

1985

THE AFRIKANERS AS THE UNPREDICTABLE WHITE CLAN OF AFRICA

S J Terreblanche
Professor of Economics
University of Stellenbosch
South Africa

In sharp contrast to the USA, the South African history is not a meltingpot to assimilate different groups and cultures. It is an ongoing struggle between well-defined cultural and ethnic groups. This struggle brought about a multitude of "frozen minorities" that is still the most outstanding feature in the South African scene. Apartheid can be regarded as an attempt to keep at least some of these minorities in its "forzen" condition on behalf of order and stability and to create a "New Europe" for a small group of Whites in Africa.

The Cape of Good Hope was not a colony of the Netherlands but of the Dutch East Indian Company. The company was originally (1602 - 1648) extremely successful - mainly in making profits on their Spanish enemy. After the 80 year war it started to decline and was a bankrupt and a very corrupt company in the 18th century.

When a halfway-station was founded in 1652 at the Cape, the purpose was not to develop a Dutch colony. It almost by accident developed into one. In the first 70 years small financial support was given to immigrants and settlers. This was ended in 1717. Since then few immigrants arrived and the settlers were very much neglected. They moved in small groups into the countryside and was cut off from European influence.

During the 18th century the Afrikaners developed into a clan with a very independent frame of mind and a rugged individualism supported by a special interpretation of Calvinism. A dialect of the Dutch language developed in due course into the Afrikaans language.

During the Napoleonic Wars, South Africa became a British colony. At that stage the White population was only ^{40,000}~~20~~ 000. Even before the British take-over the farmers on the Eastern frontier clashed with Blacks moving downwards along the Eastern seaboard from central Africa. When the colonial government was not sympathetic enough towards the plight of the Afrikaners, the Great Trek towards the north took place. Two Farmer (or Afrikaner) Republics were founded and were operated as independent states from 1850 to 1900.

During the 19th century the historic pattern of South Africa was set. Everytime a clash of interests occurred, the discontented party moved into the "wide open spaces" available and founded their own "homeland" or republic. This way of solving problems became part of the Afrikaner folklore. This approach created and maintained the frozen minorities. If more European immigrants came to South Africa the lack of open land may force the Whites to assimilate at an early date.

In a series of bloody wars the British colonial authorities had a difficult task to subdue the Blacks to accept colonial dominance. In fact it was not the Afrikaners but the British who broke the military resistance of the Blacks. It was also the British who created the original apartheid structure to serve their colonial purposes.

The discovery of gold in Transvaal was the direct cause of the Anglo-Boer War (1899 - 1902). The total Afrikaner population ^{was} ~~as~~ then only ⁵³⁰~~750~~ 000 ~~but less than a half million were directly involved in the war.~~ During the war 50 000 (including women and children) or 10 per cent, were killed. The decision to carry on with a guerilla war for two years after Pretoria was occupied, is a clear indication of the Afrikaner's stubbornness and his reluctance to bend under foreign pressure especially when the pressure is morally ^{not} justifiable in ^{their} ~~the~~ir eyes. This reluctance was reinforced during the long decolonisation process between London and Pretoria which stretched from 1910 until South Africa became a Republic in 1961. In every clash with London, Pretoria took a hard line and in the end carried the day.

Although the Afrikaner republics lost their "independence" in 1902, the idea is still fostered in the Afrikaner folklore that the Afrikaners actually attained a moral victory over the blind forces of British Colonialism and Capitalism in an unjust and even unholy war.

Because of the war and subsequent developments, the Englishspeakers and Afrikaners were posed against each other as the two dominant frozen minorities. The century-long struggle between them absorbed so much time and energy that the Whites have spent only a fraction of the time and energy necessary to find reasonable solutions for our racial problems. What a pity.

