

1985

ARTICLE FOR THE LOS ANGELES TIMES, FOR THE ATTENTION OF  
MR BOB BURGER - TELEX NO. LAT 673186 (Kollekteer)

---

APARTHEID IS A STRUCTURE, NOT ONLY A POLICY

S J Terreblanche  
Professor in Political Economy  
University of Stellenbosch  
South Africa

Apartheid has become one of the worst words of our time - a symbol of something which is totally unacceptable, and seemingly also indefensible.

We are living in a world that has shrunk - to a "global village", a world dominated by the mass media in which symbols and images are of decisive importance.

As a symbol, apartheid has acquired a meaning that can no longer be reconciled with the values and attitudes of the Western world at the end of the 20th Century. It symbolises something that goes against the grain of the current trend of history.

Apartheid, as it exists in South Africa, has many negative and deplorable dimensions. But the image projected by the symbol is far worse. We South Africans can and must fight this wrong image, but in the end we cannot do much about it.

Attempts to call apartheid by other names have failed. Attempts to give it a more humane face are commendable. But at the end of the day it is still apartheid ... and for moral and other reasons it is not acceptable any more.

As long as the government is still committed to apartheid as such, our chances of offering successful resistance to the well-orchestrated anti-South African campaign are very slim.

Until the government becomes committed to the dismantling of apartheid, our options are rather limited.



- We may plead for an appreciation of our unique situation. Our conditions are indeed unique, and not comparable to any other country in the world.
- We can try to explain that one or another kind of apartheid system is, for the time being, the only way to organise social, economic and political life in a civilised and orderly way in a country where a quarter of the population are First World people and three-quarters are Third World people.

Given the small size of the modern sector, and its small tax capacity, we cannot at this stage afford to fully democratise our political and economic life.

- We can blame its sharpest critics in the Western world that most of them would not be prepared to do what they are demanding from us, if they were under comparable conditions.
- We can blame the rest of the world for its hypocrisy and its double standards. We can try to highlight discrimination and structural injustice in every other country of the world.
- We can accuse a country like the USA that she practises a form of "territorial apartheid" behind the protective "boundaries" of the nation-state idea.
- We can argue that the international system discriminates in an inhumane way against the peoples of the poor countries.

But although the nation-state idea may in due course come under the same kind of pressure as apartheid, that time is not yet.

All these arguments are relevant in putting the case of South Africa. But they provide little scope for counteracting the negative symbolic meaning projected by apartheid.

But if apartheid has become such an impediment, why does South Africa not abolish it without further ado? Unfortunately that is not possible.

Anyone who is politically naive and economically foolish enough to



think that apartheid can be abolished overnight underestimates the devastating consequences.

Apartheid is not simply a policy. It is also part and parcel of the South African pattern of life - socially, economically and politically.

This pattern was structured in the 19th century, since when it has been systematically enlarged, legalised and adapted.

It has become the very foundation of the structure of South Africa. Consequently it cannot be demolished in a short period of time without serious disruptive and destabilising effects which can only be detrimental to every South African.

As a structure, apartheid can be compared with the Old Order in France before the French Revolution.

During the revolution an attempt was made to abolish the Ancien Regime in one night.

What the reformers of that night expected to be the arrival of an Utopia turned out to be only the beginning of a long upward, and still incomplete, process of social democratisation.

But the night of 4/5 August, 1789, witnessed the commitment to greater social equality and mobility, and to the acknowledgement of human rights.

But given that Apartheid cannot be abolished overnight, what options are open?

At least two options are open: A firm Government commitment towards the dismantling of Apartheid over an unspecified period of time and a very progressive and visible reform programme to attain it in the shortest period of time.

The government ought to state in unequivocal terms that its ultimate aims are to dismantle apartheid peacefully, to get rid of all forms of discrimination, to work towards full human and civil rights for everybody, and to create structures of equal and relevant political



participation for everyone - not necessarily in a single parliamentary chamber.

As part of such a declaration the government can also state in equal unequivocal terms that progress towards such goals cannot be simple, linear, shortterm or according to foreign prescriptions.

It cannot proceed at a pace that will cause disruption and endanger civilised standards and overstrain the capacity of the modern sector of the economy.

It will have to move through several phases before the ultimate goal can be reached. For the foreseeable future the ethnic groups will have to be used as building blocks of a new all-embracing political dispensation. It would be wrong to regard the group approach as a disguised or new form of apartheid. The group approach can facilitate not only affirmative action but backward discrimination to compensate for the many wrongdoings of the past.

A declaration of intent will clearly have disadvantages. It may, unfortunately, lead to increased radicalism on the left and on the right.

In the case of the former, it will in all probability quicken the spiral of rising expectations, create unreasonable demands, and can even create a greater degree of instability over the short period.

In the case of the latter, it may cause disruptive resistance politics and even semi-civil war between whites.

The government must be realistic enough to realise that no solution to the South African situation can possibly satisfy all parties. It must look for the most acceptable common denominator.

In order to achieve this by negotiation, the maintenance of law and order is a non-negotiable prerequisite and appropriate steps will continuously have to be taken.

On the other hand the potential internal and external advantages of such a declaration and visible reform measures must not be underestimated.



It can prove to be of enormous symbolic value.

It can be moral liberation for many white South African who experience apartheid as a bondage.

It can create a new hope and enthusiasm for the future.

It can command the indispensable foreign support for South Africa.

As the embodiment of a common long-term goal, such a declaration can prove to be the symbol that will unite all moderate people. This can give a new meaning to our common destiny.

A common commitment, to operate as a magnetic centre, is urgently needed in a country experiencing all kinds of centrifugal forces and in which unrest has already become endemic.

In his Durban speech (Aug. 15), State President P W Botha got very close to such a declaration of intent and to an explicit commitment to powersharing with Blacks. But for reasons akin to the complexities of White politics in South Africa, he unfortunately chose to formulate the important speech not in the clear terms necessary. For those who understand the idiosyncrasies of the Afrikaner culture, he hopefully meant what he said when he claimed that we have crossed the Rubicon.

(In a second article I can perhaps write about the complexities and idiosyncrasies of the Afrikaner - S.J.T.)