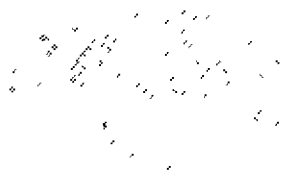


APARTHEID UNDER PRESSURE

An address by H.F. Oppenheimer

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Mr. H.F. Oppenheimer, Chairman of De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd. and former Chairman of the Anglo American Corporation of S.A. Ltd., is the National Chairman of the South African Institute of International Affairs.

Mr. Oppenheimer delivered this address to the Governors of the Foreign Policy Association in New York on 11 October 1984.

It should be noted that any opinions expressed in this Paper are the responsibility of the author and not of the Institute.

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Jan Smuts House

P.O. Box 31596

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to the Governors of the Foreign Policy
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New York:

It is just seven years since I was last privileged to speak at a meeting of the Foreign Policy Association. The title I chose for my talk on that occasion was "Prospects for Change in South Africa". Certainly South Africa is a very different country now from what it was then. It has changed for the better in many ways which are important in themselves, and which make further change inevitable. Yet none of this has reduced the international or external pressures on the South African System. Indeed, the demands for sanctions against South Africa, in the apparent belief that freedom and justice for the black majority can best be achieved by ruining the economy and cutting the country off, socially, intellectually and morally from the rest of the world, are more insistent than ever.

Perhaps the most important change that has taken place is not material at all, but a change in the rhetoric of the governing party. It is almost always a mistake to dismiss such a change as a mere matter of words. It is the rhetoric of today which determines the political programme of tomorrow. Over the last few years, the National party which coined the opprobrious word 'apartheid' has been desperately trying to rid itself of what it now feels to be an albatross around its neck. It is not the Government but their opponents who refuse to let the word die. It has become a slogan in reverse. In common usage it no longer designates any specific political programme, but is just shorthand for the oppression of blacks by whites. It has particularly become associated in the minds of radical left-wing enemies of the South African Government with the economic system of capitalism or free enterprise. The belief that apartheid should be replaced by some form of state socialism is, I would judge, one of the reasons for the emphasis on bringing about change through economic disengagement. This policy is particularly stressed by political emigrés from South Africa. But political emigrés, however much sympathy they may deserve for their sufferings, are the worst possible guides in such matters; they soon lose touch with their sufferings, are the worst possible guides in such matters; they soon lose touch with what is going on in their own countries; they learn nothing and they forget nothing; and they rapidly develop a vested interest in promoting violent solutions.

But what does the South African government's desire to rid itself of the word apartheid signify, and what did apartheid really mean in South Africa? The roots of the policy of racial separation go back far into South African history and were initially associated with the people who sought to protect the African way of life from the destructive effects of a white dominated industrial society. It reflected the same sort of ideas as the policy of 'indirect rule' in the British Colonial Empire. Up to the end of the last World War it was the policy rather of General Smuts' party than of the Nationalists. But, while it became clear to Smuts and to the more progressive elements of his party that rapid economic growth was resulting in a growing black urban population which would make separate development unworkable, this was something that the Nationalists could not bring themselves to accept. They were the sort of party which when forced to choose between the distasteful and the impossible would opt without hesitation for the impossible. They determined, therefore, to try to find means to reverse the flow of the blacks to the towns. In effect what they did was to take up Smuts' discarded policy of separate development, re-christen it 'Apartheid', and sell it to the country as the sole means by which whites could avoid power sharing with blacks.

The new apartheid policy was thus from its beginnings in 1948 closely connected with the process of economic growth and industrialization. But the nexus was completely the reverse of that supposed by those who think of apartheid as a means of ensuring a supply of cheap black labour to industry. What the Government set out to do was to lay down conditions for the organization of industry which would prevent the permanent settlement of blacks outside the tribal areas. This was never acceptable to industrialists, nor did it really result in cheap labour, for while it kept wages low, it also ensured that the workers would be inefficient.

