

PERCEPTIONS OF WESTERN ATTITUDES TO SOUTH AFRICA
THREE VIEWS

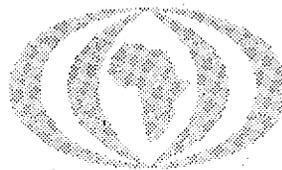
THE S.A. INSTITUTE

NOT

Sir John Leahy
Mr Harald Pakendorf
Mr Gibson Thula

OCCASIONAL PAPER

GELEENTHEIDSPUBLIKASIE



DIE SUID-AFRIKAANSE INSTITUUT VAN INTERNASIONALE AANGELEENTHEDE
THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The three articles in this paper are the texts of addresses to three separate meetings of a study group on the politics of perceptions, held at Jan Smuts House on 26 November 1981, 26 January 1981 and 24 March 1982. They present the views of a Western diplomat, an Afrikaans journalist and a black South African, respectively.

Sir John Leahy was British Ambassador to South Africa from 27 July 1979 to 12 March 1982.

Mr Harald Pakendorf is Editor of Die Vaderland.

Mr Gibson Thula is Principal Urban Representative of the KwaZulu Government.

It should be noted that any opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the authors and not of the Institute.

PERCEPTIONS OF WESTERN ATTITUDES TO SOUTH AFRICA

Three Views

Sir John Leahy

Mr Harald Pakendorf

Mr Gibson Thula

ISBN : 0-908371-15-2

The South African Institute of International Affairs
Jan Smuts House
P O Box 31596
BRAAMFONTEIN
2017
South Africa

July 1983

WESTERN UNDERSTANDING/MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL SITUATION

Sir John Leahy

South Africa arouses more interest and more argument throughout the world than almost any other country. It also attracts more criticism. Everyone tends to have a view about South Africa, whether they have been there or not, whether they know much about it or not.

I know that South Africans find it difficult to accept that their country should be singled out for criticism, for example over human rights. Why is it, they ask, that other countries are not equally criticised? Why is it that double standards are applied?

Let me try to answer this point. South Africa is, in the first place, more vulnerable to criticism because it has a more open society than many other countries. Closed societies, such as we see in the communist world and in some other parts of the world, are more difficult for people to criticise and attack. This may not be fair, but it is a fact of life. In South Africa there is a lively press and an independent judiciary. More than that : an intense political debate has been going on inside the country for some time and to some extent the criticism by people outside is a reflection of criticism by people inside South Africa. We in Britain have experienced the same sort of thing ourselves, whether it be over race relations or over Northern Ireland.

There is also another reason. Racial discrimination is not, of course, peculiar to South Africa. It is practised in one degree or another in many countries. You will, I hope, not mind my saying, however, that here you appear to have both the practice and the theory. At least that is how it seems to many outside observers. Whereas in a country like Britain we legislate against racial discrimination, here in South Africa it appears to be consolidated in the statute book and to be sanctioned by legislation.

I believe this question of legislation has an important influence on the way South Africa is judged in Western countries.

"That is very unfair", you may say. "Why do you not consider the practice as well as the theory? Look at what we have actually done over the past few years, look at all the changes that have taken place. Why do you not acknowledge those and give us credit for them?".

Now there is no denying that there have been real changes in South Africa and I who live here and am able to study the situation at close hand realise it. But it is a fact that these changes are not so perceptible from a distance. It is perhaps rather like a log-jam. From a distance the logs appear to be solid in the water and to be immobile. But when you get close to, you see that they are in fact moving. To put it another way, the visible effects of the changes that have occurred have been cumulative, because they have often been brought about by what I would term the "non-application" of the law, by making exceptions to the law. Moreover from time to time you yourselves have played down the full implications of the changes when speaking of them in public.

If, on the other hand, it were thought possible to introduce legislative changes, particularly the modification or repeal of some of those laws which have become universally well known, it would, I believe, make a much greater impact overseas. South Africa's friends, wherever they may be, would have some ready ammunition to hand with which to counter the arguments of South Africa's detractors. In saying this I am not suggesting that all the relevant legislation should be repealed at a stroke. We have to be realistic. But some laws would perhaps be easier to do away with than others - you know what they are - and if one or two of those could be taken off the statute books it would, I believe, help to create greater goodwill for South Africa.

