

SOUTH TO SOUTH: NEW ZEALAND-SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

White New Zealanders and South Africans, bred in the same wave of 19th century colonialism, share many things. One of these is sensitivity to our image and place in the wider world. In New Zealand we like to think we are growing up because we give visiting celebrities a few days before asking what they think of the country, where previously it was the first question asked on setting foot in the country.

Until recently we were a close-knit and parochial edge of an Empire. Over the last 10 years we have been forced to reconsider our archaic world-view, largely by the inscrutable but disastrous workings of the Common Agricultural Policy in the quota-fetishist Europe.

The unprecedented domestic "unrest" of 1981 during the Springbok Rugby Tour amazed us as well as foreigners. The truth is that it wasn't all about rugby being soft on racism. That issue pulled many others with it. The political and social hierarchies had not caught up with a widespread unease. At the urban level there had been many changes, some for the good like a greater variety of ideas and more adventurous attitudes, some for the worse as economic decline fed insecurity, and our national myths of egalitarianism and modest prosperity seemed to slip away.

The right wing politicians, quite out of sympathy with any of this "nonsense," saw a golden opportunity to use the tensions unleashed by the Springbok tour to their political advantage and subsequently won an election they would otherwise have lost.

Now we have a situation rather more complicated – a nominally left-wing government characterised by liberalism on social issues, and thorough-going right-wing monetarism in economics.

In foreign policy the necessary fence-mending ('panel-beating' was the Prime Minister's description) with Africa was achieved in quick time, though the domestic effect of this has been described as a 'political albatross.' It seemed as if infantile media reporting of the official trip to Africa stirred a chord of basic racism in the Kiwi psyche. Fortunately for the Prime Minister, David Lange, Africa and the aborted tour were soon forgotten as the stand-off with the United States over nuclear weapons developed mock-heroic qualities and then all was submerged with the farcical French initiation of terrorism in "Godzone", the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior.

Through the mist of American anger, Australian exasperation and EEC arrogance we could see that things were happening in South Africa, but our bit there was well and truly done with the astonishing judicial decision that grounded our brave All Black touring party. This elicited considerable international admiration for the subtlety of our 'processes', but it was no foregone conclusion, rather the sweetest gift any government could want.

LOOKERS ON

Far from being a hotbed of anti-apartheid activism ("the GLC (Greater London Council) of the South Pacific" according to a misinformed British commentator), we have merely looked on. The government has joined in various prestigious rituals such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, but has played no leading role. Indeed, the greatest care has been taken to see that as little controversy as possible can be read into any statements regarding South Africa, not a whiff about support for the forces of liberation, for example.

In the non-governmental arena the much vaunted anti-apartheid movement has almost died a natural death. In a sense, the chickens have come home to roost. Following debilitating ideological disputes in the past no sound link was developed between HART (the Halt All Racist Tours organisation) and the ANC. The trend has been for HART to become a utopian-type sect and its very South African orientation is even now in question, as it attempts to define itself as a generalised anti-racist movement, rather than a specific South African solidarity campaign.

The question of confronting racism in our own society is a by-product of the healthiest current movement in the country – the cultural, economic and political revival of the Maori. But it means in HART's case, that at a time when a mature understanding of South Africa is more relevant than ever before, there is only an introverted idealism and virtually no public profile.

The breadth of our responses to South Africa remain. The two most prominent South Africans to feature here in 1985 were Arnold Stofile and Gavin Relly. Stofile was crucial in the court decision to abort the rugby tour, but his experience here was often painful, and he was subjected to a great deal of abuse. Relly, for his part, had an easy ride and ably used the media platform given him to expound views which seemed more reminiscent of the patronising public relations of past Consuls-General than the shrewd wisdom of a man who talked hard facts with the ANC. The differing receptions given to these two, show something of where we in New Zealand really are, as a settler colonial society. I don't think we've learnt much from the Zimbabwe experience.

PIK BOTHA

A surprise visitor to our living-rooms was none other than Pik Botha. In a sense his intrusion sums up the naivety of many New Zealanders regarding South Africa. It was a public relations coup, a masterstroke, whether it was deliberately set up or not.



David Lange

(picture by the Natal Witness)

It was in April when the New Zealand Prime Minister's party arrived in Gaborone, with a bunch of very tired and disgruntled journalists in tow. Starved of hard news by the ceremonial side of the African tour, they jumped at the apparently innocent chance held out to them to go south and get a real story. In their extensive interview with Botha they revealed their abysmal lack of preparation and background. They were no match for the formidable minister but, storywise, they were on a winner.

Their lack of judgement meant that right at the climax of Lange's trip, when it was actually relevant and important that he talk about his government's attitudes to southern Africa, it was a South African politician who took centre stage back in New Zealand.

For all that, the Lange overture to Africa was not pointless. It was with some foresight that Zimbabwe was chosen as the site for New Zealand's first diplomatic mission in Africa, rather than Kenya or Nigeria. This was a recognition of the long-term importance of the southern region to New Zealand. The South African issue will not go away and the situation, as we see it from here, will get far worse before it can even start to get better.

The importance of SADCC (Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference) in the region is acknowledged, and this will be the logical vehicle for increased development and technical aid.

In the event of the current Labour government settling in for a reasonable period in office (i.e., winning an election in 12 to 18 months time), it is probable that New Zealand will eventually make further overtures to the ANC (the Lusaka meeting in April was brief), implying at least that the ANC is essential for a peace process, if not that it is a 'virtual government in waiting.

Current thinking would be that the time has not yet come for public acceptance of this position, and in the absence of a strong lobby it seems that New Zealand's 'contribution' will remain off the rugby field. It goes without saying, that if P.W. Botha's successor can make a decisive breakthrough towards the bottom line of negotiations with genuine black leaders this would be greeted with rapture in Wellington.

New Zealanders of a liberal or left persuasion don't view South Africa with the same self-righteous purity of the past. The effect of the Maori revival is felt very much by Pakehas, who are being forced to reconsider their history, its structural injustices and their identity as citizens of the Pacific rather than Europe. The cultural products of this awakening are apparent in the arts but we do not yet have a van Onselen or a Freund to make us really sit up and take stock of our history. We remain basically a pleasant backwater, with a few troubling ripples and interesting currents, but lacking stimulation of crisis. □

RESETTLEMENT

Deep beneath the rubble
tight between two
old
rusty pieces
of corrugated iron
lies my heart
I shall never get it out now
the bulldozer tracks have bruised it
into the ground
I walk on
my new home
nowhere
and nothing beats in my breast
my blood runs cold
reptile-like
my eyes do not close in sleep
I dream no more
my heart is buried in the rubble
all I have left is my nightmare
and a bent tin bucket
with a hole

Barbie Schreiner

POETRY

He read Serote
who defines fiercely
our social need.
"That's not poetry:
it's politics,"
he cried.
"Poetry is a pure thing,
quite unconcerned
with worldly aims."

Then he plunged
into a proper poem:
it was Andrew Marvell
speaking subtly
to his coy mistress.

And he exclaimed:
"That's not lyricism:
it's love.
Poetry is a pure thing,
quite unconcerned
with worldly aims."

Vortex