron explained.

Looking at Nomsa he continued, 'You said earlier that you are confused about who to vote for. Obviously, I can't tell you who to vote for, but I can tell you to educate yourself as much as possible about the different political parties that are standing for elections so that you can make an informed choice.'

Tshepo looked at Ron with mistrust. 'Surely you have your own opinion about who to vote for? Aren't you tempted to persuade people to vote for the party that you support?'

'More than anything, I believe in democracy. For these elections to be truly democratic, everyone must have access to information about how to vote. Otherwise they will not be able to use this democratic right effectively. My job is to tell people some of the things they need to know about voting.'

'So, do you teach *anyone* how to vote . . . even people who support a party that you hate?' asked Nomsa.

'Absolutely!' replied Ron. 'I have been travelling all over the country, even to places that I never knew existed, and I've come across all kinds of people, from women who have to walk miles to fetch water every day to streetwise city slickers like yourselves.'

Tshepo and Nomsa smiled at this last comment. Nomsa particularly liked the idea of being considered 'streetwise'.

Sipho, who had threatened to come round to watch TV, had walked in and heard Ron's remark. He laughed.

'Is this your brother?' asked Ron.

'Oh, no,' giggled Nomsa. 'This is Siphon. We're in the same class. We're working on this project together.'

Ron quickly filled Siphon in on why he was there.

Like Tshepo, Siphon was suspicious of Ron's motives, but he quickly picked up what the discussion was about, and joined in.

'Okay, so everyone will now have the chance to vote for the government of their choice for the first time in our history. But, how do we know that people will count the votes honestly?' asked Tshepo.

Siphon added, 'If I was counting the votes, I would definitely want to make sure that my party wins the election,' Siphon said earnestly.

'That's disgusting!' exclaimed Nomsa.

'I definitely won't appoint you to count votes in the election!' laughed Ron, half sternly, half amused.

'Seriously, how do you make sure that the counting of votes is done honestly?' asked Tshepo.

'Each vote is put into a large box, called a **ballot box**. When the time allowed for voting is over, each ballot box will be sealed by **election officials**, and the sealing of the box will be supervised by representatives of different parties.'

'Why?' asked Nomsa.

Siphon answered, 'It's obvious. Otherwise people might put extra votes into the ballot box. . .'

'Or they might remove some "unwanted vote",' added Tshepo.

'Yes, you are on the right track. Sometimes, the ballot box is moved to a central place, under close supervision, where all the votes will be counted. Sometimes, the votes are counted at the **polling station** . . .'