Another formidable difficulty in trying to understand South Africa lies in the fact that it is neither a First World country nor a Third World country, but a bit of both. Western countries tend to judge it as if it were a First World country. This is partly explained by the fact that South Africa is governed by Whites. Partly also because these same Whites clearly believe in the values of Western Christian civilisation and are intent on maintaining them in the country. But to treat South Africa as if it were wholly a First World country is to misunderstand it. South Africa is part of Africa and we should never lose sight of that.

Sometimes South Africans themselves add to the confusion. I am thinking of the occasion when in answer to criticisms people here say, "But we are an African country and look how much better we run our country than other African countries do". And yet in saying that you are implying that other African countries no longer maintain the same European or Western standards that are important to you.

South Africa is indeed sui generis. There is no other country quite like it. Its problems are different from those of any other country. It is not a typical product of colonisation. Nor do the traditional methods of decolonisation provide the solution to its problems. This is not properly understood outside South Africa. But I believe people of all races inside South Africa do understand it and that there is a general acceptance that the Whites are here to stay and have nowhere else to go.

Overseas we have a tendency to simplify, to over-simplify, the South African situation. For example, many people in the Western world see South Africa as the cockpit of black versus white confrontation. "Not so", says the South African Government; "It is not like that, that is an over-simplification. We are all minorities in South Africa. There is not one black nation but many and it is on that basis that we must build our political future". "Not so", reply many people overseas, "That too is an over-simplification: it is in your interests, as you see it, to emphasise and exploit the tribalism inherent in South African society and to play down any attempt by the Blacks to come together".

Now I do not wish to make value judgements myself about this and to say which view seems to me to be right. That is not the purpose of my talk today. But there is no point in hiding the fact that this is at the core of the misunderstanding that often occurs between people in Western countries and in the white population of South Africa. Many people in Western countries believe that at some stage there has got to be a negotiation round the table here between the white government and national black leaders representing the whole black population of South Africa. I repeat that I do not say they are necessarily right, but that is certainly what they believe.

Another factor that affects Western understanding of the South African political situation is the tendency we all have to ignore or belittle the political problems of other people whilst losing no opportunity of reminding everyone else of our own. I have noted this phenomenon time and time again all over the world. We all spend quite a lot of time telling one another why it is that we are inhibited by our public opinions from doing this and are obliged to do that. Now there is nothing wrong with that in itself. On the contrary it is the very essence of the democratic system that governments have to pay attention to pressures on them.

What is wrong is that while claiming for ourselves this need to pay attention to pressures we are apt to deny it to others. And it works both ways. People overseas do not easily or automatically understand why it is that in South Africa a government having such an overwhelming majority in the House of Assembly is not able to do what it likes. You and I may know why this should be so, but the point is that it is not self-evident overseas. The reasons have to be carefully analysed and explained.

On the other side of the coin, I sometimes wonder whether South Africans give sufficient weight to all the pressures, both international and domestic, that a Western Government is apt to be faced with over South Africa. They tend to think that we should, like they should, ignore such pressures or at best not give them much weight. Let me say no more than that you have little if anything to lose by adopting such an uncompromising attitude, the West has a great deal to lose. Moreover, if we did adopt such an attitude you would also be the losers.

"But don't you understand", I can hear some people say, "South Africa is a prime target for communist attack and if that should be allowed to succeed Britain would be the loser?". "Why do you constantly ignore the communist threat to South Africa?". "Don't you understand South Africa's strategic value to the West and what it would mean for you if it were lost to the Russians?".

Well, I cannot speak for everyone, of course. But speaking for the British I can say straight away that we do not by any means underestimate the threat. We believe that the Russians will take every opportunity that comes their way to turn things to their advantage in Southern Africa : we have no doubt about that. South Africa itself would be a rich prize indeed if it could be brought into the communist ambit - and a correspondingly heavy loss to the Western world.

