

# Out of the grey and into the black...

What are the implications of the government's decision to establish free settlement zones in some 'grey' areas? Will this lead to new, non-racial suburbs - or merely create other forms of segregation? **ALAN MABIN** looks at some possible scenarios.

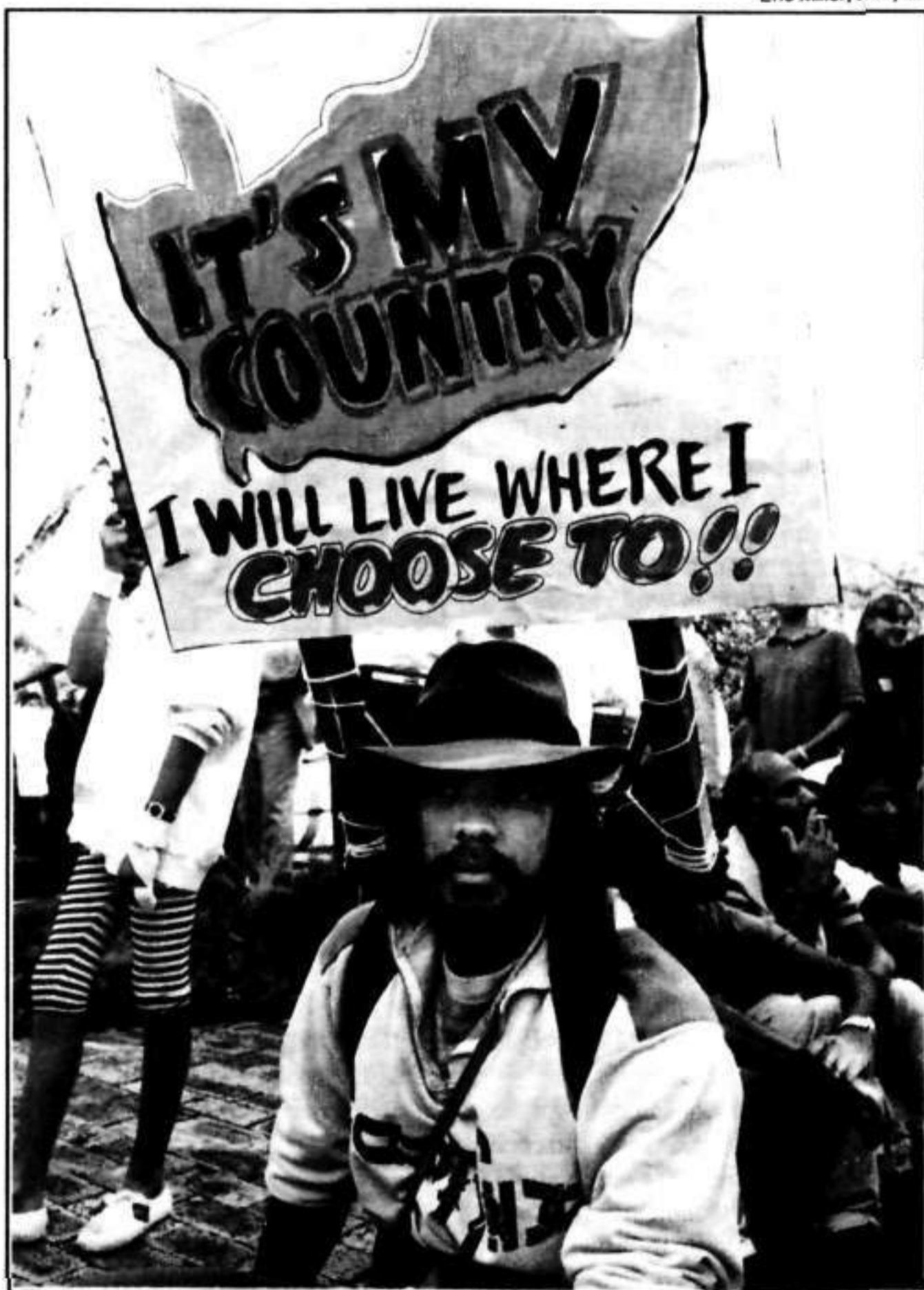
**T**hose who believe that 'free settlement areas' are a step away from apartheid should think again: the policy will create new patterns of segregation rather than establish communities for non-racial living.

