

'Slogans don't kill'

A number of slogans used by political leaders in recent months have caused strong reactions in the media and among sectors of the public. UCT political scientist JEREMY SEEKINGS is sceptical about the emphasis placed on the issue, however. He spoke to SUE VALENTINE.

MOST OF the discussion in newspapers about emotional slogans seem to miss a whole lot of points. Slogans are symbolic and shouldn't be read literally.

Probably the most controversial slogans are "Kill the boer, kill the farmer" and "One settler, one bullet". As far as I can recall, "One settler, one bullet" did not have any currency during the 1980s in United Democratic Front structures, but slogans about boers certainly did.

I don't know where they originated, but I imagine they came out of the freedom songs of the 1950s and 1960s and were given a big boost by the whole experience of Afrikaans in 1976. That particular slogan, "Kill the boer, kill the farmer", as with most slogans and most freedom songs, seems to me to be at such a symbolic level that to try read it literally is nonsense.

This was a big debate in the Delmas treason trial (1985-89) and other trials. The state was trying to say there was a conspiracy between the UDF leadership and the ANC which was causing the violence in the Vaal Triangle and elsewhere, but it was unable to show any concrete connections. And so the state's case ended up revolving around slogans, freedom songs and speeches to see if they included ANC messages, and so on.

The intriguing thing about "Kill the boer, kill the farmer" is that it's translated into English and the translation is what makes it interesting. It doesn't just focus on "boers" and the associations that term has with the state, but it also names farmers specifically.



'Violence can't always be traced to particular slogans or buzz words.'

ERIC MILLER, *Southlight*

The other thing is that there is a perception that farmers are, for the most part, combatants. And it's a perception that is born out in reality - remember the landmines in the Northern Transvaal? There is a real basis for seeing farmers in those areas as combatants.

But doesn't the media attention, coupled with the continued, almost deliberate use of the slogans give their content greater meaning?

I wouldn't look so much at the literal content of the slogan as at what the slogan is

saying. Slogans are by definition symbolic and what the slogan is saying is that violence plays a part in the strategy.

This is a point which I'd raise as a limit to the whole focus on slogans. In townships you're not going to find many people who don't believe that violence isn't part of a strategy, and the reason is that violence is an everyday feature of life. Given the complete inadequacy of the security forces in terms of day-to-day policing defensive forms of violence are very widely sanctioned. In other words, defensive forms of violence are seen as defensive and responsible and all the rest of it, not simply as out-of-control.

That's an issue which I'm sure is endlessly discussed and debated and gossiped about in townships. But if Peter Mokaba stands up at a funeral in Thembisa and says, violence is part of us and it's something we have to take seriously and engage in, he's actually just expressing a reality. It's a reality on the ground, just as

much a reality as the multi-party talks at Kempton Park.

There are two responses to this situation I suppose. The first is that, even if it is a reality, Mokaba shouldn't say anything about it and should ignore the reality that is there. That's what the media seem to want. The second involves asking whether talking about it and using slogans in some sense sanctions or perpetuates cycles of violence?

Now I'm quite sceptical about that. Slogans on their own don't kill people. Other things do. The question is do slogans rouse

'Large parts of South Africa are in a semi-war situation. The meaning of liberalism and tolerance in that context is very different from an ideal sense'

people and motivate them to actually engage in violence? I would be very suspicious and sceptical that slogans in fact do that.

What you need to focus on far more are the day-to-day dynamics in which self-defence units and so on are strategising around the ways they'll defend townships, or the way hostel dwellers are strategising on how they'll protect themselves or whatever.

What happens at funerals is far more a reflection of what is happening on the ground than a contributory factor. That would be my guess, anyway. The only way to really tell would be to undertake some very detailed micro study.

But at the moment, certainly in the Western Cape, it would seem that slogans are being used to vindicate people's actions. People are chanting them and acting on them.

I'd have more problems with a slogan like "One settler, one bullet", than "Kill the boer, kill the farmer" because the symbolism in the slogan is very different. Certainly I'd have a problem with political leaders using that slogan because it's saying that my political party is going to condone certain forms of action which follow on from this.

In the case of the PAC, I'd say that the use of the slogan "One settler, one bullet" by political leaders at rallies is probably far less important than the fact that, on a day-to-day basis, PAC leaders are saying to followers, in statements, not in slogans, "go ahead and take action". This is rooted in the PAC's understanding of the struggle.

If we want to know why PAC-aligned youths are attacking whites trying to go into townships, I don't think it's because PAC leaders mouth "One settler, one bullet". I think it's because the PAC articulates a view of the struggle in which violence plays an important part.

The ANC view of the struggle, while ambiguous, has tended to vary according to different parts of the ANC in different parts of the country. In general it has been one in which morality has been recognised in almost Christian, bourgeois terms, if you want to put it that way. It has a much deeper hold and I think that is a key reason why it permeates through to the ANC support base.

You can take another example - a counter-

example which is quite illustrative - which is the Inkatha Freedom Party. Inkatha goes around all the time complaining that it doesn't use these vicious slogans and that it's a very upright party - and it doesn't use slogans. But if you want a single case of where a political party has been instrumental in fomenting violence as a result of what's been said at rallies and in meetings, I would argue that it was when the IFP tried to expand its support base and organise on the Reef from mid-1990. There was a great deal of violence.

In June, July, August 1990 there was a whole series of rallies and at those rallies there were no slogans, as far as I'm aware. But the IFP said two things. Firstly, it told supporters they had experiences of being ostracised or intimidated in the past. Secondly, it basically said that the ANC and its allies were out to get you and unless you did something about it, things would go from bad to worse.

