RATTLE dem BONES!

The call to forget the past and bury the skeletons of apartheid lingers on. WILMOT JAMES argues that this approach will be fatal for genuine democracy, and suggests a course of action for dealing with apartheid grievances.

FW de Klerk and his supporters have admitted to the failure of apartheid as a political system, but they have yet to acknowledge its cost, let alone specify mechanisms that will address the consequences of its regrettable successes in some key social and personal arenas of South African life.

Political actors currently involved in the affairs of Codesa and the wider constituencies they represent have been urged to forget the past and to "wipe" the "slate" clean in a spirit of "toenadering" and reconciliation. When speaking to various (white) constituencies during the run up to the March 1992 referendum, De Klerk received loud acclamation when he appealed to the public to leave the skeletons of apartheid in the cupboard where they (presumably) belonged.

The "clean slate" phenomenon is worrying in a number of respects. It frees the present government and their supporters from a moral and financial responsibility for actions which they and their predecessors are accountable. Refusing to face up to the consequences of apartheid, the National Party avoids the financial commitments which a mechanism of redress for past injustice might oblige them to meet. In line with its current constitutional proposals which seek to link the allocation of resources for majorities to the veto of minorities, a "clean slate" frees whites from having to pay for such disadvantages as their past privileges have in part generated. Therefore, if we start afresh, from a symmetrical moral bottomline, blacks would have to fund their liberation from the proceeds of growth and not from redistributing state revenues based as they largely are on the wealth of whites.

It appears short-sighted to try and build a nation on constituencies that harbour unredressed grievances against a party and a leadership they believe have done them great harm in the past. It is likely that this will produce a political order with an unresolved, fragile and weak moral centre, and constituencies that are polarised along traditional racial lines. Observers of democratic societies have emphasised the importance of establishing personal and professional ties

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that cut across traditional divisions and loyalties. Policies that are blind to historical grievances will reproduce – not erode – the polarisation between oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim, them and us, whites supporting traditional white parties and blacks traditionally black ones. A future democratic society demands that we break from such divisions, so that people do not at every opportunity divide along (the same) racial fault-lines when confronting the crucial questions of the day.

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Keeping the "skeletons in the cupboard" also fires the already wild imagination of those Africanists who hold whites collectively responsible for a history of colonialism, segregation and apartheid. The NP's failure to admit let alone address the people's grievances will appear to confirm the notion that whites have no concern for the welfare of blacks, a disposition rooted, it is argued, in their status as settlers. The Africanist characterisation of nationality does not assist a democratic project either, for it freezes the population into two irreconcilable racial groups, locked in an ongoing struggle over resources and political power. Cross-cutting solidarities are not only given short-shrift, they are ruled out altogether.

What, then, is the character of the grievances, and in which social processes are they rooted? This society must live with and confront the shame of racial classification, of tearing families asunder, and of criminalisng "interracial" sex and "mixed" marriages. We are now feeling the consequences of decades of influx control, pass laws, forced removals and group areas in efforts to create a single-revenue base and service-delivery infrastructure for integrated cities.

