The Institute of Race Relations

— *its role and relevance*

Sash editor Jill Wentzel interviews the Institute's Director John Kane-Berman

John Kane-Berman's mother, Gaby, was a founder member of Sash and a member of the Liberal Party. His father Louis was the Torch Commando's National Chairman. Politicised from childhood, editor (with Clive Nettleton) of a reportedly scurrilous sixth-form newspaper, 'Sixth Sense', living among duplicating machines, petitions, protests and endless meetings, John grew up as a child (or skivvy) of the Black Sash, the Liberal Party, and the PFP. Members have followed his career from president of the Wits SRC to an Oxford PPE as a Rhodes Scholar, a researcher for the South African Institute of Race Relations, a journalist, assistant editor of the Financial Mail, a brilliant foreign correspondent — and now Director of the South African Institute of Race Relations.

As a founder Sash member myself, I've known John since he was 10 and I was 23. I most vividly remember him as a young researcher for the SAIRR, bitterly critical of the conservatism of the Council, absolutely furious when his exposures of business malpractice were subjected to merciless scrutiny and editing by Ellen Hellmann (it was he, was it not, who nicknamed her The Godmother?). Then, he grudgingly admired her; now, ironically, he wears her mantle in his efforts to return the Institute to the Ellen Hellmann ethic — political lobbying based on impeccable and independent research. Most vividly of all I remember John hurling abuse at me for reading George Orwell, who, he said, curling his lip scornfully then as now, was socialism's single most irresponsible and dangerous destroyer. Well, kyk hoe lyk hy nou . . .

John, you took over the Institute amid financial crisis and administrative breakdown, and you have spent just over a year trying to consolidate and start afresh. Inevitably, amid all the cutting back and redefining and consolidating, people have felt let down or bewildered or antagonistic. I think it would be useful if we examined some of the criticisms currently levelled at you and the Institute. Let us start with the most common of these: that now there is nothing for ordinary members to do; that the most important functions where all races could meet, where everybody felt comfortable and at home, were the lunch clubs. Why, people ask, have these been closed down in favour of symposiums where the whole flavour is elitist?

The lunch clubs were stopped because, with the occasional exception, only about two dozen people attended although well over a thousand were invited each time to hear the guest speaker. Now that we hold the equivalent function in the evening we get three or four times as many people and quite often well over 100. We also get a much bigger black attendance.

And do you feel a more elitist audience have attended these functions?

It's very difficult to judge, especially since we are seeing a lot of new faces, black as well as white. Our evening panel discussion on the cultural boycott, which was very exciting and controversial, drew more than 100 people, of whom about three quarters were black people we'd not seen before.

You couldn't have called these VIP's ?

I shouldn't have thought so.

Let's return to the question of there being nothing for ordinary members to do. There is widespread criticism regarding the abandoning of projects. People feel lack of money isn't a good enough excuse and say that projects can be devised where people can work together across the colour line for common goals, which do not need to cost much money. There is a lot of dismay at the closing of the arts and crafts shops.

When I was appointed director of the Institute in September 1983 it had already had to obtain a large bank overdraft and we had to take a very thorough look at the whole range of our activities and the costs thereof. We found that we had become a kind of holding company for a large number of projects, and there was simply not the money to continue financing them. The project itself may not seem terribly expensive but there are all sorts of overhead costs like bookkeepers and telephones and so on. These all add up, so it's just not true to say projects can be run without worrying about the costs. The arts and crafts shops, for example, were collectively losing R2 000 to R3 000 a month. With an overdraft of well over R100 000 we had no choice but to call a halt. You can't go on subsidising projects on borrowed money.

In any event there are now a whole range of other organisations with expertise in a variety of fields and we see no purpose in attempting to duplicate. Operation Hunger was initiated by us and once it was able to stand on its own feet administratively it went off on its own with our blessing (as other projects have done since the 1930s) and we, of course, are still represented on its board of trustees.