In practice, however, the apartheid policy was not, and could not be carried out. The reason was simply that it would have involved limitations on economic growth that were entirely unacceptable. In spite of all the Government said and did, the black urban population continued to grow rapidly and the excuse for not sharing power with the blacks became more and more threadbare. But, what the apartheid policy did do was to ensure that the inevitable process of urbanization should take place under the worst possible conditions, that the black workers should be subjected to complicated influx control regulations and harassed by the application of humiliating pass laws; that there should be a permanent housing shortage; that such houses as were built should be of poor quality; that there should be no security of tenure for urban blacks; that the black residential areas should be developed as dormitory towns with minimal or no provision for normal social amenities; that educational needs should be grossly neglected; and that the blacks being envisaged as temporary wage labourers in European businesses, should be prevented from developing businesses of their own. In short, what the Government's policy did was not to bring about racial separation but to exclude black workers from almost all the benefits of the private enterprise system in which they have been caught up. These are the real evils of apartheid; these are the immediate injustices which must be eliminated from the South African system. But little could be done while the government persisted in a policy which pretended that the black urban population was a temporary phenomenon only. This is why I believe that the recent changes in Government rhetoric are so important; for they imply that at long last the notion that directly or indirectly all black people are tribesmen, not South Africans, has been abandoned. And this fundamental change in Nationalist thinking is what is expressed by dropping of the term 'apartheid' as a description of a Government policy.

This had significant practical effects; and in the changes that have been brought about a private sector organisation, the Urban Foundation, has played an important part. This organization was formed by leading businessmen in reaction to the serious urban riots which took place in 1976 in an effort to improve the quality of life in the black townships. Large sums of money were raised through donations and also by way of loans; and here some leading American banks were helpful and generous. Originally, the organization was designed simply to undertake useful projects in the fields of housing and education, and to exercise influence on leading companies to eliminate racial discrimination in industry. Soon however the Foundation's scope was greatly widened. Under the very distinguished leadership of the former judge, Mr. Jan Steyn, it successfully tackled what had seemed the virtually impossible task of winning the respect and confidence both of members of Government and of the more important black leaders. Noteworthy was the Foundation's success in securing the agreement of the Government to the granting of 99-year leasehold rights in the black townships. Significant improvements have also been initiated in the educational system and much has been done to facilitate the development of small black-controlled businesses. Perhaps most important of all, the laws governing the black and mixed trade unions, which had previously not been recognized in terms of South African labour legislation, were brought into line with those governing the white trade unions.

As a result, an active, powerful black trade union movement has come into being which has already affected wages and conditions of employment and will undoubtedly have far reaching effects in politics as well as in industry. In spite of the new problems, this development will inevitably create for industrialists it has been welcomed by almost all the important and progressive business concerns. In general too, I would say that there has been a noticeable loosening up of social relations between whites and blacks. This does not mean, of course, that racial prejudice has been brought to an end, but nevertheless a subtle and far reaching change is certainly taking place.

Naturally, these developments have in no way mollified the black radicals. On the contrary they have caused the serious injustices that remain to be regarded as still more intolerable. And, of course, no social or economic reforms can serve as a substitute for the granting to blacks of a fair share in political power. To that basic question I shall come in a moment, but before doing so I want to mention a few of the lesser but still highly important practical changes that are urgently needed.

The new housing policy, though a great improvement, is not going ahead as fast as it should, and it is vital that more land for black housing should be made available without delay. But here Government procrastination and red tape get in the way. The 99-year lease system while it is from a practical point of view virtually equivalent to freehold, is still perceived as discriminatory because it is not applied to whites, and it is therefore resented. The conversion of the 99-year lease to freehold would have great symbolic significance. Then, while a sound legal structure for black local government has been enacted, the manner in which it is to be financed has not yet been resolved and, until it is, the blacks are going to be suspicious that the whole system is a sham. The Government also needs to make it abundantly clear that it does not think of local government for blacks, as I am afraid it did in the past, as some substitute for a share in central government. Doubts about this have already caused a movement by many blacks to boycott local elections. Finally, the restriction on black mobility contained in the influx control system, associated as it is with the abhorrent pass laws, is entirely unacceptable. Until this system goes, or is radically changed, it will be a continual case of unrest and sporadic violence.