I believe, therefore, that it is as well to be alert to the risk of communist subversion here, or elsewhere. At the same time we should not, I submit, fall into the trap of over-simplifying things ourselves to the point where all the problems of this part of the world are ascribed to malevolent Russian or Cuban or East German interference. Even without them there could still be problems which need to be solved : what they do is to take advantage of them and at the same time exacerbate them. What we have to do is to cut away the ground from under their feet.

- - - - -

WHAT WE PERCEIVE AS THE WORLD'S DEMANDS OF SOUTH AFRICA, WHY WE HAVE THAT PERCEPTION AND WHAT WILL SATISFY THOSE PERCEIVED DEMANDS

Mr Harald Pakendorf

The short answer to what the world demands from us is the easy one : the world expects from us only one thing and that can best be expressed in the words of Paul Kruger when he sat opposite Alfred Milner : "You're not interested in the vote, it is my country you want. The only way to satisfy that demand, is to hand over the country - or go to war".

But then the answer is not only short but simplistic. Its implication is clearly that the "we" I am referring to are those who hold the power, the Whites, and those to whom the country should be handed over are those without power, the Blacks, that those who hold power are the original inhabitants, who have an inalienable right to power and the country - which the "they" do not have because "they" are strangers, outsiders, uitlanders.

What I am saying then is that the concept "we" will have to be defined first as well as what is meant by the "world". Obviously I can only speak for those I know and equally clearly I cannot discuss the whole undefined world.

The term "we" thus represents mostly white Afrikaans-speaking inhabitants. I am not sure I can include the other Whites in my definition of "we" because I have a suspicion that in some respects their perception of what the world would demand from us, and in particular what our response to those demands should be, would be different from those of the others considered as "we".

To illustrate the point : there are some 350 million English-speaking people in the world. In fact, this is the Anglo-Saxon century. This must have an impact, even if only psychologically, on those in the country who speak English at home. Surely Afrikaners would have reacted differently if there were 350 million of their brethren around the world.

Thus, in my terms "we" is narrowly defined, even if it is only because I am not presumptuous enough to speak on behalf of everybody else.

My world, that world which makes demands, I would also define narrowly. It is not that mythical thing called world opinion, but concerns only those who are directly involved with us - the West mostly, and marginally the neighbouring states.

Why I do not wish to, or rather cannot, speak on behalf of Blacks in this country is obvious : they may think, for example, that they can expect very little from the West because the big corporations are making nice profits in South Africa. I, on the other hand, may be of the opinion that those big companies would be as likely to work with a black government, as Gulf Oil is proving in Angola. They may obviously prefer a particular type of black government - preferring Kenya to Mozambique, for instance.

Speaking then as an Afrikaner about the perceptions we have - and even that is a generalisation as I do not necessarily share the perceptions that I will be expressing with all Afrikaners - as to what our narrowly defined world expects of us and how do we respond to it, we may look at those perceptions on two levels :

There are the short and the long term views; the immediate, tangible and easy steps as against the final solution (if I may use that phrase). The short term is the backdrop against which the long term must be seen.

We look with cynicism at many expressions of concern about human rights violations in this country. That they exist, or to what extent, is not at issue here. In our view the West is guilty of inverse racism because of its continual stridency on this issue (and Jimmy Carter, particularly, was guilty on this score).

Because what the West is saying, or that is how we see it, is that we should know better. After all, we have a Western inheritance, somewhat diluted perhaps by our frontier and mining days, but still, it is there. Habeas corpus, freedom of speech, of movement, of the right to a fair trial - why, those are part of our mother's milk.

That we ignore this inheritance is yet another example of how we are driven to injustice by our fears, our irrational fears about life under a black government.

Yet the same West is very little concerned about the self-same and frequently far worse violations of human rights in Third World countries. Why, Uganda has become a respected member of the Security Council after all that has been happening there for the past years!

We think then of the West as being hypocritical; and the effect on us is to make us suspicious. The message seems to be : "you are white, Western, and should know better; that you do not make your sin so much worse. But as to the Third World countries - well, it's early days for them, give them a chance".

