

## ● THE SOUTH AFRICAN CRISIS

# THE APARTHEID EFFECT

## Britain & South Africa

Sarah Benton

**When it comes to South Africa, Thatcherism is isolated, beached, stranded. This could have profound repercussions.**

CONSENSUS FLUTTERED back into British politics this July and went on show on the Jimmy Young television programme. In front of a sceptical audience, Labour's Denis Healey and the Tories' Lynda Chalker vied with each other to prove whose party had done most to bring down apartheid. There were no winners. In the view of several of the audience the moral simplicity of opposing apartheid was being perverted by party politics.

But from the wets in the Conservative party to the stern souls of the Labour Left there is certainly consensus. It says: apartheid is morally abhorrent and is anyway doomed to end. It should therefore be ended as quickly and painlessly as possible. For that purpose, economic sanctions should be imposed against South Africa. Church leaders, if not the Church Commissioners, agree. David Owen agrees. David Steel agrees. Even most Conservative voters agree. Mrs Thatcher stands alone, but only South Africa applauds her for that.

This consensus was arrived at somewhere between the middle of June and early July this year. It is the first of what are going to be many major repercussions throughout Britain and Western Europe of the epic struggle in South Africa. The political repercussions could include the first significant isolation of the Right since they began to champion the politics known as Thatcherism 10 years ago; a changed relationship between Western Europe and black Africa as a whole; a breakthrough in the ability of British popular opinion to come to terms with its imperial past; the growth in extent and ambition of black politics here, with consequent effects on 'moderate' British racism.

The political repercussions for Britain are likely to be far more important than the economic consequences which have been exaggerated both by the Right, in their opposition to sanctions, and the Left, in

their stress on British responsibility for apartheid.

The new consensus has been the most noticeable of the political repercussions because party politicians are what the media notices, and because it has been absent so long. On June 18, 80 Tory MPs tabled an amendment opposing sanctions – Lynda Chalker was welcoming ANC President Oliver Tambo at the time – in the belief that they could still lead a groundswell of popular support for apartheid. They were seen as backwoodsmen. Since then, Mrs Thatcher has been forced to use the language of 'abhorrence with apartheid' in order to justify her abhorrence of sanctions. No-one believes her. A Gallup poll revealed that 63% of British people think she favours apartheid. The same poll showed that even 54% of conservative voters sympathised with South Africa's black population, while only 11% thought she did. Her words no longer have that familiar ring of conviction as her suppor-

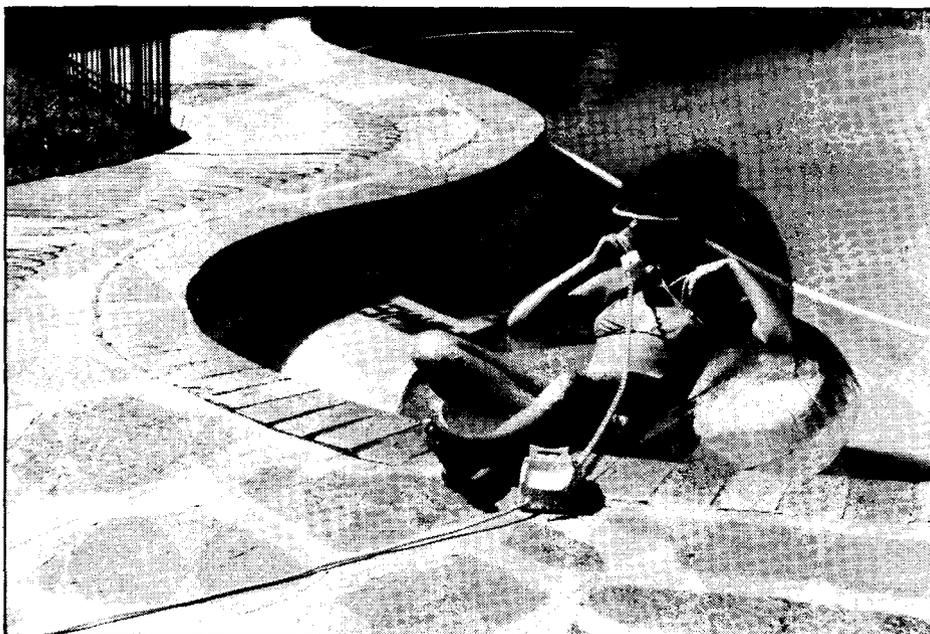
ters watch, with increasing embarrassment, her squirmings in the international limelight.

