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FIRST
IMPRESSIONS
OF A CHANGING
SOUTH AFRICA

ANTHONY REEVE

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF A CHANGING SOUTH AFRICA

by

Anthony Reeve

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much, Chairman, for that introduction.

I am delighted that my first formal speaking engagement since I arrived in South Africa should be here at Jan Smuts House: delighted because of the Institute's reputation as a contributor to international understanding of South Africa *and as a forum for discussion of international affairs in this country*; and delighted also because of the connection with Smuts himself. When Mrs. Thatcher visited Durban in May to give the fourth Jan Smuts Memorial lecture, she noted that the words Smuts had used to describe the need for reconciliation between Afrikaners and British were entirely appropriate for today's different circumstances:

'We must have national unity in South Africa (Smuts wrote), as the one true basis of future stability and strength – and that national unity is entirely consistent with the preservation of our language, our traditions, our cultural interests, and all that is dear to us in our past. The ideal of national unity means a continuous effort towards better relations, towards *mutual respect and forbearance*, towards cooperation, and that breadth of view and character which will be the most potent instrument for dealing with our problems.'

I can think of no more elegant text on which to base my remarks to you this evening.

Now as you know, I have not been in South Africa for long. When I arrived in July, it was not my first visit to this country. But dealing with South Africa from Whitehall – 'flying a desk', as the Royal Air Force put it – is *nothing at all* like being on the spot, and experiencing a country day by day.

And I was immediately conscious when I arrived how much had changed since, four years or so ago, I exchanged the problems of Africa for the problems of the Middle East. When I was head of the Southern Africa department at the Foreign Office in London, if I had forecast to my Minister that in a few years' time the ANC and other leading black political organisations would be unbanned, Nelson Mandela and many other released, and the country firmly set on the path of democracy and reform, I think I would have been sent off for a spot of gardening leave. In those days, none of us thought that change would come so soon or so quickly.

But come it has. The changes have made the situation in South Africa far more fluid; and they have meant that the ascent of my own learning curve has

sometimes felt like the ascent of the North Face of the Eiger. Or, to take a more suitable analogy, the ascent of Cathedral Peak – which I did the other day (as my legs keep reminding me!).

So I am very conscious of being a newcomer: and I have therefore made it my business in my first few months here to travel round the country – from Cape Point to KaNgwane, and from Kimberley to Rorke's Drift – talking to as many people as possible, and trying to get a feel for what is happening in this vast, complicated country – and a feel for how Britain can help.

I would be foolish indeed if I were to draw any hard and fast conclusions on the basis of my experiences so far – and positively suicidal if I were to stand in front of you this evening and lecture to an audience far more knowledgeable than I am, on what is or is not happening in South Africa, and what should or should not be done about it.

But in the British Diplomatic Service we have a rule whereby each new Ambassador is required to send a formal despatch to the Foreign Secretary within a few months of his arrival in post, setting out his first impressions of the country and his recommendations for British policy in the light of them. In the old days such despatches began 'Sir' (or 'My Lord', in the days when Lord Carrington was Foreign Secretary); and ended 'with the utmost truth and respect, I am, Sir, your humble servant'.

Those indeed were the days. In some ways I much regret the passing of those more leisurely times when work for the diplomatic was only one component of a far more varied existence.

We are all much busier now, more's the pity: and we sign despatches rather more simply – though I am not at all sure whether that is because Ambassadors nowadays are less humble or respectful than they were. Anyway, I have recently sent my first impressions despatch to London. It would have been simpler had I been able to give you copies this evening; but I fear that something called the Official Secrets Act rules that out. So let me attempt to give you the gist.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Let me start by saying how many things about South Africa impress the new arrival. We can take as read, I think, the beauty of the country and the real warmth and hospitality of its people – all its people. But the strength and sophistication of

the South African economy also cannot fail to strike any newcomer.

But I have to say that at the same time I have been struck by *the enormity of the task South Africa faces*. Anyone who wanders, as I have done, through the squatter camps of Phola Park or Crossroads, *cannot fail to be appalled by the conditions in which millions of South Africans are living*.

