

Race against time?

SA ignores racism at its peril

WE'VE seen it all: cries of 'kill the farmer, kill the boer', white snipers gunning down black protesters, black youths angrily chanting 'one settler, one bullet' at coloured marchers - just what are the prospects for a non-racial society in South Africa?

Is it simply the dream of idealists, a populist vote-catching slogan for political parties, the vain hope of white liberals - or is it an essential concept if we are to build a new and inclusive and democratic society?

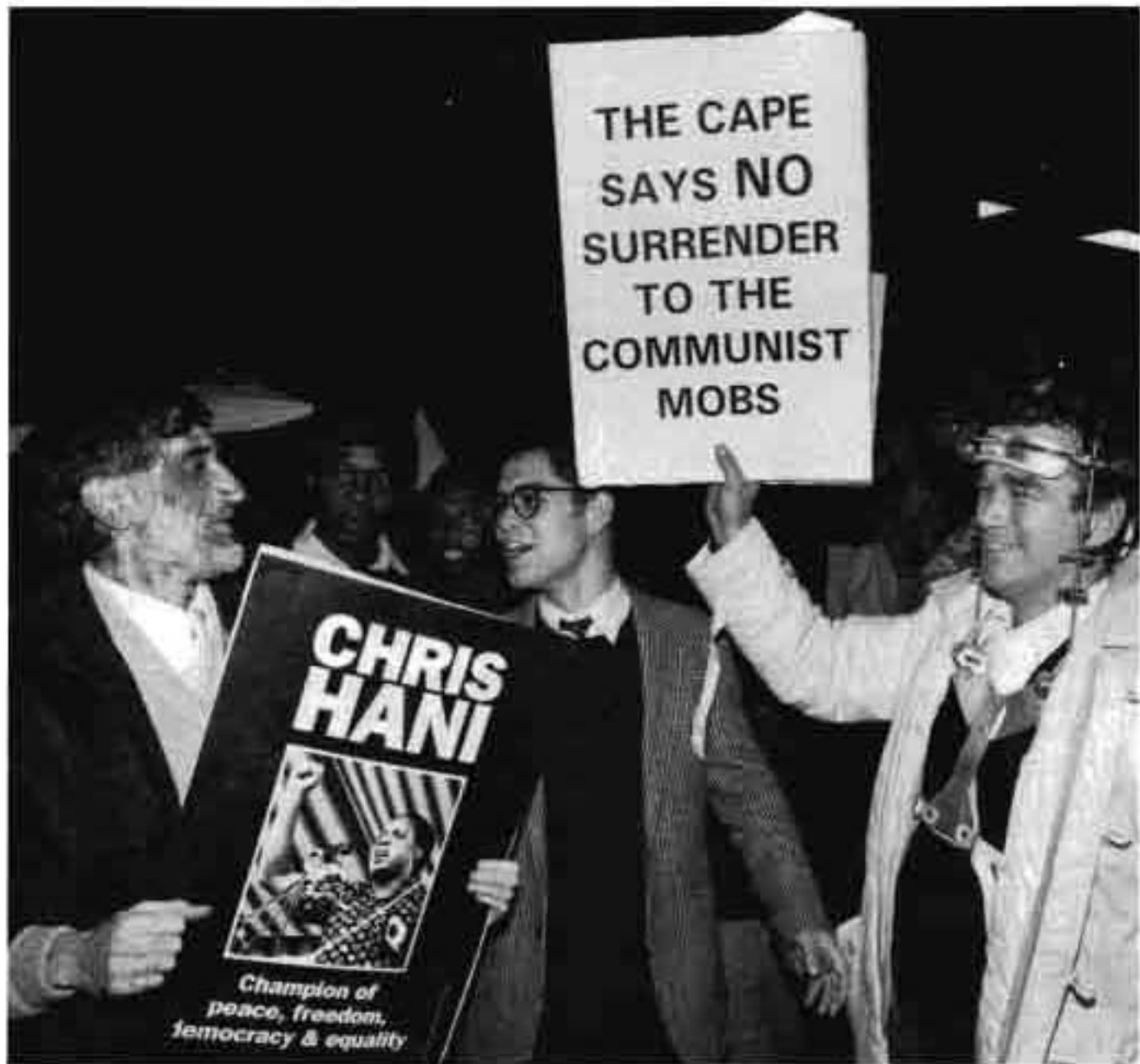
By **SUE VALENTINE**

Anthropologists tell us that there is no such thing as 'race' - it has no genetic basis. There is no such thing as the white race or the black race. By contrast, the concept of ethnicity does have some meaning - people have different languages and cultures, but these are aspects of ourselves that are learnt, they are not innate.

