

**SOUTH AFRICAN — AUSTRALIAN RELATIONS  
AND THE POLITICS OF PERCEPTION:**

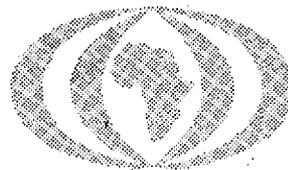
**Kissing Cousins or a Quarrel in the Family?**

Peter C J Vale

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**OCCASIONAL PAPER**

**GELEENTHEIDSPUBLIKASIE**



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

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Dr Peter Vale is Director of Research at the South African Institute of International Affairs. He visited Australia, on a study tour, in April/May 1982.

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

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Peter Vale

ISBN 0-908371-13-6

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

July 1983

## SOUTH AFRICAN - AUSTRALIAN RELATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF PERCEPTION: KISSING COUSINS OR A QUARREL IN THE FAMILY?

Like life, political moods and attitudes are determined by images and, as in life, images themselves are the products of association, both formal and informal. Secondly, the images which political actors hold of the world around them - and of course, their reactions to events - are conditioned by experience, both contemporary and historical. Thirdly, there is little gainsaying that banal observation - so often made by theoretical writers - that political images are subject to changes and that, more often than not, threat and opportunity set the margins for these.

In viewing the world of perceptions - or, if one prefers, images - it needs to be borne in mind, certainly in the arena of public affairs, that bureaucracies play an important role. At the level of policy formulation, both in government and outside of government (ie. the private sector), competing sets of images determine policy. Policymakers are themselves subject to multiplicity of pressures, each of which arises from an audience which may have a differing image of the issues involved. Whilst, however policymakers are subjected to these pressures, they may not be accountable to all, with the result that in practice they are highly selective.

A further point needs to be noted: existing policy can itself become part of the images which condition the world in which political actors find themselves. In this fashion, they become the conventional wisdom which serves to perpetuate itself if it is not constantly challenged, and if no change develops as a result of the challenge.

### Images of South Africa in the Australian mind

This rather tortuous discourse into the general notion of perceptions in international relations is crucial in trying to understand the substance of this essay. Like the relations between any two states, in the bilateral or multilateral setting, the ties between Pretoria and Canberra are conditioned by one, or a number, of the features which have been alluded to.

As one might expect, there are many perceptions of South Africa in Australia: each is the product of the world view of the beholder. This is not to say, as some would have us believe, that the topic of South Africa dominates the thinking of Australians or, for that matter, the Soviets or anyone else! It is to say, however, that when South Africa enters the thinking of Australians, certain images emerge and the generalisations which follow focus on these images.

Primarily, we may identify three main perceptions of South Africa, which, for the sake of clarity, we shall call: a) The Kith and Kin School; b) The Functional and Help SA Reform School; and c) The Be Damned, Leave us Alone School. It needs to be stressed that each of these positions has two dimensions; first, an analytical - meaning the fashion in which the issue is seen - and second a normative - meaning offering a solution to the problem.

#### a) The Kith and Kin School

There is a long - but not very substantial - lineage of association between South African and Australia. Early ships ploughing their way to Australia from Britain made essential stops at the Cape and firmly implanted the image of a kindred association in the minds of many early Australians. It can be rationally argued that the opening of the Suez Canal terminated this first-hand association with, particularly, the Cape; but even after Suez, ships continued to pass the Cape en route for Australia.

The first intimate links were to come with the Boer War and the participation of Australian troops in that War. Two aspects thereof are important. The Boer War was the first expression of Australian nationhood in a direct foreign policy endeavour and, in a symbolic sense, it is firmly embedded in Australia's historical consciousness.

The recent development of a Boer War awareness in Australia - primarily associated with successful film "Breaker Morant", is part of continuing interest in Australia's early history, for it raises a series of questions about Australia's early world role. What is, however, essential for our purposes, is the association with South Africa.

A further feature of the Boer War association is important. The fact that Australian forces fought against the Boers conjured in their minds a general (and sometimes highly erroneous) view of Afrikaners which in certain settings still persists. It follows therefrom that an opposite view was held of English-speaking South Africans which is as erroneous and is equated, generally speaking, with liberalism and an antipathy towards the racial policy of the South African government.

