

# Dissident has stood firm against inequality

• Terreblanche has insisted on role played by slavery, land theft, neoliberalism and transnational corporations

Dennis Webster

Edenville lies in the middle of the non-descript expanse between Kroonstad and Heilbron in the Free State. In the town fancifully named for the Garden of Eden, Sampie Terreblanche picked up the hoarse Afrikaans accent with which he would later articulate some of the most scathing accounts of dispossession and poverty in SA.

Terreblanche was born into an Afrikaner nationalist family during the economic depression, drought and Calvinism of the 1930s, which sparked his interest in the economy, and how it should be organised.

Terreblanche is now 84 years old. He describes, in his thick Edenville accent, a life of extraordinary transformation as "very interesting and very challenging". He has always communicated as much with his hands as he has with his words. They have taken on a gruff accent, thrown out wide in ridicule of US triumphalism, or lifting three chubby fingers to illustrate that the ANC's calamitous concessions during the transition were either the result of coercion, being convinced by neoliberalism or being bought by big business.

In word, gesture, and some of the more important economic history written in SA, Terreblanche has provided some unpopular explanations for the morose economic realities faced by the majority of citizens. When writing *History of Inequality in South Africa* he did not find the seeds that germinated into the

country's intractable social divisions in apartheid, or in the incomplete democratic revolution that succeeded it. He found them in the arrival of European settlers in 1652.

Where the mainstream now lays the blame for poverty squarely at the feet of a failed ANC, Terreblanche has not wavered from an insistence on the paramount roles played by slavery and indentured servitude, land theft and deprivation, neoliberalism and western transnational corporations.

His trenchant critique of the democratic project retains a searing evaluation of the ruling party. Terreblanche maintains that secret meetings between the ANC and big business – behind the high walls of Harry Oppenheimer's estate and at the Development Bank of Southern Africa – laid the foundations for the continued beggary of the majority. The difference now, adds, is that elite compacts are no longer made in secret; they are celebrated. Before jetting off to Davos to assure the global economic elite that SA was a safe bet again following his election as ANC president, a grinning Cyril Ramaphosa remarked that he was looking forward to one of the event's hottest tickets – a wine tasting to be held at the Hotel Europe.

Ramaphosa was not alone in his excitement. A champagne cork cannoned appropriately off the ceiling on the first day of the summit, briefly interrupting PwC's announcement of record levels of CFO confidence. And the IMF upgraded its forecast for global economic growth following President Donald Trump's

large tax cuts for the wealthy in the US.

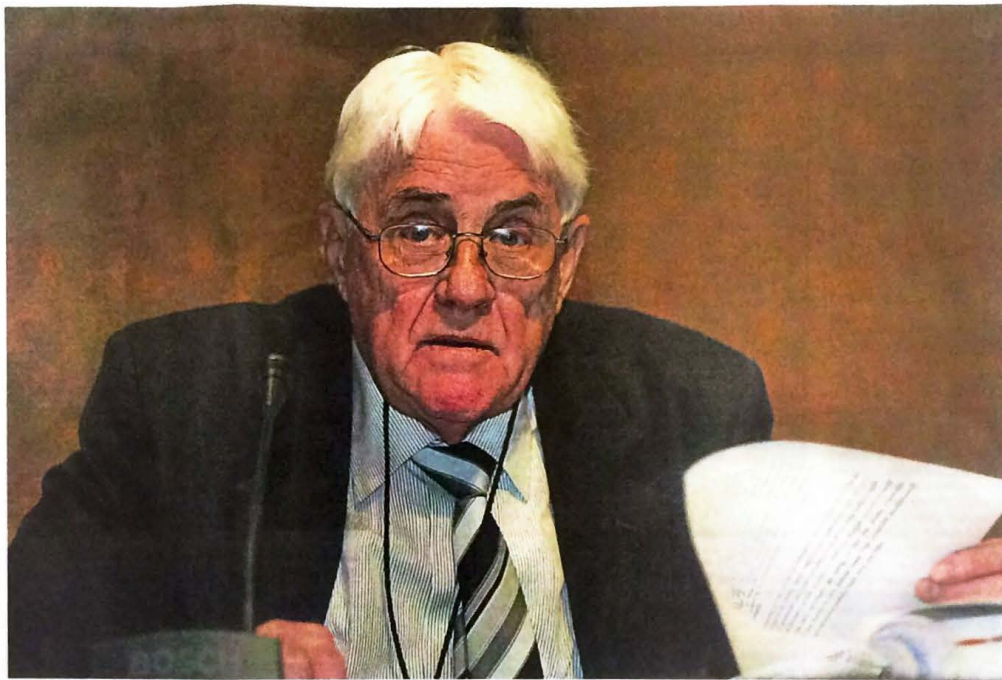
There is no stronger confirmation that prevailing economic orthodoxy, and those revelling in it from Davos to Sandton, remain as vulnerable to Terreblanche's reproach as ever.

A recent study found that South African citizens think that CEOs earn 28 times more than the average worker. In reality, they earn 541 times more. SA's wealthiest top 10% now own 93% of all wealth in the country. The richest South Africans are among the richest people in the world, and the poorest are among the poorest. It is Terreblanche's phantasm writ large.