As you all know only too well, *the figures simply do not add up*. Per capita GDP has *fallen* since 1981 at an average annual rate of about 1.5%. Last year it fell by about 3%. And this has been at a time when population growth has been around 3% per annum.

To take one striking example: the country needs an extra 10,000 teachers to cope with the annual growth of pupil numbers: one primary school needs to be built every day to absorb new pupils. And this is not even to take into account the needs which would be generated by compulsory education or to raise standards. The housing problem is of the same dimension.

But *the hope for the future lies in the fact that South Africans – all South Africans – have themselves decided that the status quo is not acceptable*.

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

The question now, therefore, is where the current process of change will leave South Africa. There is no need for me to repeat here the steps which President de Klerk has taken towards profound political and economic reform. His personal courage is beyond question. And *I would like to make one thing clear: it is my firm view that, contrary to what some people say, the process cannot be reversed*.

Can you imagine a situation where people whose skins happened not to be white were thrown out of Hillbrow or Yeoville and told to live in Soweto? I can't. Can you imagine the literally hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who have become actively involved in politics being told that the organisations of which they are members are now banned? I can't. Can you imagine people being thrown into prison for expressing their views in a newspaper article? I can't.

This is not to say, of course, that more does not need to be done. In innumerable areas – including housing, political activity and the media, which I have mentioned – enormous ground needs to be made up to put right the mistakes

of the past. But *I firmly believe that the clock could never be turned back.*

In some respects, of course, the move to freedom and democracy in South Africa mirrors changes that are taking place all over the world. In the Soviet Union and in much of Eastern Europe, ordinary people have rejected regimes which took no account of their wishes. Even in Africa, which for so long was thought by some people to be incapable of true democracy, the same processes are at work. *All over the world, people are crying out for good government:* in other words, government which is accountable to the people and responsive to their wishes.

But one of the areas on which there is general agreement is that democracy, in the sense of one person one vote, is not enough for South Africa. It is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition. *South Africa also needs a new political culture: one in which tolerance and respect for human rights have a much more important place in the life of the country than they did in the past.* In this context, it is immensely encouraging that so much work has been done on a proposed Bill of Rights to *guarantee* the fundamental freedoms of every South African under the law.

THE ROLE FOR BRITAIN

This, then, is the challenge South Africa faces: nothing less than a profound reassessment of all aspects of its life.

But what, one may well ask, has Britain got to do with this? Why should we be involved?

The answer is that our historical, economic and (not least) our personal contacts here – for example innumerable family connections between Britain and South Africa – mean that *we too have a real interest in prosperity and good government in this part of the world.* The figures tell their own story. There are some 250,000 British passport holders in South Africa – and we believe that anything up to a million people living here could have the right to live in Britain. Trade in each direction is running at an annual figure of some 1 billion pounds sterling. And we are the largest single investor in the South African economy.

Let me give one example of the ties which bind Britain and South Africa. Earlier this month, a wreath was laid at the War Memorial in Pretoria to commemorate and honour the South Africans of all races who died fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Allies during two World Wars. Memories of those

ties are fading; but I think we would do well to remember our shared history.

So we are anxious to help the transition to democracy in South Africa wherever we can. Let me say at the outset that we make this offer with some humility. We in Britain are not perfect: indeed, it amused me to discover when I arrived here that perhaps the one thing on which everyone seems to agree is that the so-called 'Westminster Model' is *not* applicable to South Africa.

But we are proud of our democratic institutions, and we think we can help, at least in some areas, by making our experience of them available to South Africans.

For example, we are in touch with the National Peace Committee to see whether Britain's experience in the field of *community policing* can be of help here. When the Foreign Secretary visited earlier this year, he was struck – and his experience as Home Secretary made him well qualified in these matters – by the fact that millions of ordinary South Africans have little access to the everyday local police service which we in Europe take for granted.

The reasons for this are, of course, well known: but the sad fact is that many South Africans – perhaps the majority – see the police as an instrument of Government policy: *them* rather than *us*. There is an urgent need, therefore, for trust to be established between the police and local communities: so that people can feel that if they have a problem, the police will make it better, not worse.