That was a statement, an analysis of the situation, not a slogan. The direct result was that when people from IFP rallies went back to the hostels, they barricaded themselves in and started slaughtering anybody who wasn't an Inkatha supporter. Now that's a prime example of the way in which analysis and argument, which resonate with the way in which the supporters see the world anyway, are in certain cases much more dangerous than slogans taken out of context.

I'm sure that if you looked at, for example, racist violence by whites, you'd find a similar thing: systematic violence perpetrated from a basis of racist language and concepts, but which you couldn't trace to particular slogans or particular buzz words.

Do you think that youth today are often ignorant of the context from which slogans originated and that often their use of slogans is expedient? They invoke political language but there is no fresh analysis of changing conditions or circumstances?

I think there is a problem. In the mid-1980s those who would have been described as youths who had a penchant for direct action would have understood this action in ways drawn from the liberation struggle,

Fear is blinding us

Danish student Henrik Poulsen gives his first impressions of South Africa.

I ARRIVED in South Africa early in September, on a bright sunny day. From my window in the plane I could see the green fields and characteristic mountains around Cape Town, and my expectations about my five-month stay intensified. I had a feeling of coming to a country at peace with itself, even though I knew that it was not true.

But already in the airport that feeling disappeared. The very first news I was told was that a white woman had been killed in the township the day before.

I did not take much notice at the time because I knew that South Africa was experiencing a lot of violence. But after only a few hours I was almost transformed into a nervous wreck. All the whites I met were talking about the murder with fear in their voices. Everybody seemed to be in shock. Later that day I saw a newspaper story about the murder that took up three full pages. Since then the one-sided and inadequate newspaper reporting has become one of the most irritating aspects of being in South Africa. Sometimes I have a feeling of knowing more about South Africa from reading the Danish newspapers.

I think I got what could be called culture shock. I come from Denmark, a very, very peaceful country. You don't have to worry about where you go, and unless you are a woman you can walk alone, even at night. Now suddenly I found myself wondering all the time where it was safe to go. I always ask at least three or four people if it would be safe.

For a while this meant I did not go anywhere, but soon I was forced by those around me to go to more "insecure" areas. Today I have already achieved several things I wanted to achieve; I have been on a short visit to some of the townships and I attended an ANC mass meeting in Elsie's River. So in a way one can

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and would have been encouraged by the ANC during that time to pursue the aim of making townships ungovernable.

There was some clear linkage between liberation struggle and direct mass action. Now, however, the groups engaging in mass action no longer have a moral reference point. Things are much less predictable – whether you're looking at university campuses or whether you're looking at whoever in townships.

This is a cause of concern. What you do about it is another question. But I think that making a big song and dance about Peter Mokaba and "Kill the boer, kill the farmer" is blaming the messenger for the message. Ultimately there are much more fundamental things which are going to have to change before the problem can be addressed.

This brings one back to what are the main causes of violence in townships? The main cause of violence in townships isn't the fact that you have leaders sloganeering on occasions. There are other factors and some of those factors aren't going to change very fast.

One thing is a prerequisite: people often say this and it sounds a bit trite and clichéd, but having some kind of democratic, representative dispensation is actually a prerequisite for introducing reasonable law and order – for more stable daily lives in townships and elsewhere.

The important thing to bear in mind is

that there are large parts of South Africa which to all intents and purposes are in a semi-war situation. The meaning of liberalism and the meaning of tolerance in that context is very different from an ideal sense.

If we really want to have much impact, we need to transform the structural constraints that are holding us back. There are two which are reachable targets. The first is trying to ensure democratic forms of representation so that there are legitimate representatives in areas to whom one can voice grievances and so on. Democratic local and central government is a prerequisite.

The second is transforming those structures in institutional society which are responsible for policing. This might mean transforming the South African Police or South African Defence Force, or it might mean trying to build alternative types of structures.

There are also issues of political education. I'm in no doubt that very large numbers of South Africans have a view of South Africa which is very much derived from their particular experiences. While these experiences might be very real, they are not always a very good guide to understanding the way in which South Africa as a whole is moving.

Simply saying "be tolerant" or "tolerance is important" is unlikely to have much impact. What you need to do is broaden people's understanding of what South Africa is all about, and how different people have very varied but equally "reasonable" perspectives.

frame towards her baby, lying on the floor of her one-roomed shack, bottom right. The baby stares out at the viewer, completing a triangle which includes the viewer. A few basic cooking implements sparsely occupy the bare space in which they live.

Magubane has many strengths as a photographer. His sustained commitment and courage and also his ubiquitous presence have resulted in a record of the moments that add up to a history of a country. My lasting impression of the photographs in this book is of strength accompanied by pathos and misery; it is filled with portraits of serious women – little joy or frivolity appears in these pages.

The images are placed in context within a brief historical account written by Carol Lazar. It relates the political role of women over the period starting with the formation of the ANC Women's League in 1943, and includes the personal histories of prominent women activists, situating their stories in the broader socio-political context up until the Boipatong massacre in June 1992. A rather depressing conclu-

sion quotes an unconvincing Gertrude Shope of the ANC Women's League: "We have hope".

With a body of work as substantial as Magubane's, chronological editing of photographs should have been relatively easy. However, the editing of this book is not always coherent. For example, Helen Joseph is mentioned in a section dealing with the 1940s to 1950s, but the photograph of her is one taken in 1978, out of place among the other images used.

It is a sad state of affairs that a book like this was not published by South African publishers and that a foreign publishing company had to be responsible for this important document of our history. Perhaps this explains the disappointing lack of care and quality of reproduction of the prints – they are grey and flat, with dust specks which should have been spotted out. This poor finish does not do justice to the work of a photographer of the calibre of Peter Magubane.

Karina Turok is a freelance photographer based in Cape Town.

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