

# Political cynicism,

## *Wither the*

### **Returning to the UK,**

the usual questions about how it is going in South Africa. I reflect that a major plus for me in South Africa is the relative absence of cynicism compared with England. South Africans argue, disagree, struggle: they face hard issues and go for conflict resolution and act as though they believed their opponents are human beings with a viewpoint and a soul. Even when talk collapses and people fight, there is a genuine passion for some sort of justice, rather than the coldness, the easy brutality of cynicism. Romantic view maybe; bear with it anyway for the moment.

Sadly, the exception to that (romantic) notion seems to be found within the English-language press. Lest I am misunderstood: that is a conscious generalisation to which I know there are many exceptions; it is not a stereotype, which is a product of assumptions, not thought. The English-language press is often brave and original, creative, passionate and non-pretentious. Those qualities are the opposite of cynical.

The cynicism is symbolised by random over-use of the term PC (political correctness) as an insult. It means we worldly, successful people are tough enough not to care whether our words or action hurt vulnerable people—in fact we like to amuse each other by sneering at those who do care. It includes an “as we all know” quality, which suggests there is no more to be said once the PC label has been applied: its object has no option but to apologise for a breach at the very least if good humour and/or good taste.

The term PC was first coined, apparently, in the United States where small groups of equality zealots, semi-Marxists, applied the phrase to the unreconstructed old order who refused to adapt to new ideas about equality of esteem. “Correct” is of course a horrible authoritarian concept when applied to ideas; so the phrase was a gift to reaction—the perfect weapon for the backlash against the trend towards egalitarianism.

Of course, doing or saying anything for the sake of image or effect is hypocritical. Making changes because they would please the big battalions of the left or the right is unattractive and untrustworthy, and may be said to be inspired by political correctness in the real sense. But not all changes in outlook, not all widening of perspective, is about currying favour. In fact, the righteous indignation over PC is very often itself hypocritical because it is a cover for the wish to preserve the status quo and existing privilege.

# logic, anger...



## English-language press

Cynicism is about the assumption that all criticism of privilege—on account of whiteness or maleness or class or any other—is motivated by sycophancy if it comes from a privileged person. It is not about justice or personal values; it is about sucking up to the avenging hordes or previously excluded people lining up to claim their just desserts. Cynicism implies that no one who has privilege can possibly see any personal advantage to giving it up in favour of an egalitarian order, presumably because the cynic cannot imagine so doing.

But I think there is more to it than that. There are plenty of people who participated “selflessly” in the struggle—in the sense that they put themselves at risk in many ways—and who are now adopting a cynical posture via the English-language press which is not congruent with the values they demonstrated before the battle for political democracy was won. I think the cynicism, which assumes the proportions of a new form of political correctness, covers hurt or fear, and therefore anger.

In my work I travel widely, to many different kinds of society. From the sweet clean suburbs of Sweden to the desperate masses of Bangladesh, from the scrawny poverty of the high Himalayas to the roaring obese sophistication of New York City. In all of these places I am welcomed as a representative of a superior breed, bringing the beauty of my language, spoken “properly”, my classy ancient cultural roots, my amusing sophistication, my unpretentious dress, my effortless worldly wisdom, my low-key Protestant Christianity—above all my internationalism, my liberal open-mindedness, my democratic kindness, my magnanimity.

Of course, I and many of my colleagues in those societies know that is all utter tripe. But it is there. It exists. And whatever our conscious minds think about it, we are aware that unlike lesser mortals, I am not required to speak the language of my hosts; on the contrary, they

apologise for not speaking mine well. The assumption of superiority on the part of we international English liberal/progressive development-minded people is accepted at a deep level all over the world. We belong to the world. We are at home everywhere. Though we are also much resented for all that, we can fall back on a smug sense that basically they are all just jealous.

These days, however, that sense is beginning to fail. Britain and especially England, is on the skids, her culture needing a lot of cheap scent to cover the sad decline. Down the ladder of comparative achievement and health she slides year by year. Other, formerly despised, nations overtake England; and our shops are forced to put up signs in Arabic, Japanese, German and Portuguese. What will be next. Thai? Swahili? This perceived decline affects the morale of all of us—even those who have lived for generations in South Africa, Australia, Zimbabwe and the rest.

Particularly if we live in South Africa, and have played an honourable part in the process of giving up white political privilege, we may feel threatened. Unlike Australians we are surrounded by people who have suffered extremely at the hands of people who look like us; unlike Zimbabweans,

our Black competitors have a strong worldly sense of their own capability, culture, place in the world and general strength and importance. We feel for the first time perhaps, genuinely in a minority, with perhaps some advantages which may not last.