All too often ethnic identities are manufactured or constructed self-consciously by politicians in order to mobilise groups of people for specific social, political or economic goals.

However, no matter how essential to our ability to analyse, challenge and learn, the theories and the academic debates have little impact on the present level of day to day reality of most South Africans.

Speak to your average farmer, farm labourer, artisan, township youngster, mineworker, housewife or domestic worker - and you're unlikely to hear them affirming the theory that race does not exist. The very



Victory for racial and political tolerance? Opponents square up in good spirits in Parow.

fabric of our society has been organised along the notion of 'race'. To get beyond it to some promised land where human potential and individual differences are affirmed is definitely desirable, and arguably essential. But when, and how?

Just what is the ideal of non-racialism? Academic and political activist Neville Alexander has said, 'when we speak of non-racialism we mean that our position is determined by the scientific fact that "race" is a non-entity'. Perceptions, however, do not always dovetail with facts and reality. How we begin to ensure they do is part of the challenge.

Idasa policy and planning director Van Zyl Slabbert makes the point that one should draw a distinction between statutory non-racism - in which all formal obstacles on the basis of race are removed and an enabling environment is created - and the need to promote 'racial' and ethnic tolerance.

He is optimistic about the capacity of South Africans to accomplish this. 'By and large the majority of South Africans are capable of being tolerant. It is when you live in circumstances of economic decline and political instability that prejudices bubble to

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the surface.'

This sentiment is echoed by University of the Western Cape anthropologist Ben Cousins who sees greater potential for integration when there is economic growth and increased opportunity for all South Africans.

For him the hope of a non-racial future lies in giving some content to the talk about democracy. Democracy must mean more than the writing of a democratic constitution, it must afford people the right to organise according to their interests, the right to address differences without having to split off from society.

'South Africa has the challenge of building a culture of tolerance,' says Cousins. 'We must take on difference, acknowledge our differences and live with them. People do not have just one identity, we are all more than one thing. We must open the debate on multiple identities. Zulu workers are Zulus, but they are also workers.'

Slabbert also emphasises that non-racialism is an inclusive philosophy. 'But it can become an intolerant form of non-racialism



NIEHAUS:
Black and white perceptions like night and day.

if it denies people's feelings of diversity and difference.'

Idasa executive director Alex Boraine makes the point that in order to achieve non-racialism, 'we need to deal with the reality, not the imagined'.

He identifies a visible shift in attitudes since the murder of Chris Hani.

'Whites seem to blame the ANC for the change, for mobilising black mourners and demonstrators on to the streets, but they forget that it was whites who pulled the trigger.

'At the same time young blacks are very aware that Hani was killed by a white person. It has triggered off feelings that have been suppressed and put on the back burner during the negotiations period. The reaction

now among black youths seems to be against the fact that they've been asked to trust whites in the negotiation process, but as soon as they do so, their leaders are killed.'

Boraine says one cannot deny the racial



SONN:
Racism not necessarily on the rise in SA.

overtones contained in the rhetoric of student leaders or the mood at public rallies.

'We have got to deal with the depth of hurt and anger arising from generations of racial discrimination. Part of the apartheid legacy is in fact a pathology. It won't be dealt with from chatting together in the pub or over a cup of tea, we must do far more than that.'

'We have got to deal with the depth of hurt and anger arising from generations of racial discrimination'

Cape Town psychologist Julian Sonn says the extent of anger among black people towards whites in the wake of Hani's murder is not surprising.

'There is so much anger, Hani was a much-loved leader, one needs to understand the anger of black people and not overreact. The mischief-makers are aware of the powers they can unleash by killing off certain leaders.'

Sonn says he believes there are many positive changes occurring in South African society, he does not believe racism is necessarily on the rise - it has always been there.

'I feel hopeful. We can still work on the angle of racism now because people are not yet disillusioned. Perhaps if we get to two years down the line and we have still not addressed the issue, then it will be much more difficult to talk about it.'

He acknowledges that building a non-

racial society is difficult because differences along racial lines have been entrenched for so long. But nevertheless, he is confident.

'Racism is learnt behaviour and it can be unlearned. It is a process and engaging in that process is both necessary and worthwhile.

'Workshops with groups of people provide a structure and a model in which to talk about racist, sexist and classist conditioning. As adults we can make decisions about which beliefs we want to let go of and which beliefs we want to take hold of. We take on certain beliefs at particular times when they appear to serve a purpose. As conditions change, they can become dysfunctional and it makes sense for us to let them go.'

Against the backdrop of our painful and brutal history, it is perhaps acceptable that, confronted by the need for reconstruction throughout South African society, perceptions and gestures should take on a somewhat inordinate degree of importance.