We still have two major project-type activities going in Johannesburg. One is the Education Support Programme, which last year had about 1 200 black schoolchildren studying for the JMB matric. The project will continue, as long as the funding does. The main project that we have, however, is our bursary programme, which is the biggest in the country as far a I know. Last year from our Johannesburg office we had about 325 black students at university.

Our ability to continue with this very large bursary programme depends on receiving the necessary funding and I have recently been in western Europe trying to increase that funding. Some of our regional offices also run big bursary programmes for both schoolchildren and university students.

So why do people, do you think, get the vision suddenly of Race Relations as an organisation that seems to be divorced from anything other than elitist functions for important business people? Someone said that the Institute seemed to have turned into 'a business advisory service.' Why do you think people are saying that?

I don't really know. Possibly they see things changing at Auden House and feel threatened by the changes. Our functions are certainly not divorced from issues of concern to the majority of the people in this country. We have organised discussions around the new constitution; we've had local and foreign experts talking about the dynamics of change in this country; we've looked at Namibia, influx control, the crisis in black education, whether ethnic editions of newspapers are perpetuating apartheid, and so on.

Another issue that we had a panel discussion on one evening was the Nkomati Accord, and that was a specific attempt to enable our own members and the public at large to listen to three or four diffferent black perspectives on the issue. We did that because we thought whites should be made aware of the fact that blacks didn't necessarily share their euphoria about the accord.

We encourage business leaders to attend because we believe that one of our roles is to try to put them in touch with black attitudes from the most militant to the least politicised. But that doesn't mean that the functions are geared towards business. Some, in fact, are geared in the opposite direction — like the briefing we specially arranged this week for trade union leaders on the Urban Foundation's investigation into influx control. We knew this information was being made available to the top business leaders and we wanted the unions to have it too.

Have you any ideas of numbers vis-a-vis black/white membership?

We obviously don't have records on a racial basis but I would guess our membership is three-quarters white and always has been. It's not at all a satisfactory situation. The question of increasing black membership has been raised repeatedly down the years at Institute meetings, but there has been a feeling that for us actively to recruit members from a particular section of the community is contrary to the whole ethos of an organisation which is supposed to be colour-blind. I don't believe that this is necessarily the right approach and we intend to take steps to increase our black membership. And people of all races continue to enrol.

One member quoted Ellen Hellmann as saying that she wanted the Institute to be relevant in the townships. What hope would there be of the Institute being relevant in the townships?

I'm never sure what that rather vague word is supposed to mean. I imagine we could be relevant as a charitable, or para-legal, or community-help organisation, but I don't think that's really our function. That work is obviously important but it is nevertheless really concerned with treating symptoms. We have set ourselves the tougher, and, I think, more radical task of getting to grips with the causes of some of the problems in this country, which are all too often rooted in our political system, and to work for structural change. If one takes something like education, our bursary programme is assisting several thousand black pupils and students and that's essential because they would not otherwise have the opportunity. However, we don't believe it is right that their chances of going to school or university should depend on the generosity of individuals or the private sector or foreign governments and foreign churches. After all, white education doesn't depend on charity. We therefore see it as our main purpose to work for fundamental changes in official education *policy* in South Africa.

I reckon when people talk about being relevant in the townships, what they are really criticising you for is not joining in on UDF campaigns, not joining the end-conscription campaign, that kind of thing.

I don't think — and I'm sure our governing Council doesn't think — that we should identify with particular political causes even though we might sometimes agree with the views of protest organisations. One of our problems down the years is that we have been too often preaching to the converted and have become part of a kind of protest laager, but if we are going to have any impact in this country in bringing about policy changes we have to break out of that laager and start making an impact on people who are not members of it. If we publish research showing the detrimental effects of the pass laws, for example, we want it to be respected because it is accurate from a statistical point of view, because it is dispassionate in its presentation, and because it is seen to be independent and not grinding the political axe of any particular organisation. We believe we will have more impact that way.

