

South African Impressions: (I) The Social and Political Scene by Russell Hill

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The Afrikaans daily *Die Burger* for Saturday, 26th August, 1967, reports the Prime Minister, Mr Vorster, as saying the following to a Nationalist Party gathering in the Transvaal: 'We have developed a way of life in South Africa. We have learned from experience, so that we have been able to find a solution (to the problem of race relations) which the world can learn from. South Africa has never expected the world to subscribe to its policy or accept it; our standpoint has always been that we should be given credit for being honest. I think more and more people are giving us credit for our honesty. They are asking whether we haven't perhaps got something. South Africa is being looked at with new eyes.' Mr Vorster asked the United States and Britain whether they had found the solution to the colour question. 'We have reached the stage when we can tell the world that we have the solution. We have reached the stage when we can invite the world, and say: "Come and see what it looks like where people can live in a country according to the policy of separate development." In South Africa there is peace and calm, and this is not because of pressure from the government. South Africa has no need to call out an army, in order to let people live together like this. Everywhere in the world there are problems and strife. This is not the case in South Africa, because we have been dealing with the question for generations. We can discuss these matters, because the evidence is there for any unprejudiced person to see.'

Mr Vorster also said that the Nationalist Party had had to convince white and non-white that separate development was the only policy for South Africa. 'I took over', he said, 'when this had been done. I then realized that separate development was not only the policy of the Nationalist Party, but also of South Africa as a whole. I can tell the world that separate development has become the accepted policy of white, black, and coloured in South Africa. Thanks to the work of Dr Verwoerd, the architect of separate development, non-whites also have begun to grasp that the policy is not only to the advantage of the whites, but also to their own advantage. Separate development is not a disregard of human dignity. It is a policy that is morally right, and can fulfil the demands of Christianity. Because that is so, the time has come for us to move outwards.'

After this rather long introduction of Honest John Vorster (that is the image being sedulously projected at the moment), let me introduce another, altogether more insignificant character, Honest

John Bull (Rev), myself; a tiny fragment of the world which has, in fact, accepted Mr Vorster's invitation, and came to South Africa just over a year ago, and has been busy looking ever since. I have no reason to suppose that Mr Vorster and his party are any less—or more—honest than politicians and their political machines elsewhere, than Mr Kaunda, Mr Nyerere, Mr Wilson or Mr Johnson, for example. And if I have not succeeded in seeing South Africa quite as he would like me to, I trust that Mr Vorster, in the highly unlikely event of his reading this article, would give me the credit for not being any less—or more—honest or unprejudiced than the average clergyman. South Africans, by the way, are constantly complaining, with a certain amount of justice, about the way they are stereotyped in the rest of the world as rabid racialists, ruthless oppressors, and so forth. But it takes a foreign visitor in the country to appreciate their own stupendous power of stereotypic creation. They people the world outside, and indeed inside the country too, with a demonic array of 'our enemies', and prominent in this gallery of gargoyles, of course, are clergymen, for the most part Anglicans. I will have to refer again to this obsession with 'enemies'. I find it one of the chief points of contrast with the atmosphere of England—a kind of South African smog.

Before I go on to give my impressions, which are derived mainly from residence in the Cape Town area, I think I must briefly explain the context of Mr Vorster's remarks. Without some knowledge of this context the inevitable reaction of the ordinary English or American reader will be one of amazed incredulity, which will make it quite impossible for him to give Mr Vorster any credit for honesty whatever. The situation seems to be that the Prime Minister is engaged in a complicated rearguard action within his party. Ever since I have been in the country there have been mysterious disturbances within the ranks of Nationalist Afrikanerdom, which erupted in July and August 1967 into a rather acrimonious dispute between *Die Burger* and the Sunday paper *Die Beeld* on the one hand and a Transvaal daily, *Die Vaderland*, on the other. It has come to be labelled as the *Verligte-Verkrampte* dispute, that is the Enlightened versus the Cramped (as the second term has been invented for the occasion, its precise English equivalent is disputed).

The enlightened Nationalist is concerned to break down South Africa's moral isolation from the rest of the world; he is outward looking, and wants to create and foster positive relations with independent states of Black Africa. He wants to make Mr Vorster's statement that the policy of separate development is in the interests of the non-white race groups in the country, and does not mean any depreciation of human dignity, really come true. He does not see that policy as the elimination of all contact between white and non-white, but as providing a secure framework in which such contact can be harmonious and fruitful. It goes without saying that he

welcomed the official reception accorded to Chief Jonathan, and later to the Malawi trade delegation, which involved their being lodged in the most pukka hotel in Cape Town, and dining with white cabinet ministers and officials. The somewhat microscopic concessions about inter-racial sport announced a few months later, and designed to ease South Africa into the Olympic games and enable the M.C.C. to tour the country even with D'Oliveira in its side, would also of course have met with *Verligte* approval.

