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**COPING WITH SOUTH AFRICA'S BITTER LEGACY:
CONFESSION OF GUILT AND POLITICAL
LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF TRANSITION**

(A working paper)

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COPING WITH SOUTH AFRICA'S BITTER LEGACY: CONFESSION OF GUILT AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF TRANSITION¹

A. Introduction

The legacy of Apartheid and Resistance against it left South Africans with an atmosphere and context that are characterised by several negative tendencies. These are, amongst others, collective national mistrust, a culture of endemic violence, a tendency to authoritarianism (on all sides of the political spectrum - but more specifically on the rightwing), a simplistic win-lose approach to conflict, pessimism and insistence on "easy solutions" by some politicians and some rank-and-file South Africans.

Ironically Apartheid, and its later deformations such as "Total Onslaught" and one-sided top-bottom co-optation (or "sham-reform" - deceptively called "Reform") and the resultant resistance against it (Armed Struggle, People's War, Mass Action) brought us a political context with dubious features. This context points towards a rather pyrrhic future instead of the acclaimed *freedom and prosperity* that the supporters of these ideas on all sides of the political spectrum proclaimed. The irony of South African politics is that we are left with a legacy of "the success of failure" as the intended imposition of harsh ideologically models failed bismally, being stranded in a stalemate of directed and undirected/diffuse violence amidst a weakening economic situation. (For a application of "the success of failure" in SA politics during the 1980's see Van Vuuren, 1986). This legacy included inter alia:

- Mistrust: People in South Africa are still prisoners of their ideological prisons and power-games (Du Toit, 1991:2-8). An atmosphere of great mistrust prevails. (The debate about the genuinity of negotiations, the Inkatha-ANC fighting, the PAC's initial non-committal to the negotiation process, AZAPO's indecisiveness, and the militancy of younger ANC

¹ This paper was written under the auspices of the Centre for Intergroup Studies and reflects some of the insights of a paper "Coping with the legacy of injustice and oppression in South Africa" delivered in July 1991 in Port Elizabeth by HW van der Merwe, Director of the Centre. In fact, the basic premises of both papers are that a genuine and square look at our bitter political legacy implies an admission of guilt as a precondition for transforming our societal structures to a more just and peaceful South Africa.

supporters as well as rightwing militancy are results and manifestation of this mistrust. Closely linked to the prevailing atmosphere of mistrust, is the issue of violence.

- A culture of endemic violence: Heavy handed imposition of Apartheid, "Afsonderlike Ontwikkeling", "Total Onslaught" - machinations and structures of the so called Total Strategy and resistance against it (by means of armed struggle, people's war) resulted in polarization and violence. On the one hand "Terrorists needed to be smoked out" and on the other hand, the "Struggle" asked for *liberatory intolerance* while mass-action, international isolation, armed struggle and underground activity was strategically waged against the apartheid regime. The harsh imposition of "law and order" and "stability" on the one hand, versus the liberation movements' aim of making "apartheid ungovernable" had far-reaching consequences. (See Müller in Liebenberg et al, 1986) The result: a legacy of endemic violence and authoritarianism.
- Groupthink, Authoritarianism and ideological prisons: The stark contrast between the power-holding elite's win-or-lose approach and those of the oppressed masses win-or-lose approach lead to an intellectual and social atmosphere of harsh imposition of own models, plans, and strategies.

*When ideas are used as weapons they are finally evaluated for their fire-power in psychological warfare, not for their truth. Unless, as a believer, the ideologist defines **truth** in terms of fire-power" (This kind of) **truth** finally leads every ideology to anti-intellectualism and insists on the irrationalisation of political life. (Feuer, 1975 cited by Liebenberg, 1990)*

Authoritarianism became part of "white survival" and the struggle for "peoples power". This does not bode well for a joint future.