And the ghettos which free settlement policy seems certain to spawn will be no easier to eradicate than the impoverished townships that are the legacy of apartheid.

There can be no doubt that state policy on race and residential areas has undergone some changes in recent months. These are reflected in the retreat from evictions under the Group Areas Act, in an apparent tolerance of some invasion of dominantly white areas by 'disqualified persons', and an increase in the numbers of permits granted to black people wanting to live in white areas.

The passage of the Free Settlement Areas Act early in 1989 was also a measure of change in the state's approach.

Despite this, current government policies remain pro-property, pro-white, anti-tenant and extremely discriminatory. They ignore the aspirations of poorer residents of the cities - black



*Towards an open city: one of 2 000 Cape Town marchers who demonstrated against Group Areas legislation earlier this year*

tenants as well as white.

The policy proposals emanating from a variety of think-tanks on the right wing and in the 'centre' - that is, predominantly business-funded and English-language - are not much different.

Despite some differences in nuance, there seems to be a consensus from National Party reformers to business lobby groups on the following points:

- \* summary abolition of the Group Areas Act without other policy measures is not desirable;

- \* a management process is needed to ensure that white and/or property-owning interests are not too severely threatened by rapid change in residen-

tial patterns. This is often referred to in terms of 'maintenance of standards';

- \* market processes can be relied on to a greater or lesser extent to manage the transition.

The NP reformers' present policy is to maintain the legal practices of the Group Areas Act in most urban neighbourhoods, while allowing or encouraging some districts to become 'free settlement areas' for people of all race groups.

As yet, residents in free settlement areas are only entitled to elect 'management committees' with minimal powers - which partly explains the aversion of more liberal municipalities to applying for free settlement area status.

In most new, properly-serviced residential areas, group areas declarations will continue to have force and the majority of the black population will be expected to remain in group areas administered by the houses of representatives or delegates, or in black townships.

Even the burgeoning black middle classes largely find accommodation in rapidly growing, racially exclusive suburbs attached to existing townships, like the extensions of Diepkloof, Vosloorus and Soshanguve.

According to one estimate, by the late '80s more than 200 000 black people were living in white group areas. Had middle-class areas not been added fairly rapidly to the townships over the past decade, the 'invasions' of white space would have been even more impressive.

The Free Settlement Areas Act is not intended to lead to 'mixed' areas, but primarily to facilitate the legal conversion of formerly white group areas to de facto black areas.

The debate is about how local and central government should deal with the increasing number of black people moving to white areas.

In 1983 the obvious inability of the existing group areas framework to cope with new social realities led to an investigation into 'technical' problems. This was followed by the 1987 report of a President's Council (PC) committee and the introduction of free settlement areas.

While the government did not accept the recommendations of the PC report on how residential change should be managed, it did adopt some of its principles: that there should be areas in which the Group Areas Act would not be applied strictly (thus the report served to legitimate state inaction in 'grey-ing' areas); that there should be some local involvement in determining which areas would be open to racial residential change; and that the property market, together with some managing devices, should direct the process of residential change.

The Free Settlement Areas Act provides for the state simultaneously to legalise the dropping of racial restrictions in given areas, and to restrict



**Black residents in Hillbrow: more than 200 000 black people now live in white group areas, according to one estimate**

the market process by which residential change occurs.

The PC report and much of the subsequent research drew on two sets of experiences. One was that of southern African cities such as Harare, Windhoek and Mafikeng-Mmabatho where highly segregated urban patterns were exposed to the removal of legal and other discriminatory practices. The other, probably more influential experience, lay in the large amount of literature on experiences in the United States.

**R**ecent South African policy documents explain residential change in North America as primarily a free market process. But this interpretation is open to contest.

From the president's council report to the work of the Rand Afrikaans University department of development studies and the reports of the Centre for Policy Studies at Wits, the same overarching image is created: white residents eventually flee when faced with significant numbers of black people 'invading' their neighbourhoods through free property markets.