Of course it is not just her. Apartheid has always been the Right's weak point. You cannot bang on for years about freedom and democracy and then uphold a system where even to the most prejudiced eye neither exists.

Not that the far Right cared about such inconsistencies when apartheid seemed to offer a stable economic system and safe allies in a vulnerable part of the world. But they have been left with no ideological justification for their stance; and as they pioneered the politics of the last decade through ideology, they are now floundering.

### Out of tune

At first both the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times* wrongly thought this profound Conservative dilemma could be resolved by words. If they *said* they were against



Johannesburg 1985: Northern suburbs pool owner cooling off.



photo: Orde Eliason/Link

Worcester 1986: Washing clothes in the black township of Zwelitemba.

apartheid, black people here and white people in South Africa would believe them and revolution would be averted. 'Apartheid could be ended by discussion' said a fatuous *Times* headline on June 18. Sure. Geoffrey Howe will bore them all into submission.

Two days later the *Daily Telegraph* cried in alarm: 'The government has a responsibility which thus far it has failed to meet: it must demonstrate, incontrovertibly, its abhorrence of the South African government's refusal to concede the principle of political rights to its black majority.' Why the shift? 'If the Conservatives wish to win the next election (if morality doesn't touch Mrs T's heart, this point will) they must maintain the support of millions of people in the middle ground of politics who find apartheid deeply repugnant.'

The popular repugnance for apartheid came as a shock for the Right (and a more pleasant one for the Left). But that is just one, if the most serious, of a series of errors of judgment they have made in the last two years. From political ballots through the (averted) sale of British Leyland to the bombing of Libva, the Right has overesti-

mated the quality of its popular support. Temporarily, the interests of a white business class, seeking an entrée back into politics in the 1970s, were similar to those of a lot of other people. All the troubles of society were identified as the products of state socialism and moral permissiveness. The 'ideological' Right identified the causes and thus produced the solution: 'rolling back the tide of socialism'.

It was not so much a revolution as a counter-revolution and their energy was always higher when scorning their enemies – Norman Tebbit's forte – than when pursuing a bright new world. They were slow to recognise that after they had vanquished their enemies and produced, not a bright new world but a poorer and uglier one, they could no longer carry the people with them.

They believed they could carry them on apartheid because they assumed that most white Britons would, like them, identify with white South Africans. They assumed that their business interests in South Africa would be shared and defended by the white working class here. They thought the popular support for Mrs Thatcher's

evident racism would translate into a doughty defence of white supremacy in South Africa – or at least indifference to the black population.

#### **Apartheid and the new Right**

Their problem was that they could not think such thoughts out loud. Apartheid can only be publicly defended if you believe in white supremacy. There is nothing in the ideology of the new Right which allows them to say that white people are genetically superior to black and thus have a nature-given right to enjoy rights which they deny to black people. Instead, they have had to resort to arguments which often verge on the mystical and always on the mythological, about homogeneous racial, national cultures.

It may stretch the bounds of credibility and fly in the face of history when they assert that white Britons share a common cultural and ethnic heritage. But if Britain is for the ancient British, then Africa must be for the Africans. Not for Africans who, as the Boers insist, include white people who have made Africa their home. But the Africans who are there by reason of their



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ethnic origin, their shared racial culture. For black Africans.

That's how the logic of the ideology goes. But it's not the logic of the new Right's project of counter-revolution, of beating back the menace of socialism. Then the argument does lead to a justification of white supremacy because all black people are potential and actual forces on the side of socialism or at least against international capitalism. All black people come out of a history of oppression so all black people carry the historic potential of overthrowing their oppressors. Apartheid kept them in check. Apartheid is still the only way of stopping revolution before it happens because a white right-wing party in Africa has none of the means available to a white right-wing party in the West of getting popular opinion on its side.