- Potential political Stalemate: In general the end of the 1980's was marked by a political stalemate, violence and polarization, economic decline and the "death of politics" (and true communication and creative co-existence one might add) as Degenaar terms it (Liebenberg,

1990:130-131). "Pessimism" could be the concept to describe the general mood in South Africa at that time. Certainly, it is time for South Africans to write their own **In Defence of Politics**, though it should go further than a mere liberal credo as manifested in Bernard Crick's approach.

- A tradition of state-sponsored "dirty-tricking": For some years the South African state ruled, not only by decree and oppression, but also took its divide-and-rule policies to its logical extremes. The result was the sponsoring of state violence by a host of South African security agencies. Southern Africa was deliberately militarily and economically destabilized. Inside South Africa some police units and military units sponsored "black-on-black" violence. Even, sometimes fanned differences until it erupted in violent conflict. (See for example *The Weekly Mail*, vol 8(1), Jan 3-9, 1992.)

B. Long term goals

As long term goals for a viable, stable and just future South Africa we proposed that the following should be imperative:

National Reconciliation;
Building of a Democratic Culture;
Stability and Growth.

Explanation of key concepts:

National Reconciliation: To redress the past injustices, to create an atmosphere of trust and reconciliation between South Africans that were (and still are) poles apart and to facilitate communication about ways and means to enhance the tackling of the future problems as joint problem-solving ventures, an equal partnership of creative human beings, should be seen as a necessity. National reconciliation in my view is of utmost importance and should be the guiding light for the process of transition. If not, not only will the possibility of an imbalance in negotiation exist, but the bitter legacy of "terror enacted against terror" will destroy the potential for goodwill and a common core of humanity amongst South Africans. President Kaunda aptly states

Gerechtigheid en vergiffenis zijn mijns inziens op die manier met elkaar verbonden... Gerechtigheid heeft niet alleen te maken met wat jy aan een mens verschuldigd bent, het heeft ook te maken met goede verhoudingen tussen mensen.

He argues furthermore that justice, repentance, and forgiving of past wrongs, is an important ingredient of national reconciliation (Kaunda, 1982:156-159).

Culture of Democracy: To develop and enhance a culture of Democracy is in my view of great importance. This idea is inter alia advanced amongst others by theorists such as Degenaar and Van Zyl Slabbert. Institutions like the Institute of Multi-Party Democracy and the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa are playing an important role in helping to facilitate a climate for a working democracy in South Africa.

It is my contention that the conscious building of such a culture can enhance communication, facilitation of conflict and help people to jointly develop strategies and tactics to tackle our economic, ecological and political problems. It also can contribute to a stable democracy and a healthy marriage between democracy and growth. (See also Van der Merwe and Liebenberg, 1991.)

Stability and Growth: To retain our position as a third world "country with hope" (vs. those in the third and fourth world "without hope" - the so-called "basket cases") and to enhance our growth rate, a great deal of energy and strategising is needed to marry democracy with stability and growth. In view of our housing and educational crises and our low growth rate, it speaks for itself that much work is needed here.

Experience elsewhere has shown that in many cases stability and growth infringes to some extent on popular democracy. Some people argue point-blankly that a high growth rate cannot be reconciled with popular democracy and/or "economic" democracy (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986:7ff). Other argue that too little democracy stifles economic growth, i.e. as was the case in the Soviet Union.

Some serious questions will have to be answered by political elite and masses alike, in this regard:

- Do we want, **and** can we afford "Minimal" or "Maximalist" democracy, Popular democracy or representative (limited) democracy (polyarchy in Robert Dahl's terms)?
- What should be given priority; "Development first", or "Democracy first"?
- Legitimacy (Political) as goal or Efficiency? And, how to practically effect the optimum marriage between the two concepts in our context?
- On economy: Import substitution or export orientation, or a drive towards progressive subsistence economic strategies etc.? To what degree should the market be regulated by state intervention in order to redress economic inequality and what initiatives can be taken to recharge South Africa's economic batteries?
- To what extent should the market and market forces be allowed to "create" growth, and what rule should state intervention play in attaining a high growth rate i.e. through nationalization and/or co-operative ventures. (See for example Coleman, 1991 and De Klerk, 1991.) The debate on the type of economy, thus.
- Education: What steps can be taken to lessen the education crises and how should it be implemented. The transition from apartheid education (with its multiplication of facilities with negative effect on the quality of education) to non-racial, non-sexist (thus non-discriminatory) education will not be easy.
- What role can political leadership play in enhancing a negotiated transfer of power, national reconciliation and in creating a just and democratic post-apartheid South Africa?