This process leads to 'succession' in which the previously white neighbourhood soon becomes predominantly black.

An obvious problem in generalising from this literature is that the proportion of 'white flight' that actually occurs varies widely. Despite this,

South African writers create the impression that group behaviour - expressed through a free market - would have more or less similar results anywhere, and especially in this country.

South African literature also tends to ignore certain important aspects of the United States experience. Among other things, these factors cast suspicion on the assumption that free markets compel estate agents to act in a non-discriminatory way.

Active discrimination has taken place in United States cities through 'red-lining', whereby institutions refuse to lend money on property in particular neighbourhoods. Even when the intention has been quite colour blind, 'red-lining' has had important racial effects. In South African literature 'red-lining' is excused as an understandable reaction of building societies to poor risks.

Another common practice is 'block-busting' - using the (usually false) threat of falling property values and sometimes criminal means to drive residents out in order to alter the character of the neighbourhood.

The United States studies also look at a phenomenon called 'tipping' or 'invasion and succession' which eventually occurs, mainly as a result of manipulation of the market.

They argue that estate agents stop taking white home buyers to neighbourhoods once their black populations reach 12% or 20% of the total,

but show black house seekers property only in such neighbourhoods - which again increases the black population.

**S**egregation is not unrelated to white residents' own racism and fears about social and economic security, but it is not a consequence of such 'communal' factors alone. Yet it is 'communal' or 'group' factors which have dominated recent literature from a variety of right and centre groups in South Africa.

Most importantly, South African writers tend to downplay what North American studies show about the crucial role of local authorities in creating ghettos or racially mixed areas.

A recent study of three suburban municipalities near Chicago - areas which could perhaps be compared to Randburg, Bellville or Amanzimtoti - showed that:

- \* determined attempts to keep one neighbourhood exclusively white succeeded, despite anti-discrimination legislation;

- \* local authority inaction and market manipulation by private parties 'tipped' one area from white to black; but

- \* careful use of subsidies to pro-

gressive landlords, publicly-funded advice bureaus and public insurance against scare-induced property investment losses allowed one local authority to achieve and retain a pattern of integration which reflected reasonably closely the United States population.

Two lessons emerge from the North American experience.

First, real estate markets are no more 'free' from manipulation and discrimination than other markets: they may actually be extremely prone to such practices.

Secondly, in potentially racist white communities, rapid change in the direction of integration tends to lead, through combinations of market and manipulation, to white flight and the creation of new ghettos.

If these central conclusions are extended to South Africa, it can be argued that free settlement areas provide for the legalisation of 'tipping' in a restricted number of neighbourhoods.

The centrist policy proposals are predicated on the same model, except that they seek non-racialism by calling for abolition of the Group Areas Act and visualise most poorer people gaining easier access to poorly serviced and largely peripheral residential sites.

They aim to avoid conflict generated by the supposed threat to white communities which 'tipping' presents by limiting and dispersing 'invasion'.

All proposals which seek to allow only limited integration in most white group areas would lead inexorably to concentrating black 'invasion' in just a few localities, where - if the twisted experience of 'tipping' is anything to go by - new ghettos would emerge. Johannesburg's Joubert Park area illustrates this.

None of the right and centre proposals provides ways (aside from the townships) to overcome the concentration of black residents in mainly inner city ghettos. If alternative strategies are not developed and implemented by the left, this is the future which lies before us.

**I**n expensive areas, for economic reasons, little change in the racial pattern of occupancy can be expected in the medium term, despite free settlement or permit provisions.

In some lower-priced inner city neighbourhoods, the extension of the permit and free settlement systems facilitates quasi-legal invasion by people 'disqualified' under the Group Areas Act. The declaration of a free settlement area together with a battery of city management measures - such as the manipulation of the town planning scheme, new investment in infrastructure or failure to improve infrastructure - might push change in one of two directions: 'gentrification', or 'ghettoisation'.

