

# Let the people trade

BUSINESS MAGAZINE CALLS FOR OPEN CENTRAL BUSINESS AREAS

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QUITE A LOT of support for "the spirit of Riekert" has been emanating from government circles of late. And the Financial Mail would be the first to applaud if Pretoria took itself seriously, rolled up its sleeves and got round to the serious business of purging our statute books of that cornerstone of racial discrimination, the Group Areas Act.

Yet, caught up in the historical contradictions of apartheid, the NP appears to have fallen back on the position that the Group Areas Act is "not negotiable."

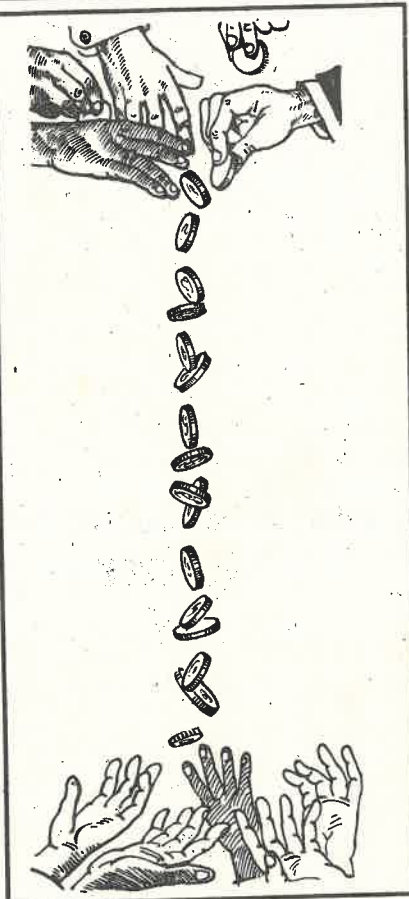
Given what Riekert said, and government accepted, this is to argue that a retreat is an advance in reverse. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the matter of so-called "grey areas" trading — where government, even within its parameters, can move, looked set to move, yet has done little.

Government has in theory embraced economic free enterprise. On permitting blacks to move as traders into areas hitherto reserved for whites.

Riekert recommended in 1979 that "the protection of trading rights under the Group Areas Act is totally irreconcilable with the principles of the free market system observed in SA."

He went further: "The Group Areas Act (should) be amended so that the restrictive provisions on acquisition, ownership or occupation by disqualified persons in specific demarcated areas in the central business centres of cities and towns not be applicable to buildings, land and premises in such areas which are used exclusively for trading, commercial or professional purposes."

In other words, pockets of multiracial trading should be allowed in the city centres. Of course, a commission's recommendations and white paper acceptance do not automatically follow. Yet, in this case, then Minister of Community Development Marais Steyn told Parliament over a year ago that government has approved, in principle,



the opening up of CBDs to Indian businessmen, Coloureds, he said would follow. What, in fact, has happened? The Department

of Community Development takes the position that there is no necessity to amend the Group Areas Act. Change will come in terms of the existing Section 19 of the Act, which "almost enables us to do the same thing," according to director-general Louis Fouche in an interview with the Financial Mail this week.

By using Section 19 — which provides for open areas by exemption — "entrance is regulated by ministerial permission, says Fouche. Pretoria clearly likes leaving itself in control of this particular "free market" situation.

There has been some movement. By the end of 1980, 11 "open" trading areas had been proclaimed. And so far this year eight have been created and about 20 are being considered. This, says Fouche, "shows we are expediting the matter." Really? Even assuming that the areas under consideration are "opened," that makes a grand total of 39 — out of the uncountable thousands of CBDs in SA.

And why the hesitation when Pretoria itself sees the promotion of small businesses as crucial to the economy?

There is even considerable room for cynicism in the fact that most of these "open" zones are in platteland dorps where Indian merchants have in any case traded for decades. Indeed, the Group Areas Act is consistently used to remove these very traders from their trading homes — despite opposition from white traders who know that packing them off will adversely affect the total prosperity of each town as a whole.

Furthermore, in Johannesburg, community leaders saw the open zone "concessions" as a ruse to evict them from the "white" city area. In Fordsburg and Jeppe, for example. Asian residential areas have become "grey areas" at a time of acute housing shortages.

Riekert suggested that the law be changed so that local city authorities be given the discretion to let in all race groups for commercial purposes.

Both the Cape Town and Johannesburg municipalities and chambers of commerce opted for opening up completely. But when the authorities went for governmental permission they were shot down.

"Pockets" of free enterprise are all that will be allowed, it seems — and that makes nonsense of the concept.

An Indian businessman who has "survived" in a white area — courtesy of Section 19 — makes the telling point that there are relatively many more Indians trading in "white" CBDs today than before the advent of the Group Areas Act. Its intention was blatantly racist — to force Asian traders out of the CBDs out of business itself and even out of the country. Fortunately this has failed.

What Pretoria needs to do right now is to recognise that, like the Immorality Act and the sports policy, the Act has failed. And, from that recognition, to open the CBDs entirely.

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