This being just a few examples. We submit that these areas are in dire need of attention if a growing economy and stable democracy is to married with human rights, rule of law and just political structures.

Also: Paul Bell's suggestion of three questions for South Africans comes to mind; in a sense they are more ethically or morally intended, yet are of great importance:

Is it peace we seek, or victory?

Is it justice we wish to exact, or vengeance?

Is it equity that will satisfy us, or equality?

Needless to say, that the answers to these questions should be sought in open communicative interaction with other South Africans, political leaders and laypersons alike.

These are important questions. But all of these, can only be answered in integrity if the issue of "past guilt" and guilt confession as a precondition for fruitful transformation is addressed.

C. The Ruling Elite: *Quo Vadis*?

Elsewhere (Van der Merwe and Liebenberg, 1991:8 and 9) we argued that political leadership, though it should not be overrated, can play an important role in the transition process. (See also Van der Merwe, Liebenberg and Meyer, 1991:38-40.) This is also true for national reconciliation as an important guiding light for social-transformation by means of a process of negotiation. It is said that there is a need for a public and open admission of guilt on the side of those that presided/ruled South Africa during the era of Apartheid, Total Strategy and (sham)-Reform. After years of ideological blindness and acting out clashing visions from the rigid models planned inside the ideological prisons of groupthinking (that resulted in one-sided "solutions"), some issues need to be seriously addressed. One of these is the issue of **confession of guilt**.

Recently, this debate was touched upon again when André du Toit in an open letter to Sampie Terreblanche in *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, April/May 1991, argued that the so-called break between *Neo-verligtes* / or Independents during 1987-1989 (especially manifested in the Stellenbosch context) was not so much a break **with** the establishment, but a break **within** the ruling establishment. (Which lead eventually to the fall of the ill-healthed President Botha, when after his stroke, Nationalists succeeded in plucking up the courage to dispose the much feared ill president.)

André du Toit also argues that guilt-confession is not only admitting to mistakes of the past, but

asks for a genuine admittance of past horrors and implying **practical future orientated action**.

Vir 'n skuldbelydenis om sin te hê, moet dit nie te maklik wees nie. Dit moet verdien word. Dit moet konsekwensies hê. Wat ons bely en erken, het implikasies vir die verlede en die toekoms. (Die Suid-Afrikaan, April-Mei, 1991:45-47)

Du Toit warns that

Daar is 'n ernstige gevaar dat as Afrikaners eindelijk tot die insig kom dat apartheid en die NP Bewind 'n skreiende onreg teen hul landgenote was, hulle dit op so 'n wyse sal erken dat niemand persoonlike aandadigheid daaraan aanvaar nie. Dit mag dit vir hulle makliker maak om met hul eie gewetens saam te leef, maar ek is bevrees dat dit nie 'n genoegsame bydrae sal wees tot die versoening en regstelling wat die land nodig het nie. (Du Toit, 1991:47)

In short, the past bitter legacy asks for deeds that will transcend the current atmosphere of mistrust, hate, and vengeance. One way to effect this "national healing" is to, other than the German political elite just after World War II, squarely look at our situation and give serious contemplation and action to the admission of guilt. President Kaunda surely is right that no future can be built upon lack of forgiveness and national reconciliation. Yet, also, no forgiveness (as a theological or a humanist moral imperative) can be given if there is no genuine admission of guilt.