The recent example of the tardy reaction by the South African government following the death of Chris Hani did little to help matters. Declaring a national day of mourning or a public holiday would have sent a significant empathetic message to an angry public. The gesture of a mere press statement from a holiday home spoke volumes.

In the United States many people remember where they were when they heard the news that President Kennedy had been shot. As a six- or seven-year-old I remember an afternoon radio programme being interrupted with the news of Verwoerd's assassination in Parliament. How many whites will remember where they were when they heard of the news of Hani's death, or when the Sharpeville killings were reported or the news of the student uprising in Soweto in '76?

Whites are quick to react to racist statements that target them. The media attention given to Peter Mokaba and Winnie Mandela's outbursts are recent reminders. However whites forget the racism which



KADALIE:
Alienation intensifies racism among youth.

most black people endure as a daily experience.

Spike Lee's movie on the life of Malcolm X highlights the reaction of white society to calls by a black leader for blacks to defend themselves and put their own interests first.

We need to realise the degree to which racism, through the institution of apartheid, has permeated not only the structures of our society, but our beliefs and attitudes as well.

Even if whites do not feel directly responsible, white South Africans need to confront the harsh realities of what was done in their name with the intention of privileging them.

This is not to suggest an endless 'guilt trip' for whites, nor to justify a perpetual anger among those disadvantaged by apartheid. But to sweep emotions under the carpet is to

leave too much unsaid. We cannot wipe the slate clean because we cannot erase the past. What is done is done, but we must now begin a new chapter.

Despite the apparent contradictions between ANC policy and certain statements and actions of those claiming ANC membership, non-racialism as a *policy* remains unchallenged and firmly entrenched within the organisation, says ANC spokesperson Carl Niehaus.

However, he admits that building that culture is a difficult job made worse by limited time and resources, and a none too sympathetic media.

'In the medium term we can only hope for limited success. Only after the introduction of a new constitution can people experience what it's like to live under new conditions in which individual human rights will be upheld. I envisage a process similar to what has happened in Namibia and Zimbabwe.'

Against the backdrop of history and recent events Niehaus says it is nothing short of 'remarkable' that black people have stuck to the basic principles of non-racialism and that they are so willing to embrace white people who are willing to change. The recent ANC meeting in Parow, Cape Town, exemplified the spirit of non-racialism, said Niehaus.

'There is a lot of hope. If only white people realised how remarkable it is that there is so much goodwill after so many years of brutal racism.'

The other side of the coin is that in the white community there is not the same reali-



High spirits during the ANC's first meeting in 'white' Parow.

sation of the changes that need to be made to build a new society. They think they've made changes when they see Nelson Mandela on TV or they can buy *Mayibuye* at the corner shop, but that's only scratching the surface,' says Niehaus.

'The perception of what major change is in the white community and what it is within the black community is like night and day.'

Clear messages have to reach all South Africans on what non-racialism is all about and how it is being built in society. The media have a vital role to play in this process.

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'There are as many positive developments that can be shown on the eight o'clock news as there are negative ones,' says Slabbert, 'although they are not always rated as news.'

The gap between leaders and those on the ground must also be addressed. Certain Idasa fieldworkers report a growing degree of criticism of top ANC leadership who are seen as able to make fine speeches and mingle with dignitaries in hotels, but have forgotten what it means to have 'their hands in the dust'.

According to UWC anthropologist Rhoda Kadalie, the antagonism and growing racism among many young people today results

from a sense that they are mere observers of the process of negotiations.

'When they hear in the news that Mandela and De Klerk will receive an award from Clinton, they become angry. The negotiations process is perceived as an alliance between elite blacks and whites.'

Kadalie is also critical of the ANC's appeals to community and nation-building, claiming they are little different to the Afrikaners' preoccupation with 'die volk'.

'These concepts assume a homogeneity; they do not deal with notions of difference. They fall into the same trap which assumes that white women are divided along various lines, but black women all have the same interests.'

Finally, it seems, one comes back to the promise contained in the creation of a culture of democracy and tolerance, in which differences are acknowledged and embraced rather than denied.

Perhaps, as Borraine suggests, something akin to a revival of black consciousness is needed. To ignore the smouldering issue of 'race' as it is perceived by South Africans is to court disaster down the road.

'Perhaps we have something to learn from the United States of the 1960s,' says Borraine. 'Martin Luther King called for reconciliation, whereas Malcolm X said it was impossible to achieve reconciliation at no cost.'

'If reconciliation comes without an honest confrontation with the past, it serves merely to cover up deeply held hurt and suspicions. We need a catharsis.'

Sue Valentine is Idasa's media director.