

# SHEPSTONE, NATAL AND THE ROOTS OF SEGREGATION

A review of "The Roots of Segregation: Native Policy in Natal 1845- 1910" by David Welsh (Oxford University Press, 1971. R8,00)

by Edgar Brookes

Sixty years ago in the Natal High Schools the political hero of Natal was Sir Theophilus Shepstone. Russell's "Natal", in the writing of which he was consulted, did full justice, perhaps a little more than justice, to his achievements. At a much more recent date the University of Natal claimed and was accorded, the honour of incorporating the Shepstone crest in its armorial bearings. Now comes David Welsh and in the best tradition of modern historical biography he "debunks", with erudition and brilliance, Shepstone and all his doings. Where does the truth lie?

"Native policy" in pre-Union Natal has been described as "embalmed Shepstonism plus acquisitiveness". In the 1870's the Shepstone policy had become a fixed tradition. It amounted to the segregation of the Africans in scattered Reserves, under the rule of Chiefs; the encouragement of the tribal system; the recognition of tribal customary law; and the discouragement — or at best the somewhat reluctant tolerance — of the spread of white civilisation among them. This, we may say, is the basis of Nationalist policy, but Nationalism is more liberal than Shepstonism: Sir Theophilus never envisaged a University of Zululand.

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One of the main points which comes out of this study — perfectly valid if not of the first importance — is that apartheid is neither an Afrikaans nor a Nationalist discovery. It originated in English-speaking Natal; it was frequently approved by the Colonial Office; Rhodesia consciously borrowed it from Natal. Even the Milner Commission of 1903-5 reported in favour of separation in land ownership and separation in the franchise, and provided the basis for the Natives' Land Act of 1913 and General Hertzog's Representation of Natives Act of 1936. The cause of Liberalism is not advanced by presenting it as the English reaction against Afrikaner obscurantism. Shepstonism was repugnant to W.P. Schreiner, Onze Jan, President Steyn and Professor B.B. Keet; it was supported by Sir John Robinson, Sir Herbert Stoley, Dr. Jameson (at least in Rhodesia) and Sir Frederick Moor.

It is not quite fair to put all the blame on to Natal. The system of Reserves began in the Cape sixteen or seventeen years earlier than in Shepstone's Colony. Even the much-lauded Transkeian system was based on territorial separation. But the later Shepstone policy was more thoroughgoing than that of the Cape, more lauded (not least by the Colonial Office) and more systematised.

We speak of the "later" Shepstone policy. It must be remembered to Sir Theophilus's credit that when he first recommended the placing of Africans in Reserves he coupled with this the recommendation that missionaries and educational institutions should be encouraged in each Reserve. It was only when all monetary aid was refused him that he fell back on the tribal system. Not only missionaries but magistrates were refused him: he *had* to resuscitate and encourage the tribal system in order to have government at all.

Out of his improvisations, both brilliant and necessary, he and others built a theory. The second-best became the ideal. The great Karl Marx once said of himself, in one of his all too rare moments of humour: "I am not a Marxist", but Shepstone never seems to have said, "I am not a Shepstonian". He was willing to accept the good opinions of the Colonial Office of the 1870's for a policy forced on him by the parsimony and unimaginativeness of the Colonial Office of the 1840's. By the time of the annexation of the Transvaal in 1877 he had come to believe blindly and deeply in the "Shepstone policy".

That this analysis is correct can be illustrated in two ways.

In the early years of Natal's existence as a Crown Colony the elected members of the Legislative Council were to a man against Shepstone: in the 1870's they were all for him.

No one will accuse Bishop Colenso of being a reactionary. More than any other early Natalian he strove for the education of the Zulus. In the earlier years of his episcopate he was the close friend and admirer of Theophilus Shepstone. From the time of the Langilabalele episode (1872) he became Shepstone's unsparing critic.

Once he had started on this downward slope, Shepstone slid a long way. He must undoubtedly bear a large share of blame for the Zulu War of 1879 and for the failure of the restoration of Cetshwayo in 1883. The Zulu royal family came to hate the very name of Shepstone. It is a little-known but thoroughly attested fact that Doris Shepstone, a liberal and otherwise an excellent candidate, lost the Senate election of 1937 largely because the Zulu royal family would not support anyone who bore that hated name.

Thus far David Welsh has amply proved his case. But he and others do less than justice to the early Shepstone. He is criticised by some for putting the Africans into Reserves. What else was he to do in the conditions of the 1840's? Even Dr. John Philip, even Dr. Lindley, even Sir George

Grey, believed that some such provision was necessary, as indeed it was. Surely it is hind-sight which assumes that Shepstone ought to have known that the Reserves were going to become warrens of barbarism. There was a famous controversy between Shepstone in his last years and President Reitz on this matter: those who support President Reitz must commit themselves to the view that the Free State system of distributing almost the whole African population on European farms as farm labourers was better than a Reserve policy.

Inadequate justice has been done to the epic fight which the young Theophilus Shepstone (only in his early thirties and with no great influence behind him) put up against the colonists, Sir Harry Smith and Benjamin Pine, to preserve some land for the Africans and to prevent them from becoming merely cheap labour for white farmers. At the time it was the best thing he could do for them. It cost him popularity and peace. His motivation can only have been a sense of justice.

David Welsh has proved to the hilt that "the evil that Shepstone did lived after him". May we also plead that the good he did in his early years may not be "interred with his bones". □



*Sir Theophilus Shepstone*

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## FALLACIES OF

# ” THE WHITE ENLIGHTENMENT ”

by John Wright

Natal readers of Reality may remember the angry reaction of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, Chief Executive Councillor of the Zulu Territorial Authority, to a leading article that appeared in the Natal Mercury in September last year under the headline 'Evolutionary Currents'. The article took Chief Buthelezi to task for referring to certain whites as 'those who keep me in the shackles of slavery', and went on to put forward the Mercury's own interpretations of 'the real slavery' of South Africa's black peoples and to make a number of general assessments of their history and culture. In a long and sharply critical reply, Chief Buthelezi rejected the Mercury's arguments as an example of 'white paternalistic arrogance' and expressed in no uncertain terms the depth of his disillusion with the politics of white 'moderation'. His letter, with a reprint of the offending article, was published in the Mercury on October 2.

In its own way each is an important document. In showing the intensity of the resentment felt by black South Africans when they see themselves as patronized by whites, Chief Buthelezi's letter focuses closer attention on the Mercury's article than would normally be given to a newspaper editorial. 'Evolutionary Currents' turns out, in fact, to be the most revealing example to appear for some time of that newspaper's periodic commentaries on the particular characteristics of South Africa's racial groups. While the Mercury's editorial judgements are not usually distinguished by any great degree of insight, its position as a large metropolitan newspaper with a predominantly white readership lends some importance to its leading articles as indicators of white public opinion, and especially of white attitudes to African culture and African achievements. It is admittedly a dangerous exercise to try to deduce the state of public opinion from newspaper articles alone, but it seems a safe enough assumption that most of the Mercury's white readers — and the great majority of white South Africans — would accept the important cultural and historical judgements