

SOUTH AFRICA AFTER SOWETO

by

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As one contemplates the weeks, stretching into months, of demonstrations, rioting, looting, arson and carnage, that have spread to every major centre in South Africa in the aftermath of the Afrikaans-in-schools issue that erupted in Soweto in June 1976, one is filled with great sadness, and a sense of deja vu. The proximate cause of the whole affair was the issue as to whether certain subjects in the Black high schools of the Soweto complex should be taught in Afrikaans. The teachers, the parents, the School Boards and the pupils themselves were adamantly against it. In spite of repeated warnings in the plainest terms of the pent-up emotions and frustrations that were building up, the authorities persisted in an attitude that can only be described as mulish myopia. Eventually they had to make the concession under duress, the very situation they were intent on avoiding at all costs. Their attitude was all the more remarkable in view of the prominence in the Volkmemory given to the enforced use of English in all Transvaal schools during the Milner dispensation.

One must concede to the Establishment the point that there was a great deal more to the situation than the school language issue. A timeous and graceful retreat on this front would undoubtedly have defused the immediate *causus belli*, but one concession in isolation no more heralds the arrival of the millenium than one swallow announces summer. The underlying causes of deeper discontent, of which the language question was the most obvious symptom, were and are still there. Nobody supposes for a moment, by way of analogy, that if the British had been prepared to be reasonable about tea in

Boston, they could have averted the American Revolution, unless the major underlying grievance, no taxation without representation, had been removed step by step in an orderly and evolutionary fashion. Similarly, The Ancien Regime could hardly have side-stepped the French Revolution merely by rectifying the salt tax inequities.

It can also be conceded that there are undoubtedly provocateurs only too anxious to fish in whatever troubled waters are available. In all probability some of these agitators have Communist or at least Marxist connections. To conclude from this, however, that granting any concessions is playing right into the hands of the Communists, and that the policies of the present regime are our strongest bulwark against the Bolsheviks is to be guilty of a gigantic nonsequitur. Imagine for a moment, if only imagination can stretch that far, a series of cataclysms in Russia and China that leads within six months to the establishment of governments of impeccable Western democracy in those two countries and to the complete destruction of every trace of an international Communist apparatus. Would such a state of affairs contribute one iota to the ultimate resolution of South Africa's underlying problem? The answer quite clearly is No. The only difference it might make is one of timescale. So much for the simplistic "Red under every bed" explanation of our woes.

When one has exhausted all the rhetoric about preserving Western and Christian values, about standing firm against the onslaughts of godless atheistic communism, or about controlling our own destiny and each group developing along its own lines, the underlying problem of South Africa is stark in its simplicity. If anyone believes that any minority caste system, whether it be based on race, religion, culture or language, that abrogates all

authority to itself, is going to rule forever, he is flying in the face of all human experience. Such situations can persist for an extended period, in some cases up to two or three centuries. Inevitably, however, the exclusivity of the ruling caste provokes a reaction from those outside the pale. If concessions are withheld indefinitely, the majority sooner or later rises up in wrath and casts off the yoke. History is replete with examples. Where are the Mamelukes of Egypt, or the Crusaders of the Holy Land? What was the ultimate fate of the British Raj in India, the Japanese in Korea, or the Arabs in Spain? The lesson is writ plain for all to read. The only lastingly successful conquests or colonies have been those where the victors have enjoyed an overwhelming numeric superiority, have had no scruples about exterminating the vanquished, or have finally merged with the conquered people in a new synthesis. A classic example of the last alternative is the Norman Conquest of England; William's warrior barons finally blended with the local populace to form a new people.

None of the above-mentioned circumstances prevail in South Africa. Lack of numeric parity is a fact; the Whites possess neither the will nor the lack of scruple to exterminate the Blacks, nor would the world stand idly aside were such a "final solution" even conceivable. Finally, the ruling South African elite up to now has shown no incipient preparedness whatever to come to terms with the overwhelming Black majority. Unless the combination of external pressures, internal unrest and some vestigial traces of realism on the part of our rulers can force White South Africa into a belated change of heart, the road ahead is indeed a bleak one. The classical phases of ever escalating violence begetting ever more repressive countermeasures, that

precede rebellion and revolution will succeed each other like the unfolding of a Greek tragedy. The actors move on to their foreordained doom with the certainty of two trains approaching each other on the same track. The principals are apparently oblivious of their fate, a fate which to the impartial observer with the Man-from-Mars viewpoint is as certain as day succeeding night.

Truly it has been said that those who do not study history are fated to repeat it. Czar Nicholas learnt nothing from the 1905 Winter Palace episode, when the Cossacks ruthlessly cut down the passive crowd. Twelve years later the Little Father was toppled from his throne in the October Revolution. The 1916 Easter Rebellion was the harbinger of the Irish Free State. Nicholas learnt nothing from the first warning signs, and the British Government not much more from centuries of Irish unrest. Worse yet, we in South Africa refuse to apply any lessons from history, because our position is "unique". We progress at the pace of a stately minuet from Witmansbaasskap through Apartheid to Separate Development, and now on to "plural democracy". Who are we fooling? Not even ourselves. No wonder the ostrich is our best known bird.