So we are inclined to pull rank. We feel hurt about the lack of whole-hearted acknowledgment of our role in the struggle and hence enthusiastic use of our talents in the present. We are afraid of what will happen when the lustre of our culture fades altogether and we are left competing like everyone else on the basis of our simple humanity alone. This fear is unfamiliar. And fear creates anger. We become angrily defensive whenever we are criticised. We see ourselves as having a special role; if others do not, we see the avenging hordes and become emotional. But since this is not part of our self-image, we convert it to cynicism.

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cynical line that no one is to be trusted, that all action to correct the

past is a cover for self-interest, and “hate speech” is what Black people

use in disagreeing with White people, not the other way round. This new

form of PC is, as much as the old, a substitute for thinking.

► continued on page 18

► from previous page



The clue is in the uncharacteristic lack of logical argument; and instead the substitution of amusing insult or mockery and a world-weary tone. A brilliant and surprising example is an article by, of all people, Van Zyl Slabbert, hardly a cynic by record, nor English by heritage, in the *Mail & Guardian* of April 4–11. The important issue of “liberal” racism is headlined “There’s Much Ado About Nonsense”. The “light-hearted” tone barely conceals fury—which is picked up by the cartoonist who has him throwing rotten tomatoes. Those he disagrees with are “boring”, “unoriginal”, speak “nonsense” and treat us to “farce”. These judgements are not backed up, only stated and followed by (English) schoolmasterly commentaries along the lines of “Oh dear, Oh dear”.

Thus an opinion which has cost time and energy and maybe painful personal experience is airily dismissed as, for instance, “nursing grievance, hate or guilt”. Nuf said. You must try harder next time not to feel a sense of grievance, hate or guilt; and if you do, please deny these feelings!

In this way Slabbert sets himself above those he disagrees with. There is no respect in it, only a jaunty, barbed wrist-slapping which is clearly insulting. Here are some of the proposi-

tions which he implied are so obvious that he needn’t bother to argue them.

- The idea that a university can and should reflect the “essence” of the situation where it is located is an “intellectual disease”, “nonsense”, “old hat” and to be equated with the establishment of the apartheid-created Bush colleges.

- The accusation that a person has cooked his CV and/or acted unethically is so unimportant that it merely demonstrates how little there is at stake at universities. A person to whom it has happened is entitled to be “pissed off” but not to have his/her name cleared by an independent board of inquiry.

- The suggestion that white liberals can be racists is so ludicrous that it’s OK to dismiss it as “Barney’s thing” as “the sport of generic racial labelling” and as equivalent to the apartheid labelling of all opposition as communist. (Why? Aren’t white liberals human?)

- The discussion about Africanists’ views of white liberals’ current contribution is not only an intellectual farce but a threat to “democracy, reconciliation, human rights, tolerance and so on”.

- In case the rest of us didn’t know, there are many examples in history of universities prohibiting, banning, expelling and threatening people they didn’t agree with. This is

demonstrated by a lofty dip into European history between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries. It follows that these unpleasant activities will be applied within South African universities should they try to become more congruent with their place and time.

- Propagating the idea that Black people discovered maths or the wheel is so absurd that it can be described as “rewriting history”, “kinky” behaviour, “dressing up funny”, and in some ways akin to Mad Cow disease (Someone who needs to bone up on his history, it seems).

- white people who argue the case that white liberals—as well as other people—can demonstrate racist thought and behaviour are “palefaced ululators, prostrated with self-flagellating confessions of primordial guilt”; that being so, their arguments can be ignored.

The lack of logical argument contained in all this is even more vivid in the writings of Ken Owen. For example, under the title *Wits and the Challenge of Excellence* (editorial *Sunday Times*, 17 March) Owen describes Charles van Onselen’s new book in utterly glowing terms, which is all fine, if slightly sycophantic; but then suggests that Van Onselen should therefore be exempt from criticism. In particular he should be immune from “shabby

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and the country will be safe ”

Abraham Lincoln

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imputations of racism” because no one who wrote that book could be racist. Moreover, the “environment of excellence and intellectual honesty which allowed Van Onselen to flourish” is dependent on “white academics and administrators” to “enforce the stern disciplines that made Wits a great institution” and as the survival of Professor Makgoba makes clear this is now under threat. I take it that Van Onselen would distance himself from such overt racism. What is clear is that rage has unhinged Owen’s powers of logic.

As for Makgoba himself, Owen has not apparently read his books so has no opinion about what kind of intellectual climate might be conducive to the excellence for which Makgoba might be responsible. What is clear to Owen is that Makgoba was “economical with the truth” in suggesting his CV was “open to misunderstanding”. How does Owen know that? If he is so clear why not tell the rest of us. I have never understood why the *Sunday Times*—or indeed any other newspaper—did not get a copy of that CV and send an investigative team to establish the extent of its accuracy: perhaps its Editor realised that innuendo is a more powerful weapon than the truth?