This tacit defence of apartheid stems from a position which is hostile to all traditions of socialism and radical mass action. It does not find a strong echo in the sort of popular racism prevalent today. Racism is not a simple ideology with a single cause and a single manifestation. There is, for instance, the paranoid racism which sees black people as 'other', as an incarnation of all that is most frightening and unknowable. German Nazis employed it when they were mobilising a lesser insanity: the 'common sense' working class racism which attributes conditions of poverty to competition from 'outsiders' for scarce jobs and housing. That in turn is not identical to the 'refined' racism of the professional middle class who see black people as an extreme version of the working class: that much more criminal, ungovernable, alien and incapable of managing their own lives.

Most of the time, different racisms merely reinforce each other and to the victims of racism such distinctions are irrelevant niceties. But they become significant when trying to understand why the far Right support apartheid but has found it hard to say so and why a large majority of the population that is, on the whole, hostile to black immigration, does not. Ironically, the very strength of the political ethic 'I'm not racist but...' increases the attraction of opposing apartheid. One can express moral abhorrence at racism while still supporting racist practices and beliefs at home.

If Mrs Thatcher, once so sure of touch, has lost her grip on popular feeling here, it is partly because of class. For it is not just that apartheid breaks the basic rules of fair play – one person, one vote. It is also that

as an economic system apartheid flouts the values of ordinary white people. Twelve years ago my next door neighbour, a white single mother who worked hard for low wages to support herself and her child remarried and went to live in South Africa. Her mother was troubled by her letters. The daughter didn't have to lift a finger; she even had a black woman wash her floors. It didn't seem right.

Mrs Thatcher has preached the ethic of hard work and self-sufficiency. Why should those here, who cannot afford servants, rise up to defend a system which provides them not as a reward for hard work, but merely because of the colour of their skins? If, as a symbol of white supremacy, apartheid has little to offer 'ordinary' racists here, it is equally hard to identify with it as a material way of life.

## Defining a new relationship

But we seem to be seeing more than a refusal to rise to the defence of apartheid. In response to the clear-cut determination of black South Africa to achieve national liberation, another shift is taking place. It is to do with a sense of national identity, a vital element of popular political ideology which must have, at its heart, a sense of national history.

If British political culture has largely ignored Africa, as it tries to ignore Ireland, it is not because it does not know that many

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## the popular repugnance for apartheid came as a shock for the Right

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of the causes of 'the troubles' lie in British history. It is because it does not see why it should accept responsibility for the sins of its ancestors. School children may not learn the history of imperialism. They do know there was something called the slave trade, conducted by British merchant interests, and that British interests once governed large chunks of Africa. If this is the history of Britain's relation with the rest of the world, it is not something to be proud of. And if it is not accepted as Britain's history, then Britain as a country in the world has no history.

There is undoubtedly a popular desire to have a surer sense of what it means to be British. The Falklands war was misleading. At the time, a Left struggling for survival at the lowest point in its modern history, assumed they saw in the Falklands a passionate recrudescence of nostalgia for

empire and superpower status. It was a misinterpretation. However much nostalgia there is for the days of British colonial rule, nobody with their head screwed on the right way believes that Britain can or should resume that role.

In those countries where the effects of empire live on, disastrously, no history is forgotten. The reverse is true in Britain. For as long as the ill effects of empire live on, it cannot come to terms with its own past. A new generation of apologists for empire may be arising. But they have only felt the need to stir themselves, to say 'it wasn't *all* bad,' because the strong voices of the colonised have covered it in contempt.