The struggle between the two White groups intensified in the 1930's when the small Afrikaner farmers were forced by poor economic conditions and severe droughts to migrate to the cities. Almost half of the Afrikaners became Poor Whites. They found it very difficult to adopt to the rather unfriendly Englishspeaking cities. They also lacked the necessary skills and encountered for the first time direct competition with Blacks for job-opportunities.

They blamed their poverty on ongoing British colonialism, on the dominant political and economic position of the Englishspeakers, and on Black competition in the labour market. The struggle between the two White groups became a class struggle between the Afrikaner underdogs and the English upperdogs. The Victorian cultural superiority projected by the English Establishment (of which the English newspapers were very much a part) caused great resentment in Afrikaner circles. It was an important reason for Afrikaner cultural revival in the 1930's, and for a strengthening of the idea that they can protect their interest if they flock together in an Afrikaner laager.

Strongly supported by the Dutch Reformed Church, Afrikaner leaders used the underdog mentality and the perception of economic deprivation, to mobilise a strong Afrikaner nationalistic movement in the thirties and fourties.

The purpose of this movement was to regain for the Afrikaners - as the true pioneers - their alleged rightful political and economic position. With the take-off of this feverish Afrikaner nationalism

a new meaning ~~were~~^{it was} given to the apartheid structure and it was since then used for new purposes.

The Afrikaner Nationalist Party attained an election victory in 1948 and governs ever since. In the first 15 years the government took several measures to solve the Poor White problem and to end the real and the imaginative position of Afrikaner inferiority. In this period apartheid became legalised and became nothing else but a Welfare State policy for the Whites and especially the Afrikaners. Some of the measures taken in this period can nevertheless be justified.

By the middle of the sixties the Poor White problem was solved and all the Afrikaners had reached middle class status. At that stage a radical change in policy to broaden the Welfare State to include Blacks ought to have taken place. It unfortunately did not happen.

The rightwing Afrikaners - or those who could not get rid of their inferiority of underdog complex - got control over the National Party. During the misguided years of Mr John Vorster's administration (1966 - 1978), the government misused its political power to put the Whites - and especially the Afrikaners - in even more protected and more privileged positions.

In fifty years' time the Afrikaners developed from mainly Poor Whites to a rather Affluent Society and became extremely spoiled and materialistic but still rather hostile against outside (foreign) influences.

During the seventies a sharp tension developed between the Verligtes (Enlightened wing) and the Verkramptes (Rightwing) in the National Party. In 1982 the rightwing broke away. It is real pity - perhaps a tragedy - that it had not happened 10 or 15 years earlier. Only after the split, the government of Pieter Botha became a real reform party. But it is still inclined to do too little reform too late. It still tries to cross a chasm in ten small steps when one brave leap is needed.

In 1984 a new constitution was introduced to give parliamentary representation to Coloured and Asians in two separate chambers. Powersharing with Blacks was recently announced by State President Pieter Botha. But the new political structures will only be implemented after a long period of negotiation with different Black groups.

During the Referendum on the new constitution in 1983, almost 40 per cent of the Afrikaners ^(now nearly 3 million in total) voted against it, while 70 per cent of the Englishspeakers ^(now nearly 2 million in total) voted in favour of it. But if a general election is held today, only between 30 to 40 per cent of the Englishspeakers will support the government. Consequently the government remain quite sensitive towards the sentiments in Afrikaner circles - even in rightwing circles. This is quite a retarding factor.

Something the Botha government cannot ignore, is the deeply ingrained Afrikaner idea that it is a sign of weakness to bend before foreign pressure. In many circles the mild sanctions announced by President Reagan is regarded with great resentment. Some even view it as deplorable American moral imperialism that had to be resisted as strongly as the British cultural imperialism was resisted. Because of this attitude the American sanctions may have a contraproductive effect on the government's reform policy. Being very sensitive on foreign issues the Afrikaners - even those in the enlightened group - question the moral justification for punitive measures against South Africa.

If the American sanctions bring about a hardening of attitudes and retrogressive steps in the reform process, it would be a setback we cannot afford.