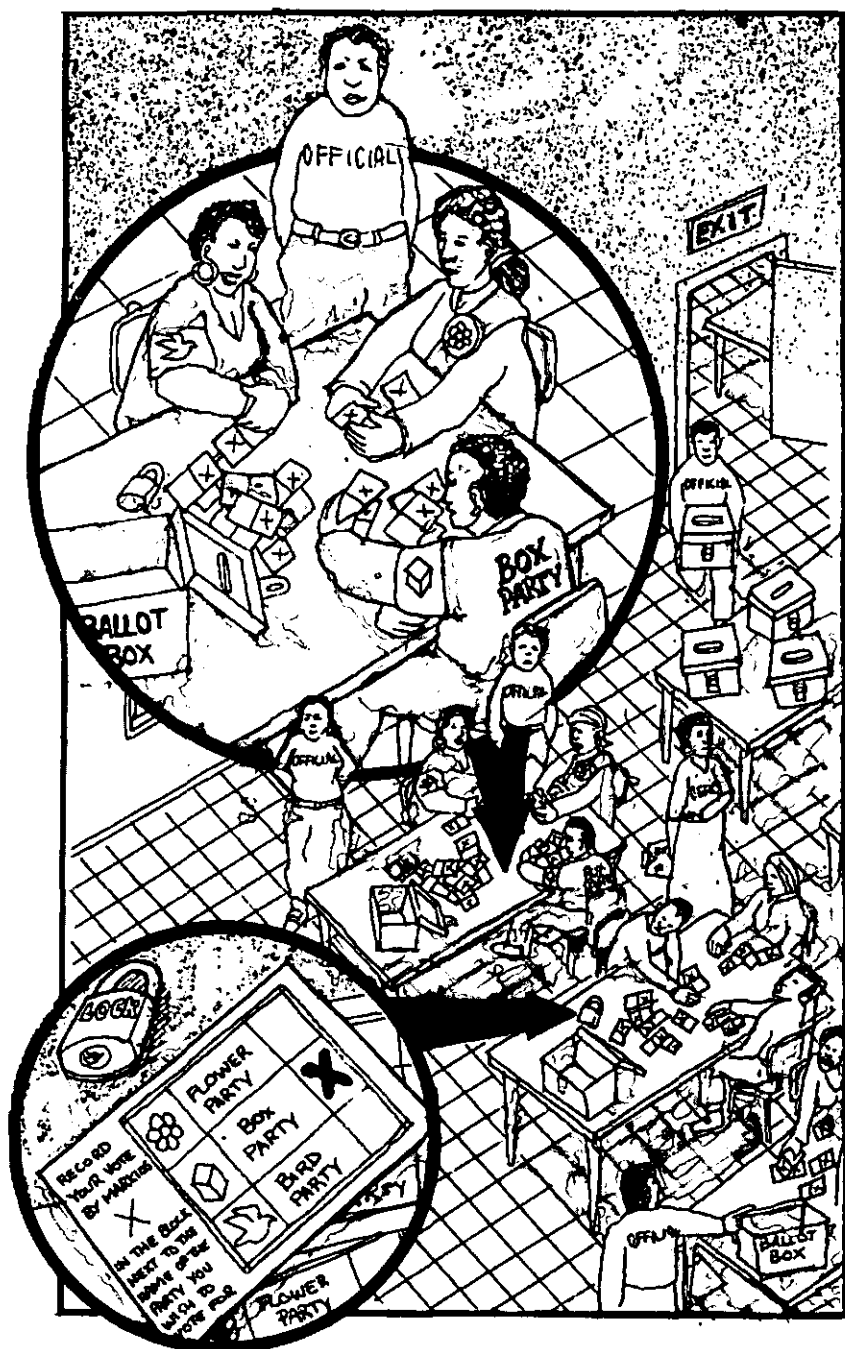
'But who actually counts the votes?' asked Nomsa.

'Representatives from all political parties will be involved in this massive task. It's no joke, believe me. The count has to be checked and confirmed by all these representatives.'

'If my party doesn't win the election, we will be back to square one,' said Siphon anxiously. 'I mean, I still won't be represented in parliament.'

'No, Siphon, that's not it. The party which receives the highest number of votes will form a **constituent assembly**. This is a special group of people which will write a new constitution and make laws. But the other parties that receive fewer votes will still be represented in this constituent assembly. They will be represented in proportion to the number of votes they get. For example, a party that gets 10 000 votes will have ten representatives, while a party that gets 1 000 votes will have only one. You will still have a voice, and protection against the violation of your rights.'

'And if the party that I vote for does win the election, then what?' asked Nomsa.



*The count has to be checked and confirmed by all these representatives.*



‘Yes, how will my life change?’ added Tshepo.

‘Things won’t change overnight. In fact, you might not notice any changes at first. There are so many things that need to change . . . people need jobs. There are thousands who don’t have a roof over their heads . . . no water, let alone electricity! We’ve had a school system that has not equipped young adults with the skills that they need for the world outside. All these things will take a long time to change, and it will be a long time before the average person actually feels the difference.’

‘But at least we will have a government that we had the power to choose . . . and we will have a voice to influence important decisions,’ said Nomsa.

Ron looked at her approvingly. ‘That’s an important point. Even when you have a new government, you will still need to participate in organisations, be it church or youth groups . . . you still may want to voice opinions on decisions or actions that you don’t agree with.’