You must also remember that the Institute has been around a long time, since 1929. It has seen protests come and go; it saw the defiance campaign come and go, it saw the great hope of real change in 1960 and 1976 come and go. I can understand why many people feel this is very exciting each time it happens, and I also want apartheid to disappear overnight, but that is impossible because the government is entrenched in power. I'm not saying more gradual change is necessarily best. What I am saying is that, in my judgment, change is not going to come about in any other way. If you are to make an impact on the process, it is just as important to make a realistic assessment of your weaknesses as to know your strengths, or you might rush headlong into strategies that get you nowhere.

I have the feeling that people have reacted, actually, with a lot of anger and disappointment as the Institute has withdrawn from this kind of thing. Have you tried to explain yourself to the members? It seems to have generated a lot of anger, this withdrawal.

We have attempted to explain the new strategic direction, decided by our Council in January last year, both in our quarterly newspaper *Race Relations News* and at a public meeting in Cape Town and also at a closed meeting of members in Durban which our regional committees there invited me to address. As for a general feeling of anger towards our new strategic direction, I believe people will eventually agree with us when they see results — when they see we are able to be more effective and more influential by acting independently.

In the correspondence published in this issue you can see that I got into some trouble for suggesting that the Institute was anathema in some circles. Nevertheless I have noted a resentment of the Institute building up in what I would call more militant, *indeed more fashionable circles. I would imagine* that a large part of this resentment centres around the Institute's attitude to defensive violence.

I presume by that you mean people who are not themselves involved in acts of violence against the state but who nevertheless at the very least regard them as understandable, or even necessary, because they believe the apartheid system itself rests on what is sometimes called institutionalized violence.

Our organization opposes violence from whatever quarter not only because we regard human life as sacrosanct but also because history shows there is a very great risk that out of it will come a society based on even greater institutionalized violence than the one it replaces (Iran for example). The great impatience of everyone who wants to see immediate change is understandable, as is their scepticism about its chances of coming about peacefully: but, whereas the hardcore perpetrators of violence fully understand what they are about, some of their supporters, including their armchair supporters, are naïve in the extreme in supposing that a government installed in power here at the end of a protracted period of violence and civil war would necessarily be better than the present one.

Any organization, like the Institute, that attempts to explode this romanticism will be deeply threatening. We have chosen to work for black-white reconciliation. We cannot deliver results quickly enough for angry people. Our task is the hard grind of promoting the idea of political compromise and the plodding search for accommodating structures, and if necessary building up such structures block by block from the bottom up.

We see no benefit in a vicious circle of violence and counter violence. Indeed our raison d'etre is to break that cycle. So attracting resentment, as you put it, from hardliners on left and right, is really part and parcel of the price that we have to pay for being what we are. Our job of promoting reconciliation and compromise necessarily involves understanding every point of view and presenting each point of view to the proponents of other points of view. In order to do that we have to give a platform to all points of view. If we are 'anathematised' it is because we refuse to anathematise others.

One of your members, upset by what she feels is the changed role of the Institute, said, 'The word Race Relations implies doing something to improve race relations. Is there now a new definition of the title Institute of Race Relations and have we now to get used to a new concept?' So John, do you feel the Institute really has a role to play improving race relations?

I certainly do. Apart from the fact that people meet and talk at all our functions (that is what they are all about — discussion across differences of race or ideology), we are able to bring together government officials, black trade union and political leaders, black personnel managers, white businessmen and so on, so that we have blacks and whites not only just meeting each other, but meeting in circumstances where the divide is not always black-white.

But we don't think that simply providing those kinds of opportunities is enough. It's only a step. Improving race relations necessitates fundamental change. If race relations in industry are better now than ten years ago, *it's not because people are politer to one another but* because industrial relations have been restructured. Black workers have fought for and won trade union bargaining

power so management has had to change its attitude. Improving race relations in a more general sense means getting the government to do the same. In other words, it means working for political compromise and structural political change. This won't happen merely by talking or doing research or protesting but by the building of political bargaining power by the African majority. If we can act as a kind of intermediary in persuading whites to respond constructively, that is part of our role. Our research comes in, not as an end in itself, but as a data base for us to use to back up our arguments with solid fact and dispassionate analysis. It's also very useful to others — 'indispensable,' one trade union newspaper said, because our *Survey* provided 'back-up information' for representation to various authorities.