To us that is racism, the very sin of which we are being accused - little wonder that we do not respond other than by sulking or through angered dispatches.

Suspicious, then, about Western motives is what we are. The double standard Eric Louw was so fond of referring to, we feel as a daily reality, and it angers us to such an extent that we tend to overlook that we are not always right in what we are doing.

But the double talk regarding South Africa goes further.

Take a very recent example. At Lancaster House, Ian Smith's Rhodesians were sweet-talked into accepting elections with the promise of a guaranteed constitution. Right now much the same process is being applied to the people of South West Africa/Namibia. As phase one of the negotiations is being completed, Mr Mugabe is talking about a one-party state, one in which the party, to quote him, is of more importance than the state.

And sweet-talker Carrington? He shrugs his shoulders. Who is to convince us then that once Mr Nujoma is safely installed in Windhoek he won't pull a Mugabe on the Namibians, as a shrugging Chester Crocker looks on, possibly expecting a Peace Prize in the same manner that Henry Kissinger received one for arranging the American flight from Vietnam?

We are looking ahead and saying : "They are selling everybody down the river with sweet words on human rights, then turning their backs. And we respond, like the Germans after the Second World War when there was talk of re-armament; 'Ohne mich. Without me'".

National conventions, constitutional guarantees, international investments to boost the country - that kind of sop is out, we tell ourselves. Never will we be caught for suckers like the Rhodesians were, and the Namibians are about to be.

We look at the divestment issue and say; "Those making nice fat profits are not talking that way. It is only those who have nothing to lose who move in that direction".

It is essentially the same as the German Government's reaction to sanctions against Poland, and why Wischniewski's response was different to that of the Americans. "Whether you trade with the East amounts to the difference between thirty or eight percent". And we respond; "That's what we always say". It's self-interest and not concern with human rights which drives the West.

We look at the issue of trade unions and are fascinated by the Western interest in what is happening here. Then we consider Mr Mugabe's handling of his train drivers and say : "So that is how you do it".

That is the background to our general response to what we perceive to be Western expectations of us. More is expected of us than of other countries outside the Third World and therefore our response is tinged with a Paul Kruger syndrome which says that the West's interests lie elsewhere, namely in getting rid of us as peacefully as possible, or at any rate in such a manner that its interests are not hurt.

To summarise Western short term expectations of us : we feel that they are primarily dictated by a personal involvement because we, too, are part of the Western heritage and the West is transferring its colonial guilt feelings onto us and expecting us to do better than they did when they fled from their responsibilities in the Third World.

It is natural then to say that we are responding negatively because we view Western concern as essentially a private ache for which we are expected to atone.

The short term casts its long shadow over the longer term. If we perceive Western intentions as being other than those put forward in the short term, you can imagine how suspicious we are of their longer term intentions.

Here, however, there has been a subtle shift. Where we previously had that single-level Paul Kruger-response, we are now beginning to perceive that there is more in our future than a simple either/or approach. We ourselves, of course, have changed our politics away from one of total segregation, of attempting to keep every stranger if he is of any colour other than white, as far away from us as possible.

The former view was a matter of principle, a starting point for our whole political world-view. It was easy to jump from that to the conclusion that any change must mean the total collapse of the "system", and without the "system" we could not survive.

We have learned through force of circumstance that that is not a tenable view. Consequently, our perception of what is expected from us has also changed to the extent that it is also not expressed in the same simplistic either/or terms as before.

There is little doubt in our minds that what is expected from us is change. But, as we have already come to the same conclusion, that presents no problem. It is, however, over the direction in which we should change that differences arise.

We see Western thinking as representative of a view which is close to that of the official South African Opposition - taking that view at its most conservative. Clearly, that means working towards a dispensation in which, sooner rather than later, there will be a black government over the whole of this country even though it need not necessarily be a one-man-one-vote system which prevails.

We know, though, that it is not a very widely held view. There are two other possibilities. In radical circles, we are seen as being beyond redemption in the sense that we do not have the insight to say goodbye to our own future by simply handing over the country to the majority - and all good democrats know that the majority rules everywhere!

