

**DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE INSTITUUT VAN INTERNASIONALE AANGELEENTHEDE  
THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

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Although extracts from Mr. HF Oppenheimer's address of 17 April have appeared in the press, the Institute felt that members might wish to read the text in full.

Towards the end of last year the Institute published an Occasional Paper containing the text of Mr. Oppenheimer's address to the Foreign Policy Association in New York on 11 October 1984.

ADDRESS BY MR. HARRY OPPENHEIMER TO THE SOUTH AFRICA CLUB

SAVOY HOTEL, LONDON. WEDNESDAY 17TH APRIL, 1985

I am very grateful for the opportunity of speaking here this evening. It is becoming rare for a South African to be able to talk to a gathering of friends of his country who, even if they condemn, as I think they are right to do, the racial policies of our Government, yet have an understanding of the complexity of the problems we face, and aim not at punishing us for past crimes or shortcomings, but at helping us to build a just society free from discrimination in a peaceful way.

I emphasise the importance that reform should come about peacefully. There are far too many people who like to write off any favourable development as negligible and are much too ready to think in terms of solutions imposed by violence or threats of violence; though I notice that most of them live at a safe distance from the likely scene of action. Let us never forget that violent means and peaceful means cannot be looked upon as just two alternative ways of reaching the same objective. They always lead to quite different final results. South Africa is going through an exceptionally difficult time. The economy is in deep recession. There is high and growing unemployment particularly among the young blacks in the cities. Black resentment of white privilege is fiercer than it has ever been. Turbulence, arson and murder have become endemic in the black townships. No wonder then that outside South Africa people have come to think that our Government has neither the ability nor the will, to tackle our racial problems; and that demands for sanctions and boycotts against South Africa have been growing.



But do try to understand how difficult South Africa's problems are - uniquely difficult, I would say. The whites in South Africa cannot just abdicate or leave as they have elsewhere in Africa. They are only a minority of course, but a long settled minority counted in millions; not as in the other African states in a few tens of thousands at the most. Then there are large "Coloured" and Indian minorities whose views and interests cannot be assumed to coincide fully with those of the black majority. The blacks themselves are still deeply divided on tribal lines. South Africa is therefore, and must remain, a truly multi-racial country. And that is something quite different from any of the new African states. And this unique multi-racial country has been and still is, in the course of an industrial revolution, under white leadership, committed to ideas and techniques which are quite foreign to the African tradition and background. In such circumstances it would have been an immensely difficult task to build a just society, whatever Government had been in power. It would have required patience and understanding from all racial groups of the highest order. And those who are inclined to treat South Africa as an outcast should thank God that they are not called upon to face South Africa's problems in their own countries.

Nevertheless - and here you must make allowance for the prejudices of someone who has spent a life time in political opposition - I do not think it can be denied that the National Government, which came to power in 1948, bears a huge responsibility for the worst features of the South African system and for the dangerous situation in which we are today. The present Government came to power at a time when, under the leadership of General Smuts, South Africa was slowly coming to realise that it must adapt itself to the facts of life in a modern industrial society; when it was just beginning to understand that what was needed was not increasing separation but increasing integration of the races. All this the National Party, after its election victory, set itself to reverse. But the trouble was that a separation of the races on fair terms would have involved an economic cost that white South Africa was never prepared to pay. And since the policy of Apartheid, or racial separation could never be honestly applied, it at once degenerated into a policy of oppression. And so the National Government, not for one season only, but year by year, relentlessly, for more than a generation, has been "trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored". Now at long last President Botha is, I believe, making a genuine, though slow and cautious effort to reform. For a man of his background this has certainly needed the greatest courage. But time for South Africa is running out; and we must pray - with Alan Paton - that by the time the whites have learnt to love, the blacks will not have come only to hate.