I may add that the political compromise I am referring to is not simply a question of white and black, though that will be difficult enough. Black politics is already starkly polarised within itself and mutual acceptance of each faction's political legitimacy would be essential to the success of any national convention or equivalent process. Otherwise we may run the risk of going the same way as Angola and Mozambique.

Are you willing to have dealings with the government?

Of course we are. The very confusion in goverment policy which is evident in practically every speech a minister makes is not something merely to be laughed at. That is the job of newspaper cartoonists and opposition MPs. Our job is to recognise that there is a confusion and exploit it by injecting some objective data into the debate in order to point the way to different policies. When a senior minister sent one of his advisers to see us recently to ask for our perspective on the disturbances in the Vaal Triangle I saw it as our job to make use of the opportunity to raise with him all the issues that we have been shouting to deaf ears about for years, like freehold, and why black political prisoners should be released and banned parties legalised again, to talk to him about the necessity of sensible financing of local authorities, to say to him the government must recognise that it can't expect black local authorities to get off the ground unless it *gives them real power, and that if it gives them real* power it must recognise that it may find this uncomfortable, but that it is actually in everybody's interests that black people build up non-violent bargaining power.

Well, a lot of people are going to call this 'co-operating with an evil system.'

It is not a question of co-operating with evil. It is a ques*tion of making use of an opportunity to get your views* heard in circles that make political decisions which affect people's lives. In any event, the question for the Institute is not whether the government is evil or not, but how to get it to abandon policies that are harmful to the country. It always particulary amuses me when people in universities attack others for collaborating with evil or capitalism or whatever, because these institutions wouldn't last a day without their huge subsidies from parliament and business. I don't suppose any of the political hardliners there are going to refuse money voted to them by the new tricameral parliament either.

So you mean, John, that making use of structures *the government has been compelled to create* could have strategic advantages for blacks?

Well, if one takes, for example, something that has arisen in the last year in black schools, the demand for SRCs. Those have now been conceded. Not in the form that the schoolchildren wanted, but it is a major step. I can't for a moment see the white Transvaal Education Department readily allowing SRCs to be formed in white government schools. I would suggest that the kind of strategy that needs to be carefully considered — I am *not necessarily* advocating it — is to say, 'All right, we now have the SRCs. We are going to take them and put our leaders on to them at democratic elections and we are going to use them to our political advantage.' That's one strategy as opposed to simply rejecting the proposal completely because it hasn't been conceded in precisely the form you want.

I think, dare I say it, that the black local authorities present a possible opportunity for the same kind of thing now that it seems that they may be in a stronger position financially. If the different political organizations (*UDF*, Inkatha, Azapo etc) built up their power bases as political parties and variously and democratically took control of the 400-odd black townships in this country, you would have councillors who were less vulnerable to nepotism or manipulation by the government because they would have to answer to their political party. In this way you could use the black local authorities to build up strong black institutional bargaining power around the country — and a potential formidable challenge to the government. It would need a lot of political ingenuity (of the kind which the trade unions have developed) to get control of these institutions; but they could be hijacked to the advantage of the legitimate black political organisations.

There's another point. If Africans are one day going to be running this country, then the more practical experience they get in the meantime wherever they can get the chance the better. No matter what their causes are, the housing and educational backlogs are not going to disappear when the National Party's monopoly of power does, nor are the problems that are attached to urbanisation or squatting. After all, Mugabe and Machel are having to grapple with them, as are dozens of other governments all over Africa. There is no time to be wasted in finding the appropriate solutions, and the sooner blacks can involve themselves in the awesome responsibilities that all government, including democratic government, entails, the better it will ultimately be for everyone. Here as in other countries, it's a question of trial and error. The quicker the trials start, the quicker the errors have a chance of being eliminated. I don't say the black local authorities in their present form are the answer. What I do say is that I have every confidence that legitimate black leaders can out-manoeuvre whatever Machiavellian intentions the government may have and turn these local authorities to the advantage of their constituents.

