



PHOTO: NATASHA PINCUS

# THE NEW SOUTH A IDENTITY CRISIS



# AFRICAN

cover story



# Falling down

## *The non-birth of non-racialism*

All around us, there are signs that the non-racial project is in serious trouble. **HEIN MARAIS** looks at the implications of a country still grappling with race and identity

**N**ON-RACIALISM TODAY IS AN emblem beaming good intentions but emptied of meaning. A hallowed concept, hollowed by misuse. The longer we stare at it, the more confused and cheated we feel.

The other day a friend quietly announced her verdict. "It's a pie in the sky," she said. Like with the most disarming lies, enough truth lay embedded in the judgment to dunk our conversation into a long silence.

"Non-racialism" had always stood as a kind of beacon for the struggle; it lifted spirits, it incited experiments in organisation and behaviour we treasured as proof that we had broken free of the black/white rut, that we had drained our politics, our visions and ourselves of the poison.

Now it has joined the ranks of motherhood and pap 'n wors — an institution, casually sanctified, something only a crazed cynic will dare ridicule in public. But privately, honestly, we can recognise in it the smell of failure.

How else, when it finds its purest expression in ephemeral and "unreal" zones: among the hobnobbing, hard-talking suits at the World Trade Centre, in the elaborate hallucinations of beer advertisements, around the cash registers of upmarket stores?

More and more, this pivot of our struggle is being transformed into a verbal memento of the hopes that propelled us forward. A concept now commandeered effortlessly by government ministers and potbellied racists, by municipal autocrats and edgy liberals.

### **Profound slips**

*'At the weekend, [the NP] had its 79th Transvaal congress opened by a black minister praying in Sotho. President*

*FW de Klerk was welcomed by two praise singers who attempted to get the 1 000-strong crowd fired up with chants of Viva and Long Live the NP! De Klerk appeared to revel in the party's newly-found non-racialism.'*

— *Business Day*, 14 September 1993

Isn't it weird that a fundamental part of a liberation movement's ideology can be appropriated so neatly, integrated so casually into the discourse of the opposition? Isn't it bizarre that a concept that engages the rawness at the heart of our society, and which is therefore so fraught with peril and hope — and so damn ambiguous — has evaded intellectual enquiry by the Left?

By ducking the need to scrutinise its relation to lived-life, we have steered non-racialism into a cul-de-sac. Non-racialism has become a stimulant for nice-warm-feelings, an accessory accessible to relatively elite strata in our society. To the rest, it has become drained of meaning and potency.

"It's given rise to socialising and politicising among the political elite, with folk who know how to behave themselves at dinner parties — that's been our non-racialism," says historian Ciraj Rassool.

The problem, as Rupert Taylor recently put it in his paper *Taking non-racialism seriously*, "is not that non-racialism is inappropriate, but that it has not been fully thought through in academic and everyday understanding".

"The irony," agrees political analyst Vincent Maphai, "is that racism and non-racialism are issues we understand least in SA, despite the fact that we're a paradigm of those issues."

This intellectual laziness is strange enough to tempt speculation. "Our illusory conception of non-racialism," says

Rassool, "masked the realities of racial power. It has allowed whites to be white and not question themselves."

It also obscured the pervasiveness and complexity of racism, the multiple ways in which racism infiltrates our realities and relations. It has enabled us to forget that there is no quarantine zone when it comes to racism in SA. Definitive lessons of black consciousness have been forgotten.

### Fighting fire with non-fire

The nub of the problem, however, is political. In many respects the Congress movement defines itself in contrast to the system it opposes, as that which apartheid is not. Thus, the ideology of racism was countered with the doctrine of non-racialism. The practice of racism — *exclusion and rejection* — was countered by rehearsing the practice of *inclusion and acceptance* in our organisations.

