
Home-Boys Abroad

A South African
in London looks at
his fellow exiles

LIVING IN LONDON can be, as we're all assured in advance, an eye-opener to many things. And for the black South African—me, at any rate—one of the most interesting items is not on the original menu: white South Africans. These fall roughly into three categories—the white liberals who pat me on the back for my presence here justifying their self-exile (If I decided to do it, it couldn't be wrong for them, could it?), the innocents abroad who insist on telling me first thing that they're not colour prejudiced (and go on to prove that they are), and of course the *ware Suid-Afrikaners*, who wander, slightly bewildered, about Earl's Court and naturally wouldn't dream of talking to me on their holiday away from *kaffers*.

The first time I came across the liberals was *en masse*, a few days after my arrival from West Africa and Italy. At a party—just like those Mixed Parties in Lower Houghton. It was a depressing evening for me (too much like home, for one thing) though I'm sure everybody else had fun: or perhaps I was depressed by all their frantic attempts to simulate fun and across-the-colour-line camaraderie (Isn't it nice not to have to worry about a police raid any more, hey?).

I think what first bewildered me was seeing these well-known and amiable faces for the first time outside the South African context. Somehow they seemed so lost and unsure of themselves among black people (rather *with*, this time). The pats on the back were harder and came more oftener (surely not only because of years apart?) than they had in Lower Houghton, and the grins seemed somehow to be saying "Remember me? You know I wasn't prejudiced, don't you?" As if it was already the day of reckoning after the Blood Bath!

Then I was shaken by the sudden realisation of what had always been wrong with these pats on the back, right from the first one in the Northern Suburbs: they had been *congratulating* me for being exceptional enough in my blackness for them to be able to publicly acclaim me as equal to them!

Of course I resented the implication in these congratulations, which was that I had at some time been inferior and had now overcome this natural disability to earn the privilege of shaking hands with them, drinking from the same glasses—and getting that pat on the back. I could write on and on about the impertinence of the implication, but this isn't the place for it.

The author is a South African working in London.

But the chilling experience is listening to some of the political exiles among them—they all are, in a way, but I mean the ones who talk about being hounded out of the country. I had a miserable luncheon once (good food going down untasted), listening to two of them telling cloak-and-dagger stories to a gullible American. To hear them tell it, South Africa should have been free years ago. I know there are a lot of such stories that can be told, about the games with Spengler's boys; but what chilled me were the exaggerations and histrionics added to them all. And the impression—perhaps quite right, how would I know?—that all the political thinking in the country was done by the C.O.D. and the C.P.

THEN THE SECOND TYPE. The first one of these ignoramuses I met in a pub. Of course he recognised me—don't all good *basies* know their own boys when they see them, whatever their disguise? One of the first things he told me was that he had never been prejudiced and, by the way, did I know Jackson who worked in Commissioner Street and lived in Moroka? No surname, naturally. This question and the information that he worked quite happily with Jamaicans (all West Indians are necessarily Jamaicans to this type, South African and native English) was supposed to prove his lack of colour prejudice.

Two drinks later (he was buying, of course!) he was asking me if I didn't agree that South Africa was at least honest by publicly declaring *apartheid*, whereas here there was an unofficial *apartheid* policy. I worked up enough tolerance to suggest that there was a moral difference—to say the least—between a person deciding to segregate himself (as we all do against various persons) and a person being forced by law to do so.

Another of this species I also met in a pub. He started off by denying that he was South African. He had only lived there, he said, even though he was born in Natal around the time of the Act of Union and came here just three years ago. This was because his parents were British-born, so to hell with the country of his birth and manhood—and to hell too with that distinctive accent he speaks with. His argument was that a person born of British parents in China was not Chinese, so why should he be South African? In fact, this was why he had left South Africa: it was leaving the commonwealth and becoming a republic, and he did not want to be disloyal to the Queen by remaining in such a blasphemous country!

There were strenuous objections from him when I suggested that he wanted to have his cake and eat it too: reap the profits of being a white South African, and still be able to bravely wave his passport in the

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air every time South Africa was internationally pilloried.