- \* Gentrification features substantial private investment by new owners and speculators in residential property, accompanied by rapidly rising prices, economic expulsion of former tenants and considerable physical 'improvement'. It is a process now common in almost every city in the world, but in South Africa it gains particular significance because it may be a mechanism to keep the neighbourhood predominantly in white hands (as in Melville, Johannesburg) or to induce a rapid alteration in its complexion (as in Mayfair, Johannesburg).

In some neighbourhoods manipulation of the market - through selective



Anna Zierninski, Atrapix

Right-wing demonstrators: vehemently opposed to the 'greying' of residential areas

approval of bonds or of first-time home buyers' subsidies - and of town planning, might keep the cultural character predominantly white but shift the class character 'upwards'. In other areas the same class succession might be accompanied by a shift to a different ethnic character.

In the latter case, the Free Settlement Areas Act effectively provides for legalising the creation of new middle-class group areas under another name. The Mayfair experience shows that this type of gentrification can occur without the new law and could be repeated under the regime envisaged by the centrists.

Gentrification typically is encouraged and facilitated by public investment in selected areas and media hype about their private investment potential.

\* The opposite dynamic of ghettoisation is marked by the deterioration of the physical fabric of areas deprived of maintenance and starved of new investment, by a decline in property prices and by a social transition in which new occupants are of a class with fewer social resources than the previous occupants.

In South Africa, that would almost inevitably mean a transition from white to black, accomplished legally by declaring free settlement areas or repealing the Group Areas Act.

In either gentrification or ghettoisation, 'free settlement' facilitates a rolling over from one class to another and usually from one dominant racial char-

acter to another. It does not create integrated neighbourhoods reflecting the overall population mix.

In a few areas, mainly those inner city neighbourhoods of high-density rental accommodation, a combination of continued investment (which reduces the chances of classic ghettoisation), the presence of stable ethnic minority communities and the rapid turnover of other tenants might allow really mixed areas to develop.

To some extent this has happened in the northern parts of Hillbrow and Berea in Johannesburg. Some inner areas of Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria and Port Elizabeth are candidates for such a process. But these 'mixed' areas would hardly represent more than a small fraction of their metropolitan areas.

**T**he Free Settlement Areas Act is not predicated on extending such mixed areas to suburbia or to the townships. Nor are centrist ideas of limiting and dispersing black settlement.

The policies of the right and the centre provide simply for more of the same kinds of change which our cities are already experiencing.

In a sense, the centrists differ only in so far as they believe that such change does not need either the Group Areas Act or free settlement areas - but that to avoid conflict, white propertied interests must be safeguarded by managing the dispersal of black residents and slowing the process of change.

If such policies run their course the product is likely to be extensive and perhaps irrevocable ghettoisation.

How might the cities move instead in the direction of an integration which reflects the ethnic make-up of the population more closely?

There is the growing prospect that the future of the cities, like that of the country as a whole, will be subject to negotiation. This presents opportunities to counter and defeat policies which condemn the cities to the polarised processes of gentrification and ghettoisation.

Both right and centre proposals are likely to revolve around the need to cater for (white) economic, social and psychological security by retaining of predominantly white residential communities.

It will take a long time to achieve mixed neighbourhoods but that prospect could be hastened by strategies such as providing public investment rewards for integrating neighbourhoods; protecting tenants against eviction and extortionate rents; taking action against discriminatory manipulations of markets - for instance treating red-lining and blockbusting as criminal offences.

Some of these strategies are already emerging in the actions of organisations like Actstop. Their further development requires that they be connected to ideas and debates on other aspects of the urban future.

What kinds of densities do people want to live in? What kinds of transport will serve the future population? Is the suburban model of individual home ownership at low densities, and with extreme privacy, what people want?

Also, does this model inevitably deprive people of participation in a vibrant urban environment, as it has done for most whites in South Africa and many suburbanites in other countries?

Placing the cities on the road to a more liveable future will need a great deal of creative thought and debate.

And the left will have to intervene much more powerfully if it is to counter the forces now being unleashed and avoid the implementation of policies with practically irreversible consequences.



*Actstop - already taking up some of the crucial issues*