

THE SOUND WE HEAR

By Ken Owen



This essay is intended as a tribute to Stuart Saunders for his pioneering role in the long process of political and social transition in South Africa.

Having reached an age at which one tracks old foes mainly through the obituary columns, I watch with equanimity, even amusement, as South Africa under the African National Congress government blunders along much the same path of folly as it did under the National Party. Few people learn from others' experience; we don't learn from our own.

Julius Malema's demand for nationalisation of the mines echoes the same demand in 1938 by Nico Diederichs, later to become President of South Africa and a rather shabby bankrupt. The impulse in each case was the same: a sense of victimhood and envy of richer communities.

Diederichs had been a student in Nazi Germany, where he was deeply impressed by the assertion that poverty and deprivation persisted because the world economy was in the hands of Jews. That thesis slotted easily into the belief in South Africa, especially strong among Afrikaners, that "Hoggenheimers" dominated the local economy.

As late as the 1980s Professor Sampie Terreblanche of Stellenbosch was still railing at the economic dominance of "the Jews and the English", both of which groups had proved remarkably resourceful in hanging on to their assets under Afrikaner political dominance.

Today, black South Africans rail in much the same terms against the economic domination of white South Africans. In both cases the complaint was justified. Ever since the advent of democracy transferred political power into the hands of black people, whites have grown richer — some of them spectacularly so — and the wealth disparities on average have widened.

But the situation is more complex than it seems. The very richest class is mainly white, but whites make up less than half the wealthiest fifth — the top quintile — of the population. Most people in this class are Indian and, lately black.

Also, the rich white population is dwindling (the birth rate is way below replacement level) and ageing. The 2007 mini-census showed no more 20-year-old white men than 60-year-olds, so the retiring baby-boomers cannot be replaced from their own ranks. The mini-census produced a distorted population pyramid that showed astonishing numbers of white men, and almost as many white women, between the ages of 20 and 34 had simply vanished.

Well over half the white population is over 40, and those under ten constitute only 4.7% of their age group. The white tribe is liquidating itself.

Emigration explains the missing young adults. They leave immediately after completing tertiary education, or as they begin to worry in their late 20s or early 30s about the education of their children, and about the safety of their families. The popular image of a white grandmother weeping in front of her fridge as she stares at magnet photographs of her grandchildren has basis in fact.

Most of those who remain in the “leafy suburbs”, if I may generalise about the middle class, approach retirement with modest assets: a house, a pension, and a relatively small amount of savings held mainly in unit trusts. Almost all the shares on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange are held by institutions, or by foreigners, not by white suburbanites.

At or after retirement, they sub-divide their properties, down-size their houses, or move to gated communities and retirement villages. Spare funds are often used for air fares to see children in California or Sydney or Britain. When they die, their assets go to their children abroad.

Taken as a group, they are desperately insecure and fearful of the future, seeing themselves as targets for heavy taxation, discrimination, and criminal attack. Their fears, like the general perception of their wealth, are exaggerated but it is true that they face continuing social and political upheaval, the outcome of which is uncertain.

Two factors are at play here. The first is that the structure of the South African economy has remained essentially colonial, driven and directed by a small elite — first Dutch, then British, then local English, and finally by an uneasy alliance of Afrikaans and English. The colonial structure has survived great political upheavals, although the composition of the elite has evolved and is still evolving as blacks penetrate its ranks.

The second factor is tribalism. South Africa is less a nation than an agglomeration of disparate tribes, riven by collective envies and rivalries. The tribes watch each other, perpetually adding up the score to see who is gaining, who losing.

From counting the number black faces (or Indians or Muslims) in the national sports teams, to complaints about the “Xhosa Nostra” under Thabo Mbeki and prominence of Zulus under President Zuma, to the perpetual calculations of wealth distribution among the races, the symptoms of tribal envy and resentment are a daily phenomenon of South African life. In the end, tribal allegiance trumps all else.

At its crudest, tribal envy expresses itself in the sentiment: “They’ve got it, we want it”. That attitude, combined with a semi-literate belief that poverty can be overcome by a mere transfer of assets, underlies, for example, the foolish government actions that have sent the once-great mining industry into decline, or ruined once-thriving farming estates.