This list of necessary reforms is by no means exclusive, and I mention them because I think that the people of goodwill in America and elsewhere, who want to help to bring about a peaceful transition to a just society in South Africa, should understand that there are many difficult practical issues involved, and not simply suppose that the only question is whether or not there should be a political system based on universal franchise in a unitary constitution.

Of course, this last way of thinking reflects the ideas of the leaders of the freedom fighters in the colonial empires, starting with Nkrumah in Ghana, who first demanded what he called "the political kingdom", to Mugabe in Zimbabwe who in a recent speech at the celebration of the 21st anniversary in his ZANU freedom movement said that the ZANU's primary objective had been "the assumption of political power by the Africans" and that other matters could be left to be dealt with later; and that went on to observe that the coming to power in 1963 of the "Rabidly Racist Rhodesian Front ... thus putting paid to all politics or reformism and compromise" was a highly favourable factor for his party. But if freedom and justice are to come peacefully to South Africa then it is precisely the politics of reformism and compromise that must be encouraged. And this, it seems to me, is something too often overlooked by well meaning advocates of disinvestment, boycotts and sanctions.

The comparatively recent idea that South Africa ought to be treated as an outcast reflects a change in world opinion, not a change for the worse in South African racial attitudes. After all, South Africa took a leading part, so far as a small country could, in the formation of the United Nations Organization and South Africa was not regarded by the United States as an unacceptable ally at the time of the Korean war. The present world attitude really dates from the dismantling of colonialism and the withdrawal of South Africa from the British Commonwealth during the sixties. The emergence of the new independent black states leads people to suppose that something analagous should, and indeed inevitably must, happen in South Africa. And yet the situations were widely different. While colonial settlement in Africa south of the Sahara was on the whole a phenomenon of the second half of the 19th century, white settlement in South Africa began in the middle of the 17th century, not long after the beginning of white settlement in America. Until the sixties, none of the African colonies were independent and only Rhodesia was fully self-governing. In South Africa a representative government started 130 years ago, full self government was obtained 75 years ago and international recognition of South Africa as a fully independent country came over 60 years ago. In the African colonies which have recently emerged as independent black states the size of the white population was counted in tens of thousands at the most. In South Africa the white population, while admittedly a minority, is counted in millions, and there are, in addition, Indians and people of mixed race whose views and interest certainly cannot be assumed to coincide fully with those of the African majority. These are fundamental differences and the idea that a just political settlement in South Africa should necessarily take the same form as in the other southern African states, is quite unrealistic and, indeed preposterous. Although I have spent a lifetime fighting against policies of racial discrimination in South Africa, I certainly would not willingly accept a political settlement which involved any serious risk of South Africa's developing into a marxist-orientated, one-party state. And who can say that in African conditions the establishment of a Westminster-type constitution based on one-man-one vote would not involve such a risk? Consider the situation in Zimbabwe. I have no desire to criticize the regime in Zimbabwe where circumstances are quite different from those in South Africa, but there you have a leader who has announced that he will regard a victory at the next election as a mandate to suppress the minority parties and to establish his own party as the only legal political organization in the country. I do not know if this sort of thing is satisfactory to the people who call for black majority rule as the only fair system in South Africa. But to my mind there are other things of importance besides majority rule; there is parliamentary government with rights for the opposition as well as government parties; and there are the rights of minorities. To put the matter cynically if you like, the Whites, and Coloureds and Indians for the matter, in South Africa would never peacefully agree to a political dispensation that would allow any demagogue who could secure 51% of the votes in an election to treat them as badly as they have treated blacks in the past. And who can say that are wrong? Nor do I believe that in a country as deeply divided racially and tribally as South Africa any constitution which simply pretends that these differences do not exist would be in the best interests of the black majority, any more than of the people of other races.