I would not want to exaggerate the scope of our initiative in this field. But the National Peace Initiative provides a framework for absolutely impartial, community-based programmes to improve policing in this country: and we will do whatever we can to help.

Then there is our initiative in the field of *public administration* training. There have been some confusing reports about this, and I would like to make quite clear what we have in mind.

We are not talking about replacing the existing civil service wholesale. We are not talking about training the ANC to take over the levers of government. It is for the people of South Africa to decide who should govern them, by means of democratic elections.

What we are doing is responding to a very widespread feeling that in the future the South African civil service will need to draw on a much wider pool of

recruits than it has done in the past. Our programme, therefore, is designed to enlarge this pool by giving training in the UK to candidates, nominated by as wide a range of organisations as possible, who might have a role to play in administering the New South Africa.

These latest initiatives are, however, only the most recent examples of a steadily expanding programme which Britain has been running for some years now, to help those who were held back by apartheid to reach their full potential. *This year, Britain will contribute over R70 million to development projects in South Africa* – one third of it through European Community programmes, but two thirds direct.

Human resources will clearly be the key to the creation of a new democratic society in South Africa: which is why over 70% of our total aid budget goes on education. Currently more than 1,000 young South Africans hold British scholarships to enable them to undertake technical or vocational training here or in Britain; and, together with the British Council, we are running a major programme in the fields of teacher training and upgrading and curriculum development, especially in English, Maths and Science.

But our aid is not limited to education. In conjunction with the Save the Children Fund and the Alexandra Clinic, we have helped set up a model township health scheme there; in the fields of housing we have helped to set up the Home Loan Guarantee Fund, and we are helping to improve the desperate conditions endured by squatters in Natal, the Western Cape and the East Rand.

But perhaps the most imaginative element of our aid programme, and the one which has attracted the most attention, is our Community Development Programme. Seven members of staff – not just in Pretoria, but those based also in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town – make it their business to get out to townships and rural areas in all parts of the country, and to find projects which are based on good ideas and have the backing of the local community. With the injection of relatively small amounts of money, these projects offer real benefits to the communities they are designed to serve. Each year we help nearly 300 projects of this kind: from a workshop for the handicapped in Soweto to a water scheme in Lebowa, from a community centre in Port Elizabeth to a non-racial pre-school in the *platteland* of the Free State. We have even helped to set up a coffin-building co-operative in the Western Cape!

I have visited a large number of these projects in the few months since my arrival. And I have to say – and I hope you will forgive my rather un-British lack

of modesty on the subject – that I have been deeply impressed by the tangible benefits which they have brought. For the foreseeable future, I fear, South Africa will continue desperately to need help of this kind: and I am glad to say that *the British contribution looks set to increase.*

But there is one final, and less tangible contribution which I think Britain can make: and that is simply by listening – and sometimes by talking.

Here again, I do not want to exaggerate our role. *We do not presume to prescribe answers to the problems which South Africa faces. That is for South Africans themselves to do.* Nor are we required to act as go-betweens: South Africans of all political persuasions are now, I am delighted to say, talking to each other about their common future. There has been remarkable progress already.

But *what we can do is to play the role of the interested – and, I hope, informed – outsider,* and by sympathetic questioning to encourage all the parties to explain their policies to the country at large and indeed to the world outside. I have been struck since I arrived by the willingness of all sides patiently to explain their thinking to me: and I hope that the British Embassy's role in this area, which has been going on for some years now, has made – and will continue to make – some small contribution to the evolution of the debate on the country's future.

THE CHALLENGE TO BE FACED

Let me say a word, finally, on where we stand at the moment. *No-one could be more delighted than I by the fact that we are now on the brink of negotiations on a new constitution for South Africa.* This is something that we in Britain, in common with many others around the world who wish South Africa well, have long urged. *My hope is that the process will attract the broadest possible support from the country as a whole.*

But the transition will be tough. Many harsh words will be spoken. I am sure that there will be moments when some of those taking part in the process will feel like pulling out.

Here I would like to say a particular word about violence. And I do not mean only the so-called 'political' violence, on which the attention of the world has rightly been focussed. I mean also the purely criminal violence, and even the violence which seems to have no motive at all.