And of course he rejected the idea that the government was his, even if he voted at the last general election. He seemed to think that voting United Party absolved him from the guilt—which of course it does not, whatever party any white person votes for: especially if it's the United Party.

THE MOST INTERESTING characteristics of this type is what they termed their "home-sickness"—a disease I seem immune to. This is a phenomenon I began taking note of while I was still in Johannesburg, when shiploads of latter-day voortrekkers returned from Australia and New Zealand, claiming life was "too tough" out there, and the diggers were not too obliging.

What they meant, of course, was that for the first time in their lives they had to compete for jobs, scrub floors, run errands—without any "boys" and "girls" to do the menial jobs while also bolstering their flagging egos by scratching their heads, making patterns in the sand with their big, black toes, and calling them *baas*.

(If only white people had an idea of what goes on under those supposedly thick skulls while they're being "baased" and fawned over, they would make such behaviour illegal, because it's far from flattering. This dependence on laws to take care of everything reminds me of the story of the Afrikaans newspaper reporter who kept muttering "They shouldn't allow it!" when the white pigeon refused to fly off from you-know-who's hand. If he'd had his way, the pigeon would've got five years house arrest, I suppose.)

Two I knew here went back south because, they said, another London winter would kill them. But I'm always sceptical, especially after listening to their nostalgic stories about how well they got on with their servants.

A white South African family I know (of course there are some I still like talking to) were telling me about a man who regularly asks them for reasons why he must stay on here and not go back to the land of sun and opportunity. This is a doctor who obviously would do much better in private practice in South Africa (those fortunes made "helping the poor Natives", for instance!) than he ever can on the National Health Service here. But he seemingly does not know why he came here, nor why he should go back.

I'm sure if my friends were to remind him of the big house (instead of the expensive, grimy flat here) and the two or three servants anxiously waiting for him with open arms, he would be off like a missile.

THE THIRD SPECIES—THOSE true defenders of White Civilisation—I have not really met yet. Except for the correspondent of an Afrikaans newspaper who thought I was Jamaican and lectured me on what great work his government was doing for the Natives. And a few who've slinked off in confusion after the introduction, when I didn't spit in their faces as they seemed to expect I would. It's surprising for me to meet the officials at South Africa House: they're so polite and nice! The first time I went there (I don't have to any more) I resolutely lit a cigarette almost in the polite face, waiting for him to remind me—as he would have in Pretoria—that I could not smoke without the *baas's* permission. ●

AFRICANA

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- Lonely border-line Whites interested in forming social club write B2750, stating telephone number—Personal Column, *The Star*. [R.F.]
- It was not considered in the public interest to say how many cases of suspected sabotage had been reported since last June 27. All cases of sabotage were reported in the daily Press and therefore received sufficient publicity—Mr. B. J. Vorster in the *Rand Daily Mail*. [M.M.]
- The Publications and Entertainments Bill gave more freedom to publications than there was in any existing legislation, the Minister of the Interior (Senator J. de Klerk) told the Assembly yesterday. The Bill gave freedom such as existed in few countries in the world—*Cape Argus*. [V.R.]
- Of necessity the definition of what was undesirable had to be rather vague and somewhat all-embracing, but in this there was further assurance of freedom of thought—Senator de Klerk in the *Rand Daily Mail*.
- Cape Town doctors can be called even when they are in their cars through a radio "tracer" service . . . "Johannesburg lacks this service, although every major city in the world has one", said Mr. Logan, managing director of the Cape Town service—*Rand Daily Mail*.
- Will the lady whom I assisted with a paper bag outside Cuthberts on Sat., please phone 22-2411—Personal Column, *Rand Daily Mail*.

TWO MINDS WITH BUT A SINGLE B.A.D. SPEECHWRITER

- Chief R. T. Pilane, chairman of the Batswana Regional Authority, on "the spirit of co-operation . . . between the Government and the Bantu of the country":
"It augurs well for the future co-existence of Black and White in the Republic of South Africa."
Mr. De Wet Nel, Minister of Bantu Administration and Development on "a new, purposeful spirit of confidence and a willingness to make sacrifices among the Bantu":
"This augurs well for a happy and prosperous future of co-existence for all population groups in the Republic of South Africa."

from adjoining articles in *South African Digest*.