The kinship, therefore, is with English-speaking South Africa and this was consolidated through contacts in two World Wars. In the First, association was not intense; the Australians being, in the main, confined to the conflict in the Aegean and Mediterranean theatres and the South Africans to African theatres and, of course, to France and Belgium. Nonetheless, the overall feeling of kinship persisted: the two sides were servants of the same Imperial cause and that alone was a sufficient bond.

The Second World War was a different matter. Here the two countries fought side-by-side in the Western Desert, Italy and in various other theatres. Association was close, even intimate, with South Africans and Australians consolidating this through marriage, for example.

There is an aspect of this wartime association which is pertinent to the general issue of perception. It does seem probable, as popular stories relate, that South Africans got on better with New Zealanders out of a feeling that Australians were too brash, too loud, too brazen! It is, of course, difficult to substantiate this impression, but what is important is that, as the political controversy over South Africa has deepened, such adverse impressions have been pushed to the background, and returned soldiers, on both sides of the divide, have been prone to forget the wartime disaffection.

A further feature of the "Kith and Kin" association has direct links which are of minimal importance but which draw their succour from a series of historical impressions. This historical association is a central theme which supports this position. It holds that the two (some would say that, with New Zealand, it is three) white societies of the southern hemisphere have a "special" linkage which arises from a common heritage: pioneering spirit, language, isolation etc. Such links give the ties between the two (or three) countries a particular colouration which makes them de facto "Sisters of the South". (1)

There is another dimension of the "Kith and Kin" position which is of more modern vintage and which may be in contradiction of some of the features identified above. This arises from South Africa's international position and her racial policy. It holds that South Africa's position is fully justified, that the white peoples of the world need to develop a solid

phalanx against the danger of being swamped by coloured people (in some circumstances, read communist). The proponents would urge closer association between Canberra and Pretoria in all areas, including military co-operation. They do not distinguish between Afrikaners and English-speakers and would have had a close affinity with the late Rhodesian cause. This may be a view held as a genuine conviction or for political expediency. In either case, however, the essential argument does not change, nor indeed does the impression this makes on those at whom it is directed.

It is extremely difficult to say exactly where one, or a number, of these sentiments are located in the Australian mind: a factor which itself is impossible to identify since "the Australian mind" (or any other, as an entity) probably does not exist. Some generalisations may, however, be possible.

First, it does seem probable that a highly sophisticated variant of the "Kith and Kin" view was held by a generation of Australian Prime Ministers in the period which was dominated by Robert Menzies. Sir Robert visited these shores as Australian Prime Minister and is said to have held exclusivist racial attitudes. Such attitudes were, however, not as clear-out as some would have us believe, and neither was his shielding of South Africa - when Verwoerd took us out of the Commonwealth - based on a crude "white is good, black is bad" feeling. Any sensible reading of the period reveals that Menzies' primary concern was for the future of the Commonwealth ideal. Also, it is possible to extrapolate from those who knew Menzies intimately, that he believed that the Nationalist phenomenon was only a temporary aberration in South Africa's political history. This is itself extremely interesting and arises, one suspects, from a deep admiration for Smuts; a feeling held by many Australians. Thus on this level, we may speak of a Menzies generation and their view of South Africa.

Secondly, there is an area constituency which draws inspiration from, and argues on, the "Kith and Kin" line. It is fundamentally rural and derives additional credence from local racial issues, particularly from the Aboriginal question. The vision of such people is conditioned by a feeling of racial superiority and is no different from crude views held by many in South Africa. It needs, however, to be pointed out that such people are in a minority, for the simple statistical reality shows that the majority of Australians are not rural people.

Thirdly, linked to the above position, is an expediency position. The very fact that South Africa (and association with South Africa) conjures up emotions within people, enables public figures to use South Africa in their political lives. So for example, the fact that Canberra wishes to distance itself from Pretoria means that other competing actors - like Queensland Premier, Joh Bjelke Petersen - will talk sympathetically about South Africa without knowing very much about the issues. The nature of his sympathy is that race is a fundamental issue and, along a familiar line of reasoning, that the Aboriginal is better understood by those who know him and, when this fails, that communist conspirators are behind any moves to take a fresh approach to racial matters.

