

1983

REPLY TO JOHAN DEGENAAR

One of the biggest ironies of the intermittent debate about the function of (particularly Afrikaner-) intellectuals in South Africa, is <sup>(nervous eagerness with)</sup> ~~(the) way~~ in which the reformist integrity and credibility of the so called "verligtes" are both questioned and disparaged the moment one of them sets pen to paper. While one would normally expect resistance to Afrikaner reformist moves from the right, the irony in this case is that the disparagement of verligte pleas for reform comes from other Afrikaner intellectuals further left on the political spectrum. One rightly fears that what will suffer in the end, is not so much the reputations of Verligtes

- though that would indeed be a welcome bonus for their critics - but the process of reform itself. The reason for this is obvious: if the verligte drive for reform within the National Party does not succeed, the victor will most certainly not be a "oorbeligte" type of reform strategy, but dr. Treurnicht and his reactionary ideology. The consequences of such a development for the process of peaceful and evolutionary reform are obvious. In fact, such a development could only be desired by people who have given up hope for a peaceful settlement in South Africa.. Are the critics of verligtheid incapable of understanding this simple fact? If so, one certainly <sup>at least</sup> can expect a little more ~~and insight into~~ sensitivity for the hard ~~political~~ realities of white politics, from where we must start if we are talking peaceful reform, than that ~~revealed~~ by Johan Degenaar in a recent response to Willie Esterhuysen ("My heart is where the hurt is....in the real world we cannot ignore", Sunday Times, December 16 1984).

According to Degenaar, Esterhuysen's "genuine strive towards democratisation within a power structure which is genuinely based on non-democratisation" is indicative of a "tragic dimension" in the current debate on verligtheid. It seems to me, however, that ~~Some~~ Afrikaner intellectuals' obstinate refusals <sup>to accept</sup> ~~one another's~~ <sup>of their colleagues, and to acknowledge their success,</sup> reformist credentials <sup>the</sup> will turn out to be the real tragedy in the history of reform in South Africa.

What are verligtes and "oorbeligtes" (the now commonly accepted nickname for the Degenaar-camp) arguing about? Basically, it seems to me, they are arguing about different means to reach the same end:



a just, democratically based South African society void of racism and statutory discrimination. Verligtes strive for this goal within the confines and discipline of a politically realistic and intellectually respectable strategy: that of constructive engagement and critical solidarity. They believe that their political inputs are optimally effective if channelled through the ranks of the party which is in power at the moment and which, in white politics, the only party with a sufficient power base to generate real reform effectively. Oorbeligtes clearly disagree with this, though this disagreement is, as far as I understand them, the only thing that is clear about their strategy. The nearest Degenaar gets to a formulation of strategy, that is of means to move from point A (the present) to point B (the next step in the reform process) reads: "He (a verligte) should rather join forces with those reform minded people who are willing to transcend racial and party differences in working towards a democratic society based on genuine power sharing and freedom of association" and later "(he should) join forces now with reform minded people of all colours in the creation of a just dispensation". From these vaguenesses, the only logical deduction that I am capable of, is that Degenaar does not have a very high regard for available parliamentary procedures in bringing about change. Since "party differences" should also be transcended, it appears that even a vote for the PFP does not seem a viable proposition either. If not, then what? Is Degenaar calling for extra-parliamentary action? Is he pleading the case of the UDF or other similarly minded organisations? If so, does he honestly think that a thus conceived "reform process" can be stable and peaceful? *How does he conceive of "the creation of a just dispensation" in which the present government seemingly has no role to play?* Degenaar should be more precise. And while he is reproaching the verligtes because of their lack of "a convincing political theory", we are also eagerly awaiting the "convincing theory" in terms of which he justifies extra-parliamentary reformist action when democratic procedures are at present available to Whites, Colours and Indians. How does Degenaar evaluate the Buthe-lezi-strategy which is vehemently opposed to apartheid, but which utilizes existing legalised means to press for change because to do otherwise is to opt for violence and ultimately disaster? ]