Thus: There is a need for an admission of guilt. Without it, apartheid cannot and will not be delivered to the dustbin of history. Merely to contend that "it did not work" or was a "mistake" is taking the historical legacy of a system with terrible consequences (harsh discrimination, detentions, assassinations, resettlements, border-wars and internal and regional destabilisation) too lightly.

Even if it was not devised that way, the apartheid political practitioner representing the minority regime, defended it, enhanced it wittingly or unwittingly. To ask for an admission/confession of

guilt on the side of those that partook in it is asking to admit past failures and injustices, and also to, at the same time, say it **must never happen again**. It asks for admission of guilt, but also points towards a **commitment** to restructure the current system. If the "new South Africa" is taken seriously enough, a new commitment can only be built on admitting past mistakes, injustices and inhuman practices. To ask for confession of guilt is **not** meant to humiliate persons. It is also not asking like the young Doctor Tomas in Milan Kundera's **Unbearable Lightness of Being** of the guilty that they cut out their own eyes. (Though there is some relevance in Tomas' question: Can those that say "we did not know", really plead innocence when the extent of the horror becomes known?) Admission of guilt asks for a starting point, a new commitment to a new society and your fellow compatriots. The main value of the "Verligte-Oorbeligte" debate in Stellenbosch during the early 1980's does not lie so much in the fact that the "Oorbeligtes" pointed to the moral and practical unworkability of Apartheid. Rather, its value lies in the testimony by some Afrikaners that a huge moral predicament was looking in the future, should the horrors of apartheid (which the "Oorbeligtes" pointed out), does not receive urgent remedial action. (See Degenaar, 1980: *Voortbestaan in Geregtigheid*.)

I contend that a confession of guilt is a necessary precondition for national reconciliation and the debate/dialogue about restitution. I also suggest, that the initiative should be taken in this regard by the ruling elite.

What about the formerly oppressed, the current contending parties? Sarte made a valid point: in the fight against terror, one becomes oneself part of the new terror. There is not such thing as clean hands. All hands are dirty.

Bonhoeffer in a similar line, made the point that guilt was on all hands in a situation of civil-war and oppression. But more so - reconciliation is not cheap; reconciliation is an **expensive** and **painful** process.

Thus we suggest that admission of guilt, as a necessary precondition for national reconciliation, should be accepted as part of the transformational procedure. The initiative for this could be taken by the ruling elite (or/and religious bodies to which they belong). However, also the "subject masses", the "powerless" of that time - the current political contenders - should become involved

in the process of guilt admission. Liberatory Intolerance, though there was no other way open at the time, brought its own horrors and excesses. And, as much as perpetrators of unjust violence (those representing the minority apartheid-regime), the perpetrators of "just" violence (those representing the "oppressed"), should fundamentally reflect on, and admit guilt for the horrors and pain that was brought about by "just" violence in the quest for a democratic South Africa.

This is not only a theological (or for that matter, Christian) argument. It points to a moral imperative on a wider scale. It can apply to non-religious moralists, atheists, christians and muslims - even Christian-Atheists - alike, one can argue. Will this call be heard? The "obstinacy of not-wanting-to-know" (*die hardnekkigheid van die onbegrip*) as termed by Vincent Brümmer is indeed great. (See **In Gesprek**, compiled by Du Toit, 1986:39-46.) Yet, I conclude that even if this plea amounts to "spitting against the wind" (*spoeg teen die wind* - see Versveld: "Waarom filosowe nog steeds teen die wind spoeg" in **Gesprek, 1986**), one feels the urge and need to put this to our South African compatriots on all sides of the political spectrum.

D. Guilt-confession, Social Transformation and Leadership

It was argued that the commitment to a "new" (apartheid-free) South African should stem from a moral acceptance of a past of guilt and excesses. We argued elsewhere in a paper delivered at the 22nd ASSA conference in Cape Town that transformational leadership, can play a role to effect fundamental structural change. (See Van der Merwe and Liebenberg, 1991.)