Ron continued. ‘Have I answered all your questions? Anything else you want to ask?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ replied Sipho.

‘Then I’ll be on my way,’ said Ron.

‘Thanks,’ said Nomsa. ‘It was interesting talking to you.’

‘I enjoyed chatting to the three of you. You are all very challenging and critical. Don’t let anyone take that away from you.’

And then to Sipho he said jokingly, ‘I’ll let you know if we have any vacancies for vote counters.’

After he left Nomsa said, ‘What an interesting job. I wouldn’t mind doing something like that.’

‘There’s no way I could do a job like that without also telling people who to vote for,’ Sipho said. ‘I don’t know how he does it.’

‘A job like that would only appeal to fence sitters,’ said Tshepo, waiting for a reaction from Nomsa.

Nomsa ignored him. She said, ‘Don’t you also have homework tonight?’

‘Okay! Okay! I’m going to my room. I can see you can’t wait to get rid of me. Work hard on your project.’

For once, Tshepo picked up the message that he was not wanted, and left Nomsa alone with Sipho. The project would have to be handed in next week.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Project X*

'Hey, Nomsa! Where have you been hiding for the last few weeks? I haven't seen you in ages.'

Nomsa turned around, and was pleased to see her friend, Salie, walking behind her. They were on their way to school after a long weekend.

'We've been working really hard to finish the history project,' Nomsa replied. 'Look at these rings under my eyes . . .' she continued, tugging at the skin under her eyes as though this was concrete evidence.

'They've been disappearing for hours pretending to work, but I suspect it's all a cover up . . .' Tshepo butted in rudely.

'Don't listen to him. You know that he always talks nonsense,' Nomsa said defensively.

Tshepo walked on ahead to chat to one of his classmates. Nomsa was glad to be alone with her best friend.

'Salie,' she said, 'I've been spending all my time with Siphso. He's not so bad after all. He's very clever, and you know . . . I really like him.'

'Nomsa! You're not serious!'

'Tshepo can't stop teasing me. But they've become friends too. Always arguing about their political differences, but . . .'

'Germay and I aren't even close to finishing that history project,' Salie said with an air of nonchalance, as they caught up with Tshepo. At least Salie knew what not to say.

'But it's due today. And Mrs Mathibedi said that there would be quite a severe penalty for students who don't meet the deadline,' Nomsa reminded her friend sternly.

'I'm sure I can get an extension out of her. Anyway, she didn't say what the penalty was.'

Nomsa looked at her friend with a mixture of admiration and irritation. Knowing Salie, she probably would get away with it while she had stayed up till the early hours of the morning adding the finishing touches to her and Siphso's project.

There was an air of excitement in the history classroom, as students dribbled in with their projects, on cardboard, in scrapbooks and in files. One or two pairs had even taped the interviews that they had done, and had part of their project on cassettes.

Mrs Mathibedi walked around the class collecting the projects, and each student who handed in a project received a card, which had a picture of somebody voting.

'I would like you all to have a look at the back of the card I have just

given you,' Mrs Mathibedi said.

Nomsa turned her card around and read what it said. 'This is a voting card. It allows you to vote in the forthcoming elections.' She felt confused. Was this for the real elections or was this some kind of game? A couple of students looked even more baffled. Salie blurted out, 'But where's my card?'

Mrs Mathibedi looked calmly in her direction. 'I will explain it all to you in a minute.' She continued, pointing at the pile of projects on her desk. 'These projects look really exciting. I'm looking forward to reading through them. I hope that you have learned something valuable while doing them.'

'It was really interesting finding out what people are concerned about,' Tumelo volunteered. People have so much in common, even though they all have different views about how their problems should be solved.'

'I learned to listen to different points of view, even if I disagree with the ideas being expressed,' Pam added.

'Also, learning to think critically, not to accept everything you're told, that was new,' Nomsa said.

'I'm pleased to hear that,' replied Mrs Mathibedi, 'but don't think your learning process is over. I have a surprise for you. It involves using the voting cards that most of you have been given.'