It is thus clear that the *Verligte* does not fit the usual stereotype overseas of the Afrikaner Nationalist. Perhaps I have described him as so enlightened as almost to be no longer Nationalist. This is of course the charge made against him by the *Verkramppte*, and one against which he must at all costs defend himself if he is to survive politically. The *Verkramppte* accuses him of the dreadful vice of liberalism, a horror only slightly less repugnant and threatening in the South African political mythology than communism. Politically, a liberal is not only dead but damned—though he is not yet in law a criminal, like the communist. As the native demonology is wholly innocent of right-wing ogres and bogeys, the *Verkramppte* has a certain tactical advantage, and is not nearly so vulnerable to mudslinging and smear techniques.

He does fit the overseas stereotype to a T. He is quite satisfied with South African, in particular Afrikaner, isolation; he is not interested in separate development as benefiting the non-whites; for him it only means keeping them in their place; he was deeply suspicious about any concessions on inter-racial sport, and regarded the hobnobbing with black representatives in the Mount Nelson Hotel as *bontetery* (piebald eating). His one positive concern is the identity, the separate existence of the Volk. One of the chief threats to his Afrikaner identity, he feels, is the English language, and he would like Afrikaans to become the one and only official language of the country. Playing opposite Dr Muller, minister for external affairs, and Dr Anton Rupert, the South African tobacco king and economic adviser to the Lesotho government, among the leading figures on the *Verligte* side, are Dr Herzog, minister for posts and telegraphs, and Dr Piet Meyer, president of the South African Broadcasting Corporation on the *Verkramppte* side—such at least is the general opinion. Curiously enough the most vocal mouthpiece of the *Verkrampptes* has been a certain Mr S. E. D. Brown, editor of an English monthly *The South African Observer*.

Such then is the context of Mr Vorster's speech. The one I have quoted was preceded by an address to an earlier party gathering at Koffiefontein in the Free State, scene of Mr Vorster's internment during the last war. At this earlier congress the luckless Mr Brown was sacrificed—easy enough to do, since he is an English speaker. But the *Verkramppte* wing had to be re-assured that the government was not sacrificing principles too (after 'enemies', 'principles' is

perhaps the second most common word in the political language). For this a show of strength was necessary, because strength, *kragdadigheid*, is the most admired political virtue.

Having then given these pledges of loyalty to the *Verkramptes* at Koffiefontein, Mr Vorster was in a position at the Transvaal gathering to make a statement of his view of things in a more *Verligte* vein. If the statements in the speech quoted are read simply as statements, then they will inevitably seem very wild to any non-Nationalist, and they were immediately derided as fantasy by, for example, *The Cape Argus*. But perhaps, like a number of the statements in the documents of Vatican II, the statements in the indicative should be interpreted as aspirations, or aims in the optative. In this way it is easier to credit him with being honest, if not with being right.

That *Die Burger*, the leading mouthpiece of the *Verligtes*, so interpreted the speech is to be inferred from the fact that in its very next issue after the speech was reported, it published a very long article by Dr Eiselen, the architect of Bantu education as it now is, entitled 'Distorted Implementation of Policy: Gulf between Afrikaners and the Bantus'; and what is more, it delivered itself of unusually long editorial comment. In the same issue a speech was reported by an Afrikaner member of the staff of the Coloured University College of West Cape, in which he pleaded with Afrikaners to 'learn to know the Coloureds'. The gist of it all was that separate development will not work unless the Whites, in particular the Afrikaners, really put their minds to making it work, by seeing that 'development' is quite as important as 'separate'. It cannot just be left to the government. As a result of apathy and indifference in this respect up till now, we have this gulf between Afrikaners and Bantu, this lack of real mutual knowledge between Whites and Coloured. Clearly *Die Burger* regards the acceptance of the policy by Black and Coloured about which Mr Vorster spoke more as a hope to be realized than as an actual fact.