What then can or should men of goodwill outside South Africa do to help, or persuade, or pressurise our Government to move faster to dismantle the evil system of Apartheid? So much injustice, so much racial discrimination remains in the laws and customs of South Africa that it is perhaps natural for most people to think that any changes that have been made must be cosmetic only. And the proponents of boycotts and sanctions never tire of telling us that the blacks are worse off today than they ever were before. But this is simply untrue. Progress is not only to be measured by the distance to the ideal of a full non-racial society but also by comparison of the present situation with that of a fairly short time ago.



I believe it will be meaningful to think back to 1976 when serious riots, comparable to those of this year, erupted in the black townships. Did the blacks in 1976 have more or less real reason for discontent than they have today?

In 1976 only whites were in Parliament and the Government was determined that this state of affairs should continue indefinitely. Today "Coloureds" and Indians are directly represented in Parliament and in the Cabinet and have already made it clear that they are not prepared to act as Government stooges. The Government has agreed in principle that blacks also should have a share in Government at the highest level and has called for a national forum, representing all races, to consider and recommend how this should best be done.

In 1976 no blacks had any security of tenure, let alone leasehold rights outside the tribal areas where they were thought of as temporary migrants only. Today they can hold their houses under a system of 99 year leasehold and are shortly to obtain freehold rights. The establishment of independent black-owned businesses is encouraged and the central business districts in the big cities are being opened to trading by all races on equal terms.

In 1976 the Government was operating the influx control system with the object of reducing and eventually reversing the flow of blacks to the so called "white" cities. Today the inflow of blacks to the cities is accepted as inevitable and necessary and the whole influx control system is under reconsideration.

In 1976 all skilled jobs in industry were by law reserved for whites. Now the whole job reservation system has been dropped and it is expressly recognised that more and more blacks must do skilled work.

In 1976 black education was not only separate from that of whites but was as a matter of policy kept down to a level thought to be appropriate to the inferior status accorded to blacks in industry. Today it is officially accepted that black education should be in every way equal to that of the whites and a beginning has been made with the long and difficult task of turning that aspiration into reality.

In 1976 racially mixed trade unions were illegal and black unions were not recognised in terms of the labour legislation. Today mixed or black trade unions are operating in the same way as white unions and the black trade union movement is large, powerful and rapidly growing. Black wages have been rising rapidly and the great gap between black and white wages has narrowed. For example since 1970 black wages in real terms have risen by 95% while real white wages have risen by only 11%; with the result that while in 1970 average white wages were 6,78 times as high as average black wages, this ratio has now fallen to 3,86.

Now such changes, while no doubt inadequate, cannot reasonably be dismissed as just cosmetic. And what is more they are of a nature which will certainly make further change inevitable. They have also been accompanied by a noticeable loosening up of personal relations between blacks and whites. And this, while impossible to quantify, may in the long run turn out to be the most important change of all.



Why is it then that in spite of these favourable developments the discontent, the resentment and violence among urban blacks is worse than ever before? Paradoxically one reason may be just the fact that conditions have to some extent improved. When people are suffering under a great burden of injustice they are not likely to feel happy or grateful because of some comparatively slight amelioration in their lot. They will on the contrary tend to feel still more resentful of the injustices that remain. At last they see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. At last they can hope. And determination, and the will to action and too often violence, breed best in a heady atmosphere of hope, not in an atmosphere of dull despair.

Another most important reason for all the violence is the economic recession and unemployment that goes with it. The last outbreak of violence in the townships was during the recession in 1976. The Sharpeville disaster also took place in a recession year. Now this is no coincidence. It is, I am afraid, by no means surprising that black youths roaming the streets without jobs should express their loathing of Apartheid by stoning passing cars and setting Government buildings on fire.

And in such a situation, as you would expect, violent political activists and bands of hooligans and criminals combine to intimidate the peaceful black population with campaigns of terror and murder. This of course compels police action. Many of the police are very young and some are probably not as well-trained as they should be. In the circumstances police excesses are sometimes almost inevitable and this in turn provokes further escalating violence! It must be admitted that whatever long term responsibility the Government may bear for this situation, in the short term those responsible for maintaining law and order have a terrible, thankless job on their hands.