Perceptions are, of course, a two-way highway and naturally South Africans in general and policy-makers, in particular, respond to this "Kith and Kin" position in a favourable manner. In both its crude racial setting and in the more sophisticated milieu, these positive Australian sentiments, from South Africa's perspective, are a welcome oasis in a hostile world. So, for example, the South African Information Counsellor in Canberra in 1982 wrote a letter to all Commonwealth and State Parliamentarians stressing the importance of the "Kith and Kin" position; later that year, Mr. P.W. Botha directed a letter to the Queensland Premier.

In South Africa's world view, there is an alarming temptation to draw comfort from such views and more dangerously, to generalise and project. So, in the Australian case, Pretoria is prone to hold that all state Premiers are in conflict with Canberra's Pretoria policy or, alternatively, that Malcolm Fraser was isolated from his Party's South African views.

It is more relevant to view the "Kith and Kin" school in a clearer perspective. This is to realise that it is a waning and ageing constituency. Now, it is true that the Young Liberals in 1982 urged, through a conference solution, closer ties with South Africa but, from such a resolution, to official Liberal policy, to mobilisation of the Canberra Bureaucracy, is a long, long haul.

As important is the reality - a fact not fully appreciated in South Africa - that Australian society is not and has never been, a homogeneous White society whose members all speak English. The Aboriginal issue aside, Australian society is a complex multicultural one of immigrants who fit, it is true, into the wide parameters of a vaguely defined transplanted Anglo-Saxon culture. While this is so, great sacrifices are being made to cater for various ethnic groups and their particular demands.

Thus, taken in its most generous setting, the "Kith and Kin" position is one of extreme fragility; it will wane with the passing years but is unlikely ever to vanish completely.

#### b) The Functional and Help SA Reform School

If the "Kith and Kin" position is amorphous, then so, too, are the general positions taken by this school, for they are closely linked to the former position; indeed some of their views take direct credibility from the "Kith and Kin" position.

Basically, the view is: in a complex world people are, ipso facto, thrown together and need to find a way of living together. South Africa is no exception to this general belief. No good is done by ostracising South Africa, it simply drives those in power further into a schizophrenic isolation which underscores the various racial prejudices which they have. "The way out of the racial maze" is to offer a mix of carrots and contacts and thereby assist the process of change. This view does not change in complexity, or scale, from a well-worn theoretical position in the social sciences that functionalism conquers all.

Those who hold this view regard themselves as practical people and, as such, believe that South Africa can reform itself. They are less concerned with ideological problems - either Black/White or Capitalist/Communist - than with getting the job done. In the relationship we are reviewing, we are talking about business people and, of particular importance in this case, sportsmen.

To be sure, there are many opportunists in this category, those who are willing to sway the way the dollar turns, but the bulk of them are sincere and constructive people. There is, for those of this persuasion, an ease of access to South Africa on a range of issues: similar language, life-style (as important as other questions is that we drive on the correct side of the road), systems of accounting and, of course, sporting interests.

The desire to see South Africa reform itself derives not so much from the intrinsic forces at work in South Africa, but rather from the fact that the act of reform would make South Africa "kosher" again, and this general acceptability is the cardinal issue. As such, the position has very close affinities with the "Kith and Kin" school but is made more urgent by the need to feel comfortable.

In the Australian case, this is not a very large constituency for a number of reasons. First, such people are normally those with close business or sporting links with this country. Only a few businesses have continuing links between the two countries and, of course, since the early Seventies sporting links have been few and far between. Equally important is the argument that those who hold this view can easily switch horses if, and when, the position threatens their own livelihood. So, for example, a businessman might be persuaded that this is the best way to approach the problem until he realises that this association might bring him into conflict with, say, the Unions working in his factory. Moreover, sportsmen keen to play with South Africa are less willing to come here, notwithstanding the financial inducements, if it threatens their sporting future or the safety of their families.

Here the clearest evidence of images conditioned by threat and opportunity is at work. People, even societies, are malleable through the simple lesson of expediency and the need to survive. In any case, at the cynical level, links with South Africa do not provide the substance of Australia's foreign trade (or relations) and therefore it is a minor question.

What then accounts for the trade links between the two countries? There is an historical link, but the truth of the matter is that the two countries compete widely in international markets. If there is a marginal increase in trade it arises from the theory that often competitors can increase trade by some specialisation, but that there are real limits to how far this can go.

