

A fierce debate over identity and dignity has reignited as the People Against Race Classification (PARC) demand that use of the term “coloured ” be declared a criminal offence in South Africa. Labelling it as deeply offensive and comparable to the K-word, PARC founder Glen Snyman said the word continued to wound generations of people and perpetuate apartheid era racial labelling. Snyman said PARC is prepared to go to court to have it legally scrapped.

The PARC founder, a teacher by profession, made national headlines in 2020 when he was charged in the Western Cape for deliberately wrongly identifying his race on a government form when he applied for a teaching post. Snyman is a vocal critic of race classification and has previously spoken out against the issue. He told The Herald he found the use of the term “coloured ” degrading.

Since 2010, Snyman has led a campaign against the government’s continued use of race categories —black, coloured, Indian and white — on official documentation, including job application forms. “We are facing the race blocks on all government and private institution forms. “We ’ve been fighting for the last 15 years for the use of the word ‘coloured ’ to be abolished. “We see it as the same dirty word as the K-word.” Snyman said when people looked at ‘coloured ’ people they saw them as second-class citizens and not the original inhabitants of the land. “They see us as a mix of black and white, but the Khoi are the original inhabitants of this land,” he said. “There are instances where there is a mix of white and black, but that’s not all.

“There’s a whole confusion about and misrepresentation of our history. “The word ‘coloured ’ gives an indication that we are subhuman and it’s very degrading. “There’ve been so many negative things said. “We have enough to have a case and take it to court to have the word criminalised.” Snyman said an alternative was to be called “brown people”. “Being called ‘coloured ’ feels degrading and insulting. “When white people call me coloured, it feels as if they are superior, meaning they are better and we are not the same. We get ‘othered’.” He said he knew the fight also lay within the community because many had embraced the word “coloured ” as their identity. “Going forward, our fight is also with the brown people who refer to themselves as coloured because they don’t know better.

“They need to stop believing the lie and refer to themselves as brown people or just South Africans. “Our first fight is with these people who insist on being called coloured. “Those people are arrogant, ignorant and stubborn —and the only way to stop the use of the word is to criminalise it and charge them,” Snyman said. Since PARC took up the fight against race classifications, it has scored some wins, including a recommendation by the National Council of Province ’s Select Committee on Petitions that the National Assembly hold a debate on the identity of the indigenous people and all South Africans. In June, the SA Library for the Blind removed the requirement for race identification in its membership form after mounting pressure by PARC.

Prof Jonathan Jansen has spoken and written extensively about the term “coloured ”, especially in relation to identity, historical injustice and the broader implications of racial categorisation in the country.

Jansen said **PARC was correct to cast doubt on the validity of the classification** but, politically, “quite naive” if its members thought it was going to change the way in which people thought. **“They are completely naïve if they think that they’ll ever succeed by getting the law changed and to make the use of such classification or the name itself a criminal act,”** he said.

Jansen, though he personally finds the word offensive, said seeking to criminalise it was ridiculous. “Why would you want to criminalise a concept when so many people in SA don’t regard it as offensive? “If you go to the average person in the Cape Flats and tell them they are not coloured, they’ll laugh at you. “So the chances of the term being criminalised are zero — not just in the courts of law, but in the common sense understanding of people about who they are.”

Jansen said before apartheid there had been no such thing as “coloured”. “People were Khoi and San, they were Malay, they were slaves, but nobody was coloured. **“The coloured concept came only much later, and it came under apartheid with the designation of mixed race.** “The moment you say somebody is mixed race, it assumes there is a pure race, right? **“If people think of themselves as coloured, for example, regardless of how ridiculous that terminology is, they start to behave as if they are better than Africans and less than whites — and that has been a horrific consequence of this thing.”**

Jansen said there was a group of people comfortable with the classifications received under apartheid. “It gives them a sense that they’re better than the black African. That is a consequence of people taking classification seriously. **“I do understand where that group is coming from,” Jansen said.**

Political and social activist Tessa Dooms, who co-authored the book ***Coloured: How Classification Became Culture***, has previously argued that while the term coloured originated as a colonial and apartheid tool for classification, over the years it had transformed into a “culture of lived experiences”. **She emphasised that embracing the term as culture did not mean endorsing the classification itself (what a contradiction! so you can embrace it without endorsing it).**

Dooms and her co-author, Lynsey Ebony Chutel, both identify as **“politically black and culturally coloured”**. **National Coloured Congress** member and Western Cape MPL Duwayne Jacobs said **while they understood Snyman’s cause,** “coloured” was a culture. “When black people move into coloured areas, they live like coloured people because it’s a culture. **“Yes, the name was degrading,** but we took that name and we’ve turned it into something. **“We do agree that in due time we will work on the name,** but for now there are a lot of people who will never associate themselves with the word Khoi or Bushman,” Jacobs said.

