

The Afrikaner

TWO major voices from within the Afrikaans community said no to invitations from the TRC to appear before the commission.

Nasionale Pers, my employer, decided: We have nothing to declare to the commission. All is written in accounts of our history. And three books of it were sent to the TRC. The NG Kerk decided it had much to apologise for, but rather not before this commission. Rather in a book. Many voices went up in the church, pleading that the commission was the instrument provided for by law to close the book on history. But the opposition was too strong.

The NP did appear before the commission, apologised and accepted responsibility ... up to a certain point. Beyond that point were acts by mavericks or by people who might have misunderstood their orders, the NP said.

The TRC didn't accept this. The NP (read FW de Klerk) lied if he said he did not know about the atrocities of the past. The NP must accept full responsibility for creating a climate in which atrocities could take place. The NP took the TRC to court because of the way they treated the party. And the two leaders of the TRC had to apologise before the parties could settle their differences.

Where does this leave me, the ordinary Afrikaans guy who grew up in stable, safe circumstances and who had the privilege of a good education which landed me a good job?

The suspicion in my church, community and from my employer towards the TRC – where does it leave me? Where does this attitude leave the thousands of Afrikaners who do not want or have any better choice but to build their future in this country?

Many of my colleagues signed a letter to the TRC in which they apologised. I didn't. You may weigh me on the same scale as De Klerk, but I cannot ask forgiveness for things I have never been involved in, like the alleged misrepresentation of facts to keep the NP in power. (I only started working for Naspers in August 1992.)

But as a young South African there are many things I do regret. Things I would indeed like to get off my chest, such as:

- That millions of people live below the breadline, their children suffering with very little hope of a good education.
- That millions of people were denied the right to vote. (I am very grateful to be part of a new society with the heavy moral burden of apartheid lifted from my shoulders.)
- That black lives were considered to be of less value than white lives.
- That apartheid was implemented as a policy by people who felt threatened by illiterate masses with a culture and value system very different from their own.
- That people suffered under this policy

because of the force and cruelty with which it was often enforced.

- That all parties did not sit around a table much sooner to negotiate a solution.
- That a war evolved in which bombs were planted in public places and in which even churches and pubs were attacked in the name of a quest for freedom. (Let me add: As a schoolboy and young man I supported the war against the revolutionaries. Not because I supported apartheid – I had a lot of sympathy for the cause of the oppressed – but because I loathed the methods used by them, especially the incredibly cruel necklacing murders.)
- That the Police and Defence Force acted in ways that shock me totally. I am indeed very glad that many atrocities are now revealed – and regret that in many cases people are given amnesty.

After all is said and done, I must express my regret that the door on history has to be closed by a commission which is mistrusted, and even rejected, by the two major opposition parties (the NP and IFP) and probably the largest segment of the white community.

What is the root of this suspicion and rejection in the Afrikaans community? Why do newspapers and people sneeringly refer to the TRC as the "Biegbank", "Liegen-biegbank" (Lying and Confessing Commission) and "Waarheids-en-voorsieningskommissie" (Truth and Provision Commission)?

We come from an era of bitter conflict and a time seething with mistrust and hatred. Therefore it is a pity that the commission – intent on reconciliation and nation-building – is so unbalanced in its composition. It is to be regretted that politicians and the media, with a few exceptions, did not expose this critical flaw more vigorously before the process started.

There are only two "wit Afrikaners" among the 17 commissioners. Many Afrikaners do not accept Wynand Malan. He left the NP and started a new movement in the middle 80s.

I supported his party, but I must admit that Malan lost my vote when he allowed the ANC to get off the hook with his silly comparison of "kill the farmer" with the baby song "Siembamba" when the ANC appeared before the commission. Chris de Jager is a former politician of the CP and not at all representative of the many Afrikaners who do not support the right wing.

The rest of the commissioners are seen by the Afrikaans community to be either struggle people or English liberals – both groups with very little understanding or sympathy for the history and wishes of the Afrikaans people. The average Afrikaner, somebody who might have voted for De Klerk in past elections, has no voice whatsoever in the commission.

And many actions of the commission have strengthened the suspicion – such as the cordial way in which the "victorious" ANC delegation was received before the commission. The TRC legal representative who questioned the ANC, shared jokes with them. The atmosphere was warm and friendly.

But swords were drawn for De Klerk. He was

grilled. In his gruelling session he asked for a smoke break. It was – quite symbolically – refused. The press conference afterwards was interpreted by many Afrikaans people as the public humiliation of their leader.

The hearing on conscription was hijacked by the objectors. Not a voice was heard from the many thousands of South Africans who today still believe they played a role to prevent bloodshed and anarchy by doing national service.

The ANC was allowed to get away with murder when they simply did not pitch up at the media hearings to answer questions about blood-thirsty reports on Radio Freedom. Yet the Afrikaans media got a hiding from the TRC for not being there.

Much progress has been made in revealing the Vlakplaas atrocities but the same cannot be said about the Church Street bomb and other similar attacks.

A huge problem many South Africans have with the commission, is the modus operandi decided upon for the Human Rights Violations hearings. Untested allegations were made in front of the world media. An SABC reporter put it this way: "The TRC leaves behind a trail of corpses with many character assassinations being the order of the day." At least one defamation suit hangs over my head after reporting some of these allegations. Thank heavens the Court of Appeal has stopped this.

Only a fool will say that the commission has no value. It has uncovered the truth about many atrocities and many victims got the chance to tell their stories, with definite therapeutic value. (Unfortunately the responsible committee of the TRC has apparently not succeeded in awarding urgent relief to many people in dire straits.)

I've also been quite impressed by the judgments of the amnesty committee that seemed to be according to the letter of the law. Unfortunately there did not always seem to be the necessary sense of urgency in the light of the 7 000-plus applications that were received.

Has the process brought the country any closer to reconciliation? Nobody I know believes that it did.

And the biggest blow to reconciliation might come with the final report.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has already warned that those who did not take part, should not be angry about the outcome. The TRC's final report may contain damning judgements against Afrikaners, the NG Kerk, the Afrikaans media and Inkatha.

Many people simply believe it to be far safer not to appear before a commission that will not understand or believe what you say. Especially after what happened to De Klerk. No one wants to be humiliated in front of the world media. This could easily have happened with Naspers.

But non-participation in the commission's proceedings doesn't mean that reconciliation is rejected. Or that you have things to hide. I don't know any Afrikaner who does not want reconciliation and peace. But unfortunately the perception is rooted too deeply that the TRC is not the instrument to achieve that.

CHRISTO VAN STADEN, who covers the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Die Burger, expresses the suspicion in the Afrikaans community towards the TRC.