The sense of deprivation that drives such folly is neither new nor unique to black people. When the National Party came to power in 1948, Afrikaners were afflicted by a similar sense of deprivation. Even under Afrikaans rulers like Botha and Smuts, most Afrikaners “felt” that the country was actually run by and for English-speakers (and, in

the eyes of people like Diederichs and Terreblanche, Jews).

In the 1950s the prospect of nationalisation of the mines by an Afrikaans government seemed so threatening that the Oppenheimers, in a celebrated act of statesmanship, arranged for Afrikaners to acquire their own mining house. It brought their most dangerous foes into the fold.

Today, black economic empowerment, stemming largely from a famous meeting at Brenthurst, the Oppenheimer home, serves much the same purpose: it transfers ownership of assets to blacks and so creates a powerful vested interest in the survival of the system.

The beneficiaries, the so-called “black diamonds”, have immediately become part of the economically dominant elite, more ostentatious in their displays of wealth and status, but no different from the dominant economic and financial class of which they are now part. The exploitative colonial character of the economy has survived another challenge.

But political power has its own imperatives, foremost among them a terrible fear of the loss of office, and all the privileges that go with it. Like the National Party after 1948, the African National Congress has moved to consolidate its hold on power by affirmative action, appointing an array of its supporters to key positions within the power structure, and “deploying” obedient party hacks to do its bidding. This, too, is neither new nor unique to black government.

In 1948 the National Party moved swiftly to consolidate a paper-thin parliamentary majority, immediately stopping most immigration from a war-shattered Britain in order to limit the growth of the English tribe while extending parliamentary representation to the mainly Afrikaans whites in Namibia.

It also carried out a lightning purge of the armed forces, sending despatch riders in the night to deliver notices of dismissal to English officers, many with combat experience which their Afrikaans replacements lacked.

English civil servants were replaced more gradually, some kept until replacements could be trained, others because they were approaching retirement, but by the early 1950s younger English-speakers, I among them, could see no future in government service and switched to the private sector.

For the National Party, the secret Broederbond played a role similar to that of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress: it ensured that hand-picked Afrikaners, bound by oaths of loyalty and secrecy, were infiltrated into strategic control points throughout government and the wider society.

Legislation followed to preserve the jobs of less skilled whites, and to protect them against competition from black people. Even coloured traffic cops lost their jobs.

Municipal bank accounts were switched from “English” banks like Barclays and Standard, to Volkskas, now defunct, and contracts were steered to Afrikaans interests. A key official in Pretoria told me at the time when Indians, mainly traders, were being moved from the city centre to faraway Laudium, that it was being done to ensure that “Indians will never again dominate the retail trade”.

Behind the racial ideology lay naked greed which, combined with centralisation of power, secrecy and short tribal lines of communication, generated pervasive and growing corruption. The procurement of food for the prisons department, or medical supplies for hospitals, or of strategic stocks to beat sanctions, became the path to fortune for people who would now be called “tendepreneurs”.

Close ties were forged with an array of international gangsters, like Mark Rich (later pardoned by President Clinton), Marino Chiavelli, arms smugglers, oil dealers, and convicted Mafiosi, contributing to a culture of underhand dealing that was the mark of the later years of NP rule.

Once when I was bumped up to first class by Cathay Pacific Airlines (I was late at check-in), I found myself surrounded by government ministers and top officials, including the chief of police, most of them looking forward excitedly to a sanctions-busting shopping trip to the Far East — behaving, in fact, as Robert Mugabe and his wife do now. The outrageous shopping trips to New York and London of the African National Congress elite are nauseating, but not unprecedented.

In the course of a generation the Afrikaner elite had become wealthy and, like all nouveaux riches, liked to show off. In Pretoria even civil servants, it was said, measured status by having “a Merc, a cycad (broodboom) and a heart bypass”. In the Cape it was wine farms, Afrikaans culture, and the history of the tribe.

However, trying to prosecute members of the National Party inner circle was as futile as trying to prosecute President Zuma’s cronies today. Published evidence of corruption was ignored or whitewashed. Nobody objected when I described the National Party elite, accurately I thought, as having “their snouts in the trough and their backsides to the nation”.