The mildly encouraging thing about these articles is that they show signs of at least a beginning of Nationalist Afrikaner self-criticism. One of the more displeasing features, to my taste, of the Afrikaner image projected by such comparatively enlightened journals as *Die Burger* and *Die Beeld* has been their cast-iron self-righteousness. One had previously assumed this to be a typical feature of the traditional British image! Indeed it is my guess—no more than a guess—that contemporary Afrikanerdom derives more of its character from nineteenth-century British attitudes than from the Voortrekkers and the original Dutch and Huguenot settlers. Even its Calvinism was strongly reinforced and coloured in the last century by a distinguished body of Presbyterian ministers from Scotland. But its very nationalism has taken on many of the qualities, good and bad, of British imperialism in its hey-day at the turn of the century. There is talk of trusteeship, of the mission to 'elevate' the

Africans and the Coloured people—in fact, a rather stiff paternalism. And there is, of course, what we regard as the colour prejudice. Where did this come from if not from Victorian England, which developed the disease at more or less the same time in India? It certainly did not come from the original settlers—witness the very existence of the Coloured people today. One of my more piquant historical discoveries here has been that the first civil governor of the Cape under the Dutch East India Company, Simon van der Stel, after whom the Afrikaner town of Stellenbosch is named, was the son of a coloured mother. It would do the Afrikaner Nationalist a great deal of good to reflect on his likeness, if not his indebtedness, to the British Imperialist against whom he considers he has vindicated his freedom and his identity. But it would also do the British critics of South Africa good to reflect that their own country and tradition bear a heavy responsibility for the South African situation.

Supposing the *Verligte* Nationalists gain secure control of the establishment in this country, which is by no means certain, what are their chances of realizing their comparatively laudable aspirations? Not, according to my impressions, very high. They are beginning to realize, what the Americans have discovered, that the real colour problem in this country, as in most White-controlled countries, is a white problem. It is white attitudes, white colour prejudice, that are so stubborn, and will not be removed by mere legislation—as indeed *Die Burger* is very ready to point out to the American integrationists. But this is only a particular instance of the general truth that colour prejudice will not be eliminated by any merely rational approach, because it is a neurotic condition. So Dr Eiselen's and Mr Du Toit's appeals to reason in the columns of *Die Burger* are hardly likely to be much more successful than American or British legislation.

And the hard fact is that colour prejudice is almost universal among the white population of this country, English as well as Afrikaner. The average white man, and even more the average white woman, refuses or is unable to conceive of any relationship with non-whites except the master-servant relationship. For the most part this is the only kind of relationship that actually exists in the country. And everybody except the *Verligtes*—the *Verkrampptes*, the United Party, the Progressives and the Liberals—all take it for granted that *apartheid* means the consolidation of this situation, and is proposed as a rational justification of it. When *apartheid* is interpreted, according to the present fashion, as separate development, everybody except the *Verligtes* assumes that the emphasis is on 'separate' and not on development—and the actual implementation of the Group Areas Act and the Race Classification Act by government departments does nothing to invalidate this assumption. And finally, everyone except the Progressives and the Liberals—and the *Verligtes*—is perfectly happy about it.

To illustrate from two particular cases, one a recent *cause célèbre*, and one from my personal experience. Knysna is a charming little place on the coast about 200 miles west of Port Elizabeth, the centre of extensive state forests. A few months ago a furore arose in a government school there when a forester called Mr Dickson, classified as White, sent his two small sons to the school. All the other children, some forty of them, except for the three children of the school committee chairman, were withdrawn by their parents in protest because they said the Dickson children were Coloured. For several months the crisis has been dragging on, only five children attending the school, while the others are being sent by their parents at considerable expense to another school some twenty miles away. The latest I read in *Die Burger* was that this extra expense of the parents is being met by financial aid from all over the country, contributed by sympathizers; and that the Ministry of the Interior has informed the Dicksons that the race classification of the whole family is being reconsidered. The family has appealed—if they had not they would automatically have been reclassified as Coloured—and the decision of a race classification board is being awaited. *Die Burger* is going to have a job on its hands convincing the protesting parents that ‘development’ is quite as important as ‘separate’—I don’t remember that it has so far produced any editorial comment on the affair—and it does not look as if it will get any support in such an effort from the government.¹

My own experience was as follows. A priest I am associated with, Fr X, has had to go into a sanatorium. He carries on an enormous work among Africans mainly, nearly all by correspondence, and has a full-time office, with two Coloured lads to help him, and a number of local Coloured people are his clients and well-wishers, some of them pretty well-to-do. The sanatorium authorities, all Afrikaners, very kindly allowed him to move his office with him, and his two employees visit him daily with his mail and the business carries on as before. No difficulties. But after two Coloured ladies had visited him once or twice, they were told on their next visit that they could not come in, and if they wished to speak to him they must go and stand outside by his window. The same exquisite courtesy was shown to an African priest who came to visit him from Cape Town. Father X of course protested, but was met with ‘regulations’. So after a day or two I went to call on the matron. I began by thanking her for their great kindness to Father X, and then broached the subject by saying how impressed I as a newcomer to the country had been by the way the government was concerned to prove that separate development did not mean permanent inferiority and second-class citizenship for Coloured people, and how it was incidents like this that did such damage to the South African image

