

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

1934-1984

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✉ 31596
2017 Braamfontein,
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(Not for Publication)

Background Briefing No. 19

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AUSTRALIAN-SOUTH AFRICAN RELATIONS

For half a century after South Africa became a single state within the British Commonwealth and Empire, it enjoyed excellent relations with Australia. The two countries had a great deal in common in their origins, political systems, trade patterns, and general outlook on the world. They were comrades in arms in two world wars, in breaking the Berlin blockade (1948-49), and in the Korean War. This all began to change after South Africa left the Commonwealth and the rate of change accelerated under subsequent pressures and events.

The relationship today is by no means wholly unfriendly or unproductive. The two countries do trade with each other, with the balance favouring Australia by about 4:3. South Africa sells Australia a large quantity of fish, of newsprint, and a wide variety of primary and secondary goods. Australia sells South Africa a surprising number of crustaceans and molluscs, motor vehicles and engines, and alumina for the Richards Bay plant. Trade for 1983/84 is expected to be worth about \$160 m. to Australia, \$120 m. to South Africa. Because of its basic attitude to the South African government and political system, Australia allows but does not actively encourage trade. Such trade as there is results essentially from private initiatives.

Despite Australian restraints on direct travel facilities, there is a surprising movement of people across the southern Indian Ocean. Nearly 2 000 South Africans, on average, migrate each year to Australia, mainly on the basis of family reunion, and almost 10 000 South Africans visit Australia annually, half being tourists and half to visit relatives. In recent years a total of over 30 000 South Africans have settled in Australia. There is a small reverse flow, and some South Africans who plan to settle in Australia decide after a time to go back. Such is the case with all migration movements. With one or two exceptions, there is no active discrimination against South African migrants in Australia. They come in under the same rules as

everybody else. The South African government discourages emigration by imposing financial constraints, but this applies to all emigrants, not just those who go to Australia.

Australia maintains correct diplomatic relations with South Africa, on the standard norms of diplomatic practice. It also makes clear that it does not agree with some aspects of South African government policy. This applies equally to the present Labor administration and to its conservative predecessors.

But the South African government is not the only one whose policies Australia has publicly and officially condemned. In recent years, successive Australian governments have had hard things to say to the Soviet government over its contravention of human rights, the bloody invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, and the shooting down of the KAL passenger airliner; to France over its nuclear testing in the Pacific; to Indonesia over its behaviour in East Timor; to Iran over the treatment of American diplomats; to Libya over its abuse of the civilised norms of diplomatic practice; to Israel over its invasion of the Lebanon and imposition of new settlements in the disputed West Bank area; to the United States over its policies in Central America; to Uganda over its appalling massacres of its own people; to Zimbabwe over its actions in Matabeleland.

Some people may feel that this is being a bit free with international advice, that governments should mind their own business and not sit in judgment of others; but Australia is only one of many countries that indulge in such practices, and indeed the Australian electorate expects - even demands - that its government protest against substantial violation of rights and norms elsewhere.

II

The formal position of the present Australian government towards matters affecting South Africa is contained in a number of official statements. They cover the following aspects:

Sport:

In accordance with the Gleneagles agreement between Commonwealth Heads of Government, the Australian government does not allow visits to Australia of sporting teams or individual amateur sportsmen domiciled in South Africa. Unless they can give definite proof to the contrary, such people are deemed to represent South Africa. Australia discourages its own sportsmen and sportswomen from competing in South Africa or from competing against South Africans in third countries. (The government does not feel it should take action against nationals of other countries who compete in South Africa and then want to compete in Australia.) To the argument that this is bringing politics into sport, the government would presumably reply that the selection of sporting teams in the past along racial lines by political edict had already brought politics into sport. To the argument that some sports in South Africa are now de-segregated - which is true - the government could fairly reply that some still are not; but in any case the apartheid system affords far greater sporting opportunities to whites than to non-whites, and life off the sports field is still subject to apartheid.

Visits:

Earlier this year two South African parliamentarians - Mr Kent Durr, a National Party backbencher, and Mr Mahmoud Rajad, an Indian member of the President's Council - were refused entry to Australia to address seminars organised by the South African embassy in Canberra. The government's reason for excluding the visitors was that their primary purpose was to advocate apartheid. When the parliamentary opposition said that it would have allowed entry, the government offered to afford the men entry as guests of the opposition provided the leader of the opposition gave a written assurance that the visit would not be exploited for the purpose of promoting apartheid.

While there are no doubt other political doctrines whose exponents would probably be refused entry to Australia, the government action on this occasion does seem to contravene the democratic principle of freedom of speech. It would seem to be better to err on the side of the proposition that visitors who do not contravene Australian laws should be allowed their say. (For its part, South Africa has been known to refuse or at least unconscionably delay the issue of visas to people strongly opposed to the apartheid system.)