Addressing a parliamentary committee in 1994 at the invitation of Gill Marcus, I tried to warn that the National Party had turned government, with its network of parastatals and subsidiary organisations, into a giant machine that sucked up revenue and distributed it to its favourites. I feared that machine would pass intact to the new ANC government.

And so it did. Government service is now the main path to quick riches for any person who can establish close relations with the ruling elite. Understandably, competition for positions within government has become lethal, as the decapitation of former President Thabo Mbeki demonstrated.

Hardly a day passes without fresh evidence of corruption and looting. I cannot say that the African National Congress is more corrupt and avaricious than the NP — for one thing, a free press can expose much more than the hobbled press of National Party rule — but it is more

crass, more ostentatious, and more concerned with the trappings of wealth, the mansions, the limousines, the convoys and outriders, the bodyguards, and the baubles.

The new moral lacuna was vividly depicted recently in a photograph of a near-naked blonde sprawled across a luxury car so that black men could suck sushi from her belly. It said a great deal about the racial fantasies of sex and power in the minds of the new elite. They have gone from deprivation to depravity in a single leap.

Both the African National Congress and the National Party saw the judiciary from the start as a centre of power and they moved to consolidate their hold on it. The African National Congress' insistence on appointing African judges to all the senior judgeships, and the drive to achieve a numerically representative quota of black judges (even at the cost of rejecting highly qualified white "struggle heroes" like Geoff Budlender), echoes the NP's packing of the courts with Afrikaans judges whose qualifications, in the biting words of Sydney Kentridge, "were not evident to lawyers".

The controversies that attended the appointment of Chief Justice L.C. Steyn were remarkably similar to the current disputes surrounding Judge Hlophe and continued for decades. Faith in the courts was so undermined that some of the most eminent lawyers in the country, Kentridge among them, refused appointment to the Bench. Judge Johann Kriegler's recent efforts to rescue the rule of law and the reputation of the courts from African National Congress manipulation are in some ways comparable to the efforts by the former Chief Justice, Albert van der Sandt Centlivres, to rescue the rule of law when the National Party packed the courts and the Senate so that it could change the constitution in order to strip the Coloured people of their voting rights.

Even the cynical release of Shabir Shaik on spurious medical grounds has a precedent in the National Party's equally brazen early release from prison of Robey Leibrandt, a Nazi secret agent who, after training in Germany, was landed on the West Coast by a submarine during the war.

The case is largely forgotten now but it branded the National Party government in the eyes of foreign governments, not to speak of the local opposition and ex-servicemen, as sympathetic to the Nazis. The taint never quite wore off.

If faith in the courts and the administration of justice faltered under the National Party, respect for Parliament almost collapsed after the packing of the Senate. The cynical manipulation of the law to evade constitutional protection of Coloured people's rights made MPs objects of derision and a rich source of material for cartoonists.

(It also, incidentally, drove Coloured people into extra-parliamentary opposition, some of them with the African National Congress, and towards the use of English. It was a huge blow to the interests of the Afrikaans language, one that may yet prove terminal).

Unlike the legislature, the executive branch of government was able to command respect through fear, and still does so. The National Party, though its MPs were answerable to constituencies, kept them in line through a tight caucus where Broederbond oaths of allegiance reinforced party discipline. Speeches "thanking the Minister" became a popularly caricatured feature of National Party backbenchers' participation in parliamentary debate. Real debate did not take place outside the caucus.

The African National Congress exerts similar control more directly. As Mathews Phosa has said, "there is only one centre of power" and that lies at Luthuli House where party bosses "deploy" people to Parliament, determine who will be Speaker, and keep MPs in line. Policy debates take place in the national executive committee, out of public sight, and policy directives are passed to Parliament. Backbench MPs "thank the Minister", frontbenchers make sure they do.

Under the National Party, South Africa could best be described as a racial oligarchy; under the African National Congress it is at best a crippled democracy, where the President can be deposed by a handful of votes in a party conference.

There is continuity in the inability of South Africans to establish and manage a fully functioning democracy. In both cases, Parliament has been reduced to an instrument of the party, not of the people.