It is also true that the two countries have over the years associated on a range of issues, including trade co-operation. Here, areas like co-sponsorship of the International Wool Secretariat is important, as is SANZA, the deciduous fruit cartel.

On the level of South Africa's response, it is important to continue to nurture this point of view. Indeed, the South African Ambassador in Canberra has his "time cut out" speaking with people in boardroom lunches. One can also hold such interest in South Africa by sophisticated mail shots and other P.R. type exercises - and here, obviously, the South Africa Foundation's Australian Committee has played a role in helping to set up the Australia-South Africa Friendship Society.

It is, however, an arduous road from penetration of the Boardroom to policy formulation in Canberra. The Capital is somewhat removed from the country's merchants and manufacturers. Whilst Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and the Liberal Party were closer to business interest than the present Labour Party, it does not follow that business is able to exert a great deal of influence in Canberra. Even if it did, the South African issue is hardly one which any Australian Prime Minister is likely to be pressured on. The Qantas lobby, for example, has been given the cold shoulder in Canberra, as two successive administrations, Fraser and Hawke, have shown.

There is one further aspect of this position which we need to consider and this involves the issue of scientific and technical co-operation in a wide-ranging number of fields. Much of this is an historical tie which relies, as far as one can tell, on close personal links between scientists. Whilst, in a limited sense, one can foster these links they too would collapse if, and when, the issue of South African politics threatened them.

c) The Be Damned, Leave Us Alone School

For reasons which are patently clear, this position is the most pronounced because it has become increasingly identified with three successive Australian Prime Ministers of somewhat different persuasions, Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke.

It is necessary, however, to outline the circumstances which spawned this position and the milieu which enables it to prosper. It is possible to argue that, had not the Apartheid issue intervened, the strong feelings of the "Kith and Kin" school would have been the orthodoxy of our relations with Canberra. In that re-write of history, the enthusiasm of the functionalist position would be vindicated and this paper unnecessary. However, the central issue of Apartheid has clouded our ties and there are a number of strands attached to this.

First, there is the issue of Australia's own racial background, essentially, the Aboriginal issue and, secondly, the long contentious White immigration policy. There should be no doubt that many Australians feel deeply over the treatment of Aboriginal people and that, in a very real sense, Canberra's efforts to tackle the Aboriginal issue have been too effusive, too compensatory and too patronising. Despite this, for many, many people, it has not been sufficient and the burgeoning of a pro-Aboriginal lobby as a factor in Australian politics is a strong political theme of the past decade.

The 1967 Referendum on Aboriginal Rights was a de jure change in their political status and thrust the issue of the rights of people of colour into the forefront of Australian politics. It seems to have been an event which failed to attract serious attention in South Africa.

There is no doubting the fact that the Aboriginal question has made many Australians want to keep South Africa at arms length. Equally so, the issue of the White immigration policy which, certainly in law, changed in the mid to late-Sixties, has done the same. South Africa, and the racial question mark which hangs over the name of this country, are uncomfortable reminders of an Australia which once espoused similar policies.

Secondly, there is the undisputed reality of Australia's own regional position: surrounded by a multiplicity of Third World states and set at the nethermost point of the Asian archipelago. These realities mean that Australia is, by historical accident and contemporary design, an alien culture in the region. Simple economics determine that Australia's markets are located around, or near her and, quite understandably, she woos these markets.

It is a fact that the Third World, both in Africa and in Asia, has come to champion the anti-Apartheid issue and it follows that it is necessary for Australia to keep her Third World credentials impeccable in order to conduct normal relations - both economic and political - with those about her. This, too, is a factor conditioning Canberra's view of Pretoria.

Thirdly, a parallel line of reasoning is operative as one sees when considering Australia's position in the Commonwealth. Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, for reasons which were clear, saw himself (and probably, Australia) playing a wider international role and the Commonwealth provided the ideal channel for this. Many observers see the role played by Fraser in that organisation as similar, if not identical to, that played by Canada's Diefenbaker in the early 1960's. Given this analogy, it is not surprising that Fraser's view of South Africa closely resembled that of Diefenbaker. Bob Hawke, too, has frequently voiced opposition to Apartheid.