Visas to enter Australia are also refused to serving or recently retired members of the South African armed forces, "officials proposing to discuss nuclear matters", intelligence officers, and "representatives of the so-called 'independent' homelands". On the other hand, the Australian government encourages and assists visits to Australia by prominent representatives of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and Bishop Tutu has already been to Australia under this program.

Civil Aviation:

Qantas, Australia's international airline, is debarred by the Australian government from flying to South Africa. It does have one flight a week to Harare, with connections to Johannesburg. South Africa is allowed one flight a week between Sydney and Johannesburg via Mauritius. The effect of these arrangements is to allow South African Airways to make a handsome profit, filling every seat on every flight, with long waiting lists, and a virtual monopoly of the mail between the two countries.

Scholarship:

The Australian government provides a modest amount for scholarships to disadvantaged non-white South Africans to attend tertiary institutions - preferably multi-racial in character - in their own country. It is envisaged that 35-40 students at a time will eventually come under this scheme. Selection is made by appropriate South African bodies. The fact that the education is in South Africa rather than in Australia means that the same quantity of funds can be stretched to cover many more students. Those students will of course not be subjected to an Australian cultural impact, will probably feel no special gratitude to or affinity for Australia, and of course will not have the opportunity, even if they wanted it, to stay in Australia at the end of their course.

Namibia/South West Africa:

Australia has been a member of the UN Council for Namibia for many years. The Australian government believes that South Africa is occupying South West Africa/Namibia illegally, and it wants to see the territory independent, with UN-supervised elections, as soon as possible, under the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 435. Unlike the General Assembly, Australia does not recognise the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) as the "sole and authentic representative" of the Namibian people. It believes the Namibian people should decide in a free vote who should govern them. It believes that the South African enclave of Walvis Bay should be incorporated into Namibia. It has offered to supply about 300 soldiers as a military engineer component for the proposed United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG). It does not endorse armed struggle as a means of achieving independence for Namibia, but says it understands the frustrations that have led many countries and peoples to conclude that violence may occur "as a last resort". (That phrase begs the question of when the last resort begins.) Australia would welcome an independent Namibia into the United Nations and into the Commonwealth, and hopes it would sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Angola:

Australia has publicly opposed South Africa's military incursions into Angola, its continued occupation of parts of the country, and the linking of independence for Namibia with the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola.

Information Offices:

The Australian government has agreed that the African National Congress (ANC) and SWAPO may set up information offices in Australia, as they have done in some European and Third World countries. A representative of the Pan African Congress apparently set up such an office some time ago without permission. On 1 November last year the Australian Foreign Minister, Mr Bill Hayden, stated: "SWAPO, the ANC and the EAC have each at times perpetrated acts of violence which have been properly condemned by this and previous governments. While not condoning the armed struggle, the government nevertheless understands why opponents of apartheid have turned to it. The government believes that apartheid is itself the root cause of the escalation in tension, confrontation and violence in South Africa." Mr Hayden said that the information offices would not be given any special status, and would have to undertake that "they would not advocate violent means of obtaining change". This may seem naive as well as unfriendly to white South Africans, and we shall have to wait and see how it works out in practice.

These policies, and especially the policy on sport, have understandably not been welcomed in South Africa. The Nationalist government, and its supporters who believe that separate development is the only way to ensure the continued existence of Afrikaner culture and nationalism as well as the most equitable future for other races, object to the oft-repeated condemnations by Australian governments and individuals. Among the South African opponents of apartheid are those who have devoted many years to alleviating the problems of non-whites, and to bringing change through peaceful and democratic means. Some of these people, not unreasonably, have been irritated by the many admonitions, the gratuitous advice unfeelingly offered, even the abuse, of Australians who are not faced with the same problems, who have not done all that well in handling the difficulties of their own (comparatively tiny) aboriginal population, and

who may have a very incomplete understanding of the situation in South Africa. Other South Africans, whether or not in the range of these opinions, may resent the "selective indignation" expressed by Australians and others, and feel that far greater evils elsewhere are overlooked or condoned. Why pick on South Africa?

III

Why indeed has the present Australian government, like its predecessors going back to Sir Robert Menzies in 1961, expressed such strong opposition to the racial policies of South Africa? Why is it that a country, for so long famous (or infamous) for its racially exclusive immigration policy, has taken so strong an international position against this instance of racial discrimination? There are several reasons, historically cumulative, and they merge with each other.