'I bet it's a mock election,' somebody mumbled.

'Yes, we're going to set up and conduct a mock election in this classroom. You have found out many different things about this election – what the people see as important, what the politicians are promising them. I hope you've analysed all this in your projects. Now I think it's important to find out more about the practical side of voting – actual voting procedures.'

'You said you would explain why some of us weren't given voting cards,' Salie reminded her teacher.

'About the voting cards. These will serve as a kind of identity document, and will indicate that you have qualified to vote. In any election there is always a qualifying criterion for voting. In most countries, for example, voters must be eighteen years old or more. To participate in this mock election, you must hand in your project. We don't yet know what kind of identification will be required in the real election, but for this mock election, you will not be allowed to vote unless you present your voting card.'

'Can I get a card if I hand in my project tomorrow?' Salie asked anxiously. She didn't like the idea of being excluded from this election, even though it was just a game.

'Yes, I think that would be okay,' replied Mrs Mathibedi. 'But tomorrow is the absolute deadline.'

While Mrs Mathibedi started handing sheets of paper to the class, Salie and her partner were hurriedly making plans to complete their project.

‘These are the provisional rules for voting. First we are going to discuss them, and once we have agreed on the rules, we will invent some political parties and set up a **polling station**.’

The class read through Mrs Mathibedi’s list of rules. It contained the following information:

- To qualify as a voter in the Form 4a mock election, you and your partner must have completed and handed in your first term history project.
- Each eligible voter will be issued with a voting card before the mock election.
- You must present this card to the **election officer** before you vote on the day of the election.
- Each voter will be given a small sheet of paper which will contain the names of the parties you can vote for.
- This sheet of paper is known as a **ballot paper**. It is confidential and nobody else can ever find out which party you voted for.
- You will mark a cross (X) in the block next to the name of the party that you wish to vote for.
- If you mark the ballot sheet with anything other than a cross (X) next to the name of the party you’re voting for, your vote is regarded as a **spoilt paper** and will not be counted in the final election results.
- The elections will take place on 20 April, a week from today, in classroom 4a, from 9.15 – 10.20 a.m.
- Voting can only take place during that time.’

‘Once you have read through the rules carefully, I would like to hear some questions and comments about them. I want to see some evidence of the critical skills you have learned in the last few weeks,’ Mrs Mathibedi told the class encouragingly.

‘I would still be worried that somebody might peer over my shoulder while I am voting,’ Nomsa said.

‘I think that is a valid concern. What do you think we can do about that?’

‘Can’t we use the stationery room as a private place to vote?’ asked Tumelo.

‘That’s an excellent idea, Tumelo. In a real voting situation there are special **voting booths** for that purpose.’

‘I still think that somebody could find out who I voted for,’ said Siphon.

‘That is a concern a lot of people have during a real election. But it is not possible to determine how any one voter voted. Your vote is absolutely secret.’

Most of the class were reassured by this explanation, but there were still a few sceptical faces.

'How will we know that somebody **hasn't** voted twice?' Daniel asked.

'By stamping their voting card,' Salie suggested.

'Are you happy with that?' Mrs Mathibedi asked.

'What about stamping their hands as well?' suggested Siphon.

'It only takes one trip to the toilet to remove all traces of that,' said Tumi.

'You're on the right track. It is a good idea to have another safeguard against double voting, but one that cannot be removed that easily,' said Mrs Mathibedi.

'Don't they use some funny fluid in real elections?' asked Allyson.

'Yes, in some elections voters have to press their right fist on a pad soaked with fluid which soon dries. The fluid is colourless and odourless but can be seen under ultra violet light.'

'Can't we ask the government to lend us some?' asked Tumi jokingly.

'I doubt it,' replied Mrs Mathibedi smiling. 'Besides, for such small numbers I don't think we would need it.'

'What if somebody is sick on the day of our classroom election?' asked Germay.