What sort of constitutional development then can be envisaged which would be fair and reasonable to all races tribes and sections? The question is easy to ask but impossibly difficult to answer; in any case a final solution could only possibly be reached over a period of negotiation between the authentic leaders of the groups concerned, whether or not they are to be found amongst those who work within the system. No one who prefers to proceed by way of discussion and compromise, rather than by force, should be excluded.

At this stage it is only possible to indicate some of the issues involved and to speculate in a general way about how they might be tackled; and perhaps the best way to begin is to comment briefly on the new and highly controversial constitution which has just been adopted.

I myself opposed the new constitution in the recent referendum. My reasons were, firstly that I feared it might prove unworkable, and secondly that I thought that the introduction of a measure of power-sharing with the coloured and Indians without at the same time tackling the problem of power sharing with the blacks was bound to increase inter-racial bitterness and tension. The largely successful campaign to boycott the coloured and Indian elections and the fact that opposition to the new constitution had a part in motivating the recent widespread rioting, seem to suggest that my misgivings were not entirely unjustified. Nevertheless, the government's willingness to share power with people of other races - even though this involved a split in their own party - is something quite new in South Africa and was undoubtedly intended as a step forward. It was because matters were generally perceived in this way that the government was supported in the referendum by an overwhelming white majority. It is quite wrong to think of the new dispensation as a sham, or as a device to entrench apartheid in a new form, even though the division of parliament into separate, racially-constituted chambers is a clumsy device which reflects the prejudices of the past. It is clearly not going to work without a degree of consensus, which it is perhaps over optimistic to expect. However, the government's prestige is fully committed to consensus politics and this in itself gives substantial power to coloureds and Indians. The division into separate chambers is not calculated to reduce the power of coloureds and Indians as a whole as against whites as a whole - the number of whites exceeds that of coloured and Indians combined - but to reduce the power of minority parties in each of the chambers, with particular reference to the white opposition parties. The majority party in each chamber will be able to speak for its community as a whole so that, for example, if it came to the crunch an opposition party such as the PFP, of which I am a member, would not be able to combine with Coloured or Indian parties to defeat or obstruct the Government. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that the role of the opposition will be negligible. By their general policy line as well as the part they take in committee, they will be able to exercise an influence in the all important matter of building up consensus, particularly so, since in matters of race relations it will naturally be difficult for Coloured or Indian parties to move closer to government policy than the white opposition party is willing to do.

All in all, therefore, I am sure that the right thing for South Africans, and for friends of South Africa, to do is to put aside their misgivings and try to make the best of the new constitution, while at the same time pressing strongly for a share in central power for the blacks. This is a constitution which should be accepted as a beginning, but only as a beginning. Until recently the government has acted on the assumption that the political aspirations of the blacks could be met by rights of self-government in autonomous or, if the preferred, independent tribal areas. But this policy has been wrecked on account of the huge and growing black urban population which is needed to support the economy. This the government is belatedly recognizing and a Cabinet committee is now trying to work out a political plan to accommodate urban blacks. This is a remarkable step forward. In speculating about possible solutions, certain limitations must be kept in mind. The "homelands" policy has gone too far to be simply abandoned. It has met some important psychological and practical needs, and vested interests have been created that cannot easily be ignored. On the other hand, none of these territories can really be thought of as fully independent of South Africa, and some federal or close confederal link is now recognized to be essential.

This must surely imply an internationally recognized common citizenship, in addition to whatever form of special citizenship may attach to the new tribal states.

I hope I have been able to show you that on the black side as well as on the white, constitution making in South Africa is not a simple matter. Consensus government is essential for peace in South Africa and it is just possible that the new constitution which has been adopted for whites and coloureds and Indians will provide experience of consensus politics which may prove of value in a wider sphere.