All this should make us think carefully about any policy of sanctions and boycotts which while aimed ostensibly at peaceful change, would operate in practice to increase unemployment and the violence that flows from it. What really do the proponents of disinvestment and other forms of economic sanctions mean when they say that they are working for peaceful change? Most of them probably are merely expressing a natural preference for the transition to black majority rule which they aim at, being brought about by the South African Government's surrendering to threats rather than being defeated in battle. But the fact is that the South African Government is not going to surrender to such threats; and in this they have the support of virtually all the whites, most of the "Coloureds" and Indians and a very large number of the Blacks. South Africa is a heterogeneous country and if a new and better society is to be built by peaceful means, its nature cannot be determined according to the ideas of any one group, inside or outside South Africa, but must be a compromise which while giving no-one exactly what he would like, will be at least tolerable to each of the diverse elements that make up the South African nation. Is that possible? I am optimistic enough to believe that it is. But in my opinion it could only be achieved within the framework of a federal constitution which provided solid guarantees for the rights of minorities. To behave as though South Africa could peacefully be induced to accept a constitution, based on universal suffrage, which would place unlimited power in the hands of any demagogue who could muster the support of 51% of the electorate, evidences either ignorance or hypocrisy.



It seems to me that people of goodwill here or in America who want to play a part in the reform of South Africa, find it very difficult to define in a positive way what they are aiming at. In a negative way of course they see clearly that South Africa is a country in which the whole national life, political, social and economic, is permeated by racial discrimination. And this is a state of affairs that they, rightly, would like to help to change. But the way that the change is brought about, if it is to be peaceful, will have to be worked out and agreed by South Africans in South Africa. It is not for foreigners to prescribe the nature of the South African constitution or society. It is particularly important to keep this in mind because among the protagonists of sanctions and boycotts there are people, not very numerous perhaps, but very influential, who are trying to do just that. Generally they are left wing radicals, often Marxists, who believe that racial discrimination and private enterprise in South Africa are parts of the same system and should be eliminated together. And often they succeed in taking the much larger numbers, who believe in private enterprise and would like to see the blacks sharing fully in its benefits, for a ride. We should ask ourselves whether we cannot find any general objectives in relation to which the rate of progression or retrogression in South Africa can be measured. I would say that in the first place all South Africans, regardless of colour, should be able to move freely about their country, to sell their labour in the highest market and work and earn their living in any honest way they choose, free from restrictions based on racial considerations. Secondly all South Africans, whether or not they are also nationals of one of the newly independent homelands should share a common South African citizenship. All South Africans should have the right to take part in the Government of the country at the highest level, subject to constitutional guarantees, of universal application, to protect not only individual rights but also the group rights of the many tribes and sections that make up the heterogeneous South African nation.

These are not easy concepts for our Government to accept. Until recently anyhow they regarded themselves as the sole legitimate political expression of the will and ethos of white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, with the special mission of retaining power in the hands of the Afrikaners. It followed that to the maintenance of Afrikaner unity, all else had to be sacrificed. But now this concept has been shattered by the split in Afrikaner ranks caused by the reforming policies of the State President. He has had the courage to think about South Africa in much broader terms than any National Party leader before him. Nevertheless, old ideas linger on and there is still to be found in the governing party a nostalgia for the simple Afrikaner tribalism of the past which delays and confuses the implementation of new policies, even though they have in principle been accepted. Yet South Africa is not, or anyhow should not be at this stage concerned with the normal party-political battle but with the bringing to birth of an entirely new sort of country. It is a great misfortune that the bitterness and the prejudices and preconceptions, inherited from our turbulent past, have so far made it impossible to tackle the new problems on a truly national basis. But it is just that, that we will have to do in order to meet the historical challenge before us with the necessary courage, magnanimity and faith.

Jan Smuts House

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