'Then they can't vote,' replied Mrs Mathibedi. 'Unless something totally catastrophic has happened, I expect you all to be here on that day. In real elections, if you are out of the country during elections, you usually can't vote unless you've got special permission to cast a postal vote. You have to arrange this with election officials some time before the election day. Old and sick people can also make special arrangements to vote.'

'Doesn't a cross usually mean that something is wrong? How can we use a cross to show who we **do** want to vote for?' asked Nomsa.

'I'd put a cross next to the party I hate most, and a tick next to the one I like,' added Germay.

'No!' explained Mrs Mathibedi. 'This is very important. Throughout the world, a cross has always been the accepted mark to use in elections. You must try and get used to the idea of the cross being "correct" in this instance.'

'If I put the cross outside one of the blocks, will it be considered a spoilt paper?' asked Tumelo.

'Yes. You must mark only one block with a cross, next to the name of the party you support. If you mark the ballot paper with two crosses, it is a spoilt paper. If you mark the cross outside a block, it is also a spoilt paper. You have to be very careful.'

'But surely if I put a tick in a block, they will know that it means I support that party?' asked Palesa.

'Definitely not,' replied Mrs Mathibedi firmly. 'Imagine if everyone started marking ballot papers with the sign that they thought was the best. The election officers would have to spend weeks deciphering every vote.'

'I suppose so,' replied Palesa.

'We should call this project "Project X",' giggled Salie.

'What an Xcellent idea!' Tumi responded.

'In this mock election, we can all read and write. What about illiterate people? How will they be able to read the names of different parties?' asked Sipho.

'I think they use party symbols, like flags next to the name of each party,' explained Salie.

'Yes, that is probably what will happen in the general election,' commented Mrs Mathibedi.

She continued, 'I think we have covered the main guidelines for voting procedures. I will add the new suggestions to the list of rules. Let's start allocating different roles for organising this election.'

She put up a large sheet of paper in the front of the class, and with the help of her students, she started listing what had to be done.

- Four groups of pairs (i.e. eight people) who will represent the different political parties and will canvass by giving speeches, making posters and brochures.
- Party support workers – at least two per party – to help with the canvassing and preparation (eight people).
- Three election officers who make ballot papers, a ballot box, and organise the voting booths.
- Two people to check voting cards.
- Two ballot clerks to issue ballots.
- A presiding officer who will be in charge of the polling booth and check that everything goes smoothly.
- Voters – who will attend campaign meetings and cast their votes.'

When she had finished, she added one more point.

- Please note that everybody will have a chance to vote, even if your role is not 'voter'. Even the state president votes.

'Are voters going to vote for a candidate or a political party?' asked Sipho.

'We will probably be voting for parties,' replied Mrs Mathibedi, 'so in our mock election we'll do the same. People associate parties with particular leaders.'

Once the class had a clear idea of what each role entailed, they volunteered for different roles. Sipho and Nomsa decided to canvass around workers' issues, and prepared a campaign speech and some posters, remembering the picket they had attended. Others busily started preparing the ballot papers and the ballot box. It was agreed that Mrs Mathibedi would count the votes, and that the outcome of the election was less important than the process of learning how to vote.



*The outcome of the election was less important than the process of learning how to vote.*

The class worked busily on the election the whole week. By the second day, everybody had qualified for a voting card.

\* \* \*

On the weekend, Nomsa and Tshepo were walking to the shop to buy milk and bread for their mother. Nomsa said, 'We must get a newspaper, Tshepo.'

'What? Even though we still have the TV? Since when do you have time for both?'

'Don't get funny, Tshepo. We had our mock election in class yesterday . . . I've still got this stuff on my mind. I really want to get a range of opinions before the real election.'

'So, who won your election?'

'We don't know yet. Mrs Mathibedi is counting the votes with one representative from each of the four parties. They'll tell us on Monday.'

'Did everyone vote?'

'Yes. Except Sam tried to vote twice, so he got disqualified.'

'What a fool,' said Tshepo scornfully. And then he added condescendingly, 'You know, you really seem to have developed a few brain cells while working on this project. Perhaps it's all this time you've spent with Siphos . . .'