Precisely because Australia has a history of racial discrimination, against its own aboriginal population and against immigrants, and has been subjected to international criticism especially during the early years after World War II, successive Australian governments have worked to attenuate the policies and defuse the criticism. Australia has a comparatively short history of international diplomacy. The first Australian head of a diplomatic mission was the then Mr RG Casey, appointed Minister to Washington in 1940. World War II demonstrated to Australians that the major threat to their security was and would probably thereafter be from Asia, and the government responded by building up, within the Department of External Affairs, an expertise on, and a range of diplomatic relations with, the countries of Asia that were or were in the process of becoming independent: China, Japan, India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaya/Malaysia, and the non-communist states of Korea and Indo-China. The wartime and post-war Labor government (1941-49) had a natural sympathy for independence movements. Some of these regimes found Australia's immigration policies offensive, or at very least anomalous. This added to the pressures for change.

At the same time, beginning in 1950 with the Commonwealth economic and technical aid program known as the Colombo Plan², Australian governments and institutions began to have contacts with counterparts in Asia, and to bring Asians to Australia in increasing numbers for education or specialist training, as businessmen or commercial agents, and so on. The Colombo Plan had an acceptable political rationale in that it was originally envisaged as a way of "drawing the teeth of communist imperialism", as well as being a genuine program of government-to-government national assistance. Trade also developed, especially with Japan which by 1966 had replaced Britain as Australia's largest market. With growing export income, Australians began to travel in nearby Asia in sizeable numbers. Australians became involved in voluntary as well as government aid projects in Asia, and in wars on behalf of Asians in Korea, Malaya and Vietnam. Numbers of Eurasian refugees were admitted from the Indian subcontinent. The multiplicity of contacts between Asians and Australians generated by these activities helped very significantly to break down the psychological barriers attributable to racial differences. The Asians who came to Australia were on the whole well educated. The numbers were comparatively small. Except for the recent refugees from Indo-China, they came at a time of high employment. They did not threaten the jobs of Australians, and they were only a modest supplement to the large numbers of refugees and other immigrants from Western Europe. They thus provided evidence in support of the developing social movement within Australia that felt embarrassed by the traditional "White Australia", and was determined to see it removed. This in turn coincided with a campaign to improve the treatment of aborigines, comprising about 1 percent of the population, who

after a constitutional referendum in 1966 became full citizens, and instead of coming only under often reactionary State (provincial) control were now also under Federal jurisdiction and aid. The condition of aborigines since then has been ameliorated, though patchily, with exclusive rights being afforded them in some remote traditional areas, including areas containing remunerative minerals.

By the time of the Whitlam Labor government (1972-5), although there were constraints on immigration under a points system, and aborigines were still on average underprivileged, the White Australia policy was effectively ended. There were and are still localised social problems with racial implications; there are still racist or racialist-minded Australians; but in the law and in much of the practice of it race is not a factor. In less than forty years Australian society has undergone a revolution.

All these developments happened during the period when the full apartheid policy was drawn up and implemented in South Africa. It came under unfavourable notice at the United Nations from a very early time, firstly being raised by India in terms of "persons of Indian origin", and then more fully to include Coloured and Black peoples. As more and more Asian and then African countries gained independence from their colonial rulers, they understandably attempted to redress the humiliation inflicted by white administrators (and, equally, their wives) upon brown and black people on account of their race. The process of racial rehabilitation, combined with the achievement of nationalist ambitions and voting power at international assemblies, brought the situation where no international crime since the Jewish holocaust was considered to be as heinous as discrimination by white people against brown and black people. Because of the factors outlined above, Australia made concessions to this new conventional wisdom and the international pressures generated, subscribed to the more moderate of the rhetoric employed, and perhaps felt also that South Africa forfeited some sympathy by leaving the Commonwealth.

Yet irrespective of that, and of any desire to diffuse security problems in a more pluralistic world; irrespective of whether some Australian critics may be ill-informed, sanctimonious or hypocritical (and Australians are probably no more prone to these vices than other people), the general tenor of the views expressed by successive Australian governments about apartheid represents the feelings of a great many Australians. Certainly they do not have South Africa's problems, or its history. They may not understand all the details and nuances of policy changes. Even so, many Australians do have a reasonably good grasp of what has happened in South Africa since 1948, and they do not like it. They see it as running counter to the trend of more civilised attitudes to race. They see a grave impropriety and a fundamental and self-destructive fallacy in the apartheid system. Newspaper or television pictures of bulldozers knocking down shanty houses while black or Coloured women and children with a few pathetic possessions huddle together in the rain, lend credibility and emotional strength to these beliefs.