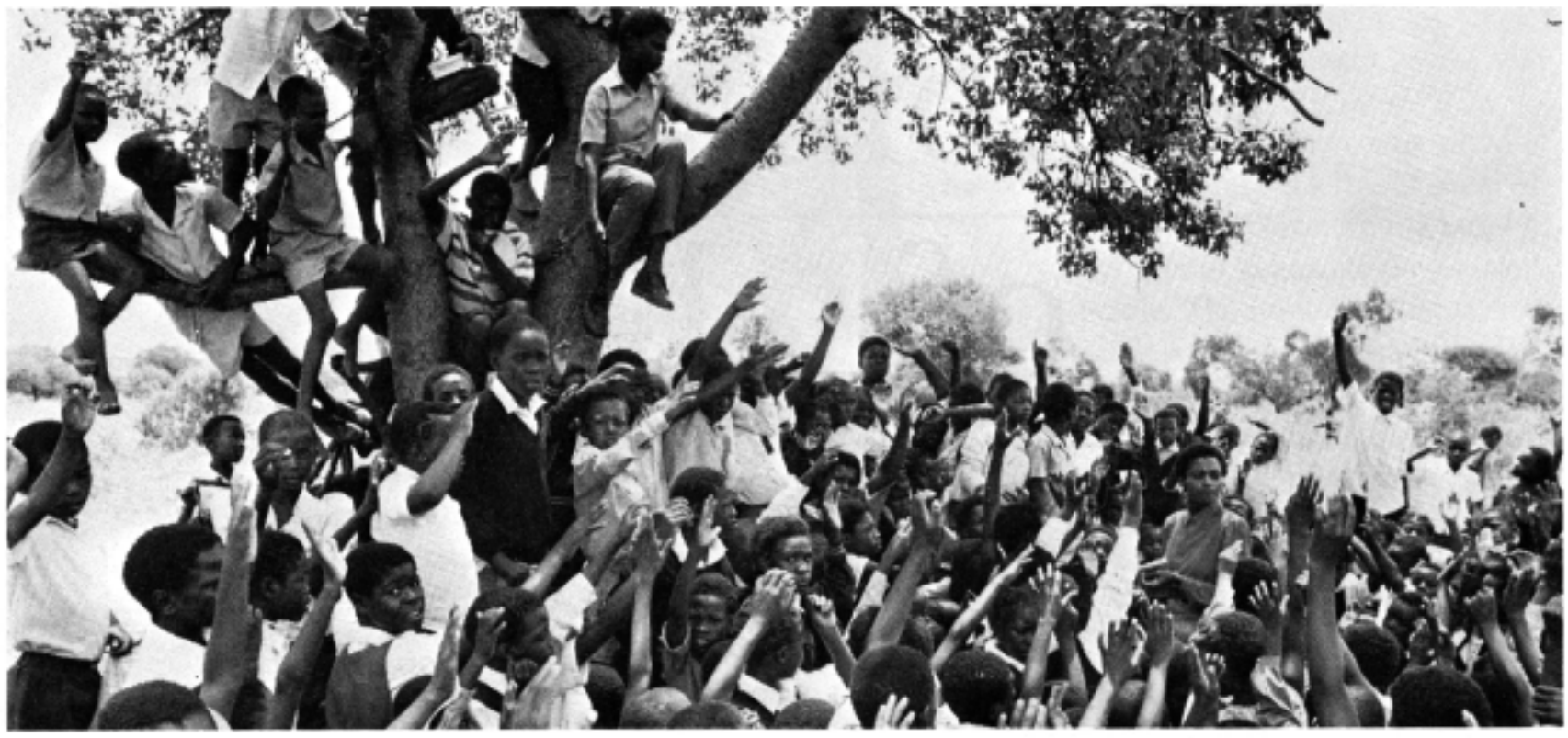
The business community faces a skewed and uneven skill profile which a history of job reservation, employment discrimination and inferior education had bequeathed. At Codesa, the political problems of homelands loom large. The question of land ownership, distribution and use could become one of the most intractable problems of a post-apartheid South Africa. It bears mentioning, too, that the widespread and vicious repression and political manipulation of the 1970s and 1980s feeds into the unrelenting and tragic violence of the townships today. This list, by no means complete, is a daunting one.

A distinction can be drawn between grievances based on apartheid practices that diminished the spirit and humanity of its victims, and those that also had material and resource consequences. This is not always an easy distinction to uphold, as the dehumanisation of victim populations often had resource implications too. On this admittedly unsatisfactory basis, we can nevertheless appeal to the world of politics to encourage three sorts of practices: firstly, to openly and honestly begin to acknowledge the human consequences of apartheid by promoting the diffusion of information about our past, however ugly it might be. Lest we trip over our own ignorance, and think we can start anew without properly knowing

the old, an informed and enlightened population can begin the difficult but badly needed process of spiritual reckoning. Funding should be allocated so that historians and other interested individuals can take the skeletons out of the cupboards and dissect their meaning and significance.

Secondly, means of psychological, social and resource support for ex-political prisoners and returning exiles can be provided, in order to facilitate their integration into society. The Human Sciences Research Council and other bodies ought to fund ongoing research into the problems ex-political prisoners and returning exiles face when looking for jobs, a place to stay, opening a bank account and other taken-for-granted needs of modern life.

Thirdly, provision can be made for non-partisan and wide-ranging corrective mechanisms for those individuals who were demonstrably disadvantaged in resource terms by apartheid measures, for example land appropriation, forced removals and group areas. De Klerk's appointment during 1991 of a commission to investigate land claims was certainly a step in the right direction, but other arenas such as group areas require an investigative commission's attention too. In these terms, the opportunity to lodge a grievance and claim redress in resource terms would be of the greatest symbolic importance.I would suggest that these measures are essential and not incidental to the building of a democratic society, for they celebrate a new honesty in our political lives and draw a grievance-heavy population, who also happen to be the majority, around a common moral hearth. Many people too easily scoff at the old-fashioned sociological notion that a stable democratic society requires a common value system where people, at best, agree that politics and society are good and, at worst, that it is not bad. By converting grievance into praise, it might just be possible to turn this remarkably destructive society into one of positive energy, growth and democracy.



Cause of grievance: "open air" schooling in Soshanguve.

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