

# RETURN VISIT

by Ernest Polack

"You'll see lots of changes after nine years", South Africans in England had kept on telling me and I did but not the sort of changes they meant. I was continually urged to note the decline in petty Apartheid. The park benches, I was told, had lost their notices, sport was becoming multi-racial, concert halls and theatres were open to all. But to tell the truth, I saw little change in this respect. As far as I could judge on a short visit of six weeks which only covered the Transvaal, Natal and the Free State, Apartheid was the same vicious system that it had always been if now slightly more furtive and ashamed. Any changes barely qualified for the title of cosmetic.

No, what had altered and altered radically were the attitudes. The crude and unfeeling complacency, the swagger in the walk of young Europeans, the acceptance of privilege as a fact of life that would last for ever, these had gone. The impression that I got of European attitudes was of uneasiness, uncertainty and in some cases fear. Why join a Commando in the Midlands of Natal, well away from hostile Black frontiers, if you do not expect to have to shoot?

On the other side, and I fear that side is increasingly the word to be used, Africans displayed a new confidence verging on arrogance. They may not know when Black rule will come or how it will come but there seems to be an increasing certainty that it will come and that the time may not be far away. Sadly, this has perhaps meant among many of the black community the feeling that the white liberal has no longer a relevance for future development and a rejection of what used to be the hopes for a non-racial community. And if this is true, it is hard to blame the blacks. When I left South Africa in 1963 after living there for seven years, the Liberal Party was still in existence and the bands of Apartheid philosophy were more loosely drawn than they seem to be today. In so far as a section of the White community is now opposing Apartheid, this movement seems to come from fear of the alternatives rather than from more positive motives. The old Liberal party may have been small but its multi-racialism arose from constructive conviction not from fear. But its achievements, regrettably, were limited. Did it convert the hearts and minds

of the whites? Did it avoid the danger of confrontation? Did it enhance the sense of human dignity of the blacks? It tried, my God how it tried, but with little success.

I remember speaking at a Liberal Party meeting in the Drakensberg in 1962 or 1963. The meeting took place in a dark school room lit only by two candles. Perhaps thirty people were present and I had to talk about Democracy. At the end of the meeting an African came up to me and asked me whether I did not think that force was the only way to achieve liberation. With a Security Branch man in the vicinity, I weakly gave an equivocal answer. What would I say after Soweto?

The lines have become increasingly tightly drawn and the flashpoint, inevitably perhaps, is Johannesburg, the symbol of the wealth and the exploitation that are the hallmarks of South Africa. Frightened whites barricaded in their luxurious suburbs face bitter blacks in the Townships with the police in between, sometimes last year seeming to be encouraging the violence of the confrontation. Is this an overstatement? I doubt it and, though control has been temporarily regained, it is hard to see how violence can be indefinitely postponed.

Travelling as I did mostly among whites, and generally among white liberals, my impressions were probably not impartial. But I am left with three memories of friends. One, a young farmer on a large scale lamenting that his assets were impossible to move. Two, a journalist who rejoiced that he and his family would have no difficulty in moving to another part of the world if necessary. Three, at a delightful party in a garden in the outer northern suburbs of Johannesburg, asking my host seriously whether it was a "fin de siècle" occasion and receiving a sombre reply.

The liberal, the religious man, those with goodwill can never, thank heaven, give up the struggle for justice and freedom but a tourist's view of the state of South Africa today and any study of the growing implications for the future of the country of international developments, must make all of us who love South Africa, and live in safety outside it, tremble with foreboding. □

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