Among Australians with a sophisticated understanding of the situation in South Africa - an understanding given more substance with information from expatriate South Africans - it is commonly considered that the Group Areas Act, the pass laws, the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act are indefensible; that the separation of working men from their families is grossly inhumane and must be socially explosive³; that the Political Interference Act is quite improper; that the homelands policy creates far more human and national problems than it can possibly solve, and that the alleged "independence" of the TBVC countries is in key respects a misleading misnomer; that because of the overwhelming

dependence of the white economy upon black labour and skills, unless there are major changes the whole structure will one day come crashing down, to the accompaniment of untold human misery. Anyone with a reasonable degree of comprehension of South Africa and a reasonable approach to all parts of the society would not ask for a rapid shift to a one-man-one-equal-vote electoral system. This could be equally disastrous, and it is not going to happen. But rightly or wrongly, and irrespective of other evils elsewhere, many thoughtful Australians, across most of the political spectrum, seem to feel that apartheid is inexcusable, and that disaster of one kind or another can only be avoided - if it now can be avoided - by a decision to reverse the process of entrenched Nationalist supremacy, by a deliberate policy of (a) associating the majority population with the processes of national government, and (b) affording to the non-white peoples more equitable opportunities for education, employment, housing and other social advantages; i.e. by according to all races the full dignity of citizenship.

Whether or not South Africans agree with this analysis, such opinions, widely and strongly held, are the basis of the majority Australian view of South Africa's political system and - by association - of South Africa itself. As we know, many white and many non-white South Africans do share this analysis.

Some South Africans may feel that these views do not take sufficient account of the many improvements already made, and this may be so. Yet the fundamental system remains, and when government or even some opposition members speak to the effect that apartheid is virtually ended, they lose rather than gain ground for their country. They are not believed because they do not speak the truth. South Africans may feel that outsiders do not appreciate the electoral impediments to change: politics after all is the art of the possible. This seems more reason than excuse. Again, they may feel that the new Constitution is a step in the right direction, yet this is a matter on which able and respected South Africans hold widely different views. We shall all have to wait and see how the Constitution is made to work.

For some years South Africa held the view, which it pressed in diplomatic negotiations, that as a country and government it was strategically important - perhaps, in a crisis, vital - to the West including Australia, and that these countries should accordingly co-operate with South Africa in their strategic planning and be more understanding, less critical of its racial policies. After all (the argument runs) South Africa is the West's principal supplier of certain strategic minerals; it is under threat from the USSR which wants those minerals (or wants to deprive the West of them) and which would like a strategic base athwart the Cape route. Because of that route, whenever the Suez Canal is closed South Africa is a guardian of trade between Western Europe and East Africa, West and South Asia, and Australia.

Although troubled by Soviet power and outreach, Australia has not been convinced by these arguments. Analysts there have argued that the USSR is already the world's largest storehouse of minerals: why should it launch costly military operations to obtain more? South Africa's insecurity is considered to be due much more to its internal situation and policies than to external threats. But in any case, to put the matter at its most cynical, South Africa has no alternative to protecting itself, and has shown great capacity to do so; in a world crisis, it has no alternative to working with the West. Unless or until such a crisis occurs, no Australian government is likely to court, on uncertain strategic grounds, the international odium of military association with a government that enforces so unpopular a policy by military methods.

The conservative opposition in Australia has recently softened its position on South Africa. The revised Liberal Party policy deleted any express condemnation of apartheid, although Liberal leaders subsequently denied any fundamental shift in attitude towards apartheid itself, while taking the view that it is better to have a "constructive dialogue" with South Africa than to isolate her. What this probably amounts to is a desire to mitigate the more strident rhetoric and actions against South Africa in the light of the greater evils elsewhere and the hypocrisy of some of South Africa's opponents (eg. those who vote for a trade embargo and themselves engage in trade), and to help those - rather than include in a wholesale condemnation - those South Africans committed to change.

It must be regrettable to many South Africans that Australia which has had so much in common with their country in the past has turned from friend to critic. What can change that situation? A more vigorous, or more confrontational, or more appeasing South African diplomacy will not of itself bring a fundamental change. Only the introduction of a genuinely multi-racial system of government will do that, and it may be closer than we are inclined to think. The new Constitution, perhaps intended to enlarge the laager, may turn out to have put a crack in the dam. When the change does come, as it must one day, Australia's more racially aware policies, including a greater sympathy for black Africa, could help to return the two countries to the friendship which is their more natural relationship.

NOTES

- 1 Commonwealth Statement on Apartheid in Sport, agreed at Gleneagles, Scotland and attached to the communiqué of Commonwealth Heads of Government, 15 June 1977, includes the following paragraph: "Mindful of (the international campaign against apartheid) and other considerations they (the member countries of the Commonwealth) accept it as the urgent duty of each of their governments vigorously to combat the evil of apartheid by withholding any form of support for, and by taking every practical step to discourage, contact or competition by their nationals with sporting organisations, teams or sportsmen from South Africa or from any other country where sports are organised on the basis of race, colour or ethnic origin."
- 2 There was a proposal to call it the Spender Plan, after its most vigorous proponent, Australian Minister for External Affairs, PC Spender, but the name carried unwelcome ambiguities.
- 3 Official statistics show that in the black township of Soweto 684 people died violently during the first six months of 1984.