¹Since this article was written, the whole family has been declared Coloured by a race registration board.

overseas. 'I don't know about that', she replied, 'but my family have been here for generations and I wouldn't mix with them on equal terms. After all, one must maintain standards.' Anyway, she added, it was not something she could change, I would have to see the Medical Officer. So I saw the M.O., and made the same opening. Well, he personally did not mind, he said, but it was the custom of the country and one had to consider the other patients. One of them had complained. I said that I found it hard to see what they had to complain about, as Fr X was in a private ward by himself. 'Also', I added, 'these ladies are helping him with his Church work and it is really very hard to carry that on through the window.' 'Oh, so they are *White* then?' said the doctor, puzzled; it is simply inconceivable to conjugate the word 'lady' with 'coloured'. But after that little misunderstanding had been cleared up, he said that as it was connected with Fr X's work, and as he was in a private ward, he would be ready to make an exception. But he rather anxiously asked me to try to see that such visits were not too frequent. There has been no trouble about the matter since.

As a revelation of social attitudes the incident speaks for itself: the more than ordinary human kindness of these people mixed with such crass insensitivity to the feelings of people who are regarded as inferiors. But the slightly sinister element in it is the way that complaint was listened to. Left to themselves, the staff of the sanatorium would never have excluded those Coloured visitors, just as left to themselves, perhaps, few Afrikaners would perpetrate the drearier acts of humiliation that petty *apartheid* brings in its train. But their built-in fears and their social conformity make them succumb at once to the slightest pressure of prejudice wielded with determination.

With such unpromising material to work on, it is hard to see even what machinery the *Verligtes* can set up to establish the fruitful contact and co-operation they hope for within the framework of separate development. Where do they think people of different colours will meet on equal terms? Will they eat together? Will they be expected and encouraged to become friends? Can you keep a friendship going without an occasional meal together, without sharing a social life? There are no actual laws against these things in private life, though there are laws that make such contact very difficult. But anyone who is known to have Coloured guests to his house, or to accept Coloured hospitality, or to frequent inter-racial gatherings will very soon be branded as a liberal. For Progressives, Jews, and English-speaking clergymen of all denominations this does not matter very much—they are outside the pale, anyhow. But how Afrikaner Nationalists are to embark on such courses without committing political suicide is hard to see. I have been informed, incidentally, that it is impossible to get a flat in any White area of Cape Town without signing an undertaking not to have any non-

whites in it other than servants. I have been involved in the organizing of a number of inter-racial conferences, and the difficulty of finding premises is enormous. Boarding schools in the holidays would seem to be the obvious place, convent schools, for example. But the authorities of such schools more often than not will decline to have Coloured people staying on the premises, even in holiday time, for fear that if the White parents of their pupils hear of it, many will take their children away.

Finally, what of the attitude of those who are on the receiving end of 'separate development'? This way of putting it, by the way, though it would not please the *Verligte* Nationalists, is eminently just, because whether or no the policy is in the real interests of the non-whites, it has been decided for them and thrust on them without their being in the slightest degree consulted. The receiving end is very exactly what they are on. Of the Africans I will say nothing, because I really know nothing about them; and anyway, 'the Africans' is such a blanket term that it would be rather meaningless to generalize about their response to the government policy. So I will simply give my impressions of the Coloured people of the Cape.

My slight acquaintance with only a very few of them almost tempts me to say that there is something in this racial characteristics doctrine. The Cape Coloured people are a unique people; not in the ways in which White South Africans regard them as unique; not in their statistical rate of alcoholism, which is said to be the highest in the world; not in the violence of the 'skollies', which makes some of the Coloured townships, the new townships created by the Group Areas Act, highly dangerous places to live in; not in any other symptoms of demoralization which are no more than the effect of the intolerable social pressures they have been subjected to, of the incredibly crude social engineering that is being practised on them, of the economic exploitation which they have long been the victims of, and which still makes it possible for some farmers to get away with paying their labourers 50c (5s.) a day. Even if you multiply this by three to allow very generously for the lower cost of living in this country, and call it in real English terms 15s. a day, it remains a scandalously unjust wage. A house goes with it, of course (hovel would be perhaps too loaded a word), and it is either supplemented by, or partly paid in payment in kind, which means in this region tots of wine. This is sheer promotion of alcoholism, and also means that a great many farm labourers are permanently in debt to their employers. One Afrikaner, who has long left the Nationalists behind him, told me that when he wanted to take on a new man, he had in effect to buy him from his previous employer by paying his debt, which amounted to some £90.