Informed commentators such as Archbishop Hurley are on record as saying that unless a fundamental change of direction is evident by 1980 at the latest we shall without doubt go the way of the pieds noirs in Algeria. What the future will be like without such a change of heart is graphically evoked by Pieter-Dirk Uys' spine-chilling play "God's Forsaken". The three Brand sisters are alone in their father's heavily guarded mansion, an outpost of White hegemony in an ocean of guerilla disputed territory. The action is periodically punctuated with the news:

"The unrest and rioting is being contained". "The police have the situation under control". All too distressingly familiar, is it not?

The question each one of us must answer individually is "Faced with such a situation what must I do?" The less stout-hearted with highly portable careers have already made their decisions. They leave for more salubrious political climes. A great majority to whom thinking is an unwonted and painful exercise simply carry on as if nothing serious has happened or is likely to happen. "Leave it all to Jolly John" is a very comforting doctrine. The trouble is, his particular brand of kragdadigheid no longer seems to produce the accustomed effects, even when applied in steadily increasing doses. The country has been "mainlining" on it for too long.

So what is left? ~~Is~~ there a Third Way between the Diaspora and the Laager? I believe there is, but it will take a stout heart, a cool head and nerves of steel. The role left for the man of goodwill who is committed neither to Black Nationalism nor to White intransigence is akin to the Salvation Army man in the midst of a street brawl. His political power is non-existent: that is the exclusive preserve of the major contestants. He is the peacemaker who tries to pick up the pieces and tie up the wounds during the intervals when the belligerents pause from exhaustion. He is unlikely to receive any thanks from either side. If Black, he will be an Uncle Tom and if White a woolly-headed Liberal, a dangerous Radical or worse. Such Just Men will not say very much: indeed the time for talking is almost over. As Archbishop Burnett has observed, everything has been said already. Unfortunately, nobody much who matters is listening. The Just Man will probably quietly stay at his post, setting an

example of courtesy and understanding to all, and endeavouring to maintain what slender bridges of understanding remain intact. The combatants are unlikely to respect his neutrality and he is in just as exposed a position as they are.

Such a man is often a man of faith: when all else fails it is faith alone that sustains. The distilled wisdom of man's quest for meaning in this life certainly supports such an attitude. In a time of crisis it is paradoxically the soundest form available of hardnosed realism. "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall obtain peace" contrasts very sharply with "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword". "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" said the cynical Chairman Mao. "How many divisions does the Pope have?" asked Stalin. Yet Pope Leo I, alone and single-handed, saved Rome, once the mightiest power on earth, from complete destruction at the hands of the Vandals. Nearer to our own time and place, the Quaker Gush, alone and unarmed, walked up the hill and faced down the marauding Xhosa band intent on the destruction of the Salem settlement.

The men of peace, the prophets and the priests, do not always seem to succeed, at least not in the short term. Henry II lacked no willing hands when he asked "Who will free me from this turbulent priest?" Yet it is Becket whom we honour, not Henry. The turbulent priests of to-day, the Beyers Naudes and the Manas Buthelezi's, may well be the hope on which we build tomorrow, even if it is only their memories that we may be able to revere. The very builders of tomorrow, if we are to have a tomorrow of any consequence, are amongst us today, quietly working at their posts and planning for that tomorrow that must surely dawn. In the aftermath of Soweto South Africa will surely never be

the same again. Can the Black schools and universities rise Phoenix-like from the ashes and charred ruins? Is not the very act of planning a quixotic gesture when no man can say with certainty what will be happening in 1980 let alone in 2000 A.D.? Ironically, one can say with more confidence what will have happened by the latter date than by 1980. By the turn of the century there is no question but that South Africa as we know it, with its extraordinary social and political arrangements, will have passed into the history books. One states this not so much as a political plan of action, or a pious hope, or alternatively a throat-gripping fear. One simply states it as a fact, with as much confidence as one could ever make about any extrapolation into the future, such as that the sun will rise tomorrow. There is as little point in railing against it as in decrying the Saharan sand or the ice in Greenland. The path through the political sound-barrier to that supersonic future is unpredictable and turbulent. The end result is not. There is little point in making the journey thither any more cruel and exacerbating than is absolutely necessary. Queen Elizabeth II put it very graciously in her Bicentenary Independence Day speech, when she thanked the United States for the lesson taught Britain by the American Revolution. The Britain of George III, she said, lacked the statesmanship "to know the right time and the manner of yielding what is impossible to keep".

Twenty-four years is not a long time in the life of a nation or even of an institution. Let at least some of us not lose our heads, and plan quietly together in harmony for the future that we shall have to learn to share together, whether we like it or not. That is the real Lesson of Soweto for South Africans, Black and White alike. Would to God that we find the courage to learn it.