Nomsa was irritated by this back-handed compliment from her brother. But in a way, she knew he was right. She thought of all the people she had spoken to and all the things she had learnt while doing the research. She had definitely found out what she didn't know, and now she wanted to know more.



# GLOSSARY

Words that appear in **bold** type in the story are explained in the glossary. They are listed in alphabetical order. Sometimes you will find more than one word listed; this is because the groups of words need to be explained together.

## **accountable**

Responsible; able to give explanations for your actions.

## **ballot, ballot booth, ballot box, ballot paper**

A **ballot** is another word for a vote. A **ballot booth** is the private cubicle where you go to mark your choice on the **ballot paper**. The ballot paper is the special piece of paper on which voters indicate who they are voting for. Usually, the names of the parties or the individuals standing for election are listed on this paper, with a block next to their name. The voter puts a cross (X) in the block. The voter then puts the ballot paper into a special box called the **ballot box**. No one can remove the ballot papers from this box until the voting is complete and the officials are ready to count the votes.

## **canvass, canvasser, canvassing**

A **canvasser** is someone who goes around asking people to vote for their party. **Canvassing** can also take place at rallies or meetings.

## **constituent assembly**

A **constituent assembly** is a group of people who are elected to write a new constitution. Sometimes, they are all from the party that gets the most votes, but in the election we are preparing for, the **constituent assembly** will be made up of representatives from all the parties that get more than a certain percentage of votes. The party that gets the most votes will have more representatives on the constituent assembly than the party that gets the least votes. This is known as **proportional representation**.

## **constitution**

A set of laws setting out how a country is structured and how the government works.

## **democracy, democratic**

**Democracy** is a system which makes sure that all people have equal rights, and that all people can vote for the leaders of their choice. In a **democratic** society, people can criticise the government without fear of punishment: there is freedom of speech. If the government is not sticking to its promises, or is not doing its job well, the people who originally voted for them can always vote them out of office in the next election.

**election, general election**

**Elections** are the process by which we vote for political parties to represent us in the government. A **general election** is an election in which a whole country is involved.

**election officers, election officials**

These are people who check voters' identification documents, and give out ballot papers on the day of the election. They answer questions and help those with difficulties. They are independent people, who are not allowed to tell you who to vote for. After the election, they count the votes. They usually do this in groups so that they cannot cheat.

**identity book, identity document, ID**

This is a special book that proves that you are who you say you are. It has your name, address, and your photograph in it. It also has a number in it, called your identity number. Every adult citizen is supposed to have one. It also has your driver's licence (if you have one) and your marriage certificate in it. An identity document is not the same as a passport, as you cannot use it to cross borders.

**picket**

This is a group of protestors, usually standing in a line, carrying posters or placards to explain what they are protesting about.

**polling station**

This is the special place where you go to vote on the day of an election. The election officials will be there to help you. **Polling stations** are often at schools or community centres. You should not confuse **polling station** with 'police station', even though they sound similar!

**referendum**

This is a special kind of vote, where you are asked to answer 'yes' or 'no' to a question or principle. It is not the same as an election.

**spoilt paper**

If a voter does not mark the ballot paper correctly, or if he/she makes more than one mark, or scribbles on the page, the vote is spoilt, and is not counted. The correct way to mark a ballot paper is to put a cross (X) in the block next to the party of your choice.

**voters roll**

This is a list of names and identity numbers of all people who are registered as voters in a country. In South Africa, for the next election, we will not be using a **voters roll** as there is not enough time to make sure that the whole adult population is registered.

**voting booth**

This is the same as a ballot booth or a polling booth.

## SUGGESTED GROUP ACTIVITIES

The following activities can be used by a teacher in a classroom, or by a group leader in a community group.

- 1 Ask the members of your class or group to answer the following question, either in writing or in a group discussion.

‘What do you understand by democracy?’