Since 1983 we have seen the first faltering steps towards coming to terms with Britain's African history. There was an astonishing swell of popular feeling about famine in Ethiopia long before Band Aid and its offspring institutionalised a connection to African poverty as part of our political culture. That connection was made by a generation which never swelled in self-importance as it scanned the pink patches stretching right across the map of Africa; never knew the names Southern Rhodesia and British East Africa, Gold Coast and Nyasaland. Its images are not those of their parents, of the fearsome Mau Mau or the hauling down of the British flag. They are of a needless and outrageous starvation while unwanted food is stockpiled in Europe.

It was, as many have said, an ambivalent feeling. Who can be afraid of a starving African baby, or not be moved by the haggard dignity of its mother? Nonetheless, the desire to give, to do something, spoke of an acceptance of responsibility for a people who are infinitely more remote than the whites of South Africa. The response asserted new geographic identities: of Britain as part of food mountain Europe, of ordinary British people asserting a connection to Africa which their elders, haunted by an angry and guilty history, could not make. It was an act of reparation not for the young, but by the young for their elders.

## A powerful opposition

To support the liberation movement in black South Africa is the crucial next step in the process of reparation. It is more testing than acts of charity galvanised by a charismatic pop star. It demands that white people play a supporting role while black people make history.

Solidarity movements are usually con-

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financed to the committed Left. But there are times when the solidarity movement goes wider and in so doing radicalises its supporters. Vietnam is the best example, Chile a less dramatic one. It's often a vicarious form of politics (which is not to underestimate it), bringing to British people the stark horrors and noble passions which they dream about but rarely experience. In a country which has long found its own politics tired, stale and lacking in any

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moral imperative, the momentous issues of freedom and repression being fought out in South Africa allow British people a faint involvement in grand political passion.

Such passion is not a primitive force which naturally atrophies in sophisticated democracies. It is as much part of being human as the 'legitimate' passions of sex and love and greed for money. But it is repressed and bowdlerised in societies where the ardour of the party politician for a cause can seem as weighty as the ecstasy of a tv actress for a washing-up liquid. Through South Africa, or Vietnam or Chile we, starved of political grandeur, can find expression for it.

So when's the revolution? Such potential for new politics is all very invigorating. But those lined up against the forces for liberation in South Africa and their supporters in the USA and Europe are not small fry. They are not going to lie down and be walked over when a sufficiently large and enthusiastic demonstration comes marching over the hill. The Vietnam and Chile solidarity campaigns made an effect, not least on their own supporters. But the US government did not get out of Vietnam until 1975. General Pinochet is still in power in Chile. If this solidarity movement is going to have effect it has to take into account both the strength of its opponents as well as the need to sustain and toughen up its own possible constituencies of support.

Its opponents are those whose economic interest in South Africa would be severely jeopardised by the end of apartheid and those, like Reagan and Thatcher, whose mission in life is to combat world 'communism'. There will undoubtedly be conspiracies to undermine the ANC and the domestic solidarity movements, to fund

organisations within South Africa which will oppose the ANC or genuine national liberation movements. It will not be done in the name of supporting apartheid but of limiting financial chaos, defending hapless white citizens, safeguarding domestic jobs, keeping out the communist menace and so on.

Those arguments have not yet been effectively put to the broadly anti-apartheid electorate so that general support has not been tested. There has only been the argument against sanctions put by, for example, the 80 Tory MPs, many of whom have an interest in South Africa, *Times* journalist David Watt who is an adviser to Rio Tinto Zinc, and the discreetly formed committee of companies wishing to defend their stake in the apartheid economy.

But their ranks are not united. There are long-term strategies to consider and within the business and right-wing community there are certainly those who accept that apartheid is doomed, and prolonging its life only prolongs the deterioration of South Africa's economic yield. Their interest is in securing their trade links and investments by replacing apartheid with a modified form of European or American domination. They want apartheid to end in order to avert revolution, not to provoke it.

#### Black Africa

Such calculations always accompany any threatened national revolt. But there is a new factor in this burgeoning international crisis which no previous repressive regime has had to contend with. The new factor is the role of the neighbouring states – meaning not just the front-line states but the whole of black Africa – and the identification of substantial sections of the population in Western Europe and the USA with Africa.