Transformational leaders act also morally. Because transformational leadership is also moral leadership and transcends narrow sectional interests. (Or should be, if the notion of transformational leadership is taken seriously.) And we suggest that the "realistic visionary leadership", as identified by Esterhuyse (Du Toit and Esterhuyse, 1990), must give attention to the need for guilt confession, new joint action and national reconciliation.

Transformational leadership in interaction with their followers can be a great facilitator towards social justice, fundamental social transformation, in effecting national reconciliation and building a culture of democracy while aiming to effect social stability and economic growth.

Clearly we are arguing here "what should be" and not "what is" (happening). We contend that

morality is part of the problem and thus also part of the solution. Politics might be immoral or have such tendencies. Also, one can hide behind the excuse that guilt confession is not *practical politics* and that one cannot expect such action from hard-core politicians. I submit, that in the aftermath of our bitter legacy of historical guilt and political excesses, the only practical way out of this burden of history, is to accept the moral obligation to confess guilt (individually, collectively and nationally). People have - and should have - moral and ethical obligations and should act that out. This applies especially to transformational political leaders in South Africa. And equally it applies to those who might be seeing themselves as "realistic visionary leaders". Obviously leaders in an interactive relationship with their followers, should try to take their followers/constituencies along in this process of guided national reconciliation. It would also be valuable to be reminded that reconciliation, real reconciliation, is never cheap, it is a heavy burden. ("Versoening is nooit goedkoop nie", we learned from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.)

E. Restitution as a part of transformational leadership, guilt-confession and social justice

Michael de Klerk, points out about restitution:

*History demands redistribution, yet the future and present demand
that economic output be maintained and enhanced.*

Between these two poles can we manoeuvre. The challenge is to reconcile these demands. (De Klerk, 1991:259 ff) This is true for not only the land issue, but also other contentions issues such as racial and sexual discrimination.

Vengeance is not the aim, but future justice. And South Africans alike should keep this in mind.

F. Building a culture of democracy: Action orientation post-confession of guilt

A culture of democracy is needed - essential to - the process of transition and after completion thereof.

A culture of democracy should include:

- learning of skills of bargaining and negotiation;

- conflict management: acceptance and use of the techniques of conflict management as part and parcel of solving destructive conflict;
- communication: to effect transition through negotiation, democracy and national reconciliation authentic communication in the interactive praxis between people is a great need;
- mediation: as a way to intervene fruitfully in destructive conflict, should be seen as part of the process.

G. The issue of nation building: Action orientation post-confession of guilt

- We contend that nation building may be a useful myth, but beware of the dangers. Degenaar's warning that the concept(s) nations/Nation dwarfs the individual and his/her rights. Also keep in mind Ernst Gellner's warning that nation-building has had a tortuous history and that imposed nationalism can have negative consequences for those on whom it is imposed (Gellner, 1983). Yet nation-building (or the myth, then) can have the valuable purpose of providing a "vital lie" on which the South African community can be mobilized for democracy, and economic growth strategies. One will have to keep in mind, however, that it can have negative consequences too.
- Maybe one should consider dumping the myth of nationbuilding altogether for the notion of building *a human, democratic community* in South Africa.

Negotiating and communicating a "new South Africa" through new styles to escape the rotten legacy of apartheid and violent resistance, and to effect new structures and societal norms is the goal. Transformational (moral and pragmatic) leadership can play a role here.

We suggest that long term goals of national reconciliation, inculcation of a democratic culture, political stability and economic growth be guided by new styles of leadership and mass-interaction. Part of that "new styled" leadership should be the intrinsic willingness to face our past with an honest admission of collective historical - but also individual-guilt.

In that sense confession of guilt and a post-confession reconstructive-praxis will lead us to the much valued "work in progress" and "democracy in action", which South Africans are hoping for. Only when we squarely and with integrity confront the South African condition and it's past, can we fruitfully and creatively start building tomorrow.

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