A remarkable similarity is evident, too, in the manner in which both the Nationalists and the African National Congress have reacted to public criticism and, at a trivial but revealing manner, to public scorn as expressed especially by cartoonists. Neither party has seen any utility in changing its own behaviour in order to earn respect; both have preferred to kill the messenger.

In the 1960s John Vorster, an intimidating presence who had introduced detention without trial to suppress political activity by both the Pan African Congress and the African National Congress, set out to bully and intimidate the management of opposition newspapers into softening their opposition. On his orders, the celebrated editor of the Rand Daily Mail, Laurence Gandar, was fired.

Two independent newspapers that stood outside the mainstream, the communist “New Age” and the liberal “Contact”, were shut down, and the mainstream publishers were forced to accept a fatuous “code of conduct” to be enforced by a Press Council.

However, the National Party found that controlling journalists was like herding goldfish. Every new control measure was evaded or undermined or ignored, and the National Party found itself moving steadily toward outright censorship.

The effects were perverse. The government’s own credibility was destroyed and its main mouthpiece, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, became an object of derision. Lasting scorn fell on those who worked there.

The African National Congress, having learned nothing from this experience, has made the South African Broadcasting Corporation the focus of its efforts to silence criticism, and has fallen back on the bullying and the intimidation, and the discredited notion of a “code of conduct” to be enforced by a tame tribunal.

It is doing the same things as the National Party and hoping for a different outcome, which is a popular definition of insanity.

Apartheid entailed the misallocation of resources, the waste of capital, on a scale unmatched outside the communist countries. The cost of moving (literally) millions of people hither and thither, the duplication of services, the doubling or even quadrupling of toilets and bathrooms, entrances and exits, hospitals, schools and universities ...the list is endless.

Apartheid required an immense, expensive bureaucracy, a diversion of police resources into enforcement of bizarre laws including pass laws, and in the end it required conscription, an arms industry and a smuggling network to maintain the system. Revenue was squandered on arms purchases, even on useless but expensive nuclear weapons, and on the distortion of economic life to meet the requirements of racial ideology. Again, the list is endless.

Even in combination with corruption, it took decades to exhaust the remarkable natural potential of the South African economy but towards the end the ruling elite could no longer collect taxes efficiently, or maintain public order, or service the crumbling national infrastructure, and economic growth came to a halt. The National Party gave up power because it had to. It was finished, and it handed to the African National Congress an empty treasury, an obsolescent infrastructure, huge debt and no foreign reserves.

The effect of the transfer of power in 1994 was temporarily galvanising, partly because it quickly freed the country of much of the burden of apartheid, partly because the international community rapidly resumed relationships, and partly because the end of apartheid brought into use the talents of many people of colour. The burst of new energy was palpable.

Tax collection improved dramatically, the treasury steered the country past the threatening debt trap, the national reserves recovered, and confidence soared. Growth resumed and even unemployment (by the

standard measurement) came down from about 32% to 24%. Corruption was worrisome at first but not overwhelming and Mbeki's team seemed to have at least an outline of long-term objectives. The achievements of his administration have been underrated.

But new social forces of near-revolutionary strength had been unleashed by the emergence of fabulously wealthy "black diamonds", and by the appointment of black people to parastatal and government positions at salaries that, to township dwellers, seemed beyond the dreams of avarice.

As they watched the new class of rich blacks pass in their limousines, or read of their antics in the newspapers, the former elites of the townships — teachers, nurses, social workers, policemen — found themselves regarded as losers. The young, their expectations soaring, looked to government service, to affirmative action, to Black Economic Empowerment, to deal-making, for their careers.

In the contest for newly available wealth even rich black people, their children at private schools, their garages filled with sports cars, claimed further privileges on the grounds that black people — not necessarily themselves — had been most oppressed by apartheid. As a black columnist noted, "professional blacks" traded on their blackness to get rich.

The working class, including the demoralised semi-professional nurses and teachers, turned to their unions for protection, generating strikes and wage increases which were perhaps justifiable but not necessarily sustainable. To dampen disaffection, welfare benefits were extended to a quarter of the population, and President Zuma promised to create millions of jobs — a promise generally seen as empty.