At the time of writing, several African countries have pulled out of the Commonwealth Games over South Africa. President Kaunda of Zambia is pressing for concerted action by African states to achieve sanctions against apartheid. Western Europe cannot afford to sustain apartheid at the expense of its trade with the whole of Africa. Britain may be the third most important trading partner for South Africa. In the league of Britain's trading partners South Africa was only the 17th and until Nigeria's recent economic malaise, Nigeria was more important.

What we are seeing through the prism of South Africa is a significant reshaping of geographic communities. It has been going

on for some time, most markedly with the post-war notion of the Arab world as a regional and ethnic entity. It has been happening in Europe; the EEC countries responding to both the bombing of Libya and the South African emergency as a political as well as economic bloc. It is happening to people who live in Europe; even the ultra-British commentators on the World Cup and Wimbledon described contestants in terms of the continent they came from fitting Britain firmly into the European slot. And though the Commonwealth itself is shaped by the old divisions of empire, in practice it functions as a regional forum for pressing the claims of Third World regions, especially black Africa, on reluctant Western ears.

Yet again, in this process, Mrs Thatcher is on the verge of being isolated. For her, the key international formations are not of imperial history or even of modern West Europe; they are, despite the Falklands, of right-wing governments against communists, terrorists and other uppity no-gooders. She would prefer to stand side by side with Reagan against the ANC, scorning the moderate EEC, were it not for the other part of this new factor – the impact of South Africa on domestic black politics.

#### Black politics at home

Its impact on black American politics has already been considerable. Here there has been no nationwide black campaign, like Jesse Jackson's presidential bid, to take up anti-apartheid in its wake. Indeed, in Britain, black politics has consistently been pressed back into being parochial in its organisation and concerns. So much has

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black politics in Britain been confined to local activism that 'community' has become a euphemism for black.

That is changing. The focus of many black groups is already shifting away from 'community' policing, 'community' arts, 'community' relations. They are having to deal with the most momentous and demanding international issues. So in a way are white-dominated organisations, but the implications of the struggle against apartheid go deeper in black politics.

Thus, unlike previous solidarity move-



# HACKNEY COUNCIL

## Working for local people



**WE TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS PUBLICLY OUR UNQUALIFIED SUPPORT FOR the struggles of the Black people of South Africa, and in so doing present our declaration to the readers of Marxism Today.**

## Anti-Apartheid Declaration



The London Borough of Hackney declares its abhorrence of, and total opposition to, the racist regime of South Africa and its illegal occupation of Namibia and believes that the apartheid system is a suppression of human dignity, and a threat to world peace and racial justice.

The Council is fully committed to the cause of freedom, justice and equality in South Africa and supports those, who through struggles against apartheid, have become its victims in one form or another; and to saluting the struggles and sacrifices of the liberation movements, in particular the African National Congress (ANC) and the South West African Peoples Organisation (SWAPO) of Namibia, to liberate their peoples.

In accordance with these views, the Council will, within the limits of its legal powers, campaign to end all links between the Council and the apartheid regime of South Africa, utilising all social, political, economic, and legal measures that are at its disposal. In particular it will, having regard to the Council's legal powers and duties, and as long as the present regime in South Africa remains in power, pursue the following practices:

- 1 Cease the purchase of any goods originating from South Africa and Namibia;
- 2 Ensure that the Council is not officially represented at any function attended by representatives of the White South African Government, the South African Embassy, the Bantustans' or trade missions and refuse to meet or receive any official visitors from the white South African regimes in South Africa and/or Namibia;
- 3 Campaign against all official links between Britain and the minority regimes in South Africa and Namibia;
- 4 Withhold the use of leisure facilities from any sporting, cultural, or political event involving participants who are known to be supporters of the white South African regimes in South Africa and Namibia;
- 5 Promote public understanding and encourage the positive teaching of the situation in Southern Africa through highlighting the history, culture and struggle for self-determination of the Black South African and Namibian people, including the role of black women and black organised labour in this struggle;
- 6 Work towards the commitment to the naming of streets, buildings and other facilities in Hackney after prominent opponents of the white racist regimes in South Africa and Namibia;
- 7 Discourage the advertisement of apartheid South African products at public sites and facilities in Hackney;
- 8 Ensure that this policy is fully implemented throughout Hackney Council.