Other, more moderate circles, feel that Whites should in some manner gradually disengage from running the country, and accept the inevitable conclusion that the majority will rule. All which is expected from us, is to handle this handing down of power in such a responsible and gradual manner that Western interests are not hurt more than is necessary.

We feel that increasingly the West looks on us not as a stabilising factor in Southern Africa but rather the exact opposite; that the West does not want to, and possibly cannot, get by without our minerals but thinks it can do a deal with a black government, while our presence here merely invites the Russians to intervene.

It is exactly here where our view differs radically from what we perceive to be the Western one.

There is no doubt that we are changing - too slowly and not in the right direction, you may say, without my necessarily agreeing, but one cannot deny that we are changing.

Why are we changing? Partly, certainly, because of the pressure from outside but the main impulse comes from inside the country and it is twofold in origin.

First, there are the practical reasons. Urbanisation and growing sophistication of the mass of the people, hard economic needs as far as trained, skilled manpower is concerned, the inadequate tax base, the security threat on the borders as well as inside the country. These are all contributing factors and very important ones.

Secondly, though, there is an historical dimension which is too frequently overlooked. The Afrikaner (my "we"), sees himself as having spent three centuries in fighting to establish himself, against the Dutch East India Company, the harsh interior and mostly the English. His relations with the black man have only been pushed to the foreground as the English threat receded.

With a sense of justice coupled with the knowledge that it is simply not realistic to try and govern a country on behalf of some twenty million odd majority, the Afrikaner is grappling with a new insight : to share power in such a manner that he will not be threatened.

I am putting it at its broadest because we are only at the beginning of the process. But the underlying elements of how we will react to what we perceive to be the demands of the West are too frequently misunderstood. I will put the outside limits of the approach at its crudest to make my point. The Afrikaner is not about to allow anybody to govern him in his own country, and yet realises that acting on that assumption, he must agree that he cannot take upon himself the right to govern other people.

It is not a question of a temporarily domiciled, basically colonial people, who can conveniently be shifted to another country, or a minority which is prepared to be taken up into some broader-based South African - or Azanian - people as in Zimbabwe and Namibia.

The question is far more involved and trite remarks such as those one hears sometimes, "Why fear? The Jews survived for two thousand centuries without political power", are just too simplistic to be taken seriously.

Whichever way the West or anybody else looks at us, we feel ourselves as rulers of our own country, but know that we have to share, not only its riches but also the political power over it. Anybody who thinks that we are prepared to be taken up into a majority-ruled, grey (to use a neutral colour) South African nation is simply missing the point.

It is then that the Afrikaner squares up and a latter day Paul Kruger view takes over. In order to avoid that, it may just as well be to the good of all concerned to take the power realities in South Africa into account. The way to a reasoned response to the perceived view of the West's demands on us, is for the West to be more even-handed in its approach in the short term, and in the long term not to leave the impression that we stand in the way of a settlement of the country's problems; a dispensable minority who should at best be sweet-talked into accepting a paper-constitution and at worst be shunted off.

OVERSEAS ATTITUDES TO SOUTH AFRICA: A BLACK VIEW

Gibson Thula

There was a time when black people set great store by support from Western countries. For many years after the founding of the African National Congress (ANC), for example, there were attempts to ask Britain to intervene diplomatically on behalf of Blacks in South Africa. By the 'forties and particularly the 'fifties, however, it was realised that these were vain hopes. Today most black people realise that the Western countries, no matter how antagonistic to apartheid particular governments may be, are not going to actively and aggressively champion the cause of Blacks in South Africa.

Black people who take note of the international scene realise that :

Trade with South Africa is too important for most Western countries to make it possible for them to do anything which could weaken the export market to South Africa or reduce the flow of raw materials and agricultural goods.

Most Western countries do not place a very high priority on race reforms within their own boundaries. Almost all Western countries with black minorities have maintained housing and welfare policies for Blacks which have done little to rehabilitate these black minorities. Their policies, more often than not, have amounted to passive neglect, under the guise of not wishing to do anything that would "discriminate" between Blacks and Whites.