The power struggles at the top of the pyramid which had brought President Zuma to office were soon complemented by a wider struggle in which the labour unions and elements of the Communist Party, as well as the disaffected semi-professionals, began to voice open criticism. The outlines of class struggle began to emerge in the black community.

At long last the colonial structure of the economy was being seriously challenged.

This being South Africa, however, class struggle is overlaid by tribal contest, and to some extent concealed by it. The latent Africanist tendency in the African National Congress has come to the fore in the clamour for swifter “transformation” which is increasingly cast in terms of race: “they have it, we want it”. In some recorded cases, competent white employees were fired to make way for blacks whose expertise was no more than a promise.

Black intellectuals use the word “racist” like a whip, just as Afrikaners used to use the word “Boerehaat”, to cow their opposition, driving most whites out of the political debate. With a handful of exceptions, educated whites now avoid public discussion of the great political issues facing the nation. Instead, their political passions are directed into politically correct denunciations of nuclear energy, or “big capital”, or the Americans and the “Washington consensus”, or people’s attitudes to “fynbos”. Israel still attracts trenchant, intelligent debate, and so do gender issues, but Christians tend to avoid the former, and men the latter.

Among those cowed by the “racist” whip is, ironically, the University of Cape Town. Once at the forefront of the fight (led by Centlivres and Stuart Saunders, among others) for non-racial admission to the university, the University of Cape Town has lately been cowed into demanding that white applicants must meet a higher entry standard than Indians, who must meet a higher standard than Coloureds, who must meet a higher standard than blacks — the old apartheid classifications, inverted. The policy would, if consistently applied, favour the child of Jimmy Manyi who played no part in the liberation struggle, or Julius Malema who was 10 years old when apartheid was abandoned, over the offspring of Mac Maharaj or Trevor Manuel. It favours the children of “black diamonds” who come from the best private schools on the grounds that they are “previously disadvantaged” over children from the Cape Flats.

University staff admit it excludes some whites who, on merit, deserve to be admitted, and does so solely on the basis of race. They do not admit that they have been cowed into ensuring that the campus must become predominantly black and they hotly defend the policy. But if one substitutes the words Jews, Muslims and Roma for whites, Indians and Coloureds, the intellectual origins of the policy become uncomfortably clear.

An admissions policy based on poverty, not race, would have produced much the same result, without entrenching the absurdities of unscientific race classification, but reverse race classification is what is intended. There could not be a sharper spur to emigration.

All sensible South Africans know that affirmative action is a moral and political imperative. Affirmative action programmes at every level of society have produced literally tens of thousands of successful black people who serve the country well and who are rapidly taking over the role of commanding elite, but still the need for skills is greater than the supply. The loss of skilled people, mainly white but also Indian, harms the development of the country and its economy, and will do so for as long as the supply of skilled black people does not compensate for the loss.

Given the condition of the schools, that day is some way off, so the process of affirmative action, pursued without regard to the fears or interests of the minorities, does not expand the skills base. It simply changes the racial composition of the elite while preserving the power relationships of a colonial society and privileges of the ruling class: a small rich class still sits atop a vast underclass which provides labour at low cost and low efficiency. The black elite are beginning to mutter about problems with domestics.

Meanwhile the quality of government across a range of technical functions continues to deteriorate for lack of skills, to the point where water quality has become questionable, record-keeping is often chaotic and open to fraud, and some municipalities have virtually collapsed.

Underlying the campaign for affirmative action — for jobs, free

tertiary education, land distribution, subsidised housing, free health care, and much else — is a rising tone of anger about the way the country is being run.

The cry of racism is a mere diversionary tactic. It is intended to mask a wider conflict, an emerging class struggle in which the main target is the richest quintile, the new privileged class, of whom the majority are not white.

Turmoil in the streets has become a steady, if distant, rumble of discontent, some of it organised by trades unions, some by the African National Congress Youth League, but mostly by angry local groups protesting at simple grievances. South Africa's transition to democracy has left the vast majority of its people out in the cold, and a newly awakened proletariat is flexing its muscles.

For South Africa's richest quintile it carries a warning. The sound they hear is the clamour of the poor at the gates of privilege.



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