

PR1981-1-9-19

## SA REVISITED:

# The glue of Afrikaner nationalism is still firm



SIMON JENKINS  
Orthodox liberals challenged

**T**HE Afrikaners in South Africa are still remarkably united, and they are employing successfully the strategy of divide and rule among the black population, according to one of Britain's most distinguished journalists, Simon Jenkins, former editor of the Evening Standard and now political editor of The Economist.

Jenkins visited South Africa in 1977 and again in 1980 and in July and August this year. A lengthy article by him on his impressions of SA appeared in The Economist this week.

In an interview, Jenkins challenged much of the orthodox liberal and verligte thinking about the political situation in SA. He rejected as unsubstantiated the theory that the "glue" of Afrikaner nationalism was beginning to dissolve and that radical apartheid reforms were on the way.

He says:

IN 1977 one was visiting a very gloomy place. English-speaking whites, in particular, had gone into what one might call a terminal mode. Their children were leaving. They were thinking of leaving, and they were becoming hyper-conscious about security.

During my 1980 visit, I detected little of that. Then I was careful to meet Afrikaners as well as English-speakers, so I had a slightly different perspective.

There was an economic boom at the time and a tremendous verligte forward charge by the government which lead to the confrontation between P W Botha and Treurnicht over Craven week and other issues, in which it seemed genuinely that Botha was prepared to face down his right-wing and achieve a substantive measure of reform.

## Cosmetic

When I did my survey last year, I poured a certain amount of cold water on that idea, because it seemed to me that it was largely a cosmetic phenomenon.

Clearly, Botha was not going to confront Treurnicht and, more important, the institutions of apartheid were not going to be dismantled — they were merely to be reformed by the mechanism of the Riekert and Wiehahn commissions, in particular, and by the natural resistance of urbanisation. That was when I came up with the idea of neoapartheid.

I think my predictions have come true. I found that spirit in SA this year is no longer one of false optimism. It was much more realistic. Liberals were much more gloomy, deeply disillusioned.

The gold price had come down, the budget was no longer as dramatically Keynesian as last year's had been, and of course on the political front the National Party had experienced a trauma at the general election.

Botha clearly had read the message that he had to go for party or tribal unity and not risk any more talk of reform.

The difficult task for the outsider, faced with that sequence of changed perceptions, is to read the underlying story, which, I believe, is still that the Afrikaners actually are remarkably united.

The theory that the glue is dissolving does not seem to me to hold water. Afrikanerdom was never a great moral crusade — that was a veneer that was put on it by its intellectuals — but a struggle for tribal survival.

I find it more helpful to interpret South African politics in terms of African rather than European politics. One gets a completely different set of perspectives in this way. Then the Zulus emerge as the largest tribe, with the whites as the next largest group.

Something I noticed particularly this time was the extent to which the concept of divide and rule is gaining wider currency — the playing off of one black trade union grouping against another, the delegation to an Africanised police force of increasing areas of the political economy, not just the homelands, but also, for ex-

ample, township law and order, and possibly township government.

## Risky

The Africanisation of the police force introduces conflict within the black community, and blacks divisiveness becomes one of the most potent tools with which Afrikaners will be able to retain power.

It is a highly risky strategy, of course, and the evidence of history is that it does not always work in their favour, but it is the natural next step for Afrikanerdom. It was very noticeable how far this strategy had advanced since my visit to South Africa last year.

I heard a lot this time about a newly emerging black elites. The ANC, for example, has experienced quite a dramatic resurgence, and black trade unionism has increased by leaps and bounds.

But it is one thing for these black elites to emerge and quite another whether they will be able to assume leadership of a unified black political movement. It seems to me they are so far from achieving this as to rule this possibility out for the present.

The disputes between trade union groups, the real hatred between the ANC and Inkatha —

these are pointers to government thinking. The government does not mind the ANC acquiring more power provided Inkatha acquires some too.

As I said, it's a very risky strategy, but that is what I call the politics of survival.

There is a three-way split among the blacks: The ANC as a multiracial, left-wing classical liberation movement with quite strong militarist pretensions; Inkatha, essentially a tribal grouping but with immense influence in many areas of the economy and political life; and then the slightly more old-fashioned black consciousness leaders who were dominant a few years ago, but now appear to be very much on the decline, based in the townships and rooted very much in community politics.

## Cohesive

The most likely channel for liberation, according to the Marxists, will be the development of radicalisation of a proletariat through first and second generation high-school educated blacks. This seems the most plausible thesis.

But such a liberation force would require a reasonably cohesive social structure and that does not exist in SA.

The economy is developing so rapidly that tremendous tensions are being generated, even within the work force, between one group and another, and those groups tend to be tribal. There is also tremendous regional diversity, as reflected in the homelands policy and in the administration of influx control.

In a sense, the Marxist theory of liberation depends upon free mobility of labour and a measure of ethnic homogeneity which does not exist in South Africa.

This suggests that the theory that the black trade union movement will provide the focus of black political maturity is a questionable one. The black trade union movement is split, and is endlessly being decapitated by the government.

I have tried in my article in The Economist to strip this vexed subject of SA of much of the wishful thinking that surrounds it. Once you do this many of the principles on which the liberal approach to SA is based begin to seem quite fanciful.

It is quite ridiculous, for exam-

ple, to talk of an economic boycott, except in terms of some vague, moral, unburdening of the soul. No economic boycott in my opinion would have any material effect, either in advancing the condition of the blacks or of bringing down apartheid. So why do it?

## Ostracised

One of the liberal assumptions is that legislative reform can proceed to a point where SA will cross a threshold into international acceptability.

I do not believe that can happen. A South African government in which whites play a major part and a South African economy still dominated by white capitalist interests almost inevitably will not be acceptable to black Africa. SA will still be ostracised.

The search for international acceptance through legislative reform is almost a hopeless cause.

I think change will come only through an internal upheaval in the Afrikaner community. Therefore some form of constitutional coup is the necessary precondition for any advance towards more liberal treatment of blacks.

Until there is a much stronger presidential-style regime in Pretoria, any talk of reform in any direction is hopeless.

One of the reasons why I am fascinated by SA is that, of all the countries I have visited, it is the one where everyone you talk to has a heightened awareness of politics.

You never have to indulge in small talk. South Africans are far more intelligent about the politics of their country than people in most other countries are.

You can talk politics with anyone you meet and learn something. That ought to be a cause for hope.

South Africans are much more realistic, for example, about African politics to the north. They are far less starry-eyed about such concepts as liberation, tribalism, democracy, one-man-one-vote, free market economics — all the concepts Europeans love to apply to Africa as if it were a kind of experimental body on which they were practising.



<sup>1/2</sup> THE GLUE OF AFRIKANER NATIONALISM IS STILL FIRM.  
• R-DAILY MAIL, 19 SEPT. 1981

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South Africans are much more down to earth. This is one reason why, at least in the prediction game over the past 25 years, Afrikaners on the whole have got it right and Western observers have got it wrong. 9