A few years ago, in 1977 I believe, a study in Germany, Holland and Britain, conducted by Professor Theodor Hanf at the Bergstraesser Institute in Germany, showed that the attitudes of European Whites towards Blacks in their countries were much the same as the attitudes of English-speaking Whites towards Blacks in South Africa.

That about sums it up. Blacks are somewhat cynical about the seriousness of Western Whites when they say they oppose apartheid.

Black people also realise that it is only really the pressure on Western nations, and probably on Eastern Bloc nations, as well, that makes them take a firm verbal stand against apartheid. There would probably be much less opposition to apartheid in the Northern countries if there was not an active and insistent Afro-Asian Bloc in the United Nations.

Furthermore, apart from some unrealistic fringe groups among Blacks, black people in South Africa realise that there is in fact very little that Western nations can do to have a quick and sweeping effect on the system in South Africa. Black people here are aware of the strength and resilience of the white-dominated system. We realise that it would take more than sanctions or boycotts from the West to change it. We realise that only very active intervention by outside countries could have a radical effect and that none of them would be prepared to, or could afford to go to, such lengths.

For these reasons, Blacks who are reasonably well-informed do not any longer respond to overseas figures who are opposed to apartheid with anything like the enthusiasm that was the case years ago. In the 'sixties, when Bobby Kennedy visited South Africa, there was a great deal of hero-worship among Blacks; his tour of Soweto was very well-supported by enthusiastic black crowds. The same would not happen today.

I would sum it up by saying that all or most black groupings in South Africa today realise that black people themselves have to secure their own emancipation and liberation.

This does not mean to say that the organisation I represent, Inkatha, is unconcerned about the attitudes in the West. There is one thing in particular which concerns Inkatha a great deal. This is, in fact, a problem which the West's own inactivity in fighting apartheid brings about.

As I see it, the intentions of most Western countries are to avoid any costly action or intervention in regard to South Africa. This diminishes their credibility among the Afro-Asian bloc. They try to counter this by verbal attacks on apartheid, which mean very little. Some countries also try to "correct" their image by making grants or appearing to be sympathetic to radical black groups operating in Southern Africa, like SWAPO or the external mission of the ANC. It is fairly typical for them to overlook the importance of Inkatha for example, while over-emphasising the role of the ANC external mission. This amounts to a kind of interference in South African black politics which is quite serious in its consequences.

This is particularly true of some church groups and other voluntary organisations opposed to apartheid. The very sense of helplessness which their governments' ineffectiveness causes, makes them "over-react" as it were by being as fashionably radical as they can with regard to South Africa. Fashionable radicalism usually means under-rating the internal black leadership in South Africa and heaping accolades on the militaristic movements, quite irrespective of how successful these movements are likely to be in the short to medium term.

Inkatha's message to the Western countries, therefore, is simply the following. Inkatha realises that sanctions and boycotts are impractical. It also realises that it is important to explore a peaceful strategy to the full before considering violence. If the Western countries feel unable to make any dramatic intervention in South Africa, the least they can do is to admit this and attempt to be as helpful as possible to movements devoted to exploring peaceful change for as long as possible, like Inkatha.

They should be positive in this way, rather than by attempting to compensate for their own inability to act by giving inauthentic moral support to more radical options. We think particularly of those Western Governments (and I do not wish to mention them by name) which benefit greatly from trade with South Africa, but which tend to give the externally-based or radical black movements more moral support than they give to Inkatha or to other black movements which are more pragmatic in their approach to liberation. In other words, Inkatha asks the West to be consistent.

Statutory race discrimination will continue to make South Africa the only polecat state in the world. Voteless South Africans desire and demand something that can induce them to be completely loyal to their fatherland. They cannot willingly die in defence of the status quo.

Minimal or even meaningful power sharing with the so-called Coloureds and Asiatics is really not addressing the search for a genuine solution, which entails meaningful involvement of black people, as well. The Buthelezi Commission Report is one black initiative which the Western powers, especially those dealing directly with the Namibian problem, cannot ignore when discussing change of the status quo inside South Africa.