- 2 Explore the advantages and disadvantages of democracy with your class or group, using this exercise.
  - a. Divide the participants into groups of 8 – 10.
  - b. Appoint leaders for half the groups. Tell these leaders that they have the power to make all the decisions; they do not need to consult their groups.
  - c. Appoint leaders for the remaining groups, but explain that the leaders can make decisions only with the help of the whole group. These groups must share the decision-making.
  - d. Set a question which needs a decision, such as ‘how should we go about asking the principal to change the exam timetable?’.
  - e. Explore the impact of these two leadership styles on decision-making. Which is quicker? Which leads to a more effective solution?
- 3 Arrange a debate on the following topic: ‘Democracy involves choosing a leader who you can later blame for all your problems.’ Do you agree with this statement?
- 4 Get your students/group members to collect as many different newspapers as possible, every day for a week. Suggest a number of dailies, weeklies, alternative or mainstream publications. Take one item of news, and in groups, students should compare the coverage in at least three different newspapers.

Offer your students some guidelines. Suggest that they:

- Compare the headlines for each article. Do any of the headlines report the event in a more sympathetic way than the others, or more critically?

- Analyse the use of language in the articles – how do the words used to report on the event affect the readers' response to the story?
  - Have all reporters selected the same facts to report on the event? If any facts have been left out, what effect has this had on the story?
  - What does the language used and selection of facts show about the attitude of the writer towards the subject matter?
- 5 Get the students or members of the group to make lists of the main political parties or organisations in South Africa. Ask them to choose three parties/organisations and find out more about the following:
- a. the principles and beliefs of the party/organisation
  - b. the kind of economic system they plan to introduce if they come into power in the next general election (e.g. Will industries be privately or state owned?)
  - c. the education and social welfare programmes they will propose
  - d. their health care policy

Suggest that students use the following resources to help them.

- brochures and pamphlets
  - posters
  - visits to party offices
  - newspaper articles
  - radio talk shows
  - television programmes
- 6 Hold a mock election.

Once your class or group has done some research into different political parties and organisations, they will be ready to learn more about actual voting procedures. You can examine these procedures by setting up a mock election in the classroom, or in your community centre. This activity would take place over a couple of days.

- a. Think of some qualifying criteria for your mock election, such as handing in some homework, or a special project. This way, you

ensure that all participants are given an equal chance to qualify. Issue those who qualify with voters' cards.

- b. Hand out a set of election rules similar to the rules listed on page 27 in Chapter Five. Debate and discuss the rules with the group, and if necessary, make changes as a result of the discussion. The aim is for the group to agree democratically on rules that are fair and effective. Reassure the group that their votes will be secret, and ensure that there is a way of checking that no one votes more than once.
- c. Once everyone has agreed to the rules, begin setting up the election. Give each person a different role for the mock election, ranging from representing the various political parties to acting as election officers. (Refer to Chapter Five for more details.)
- d. Group members are now ready to start working on their section of the mock election. Those who represent political parties should prepare speeches and campaign media. Others must prepare a ballot box, ballot papers and other media surrounding the polling booth.
- e. The candidates from each party must then present their speeches, and canvass the voters.
- f. Give everybody a chance to vote.
- g. If you want to put a spanner in the works, allocate a few students the role of demonstrators, or intimidators. They should try and force the other students to vote for a particular party.
- h. Count the votes with at least one representative from each party, to ensure honesty.
- i. When the game is over and candidates have been elected, discuss with the group what they learned from the game. Discuss ways to avoid potential problems when one is voting in a real election. If you allowed demonstrators, as in step g, discuss their role. Were they effective? Why?



**PROJECT X - A different history lesson**  
**by Belinda Mendelowitz**

When the date of the first truly democratic election in South Africa is announced, Mrs Mathibedi's Form 4 history class becomes chaotic. The students are excited, confused and critical. Mrs Mathibedi decides that the time has come for her students to find out what they do and do not know about the forthcoming election.

Mrs Mathibedi sets her students a project. While Nomsa and Sipho research what the electorate want, they learn about tolerance, freedom of speech and how to vote. They are also pleasantly surprised to learn about each other ...

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