His appraisal of SA's inequality is more compelling because, as a member of the National Party, and the Broederbond, he spent decades in the belly of the apartheid beast, which consolidated colonialism's economic gains. He became intimately familiar with the political arrangements that eventually made democratic SA the world's most unequal economy.

His mounting criticism of a system organised to benefit his community at the expense of others eventually threatened his connection to his people in the 1980s. His relationship with the Afrikaner establishment ended in a stormy confrontation with then president PW Botha.

They screamed at each other across a Tynhuys desk in a discussion about whether there was such a thing as 'good apartheid'. Terreblanche later described the necessary process of severing his 'Afrikaner national veins', and the many friendships it cost him, as



**Unwavering:** Sampie Terreblanche shows that state capture, which is associated with the Gupta family in SA, haunted the country before democracy. His support for democracy earned him the wrath of the National Party, and his support of a wealth tax ostracised him in democratic SA. Marianne Pretorius

"painful". Erstwhile fellow Broederbonders now refer to him as a 'naïve academic', furious for the part he eventually played in giving in to "the ANC (and their British godfathers) demands", which left the Afrikaners "with absolutely no power base and completely at the mercy of the black majority".

The University of Johannesburg this week hosted a symposium to pay tribute to him. The all-day programme was divided into sessions titled From Broederbond to Rebel, the life and times of Sampie Terreblanche. Lost in Transformation and the original 'state capture' debate. 1990s: Western Empires, SA Assimilation and The Fightback Against Inequality. Speakers included the country's top economists, political scientists, politicians and political activists.

Terreblanche has always insisted that coming to terms with what he referred to as the 'plain misery' of South African poverty must begin with the acknowledgment that it does not exist in a vacuum – history matters. He suggests that inequality was hardwired into the post-apartheid economy in a series of elite compacts between politicians and capitalists during

the democratic transition. Some were laid out at Davos.

In 1992, former president Nelson Mandela listened as the leaders of the world economy, drunk on the free flow of capital following the fall of the Berlin Wall, insisted that any radical economic reforms in SA would incur their wrath.

Elite interests authoring global treaties is not a new game. While "Gupta" may be the surname on everyone's lips nowadays, Terreblanche shows that state capture haunted SA before the advent of democracy.

Before Eskom's back was broken by a private grasp for public goods, the Ruperts, Oppenheimers and other capitalists of the apartheid economic system helped establish a tax regime that guaranteed the continued privilege of the economic elites who had funded and profited obscenely from apartheid.

The prophetic social diagnoses of Terreblanche extended beyond state capture. Long before Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* brought wealth taxes into the mainstream, he presented evidence at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of the wealth that had been illegitimately accumulated

during colonialism and apartheid and called on the ANC government to tax it.

His support for democracy earned him the wrath of the National Party, and his support of the wealth tax ostracised him in democratic SA.

The call for a wealth tax was a continuation of Terreblanche's practice of breaking with the myth that Afrikaner nationalists were apartheid's primary beneficiaries, and exposing the profits of all white business. His suggestion was met with derision by big business and both ends of the political spectrum.

**DA MP JAMES SELFE DISMISSED BUSINESS' APARTHEID LIABILITIES AS A 'VAGUELY CONCEIVED COLLECTIVE GUILT'**

DA MP James Selfe dismissed business' apartheid liabilities as a 'vaguely conceived collective guilt' and called a wealth tax 'absurd'. Anglo suggested that corporations had no "moral purposes". Thabo Mbeki's government rejected the call for a wealth tax

when it considered the TRC's final report in 2003.

Buckling under hard lobbying by big business, which promised billions of rand to be redistributed as reparation for apartheid, the government opted instead for voluntary contributions from business. When Mbeki's term ended, business had contributed barely more than 10% in repayment of its gains during apartheid. Little has been contributed since.

It is rare for a crime to be known while its punishment remains undetermined. The failure to heed calls, made by Terreblanche and others, to hold the economic crimes of apartheid to account means that accumulation continues with reckless abandon. The only thing remarkable about the roulette Markus Jooste played with public pensions is that it became public, we know about it. All the while poor South Africans stand proxy for a delinquent economic elite that got unchecked.

For those who put stock in political labels, Terreblanche is no Marxist. And despite his scathing attacks on white capitalism, he doesn't consider himself a radical. Learning from the sentence, as is his custom, he once said: "I am for a truth, democratic capitalist system". The problem for Terreblanche, however, is that there has been nothing democratic about capitalism for decades.

Other than a brief period in the West after the Second World War, humanity has only known "unbridled capitalism", under which system the market has never been controlled by democratic governments.

The consequence in SA is the spectre of an endless present in which the country lurches through recurring crises.

Terreblanche's longer-durée-telling of SA's socioeconomic afflictions remains a seminal disruption of the endless present and a reminder that the story of how the country got here should be at the heart of deciding how to get out.

The Free State still delights Terreblanche. He becomes lyrical when describing the smell in the air after summer thunderstorms, or the floating rainbows of green that the storms bring to the thirsty landscape.

He is less optimistic about the renewal of SA's democratic project. Terreblanche says that short of the electorate forcing the ANC to 'start down the barrel of a gun', meaningful change will prove elusive.