Their social and economic situation, then, amply accounts for many of the moral defects which are truly enough charged against the bulk of the Coloured population, and it is not in these that their

racial uniqueness lies. I see it in their inability to think collectively, to see themselves as a group, or to pigeon-hole others under group and stereotype labels. They seem unable to regard people as anything but people! So they have no resentment against the White man as such because they have no concept of the White man as such. Their mixed ancestry protects them from the racial pride which is the basic European disease. So they simply cannot fit into the Nationalist categories. They cannot understand, and therefore are in no position to accept, the policy of separate development.

This was brought home to me one evening when a colleague here took me to dine with a well-to-do Coloured family, who had had to leave District Six in Cape Town and were living in a very nice house which they had built in a new Coloured housing estate. The houses were all very pleasant, owner occupied, but the common facilities, roads and street lighting, were practically nil. That is the way the 'development' of separate development works in fact. The family had already decided to follow the example of thousands of Coloured people who can afford the step, and to emigrate to Canada. My colleague was trying to dissuade them by saying, 'If all the people like you emigrate then you are leaving your own people in the lurch, depriving them of their natural leaders'. He was appealing to their group responsibility, starting from the assumption that the Coloureds are a group. And the answer simply cut this assumption from under his feet. 'Why', our hosts asked in effect, 'are they our people any more than your people, our responsibility any more than your responsibility?'

This question is really unanswerable, and is in itself the answer to the paternalistic scoldings of the well-meaning Mr Viljoen, minister for Coloured affairs, who is periodically reported as insisting that the Coloured people really must acquire a sense of corporate self-respect, and learn to help themselves. But it is not an answer that he as a Nationalist can begin to understand or listen to. Thus the government and the Coloured people of the Cape are at cross purposes from the start. I have said that the Coloured people have no resentment against the White man as such; but they have a pretty strong resentment against the government. And the government must know it, though they will not admit it. They must know the resentment teachers feel, whose salaries, for work in usually more difficult conditions, are fixed at about four-fifths of White teachers' salaries—and even then are sometimes very irregularly paid. White teachers teaching in Coloured schools have described to me the reception given by teachers' meetings to officials of the Coloured Affairs Education Department, and it must have struck even the most self-righteous Afrikaner Nationalist as being as frigid as the Canadian winter so many of these teachers are prepared to endure in exchange for sunny South Africa's separate development.

The plain fact is that the Nationalists have treated the Coloured

people too badly too long for them to have the slightest hope of winning their support for government policy. That they know it is shown by the Improper Interference Bill, Dr Verwoerd's last contribution to the edifice of separate development just before his assassination, and surely one of the most cynical and hypocritical pieces of proposed legislation that can ever have been conceived. Its object was to prevent the Coloured people of the Cape from electing four Progressive Party members to represent them in Parliament. Everyone knew they would elect them if they had the chance—and so they must not be given the chance. The Bill was withdrawn, but at the same time the election of Coloured representatives was indefinitely postponed.

So the *Verligtes*, I fear, have little chance with the Coloured people. To win their support the government would have to make an *amende honorable* of a magnanimity which Afrikaner Nationalism has never yet exhibited. British imperialism, which according to my guess provided Afrikaner Nationalism with one of its chief sub-conscious models, was at least very occasionally capable of the truly magnanimous gesture. The political control of this country which Afrikaners have in fact enjoyed since 1910 derives directly from such an act of *Liberal* magnanimity (oh, the irony!). This weakness of the strong the Nationalists have never emulated. One would have thought that political generosity to the Coloured people would not have been so difficult, and moreover would have paid good dividends. They are overwhelmingly Afrikaans speaking; they have made their distinctive contribution to Afrikaans culture, and could have made a bigger one if they had been encouraged. But no, they have been despised—was it possibly British arrogance that pushed the White Afrikaner into a contempt for his Coloured fellow Afrikaner?—and treated with a consistent meanness that makes nonsense of the *Verligtes'* more enlightened aspirations.

So the *Verligtes*, I conclude, will not be able to provide the therapy required for South Africa's complex and deep-seated neuroses. What perhaps they might contribute to any eventual therapy is a realignment sooner or later of the political forces of White South Africa. It is just possible that we are seeing the tiny beginnings of a real and worthwhile opposition, with the withering away of the quite worthless United Party, and some liaison between the Progressives and the *Verligtes*. But I am really too ignorant of the working of party politics here even to make such a guess as that. One thing at least I take as certain, and that is that politics alone cannot provide the therapy needed. In the next article I will be enquiring if it might not perhaps come from religion.