While these three reasons are important each in their own settings, a fourth consideration is paramount and this has been the one that has changed the "Kith and Kin" perception and eclipsed the sentiments of the functionalists. In the early Seventies, Australian society - like many other Western societies - was caught up in major domestic trauma. On the one hand, Australian troops were fighting in Vietnam and, on the other, the racial issue - both internationally and domestically - was coming under sharp focus. In 1970, Australian university students, and through them a broader segment of Australian society, were protesting about the Vietnam issue. A year later, Hannes Marais' Springboks visited Australia, and the nature of our relations with that country underwent a permanent change.

Manning Clarke, Australia's foremost historian, wrote his personal impressions of the Tour:

I remember at the Springbok game against the Australian Capital Territory in Canberra a moment of alarm and terror when one of my fellow countrymen, beer can in one hand, and cigarette in the other, eyes glazed, and that bitter, sardonic mouth so unmistakably Australian, shouted at long-haired students who were walking past, "Why don't yer get back to yer play-pen, yer lousy f-----g bastards?" The men and women nearby lapped up this typical piece of Australian mockery. So did the New South Wales policeman, who winked approvingly at the local wit. It seemed to me then that despite all the curses of affluence, the alleged apathy, and the social bankruptcy of our public life, that underneath all the surface gloss, and drift, and the "who cares" mentality, our society was as deeply divided as it was during the Spanish Civil War and the Strikes of 1890/93.

But whereas in those earlier crises people were divided over class issues, this time people were dividing over the race question, and the type of society in which they wanted to live. In general people who wanted not just to preserve Australia for the white man, but accepted a world in which the white men were rich and coloured men were poor, also tended to accept the present social order, while their opponents were ill at ease in a society which enriched their material world and paupered their spiritual world. (2)

Following this Tour, there were to be no more sporting links but far more importantly, perceptions of South Africa were henceforth seen only through the prism of the controversy which the Tour had created. Never again would there be a rational discussion of what the ties between the two countries might possibly be, either in Australia or in South Africa.

Inasmuch as the Tour conditioned the perceptions of two successive Australian Governments, it also conditioned the perceptions of more than a generation of Australian children and, of crucial importance, more than a generation of Australian foreign policy-makers. Those who were recruited into Foreign Affairs, particularly during the expansion of the Department of the Whitlam period, had been affected by the Tour and the vociferous opposition to it. Today, these are the people who are in important policy-making positions and their perceptions of South Africa are fixed:

The central fact is that the Tour was the turning point in South Africa's relations with Australia because, by the end of it, all future Australian perceptions of South Africa would be negative ones. There is little evidence to show that the position has been reversed and little indication that it will change in the future.

What the protagonists of this school have in their favour is that the issue of links with South Africa has come to be encrusted with a certain bureaucratic stance which will not change. This stance is given its clearest enunciation by former Prime Minister Fraser, who, some have argued, had his own (maybe idiosyncratic) perceptions of South Africa. It was difficult to understand the roots of Fraser's view on South Africa. One suspects a mix of genuine liberal sentiment and political opportunism; the proportions involved in the mix are really not worth quibbling about, for the overall position has become institutionalised. For Hawke, on the other hand, the tie with organised labour and his personal convictions are strong pointers.

It is, furthermore, worth noting that the South African issue is so insignificant when seen against the welter of other more pressing problems that it will never bring an Australian government to its knees.

The central thrust of the "Be Damned, Leave us Alone" School is that, for reasons of conviction or simple expediency, Australia is better served by keeping a vast distance between Pretoria and Canberra.

While there is an alarming openness about Australian society, a refreshing spirit of "give it a go, mate" which pervades all facets of Australian life, there is one exception, and that is a damning one, for when South Africa is viewed, reform is seen as desperation and diplomacy as sinister.

It is appropriate to conclude by citing the middle-ranking Australian Army Officer who had visited these shores, who said "There is a minority of us - we used to be a majority - who are sympathetic with your plight, but not with the way you are going about solving it..... Let's go walkabout".

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**FOOTNOTES:**

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- (1) In 1951 Conrad Lighton wrote a book under this title published by Howard Timmins. While Lighton saw the manifold geographical problems in the relations - "sea miles too many, ships too few" - the book sets the case, rather convincingly, for a special association, p.2
  - (2) Stewart Harris: Political Football - The Springbok Tour of Australia, 1971. Melbourne, Gold Star Publications, 1972, p.7.
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