Intellectual muddle leading to double standards is common, though less blimpish, in the more liberal of the English language press. The *Mail & Guardian* (March 22–28) editorialises that Dennis Davis’ attack on the Human Rights Commission (claiming that the members had been chosen as a reward for political services) was “strikingly mild”; while Chairman Barney Pitso’s response (that Davis’ critique had racist overtones) was “really vicious”; it’s a moot point which of these insults most of us would rather avoid.

However, two things are taken for granted in that editorial which help to explain both the irritation of Africanist critics and the pain of the white liberal intellectual. One is that the political left has a special prerogative to “probe, criticise, argue and debate”. The other is that racism is to be recognised by the intended effects of the individual.

The first of these contains an assumption of superiority which irritates. Certainly the activities of probing, criticising, arguing and debating are valuable activities; but why are they assumed to exist in only that slice of the body politic? Is there an implication that debate and criticism cease when a person joins a governing party or decides to cooperate with one? Do we become sycophants when we use our judgement to decide when to support and when to criticise. Moreover, does arguing, probing etc. not count when it comes from positions other than the left-leaning intellectual?

Finally, does that activity exempt us from criticism? If we of the left criticise a government activity, why should they not defend themselves by criticising our viewpoint? Disagreeing with a view expressed by a newspaper is too often represented as an attempt to silence the press. Why? Perhaps it comes down to cynicism again.

The second assumption in the *M&G* editorial illustrated by the statement that although there may be racism in some criticism of government activity, “in Davis’ case it is patently not so”. No reasons given, no argument, just a statement of the obvious. Why? I suggest it is because the issue of racism is not being understood.

Racism is not only about the personal intentions of the perpetrator. Racism is a cultural mind-set, centred in the idea of white superiority which becomes embedded in the psyche of all of us. It is the result of centuries during which we have all been conditioned to norms of behaviour, thought patterns, assumptions, values, images, language issues and relationships which have dug themselves in way below where we have immediate conscious access to them. They show themselves in thoughts and activities that are a million miles from an individual’s intention to hurt.

For example, it turns out that in criticising the HRC, Davis meant only the right-wing white people appointed to it. He did not say so; and this is supposed to make it OK. The rest of us were supposed to know what he meant. He was engaged in a coded set of messages that would be clear to the in-people. In his mind that may have nothing to do with race. But it is a vivid reminder of how sophisticated racism (like sexism and classism) can operate; it often excludes simply by obfuscating. Intended or not, it is infuriating, because it confuses and humiliates. Its victims feel foolish. Nor is it any answer to suggest it is a class rather than a race issue: the point is that it excludes, and a defensive intellectual reaction solves nothing.

Another example of the chirpy semi-humorous unintended racism which so irritates some of us comes from the pen of Brian Kantor, UCT’s professor of economics, writing in the *Financial Mail* of March 22. Announcing his intellectual credentials right away by mentioning the “athletically challenged”, Kantor suggests that much as golfers level the playing field, so to speak, by the handicap system, all Black participants in the economy might be given a points system to compensate for their various degrees of past disadvantage. Kantor thinks this would be a fair and logical approach to affirmative action, but—here comes the cynicism—he thinks it wouldn’t work because in fact affirmative action is not about compensating for unequal access in the past, but “a case of special interest politics”.

Affirmative action, he claims “is to serve the interests of Blacks with professional skills, educational attainments and often also wealth”. Affirming them—here comes the racism—will disadvantage the poorer Black people because employing them will raise prices, create inefficiency and thus represent a tax on the poor. But just a sec. I thought these people had professional skills, educational attainments, etc. So what is it precisely that they lack which will create an inefficient market? Skin colour, maybe? Does Kantor claim there is no such thing as race prejudice or discrimination in South Africa? Or does he think that bringing black people into organisations at all levels adds nothing that would not have been there without them? That is surely not what he meant, but it is the effect of what he wrote.

There is being created a new form of political correctness, taking the cynical line that no one is to be trusted, that all action to correct the past is a cover for self-interest, and “hate speech” is what black people use in disagreeing with white people, not the other way round. This new form of PC is, as much as the old, a substitute for thinking. It creates knee-jerk reactions. Unlike the old form, it is cynical and in that it assumes self-serving motivation is universal.

It is noticeable indeed that this genre of writing actually avoids reasoned argument. It relies on the PC gibe itself, with tired jockey references to “physically different” (disabled) outsiders who are thus mocked once again. It invents and gives credence to silly excesses like objections to “manholes”, “black coffee” and “nippy” weather. It pretends to fear “threats to the English language”. Thus: “why have homosexuals taken over a perfectly good English word, gay, and made it into something different and nasty?” Ignoring the perversion by homophobics of perfectly good English words like pansy and queer. Language changes and develops. Thank God.

And thank God that in South Africa we rejoice in the kind of political and intellectual atmosphere in which I can write all this and get it printed and have arguments about it and suffer little more than ruffled feathers and the odd cold shoulder. The fact that this is true is due to the courage and intelligence and imagination of the English-language press in South Africa. So here’s to them.

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