A complicating factor in the debate is the fact that Degenaar apparently refuses to accept that the difference between himself and Verligtes is *mainly* merely a matter of strategy. According to him, the choice is not one between different strategies, but between "democratisation and its consequences and NP policy and its consequences". In maintaining a

*Does it, for instance, exclude joining forces with bishops in his campaign for disinvestment?*



<sup>Verligtes</sup>  
critical solidarity with the NP, <sup>^</sup> are therefore not really able to strive for greater democratisation. They live with a "tragic contradiction"; their thinking is "schizophrenic"; they try to "reconcile the irreconcilable". Moreover, their "highest principle" is, in fact, not reform, but "to uphold Afrikaner power". Above all, Verligtes are "dangerous, both for themselves individually and for society as a whole". They do not recognize the "discrepancy between fantasy and reality"; they have to live "both in the real world of injustice and in the make-believe world of good intentions"

These are <sup>harsh</sup> accusations which amply illustrate the real tragedy of this debate to which I referred at the beginning. Worse. They are gross instances of both oversimplifications and <sup>deliberate distortions</sup> lies. It simply is not true that a refusal to share power with blacks <sup>in some or other form</sup> is not negotiable for the government. In his address at the opening of Parliament in September the State President explicitly stated the urgency with which the government regards the investigation by a special cabinet committee <sup>into</sup> of the political future of urban blacks. If the permanence of blacks in urban areas is accepted, as the government has repeatedly done, why investigate and negotiate about their political participation if power sharing is not negotiable?

Furthermore, if the power structure of the present government is "genuinely <sup>based</sup> on non-democratisation", what does Degenaar call the <sup>events</sup> happenings of August and September 1984? Does he earnestly suggest that the Hendickse's and the Curry's are deliberately being taken for the most treacherous political ride of the century? How can the cause of reform possibly be furthered if the credibility of these accepted leaders of the Coloured and Indian communities are constantly undermined by Degenaarian ridiculing of the new constitution?

But perhaps the most preposterous claim of Degenaar is his advice that Verligtes should call it a day because of the discrepancy between "verligte rhetoric and the practice of ongoing injustice" in South Africa. I am the first to agree with Degenaar that the injustices and discriminatory practices which he so ably tables, call for urgent attention and preferably abolition. The weakness of Degenaar's argument in this regard is glaringly evident when he states, immediately after his table of injustices: "The eyes remain on the verligtes to help eradicate these injustices". Does this remark in its naive simplicity



not state the case for verligtheid more convincingly than any verligte could have stated it himself?! The simple question remains: what would have happened in South Africa were it not for verligte pressures for reform from within the NP and from moderate and realistic black leaders? Would we have seen a Wiehan-report, the normalisation of sport, black trade unions, open hotels, restaurants and universities, and a new constitution if it were not for a sustained effort by Verligtes over many years? Degenaar is looking in the right direction when he calls on verligtes to "help eradicate injustices". What blows my mind is why he himself does not join forces with the people who are trying their utmost to hasten the process of constructive change in this troubled country. Verligtheid is a strategy that works. The sort of ~~opposition~~<sup>position</sup> it meets from oorbeligte quarters is probably an indication of a stubborn, irritated and (politically and influentially) ~~frustrated~~<sup>born of frustration and irritation</sup> refusal to give credit where it is due.

Degenaar should therefore be a little more cautious when he tries to identify the real obstacles and dangers to reform in South Africa. To identify verligtheid as a threat comparable to terrorism in South Africa, as he has done elsewhere in the past, is bluntly irresponsible and causes grave concern about his own commitment to a peaceful and evolutionary process of reform, a commitment which I sincerely hope he still adheres to. I appreciate that his heart is where the hurt is. More than emotional responses are, however, necessary if we really are interested in the complete democratisation of this country. We should also listen to the claims of reason and sensibility, besides those of the heart. The seriousness and potential explosiveness of our problems demand no less.

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