

WE NEED TO TALK

For **Justice Malala**, change is within reach, if we just have an honest conversation about it

Words by **Cayleigh Bright**

In the age of Donald Trump, Brexit and our own local elections, it feels that insightful political commentary and accurate analysis is more necessary than ever; but it is perhaps scarcer, too. In the past few years, Justice Malala's dissection of ruling party mismanagement and his discussion of future challenges for SA have stood out. His criticism has been balanced with hope for what could be achieved with a shift from blind party loyalism to more discerning voting, activism and criticism. In the recent municipal elections, Malala's prediction that local voters are more than ready for change proved true. He has consistently pointed out that in order to make our country grow and prosper there has to be a solution to the big issues of education, unemployment and wealth disparity. We asked the author about how we're thinking differently now.

GQ: In *We Have Now Begun Our Descent*, you ask why we don't have more anger about our government. Do you think that's changed since you published the book, and that this is the moment we're having?

Justice Malala: I think that there's a sense of activism, that what the students did with the Fees Must Fall campaign and what they achieved, has shown that we have agency. We're not just sitting – we can achieve things if we do something. We'll see more of that... More people saying, 'This far – and no further.' That's a good thing, people realising that the Constitution has put a whole range of tools in their hands to make change – opportunities to be an active citizen. Those protests will be the beginning of power, leaders realising that they are not leading dormant fools. Hopefully it will bring a sense of urgency to government, realising 'We promised free education,

and we better work towards that. We promised to reduce unemployment.'

GQ: What role does online activism have in getting results?

JM: It's good to have people talking. That traffic adds to the conversation. But I think a lot of us have walked away from the fact that we can make a real difference. I'm big on social media – I think it's great that people are talking. But for me, the key thing is to also live that in our day-to-day lives. That comes with doing something.

GQ: What do you think the role of writers is, in getting people to read, and assisting with education?

JM: I grapple a lot with the idea of reading. Recently I went to renew my driver's licence and I was in the queue for three and a half hours. There must have been around 150 people in the queue. Many people were playing CandyCrush or just sitting, and only one person was reading. And he was entranced, reading on his Kindle. I felt so sad. I don't know what the solution is. I read to my kids, and I wish I read to them more. But I think that every parent should try to read, to their child first, and then hopefully to another child. That that would be a good start. I wish we would all buy someone a book every so often. Reading culture – especially book-reading culture – is not what it could be in this country.

GQ: What would you like to achieve with this book?

JM: I'd like to have a conversation – an honest one – about South Africa. If you say, 'We need to do something about unemployment,' you get all kinds of pushback about who you are, where you come from, your race, and so forth. If I say that, I get all kinds of pushback about 'You hate Jacob Zuma. You're part of the CIA. You're a sellout.' The conversation is being

blocked, and gets bogged down in insults. It is possible that all of us want to solve the same problems, so let's do it. I'd like to have a real conversation with South Africa about what for me is the real challenge, and it's getting those young people who don't have jobs into jobs, and then have more conversations about the place of race and its effects on all of us. We're up in arms about FeesMustFall at Wits University, while the places that are most affected are North-West University and University of Fort Hare. I think that we need to have some real, honest, frank conversations, and we're not having enough of those.

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GQ: What would be your advice to people who have considered themselves 'not political', but are becoming interested in the country's issues and want to help find creative solutions?

JM: There's something we said a lot in the 1990s: 'Don't stay in your laager.' And now I find that people in the African National Congress are staying in their laagers, building their walls and saying, 'You hate us.' Then other people are building their own. I wish everyone would listen to each other, listen with some empathy for the fact that the other person has a point of view that could be different, and that's okay. Then start conversations that are respectful of that. **GQ**