

Non-racialism: gathering the fragile threads

**What do we mean or understand by non-racialism?
How will the general principle be translated into
specific policies and practices? DON FOSTER
suggests that the debate is still in its infancy.**

Racism has been the dominant social organising principle in South Africa for some 340 years. What do we have to replace this dominant ideology? In this transition period it may be worthwhile to reflect quite critically on this question.

A decade or so ago, Neville Alexander alerted us to the surprising fact that, given its centrality, so little attention has been paid to the issues of "race" and racism in South Africa. Now, with violence and transition upon us, the position has not substantially changed: racism has not been given its due attention.

What is racism? Following Robert Miles ("Racism" published by Routledge, London, 1989) we may say that racism is an ideology: a social and psychological process of signification of the "other" as different and inferior. Nobody doubts the implication of capitalism in this process, particularly in South Africa, but most commentators now tend to see the relationship between capitalism and racism as a contingent and shifting, rather than as a necessary and static, one. There is little need to debate the case of racism here. South Africa has been, is at present and will be for some time yet, a racist society.

What do we have to challenge racism? Over the years the liberation movements in South Africa have developed four main principles to combat and challenge the racist order: non-racialism, democracy, class-transformation and – rather belatedly – non-sexism. All four are, or should be held to be, necessary and intertwined for positive social



and fragile threads", I suggested that non-racialism may better be treated in terms of a metaphor of "fragile threads", for the following reasons:

- Principles, forces or struggles against racism are of necessity quite fragile, as any rudimentary grasp of contemporary events in Britain, the USA or even Eastern Europe will testify.

- Contemporary knowledge of exactly how to challenge and transform racism is itself rather more fragile and fragmentary that we would care to admit in public places.

recently as the ANC executive committee has seen serious racism of Congresses

The 1980s turbulence Forum regarding anti-racism that Sansco's establishment of principle of non-

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racism as a key principle? Here is a suggested task for Idasa: gather this information as comprehensively and clearly as possible.

Then begins a second and perhaps more important set of questions; questions that will undoubtedly rage for years to come. How will the general principle of non-racialism be translated into specific policies and practices? For instance we may agree upon a practice of affirmative action in service of the principle of non-racialism. But what will be its boundaries? At what sites and in what manner will it best be effective? To what extent? And where will affirmative action lead to passivity rather than activity?

What exactly should the policy of non-racialism prescribe in respect of education, health and welfare, land and housing, legislation and the courts, as well as in the arenas of arts, culture and national symbols? In some of these areas debate has started; in others, questions regarding the practicalities of non-racialism have hardly begun to emerge. Take education for instance. In the United States, desegregation of educational institutions has been a fraught issue for many years, with few clear answers. Yet locally, in this respect we have hardly started. In economic terms what will have changed if whites in the main remain wealthy (and retain ownership) while blacks generally stay poor? Certainly "race"-consciousness will not be much altered.

'Non-racialism, rooted in negatives and refusals, will itself require transformation into positives'

Two final thoughts in an effort to stimulate debate. First, it seems that non-racialism - of necessity forged in resistance politics, thus centrally rooted in negatives and refusals - will itself require transformation

Flurry over symbols handy bypass?

The intensity with which the question of a potential anthem has been contested would seem to suggest that attitudes and assumptions of the past remain bottled up on the surface of evolving political relations.

By Erika Coetzee

The furore which has erupted around the flag and anthem proposed for South Africa's participation in the Olympic Games appears to have grabbed the public imagination. With the obvious exception of the resistance demonstrated around the imposition of VAT, few issues in the course of 1991 have enjoyed such fervent and spontaneous attention.

The themes that underlie the debate around symbols for a "new South Africa" are clearly fundamental ones: national unity, representation, inclusivity, democracy, breaking with the past. There seems to be a desire to find ways of expressing a novel common identity: from the design of new bank notes to the furtive media glimpses at the dress Miss SA will wear at the Miss World competition. Yet it is the symbols that will accompany South African athletes to the Olympics in Barcelona that have catapulted this trend into the limelight.

Newspaper letter columns have been littered with contributions from pro and anti factions. Front-page results from phone-in polls engendered vehement new rounds of debate. Suburban Saturday afternoons, traditionally reserved for uninterrupted communion with TopSport, have become tentative sites for reflection on the nature of national symbols. A wave of passionate opinion has suddenly emerged out of what is often regarded as the politically apathetic middle class.

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