South Africa's murder rate is now getting on for 50 a day. That bald statistic conceals, of course, an immense amount of personal suffering and hardship. The other morning the British Consul-General in Johannesburg, John Doble, travelled in from Soweto on a commuter train to experience for himself the conditions thousands of people have to face every day. There were no serious incidents that day – but John found people understandably tense. We have to ask the question, how long can this level of violence go on before it breaks the spirit of the South African people?

There is a heavy responsibility on all South Africa's leaders to do whatever they can to bring this misery to an end. Of course there are no easy solutions: if there were, I am sure they would have been adopted long ago. But in the National Peace Initiative the country now has a framework for the peaceful resolution of disputes, including at the grassroots level: it is vital that this machinery is shown to be effective.

Ending the violence will of course greatly increase the chances of success of the negotiations. But the other great challenge which South Africa faces is in the economic field.

As I have said already, the figures simply do not add up. In the Western Cape this year, only 17% of matriculants will find employment in the formal sector. Apart from whatever living they manage to extract from money earned here and there, therefore, 83 out of every 100 young people will be consigned to the jobs scrap-heap. It is not difficult to understand how in those circumstances a young person can turn to crime or violence. He simply has no stake in the future of the country.

The urgent need, therefore, is for the economy to grow, to provide jobs and an income for these millions who have neither. That is why we in Britain have tried to get away from outdated talk about punishing ordinary South Africans through sanctions, and have tried instead to encourage our companies to invest in this country's future. I was particularly pleased in this context that the communique of the recent Commonwealth Summit in Harare included a direct reference to the need for investment and job creation in South Africa. This was also the message brought to South Africa this month by Mr. Tim Sainsbury, who was here on the first visit by a British Minister for Trade for 20 years. Mr. Sainsbury, who was accompanied by a delegation of senior British businessmen, was here to show that Britain is determined to remain South Africa's key trading partner. For it is in all our interests that the South African economy should grow: without that growth, implementing any negotiated agreement on a new dispensation will be far more

difficult.

Even if the violence is curbed, however, and even if the economy begins to grow again, many South Africans will continue to fear for their futures. Black South Africans will wonder whether the agreement being negotiated on their behalf will give them the decisive say in the running of the country which they believe they deserve. And whites will fear that the society they have worked so hard for is coming to an end.

South Africa's leaders have recognised these fears, and the need to address them. And *I would like to echo the calls they have made for tolerance and mutual respect* to deal with them. For this is the key. For far too long, South Africa has been a place where the other man's point of view has not been respected: and, as I said at the beginning of my talk, this is the change in political culture which the country needs so desperately. *All South Africans have an equal right to be heard: and the task facing those who are negotiating the country's future is to devise a framework in which this is possible.*

CONCLUSION

There is no time to lose: and it is obvious that a great deal remains to be done, particularly planning for *the future, and building bridges over the railway tracks that for too long separated South Africans from each other.*

I am acutely conscious that it is easy enough for a foreigner like myself to make these appeals for tolerance and good sense. It is you, as South Africans, who are required to do the hard work. *But I can at least give you a promise that Britain will stand by you as you go through this uniquely testing period. As I hope I have shown, Britain is not just a fair weather friend. Our future is bound up in yours in countless ways. We will walk with you as you make your way towards what we hope will be a better future.*

MR. ANTHONY REEVE was educated at Oxford University and began his career in industry. He joined the Diplomatic Service in 1965, trained as an Arabist and then served in the Middle East. After a period at the British Embassy in Washington from 1973 to 1978, he became Head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He then served again in the Middle East in the early 1980s. From 1984 to 1986 he was head of the Southern Africa Department of the Foreign Office, before being promoted to the post of Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Africa. From 1988 until he took up his present post, as British Ambassador to South Africa, Mr. Reeve was British Ambassador to Jordan.

This paper is based on the text of the speech delivered by Mr. Reeve on the occasion of the Witwatersrand Branch of the Institute's Annual General Meeting on the 27 November 1991.

The views expressed in this paper are the responsibility of the author and not of the Institute.