The Council hereby declares that Hackney, as part of its Anti-Racist commitment, is opposed to apartheid in all its forms, and undertakes in co-operation with those organisations and movements named and identified above to organise appropriate events to publicise and implement this declaration and encourage other organisations in Hackney to do likewise.

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ments, the assimilation of support work into domestic political issues will change the nature and import of that support work. Questions of national, ethnic and geographic identities are raised. Possible new alliances within the Left may emerge; for while most people support the ANC's leadership of the liberation struggle it has its critics on the hard Left for being too conservative and too close to the Communist party.

And precisely because these issues are so significant, white dominated organisations – and journalists – on the Left will have to make space as black political leaders and writers take the stage to define what the issues are, not just for black people.

These are some of the changes, most of them exciting, which South Africa can effect in Britain. It is an optimistic view. And even within that optimism, it does not count the cost in lives lost and damaged in South Africa.

There are much less optimistic possibilities. Black politics in Britain may remain too parochial to respond. White solidarity, when it gets over the drama of the last few weeks, may whittle back down to the dedicated few. Limited sanctions may be imposed; not enough to have any effect in South Africa but enough to close the gap between Thatcher and 'moderate' opinion, and enough to lose some people their jobs. Those who support apartheid will undoubtedly conspire – conspiracy theory has its moments – to defend their interests.

Images of bloodshed and chaos in South Africa, of blacks fighting blacks, of economic damage in Britain could produce a backlash. Instead of beginning the acceptance of end of empire it could provoke a sulky and racist insistence that only the

### white South Africa could use the nuclear bomb

empire worked. Instead of the Left turning outwards again, it will turn its back on the insoluble problems of South Africa, as it has on Ireland and have sectarian fights over the right line in solidarity work. And white South Africa could use the nuclear bomb.

Whether the best or the worst happens is not within the control of the British Left nor, indeed, the Conservative government. What matters, here, is whether the Left can think widely enough about the implications of the history being made in South Africa to make history again in Britain. □



The neo-Nazi Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) march through Pretoria (1985).

# DIVISIONS IN THE LAAGER

The white regime has been placed under quite new pressures. The result is growing conflict within the white community. But the regime is still very much intact.

Roger Omond

NOT EVEN PW Botha's most ardent admirers would call him an intellectual. The man who left Stellenbosch University more than 50 years ago to become an organiser for the National party has, however, dozens of underemployed academics to provide him with justifications and devices to 'reform' apartheid while maintaining power. The days of crude *wit baasskap* (white domination) are over – in theory. One of the few growth industries in the sagging South African economy is in political science where fiddling with constitutions, re-drawing maps and rationalising racialism is much in vogue.

South Africa's latest state of emergency may be thought to be incompatible with the reforming image Mr Botha has been at pains to present to the world. In fact the two go hand in hand. The academics who advise Mr Botha have devised a neat pseudo-science to explain it all based on two adages. The first is de Tocqueville's, 'The most perilous moment for a bad government is when it seeks to mend its ways', and the second is one that has

served white South Africa well for 300 years: 'Divide and rule.'

But it is not put so crudely. In May this year Mr Botha rewrote de Tocqueville: 'Whenever a country experiences a period of reform, there is bound to be uncertainty,' he told the president's council, one of the new institutions devised to put a gloss on apartheid. Divide and rule has been dressed up under a variety of names: separate development, parallel development, multinational development and now co-operative co-existence.

The reform policy has the intellectual blessing of a number of in-house academics in South Africa and also of a Harvard political scientist, Professor Sam Huntington, who is much in vogue.

### Reform and repression

'It is not inconceivable,' he wrote a few years ago, 'that narrowing the scope of political participation may be indispensable to eventually broadening that participation.' He went on to say that 'the centralisation of power may also be necessary for the government to maintain the