What then is the value, if any, of external pressure for change in South Africa? Considerable, I believe, provided it is directed with a desire for justice and not revenge, and an understanding that in the last resort solutions to South Africa's problems must be worked out in South Africa by South Africans. Perhaps the most striking example of the powers and limitations of external pressure is to be found in relation to sport. The campaign to exclude South Africa from international competition, until such time as sport in South Africa was organized on a non-racial basis, has been immensely successful, far more so than I would have imagined. But now that sport is largely non-racial the movement is beginning to over-reach itself. Having succeeded in what they set out to do, or anyhow with what they said they had set out to do, the boycotters now propose to continue their campaign until the South African government surrenders unconditionally and black majority rule is established in the country. But the South African government is not going to surrender to such pressure and the only effect is to compromise the successes of the past. External pressure, if it is to be of value, must attempt to bring about reform, not revolution. The trouble with the policy of disinvestment and economic sanction is that it works, if it works at all, for violent and not peaceful solutions. It is just because the South African economy has moved forward rapidly that the original apartheid policy has had to be scrapped and that some changes for the better have come about. The fact is that continued domination of the blacks by the whites could only continue if the economy were kept small enough for all, or anyhow most, skilled jobs to be reserved for the whites as they used to be in the past.

Efforts are made from time to time to draw distinctions between sections of the economy and to call for disinvestment from those parts which are felt to be particularly associated with apartheid. For instance, a report of the Mayor of New York's Panel on City Policy with respect to South Africa calls for disinvestment in the first place from companies which "make significant sales to the South African Government, or sell to the military, police and other governmental instrumentalists closely involved with the enforcement and protection of apartheid". This sounds very well and fits in with the United Nations arms embargo on South Africa. But what have been the practical effects of the arms boycott? It has led to the build up of a large armaments industry in South Africa which can supply almost all the country's military needs, and which is now seeking foreign markets. As a result, South Africa is a much more independent and formidable regional power than it used to be; witness the Nkomati Accord. But for this a price has had to be paid, and as usual it is the blacks who are paying it in the form of lower provisions for social services than would otherwise have been possible.

The advocates of disinvestment and sanctions are curiously insensitive to the needs and views of the black workers in South Africa. Recently an enquiry financed by the U.S. Department of State was conducted under the leadership of Professor Lawrence Schlemmer of the Natal University into the attitudes of black workers.

In many ways the findings are disquieting. It appears that the level of discontent and resentment is significantly higher than a few years ago. The sense of grievance appears to be concentrated on what is felt to be the low level of wages and rising cost of living - though, in fact, black earnings in real terms have been increasing fairly rapidly - and on the discrimination in conditions of employment against blacks in favour of whites. There was, on the other hand, quite overwhelming support for continued and increased foreign investment in order to create more jobs and raise the level of earnings. In particular, there was a desire for American investment. The opinion was widespread that the activities of American firms helped to improve conditions for black workers. This points irresistably to the conclusion that American investor can do much more practical good by encouraging the firms in which they invest to eliminate racial discrimination and to take positive steps to open opportunities for black advancement, than by disposing of their South African investments in the hope that this will force a change of policy on the South African Government. Moreover, such a policy by American firms will certainly be enthusiastically endorsed in word and deed by the leading South African companies.

Finally, let me say that in general moral disapproval in America and Europe of racial discrimination is in itself a fairly effective sanction. People in South Africa, like everywhere else, want to be loved, and no country likes to be regarded as the "polecat" of the world. I certainly would not say that pressure for change in South Africa is unjustified; but I do say, firstly, that sanctions should not be resorted to without very careful consideration of their likely long-term practical effects and, secondly, that to act in a way which is likely to encourage violence is dangerous and irresponsible. Nor is this just a question of which means should be used to reach an agreed objective. Violent means never bring about the same conclusion as peaceful means and generally lead not to freedom and justice, but to tyranny. South Africa is at last on the move, economically, socially and politically. South Africans, even white South Africans, are not really worse than other people, they are just ordinary men and women who find themselves face to face with problems which require quite exceptional qualities of courage, magnanimity and faith for the solution. The hour may be late, but the way of peaceful change still deserves a chance.