Let's deal with the criticism that is so often hurled at you, John, that you don't really retain your independence, that you are biased towards Chief Gatsha Buthelezi and Inkatha. You are a great friend of Chief Buthelezi, are you not?

I would be honoured if he regarded me as a friend. I certainly am an admirer of his. But my personal friendships do not cause the Institute to be biased, as you suggest. I would ask you to point to one policy decision taken by the Institute or one publication issued that substantiates an accusation of bias towards anybody since I have been Director (and before, of course). Chief Buthelezi has had a platform at the Institute. But so have representatives of the Transvaal Indian Congress, the Labour Party, the Transvaal Council on Sport, Swapo, black journalists with anti-Inkatha views, the Soweto Civic Association, etc.

Nobody objects to our providing platforms for, or having contact with, any of these other organisations so I can't avoid the suspicion that the reason the Inkatha question is raised at all is that there is a strong — and fashionable — sentiment in some circles that Buthelezi must be completely stigmatised rather than given a platform along with many others at the Institute. This sentiment sometimes leads to very odd behaviour, for example, when demonstrators effectively stopped him from speaking at the University of Cape Town last year. But for a group of university students — including white South African students, who must be among the most privileged of elites on earth — to deny any black leader with a large following of poor and illiterate people the right to be heard seems to me rather arrogant, to say the least.

The Institute need not endorse or reject Buthelezi's overall political strategies but for us to treat him as a political untouchable, as some people seem to want us to do, would be indicative of an almost colonialist mentality. In any event our Council decides policy and to suggest that the present Director can align the Institute contrary to its constitution in favour of any one political organisation is nonsense.

What is your attitude to disinvestment?

If one is talking about general disinvestment — as opposed to carefully chosen, limited sanctions tied to specific attainable targets, where the arguments may be different — we need to recognise that the single most difficult problem which this country has to face is the spectre of many millions more jobless people by the year 2000. And that in my view means one has got to welcome investment that creates more jobs whether that investment is local or foreign.

No doubt some people who favour general disinvestment do so in the belief that if white South Africans are hurt economically they will be persuaded to make radical political changes. That seems to me to be rather naïve. It is much more likely that if the economic cake shrinks, whites will try and hang on to things even more firmly.

If disinvestment were to succeed it would have the potential to inflict great hurt and it is the long run effect of disinvestment which is the most disquieting. We live in a society with an explosive conjunction of affluence in the midst of poverty. We have to create jobs and prosperity and share that prosperity widely throughout our society to deal with rapid population growth and rising black expectations. Already we have a vast backlog in educational opportunities, not to mention jobs and houses. Disinvestment and/or trade sanctions, by causing the country as a whole to get poorer, will condemn even more people to lives of illiterate, jobless squalor.

The danger of disinvestment is that it will deliver a blow to the economy which no political change will be able to reverse. The idea that foreign companies will withdraw from South Africa but return after political change is naïve, for there are many places where that foreign investment would in the interim have been relocated.

I think there is another important point that one has to remember about foreign investment. If trade unions are not in a position to deliver material gains because the economy is stagnant and profits are declining and businesses are going bankrupt, they will have a very much tougher battle in winning benefits for their members. If we had been in a situation of economic stagnation, with foreign capital being withdrawn through the 1970s, I wonder whether we would have the resilient trade union movement that we have today.

An American visitor said, Why is the Institute so orientated towards the English-speaking community. Are you trying to change this?

The Institute's main support base down the years has been the white English speaking community, but we are not orientated solely in that direction. We make strenuous efforts to get our publications publicised in Afrikaans newspapers and in white newspapers read by blacks. In fact the briefing papers that we have published over the last year have had more coverage from newspapers like *The Sowetan* than in any other paper. We have at least one major Afrikaans company among our corporate members and I hope that we will get more. I recently had the opportunity to put the Institute's viewpoint on why the ANC and PAC and other black political organisations should have their bans lifted, and on other issues, to a group of Afrikaans academics, which included the chairman of the Broederbond. That is the kind of opportunity which we need and I welcome. If we can facilitate situations where black organisations can talk directly to the same kind of people, I welcome that too.