But the counter-measures failed to contradict the framework established by apartheid, a framework threaded by "colour lines" and "racial groups". Generally, non-racialism meant cooperation *across* the boundaries imposed by apartheid — in other words, multi-racialism. The 1990 decision to maintain the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses confirmed the resilience of this practice, and betrayed the diluted nature of our non-racialism.

Meanwhile, our rhetoric declares the irrelevance of race, the unity of the oppressed, the artificiality of racial identity, the sublime nature of non-racialism. Parts of Julie Frederikse's book *The Unbroken Thread* sound thoroughly religious; people talk of "discovering" non-racialism, much as one "retrieves faith", of finding themselves through it.

Surprise. A vast no-man's land has opened up between the celestial rhetoric and the racialism of our practice. Today that dismal contradiction towers over the gallant *non-racial* experiments of the 1980s.

And it's a terrain organisations now have to cross in search of votes —

### The tension mounts

**Like a chill in the air, a lot of South Africans sense hardening racial tensions since the thaw of 1990.**

**In July, a Markinor Gallup survey found one in two black people believed racial relations had worsened — treble the 15% who had said so a year earlier. Among white people, 48% shared that perception, up from 18% the previous May.**

**And yet, more than half of all respondents were confident of a happy future for all South Africans.**



■ DO THE WHITE THING: Jodac meeting, Johannesburg, 1984. 'Although pe basis, the reality is that they were.'

hence, the discomfiting racial tone of ANC election sweet talk when it courts whites, coloureds, Indians. Our chickens are home to roost.

Exalted as they are, the non-racial experiments of the 1980s also look a little different when held to the light. Doubtless, the UDF experience confirmed non-racialism's importance in Congress ideology. And, in some ways the Western Cape was seen as a kind of foundry of this revival.

"Generally, there was a lot of coming together across the racial divide," recalls one Western Cape UDF activist. "But when it came to the actual on-the-ground organising, most of it happened in a multi-racial way, even among the African and coloured communities."

Interviewed in 1986, in the heydays

of the UDF, Jessie Duarte confessed in *The Unbroken Thread* her concern: "Although people don't directly say they are organising on a racial basis, the reality is that they are."

Though intense at the level of ideology and rhetoric, non-racial practice was fitful. "There were genuine examples of serious attempts to develop non-racial forms relationships," Rassool recalls, "but to a large extent it was a matter of 'public non-racialism, private racism'." Non-racialism stayed a momentary rupture in an expanse of racism.

What's more, warns Rassool, "the non-racial experiences and political alliances of the 1980s have not been passed on to the next generation. That's why, with the Hani marches, people got so freaked out. Some of our leading activists of the 1980s found *laaities* yelling at them, 'Hey, whitey, gat vi' dzou stiek' ('We're gonna nail you')."

So, are we looking at a non-racialism that is possible for an elite minority, that is a social spin-off of material comfort? Those beer ads again?



PHOTO: PAUL WEINBERG (SOUTHLIGHT)

**It say they were organising on a racial**

“One of the dangers of partial transformation is that you perpetuate the experiential conditions that make a mockery of non-racialism,” cautions Colin Bundy. “We need to ask ourselves, ‘As long as Khayelitsha or Alexandra exist, how do we achieve non-racialism?’”

However deracialised and “normal” it becomes at the centre, corralled out on the perimeter will be the masses. For them race will continue to symbolise power, resources and opportunity; the code that allows you in or locks you out.

The structural blockage in the transformation of our society will make non-racialism even tougher to achieve. For Vincent Maphai this suggests we focus less on achieving “a sort of shangri-la non-racialism” and concentrate more on issues of poverty and democracy. “The way forward is to shift attention from non-racialism to democracy,” Maphai advises. “What matters to me is whether I’m oppressed — on whatever grounds. Apartheid was wrong because it was *oppressive*,

not because it oppressed on the basis of race.”

But, asks Bundy, “in a society that has been simultaneously so undemocratic and highly racist, how do you separate the two?” He’s not sure we can.

Maphai replies that “we can have a non-racial, oppressive system — let’s not forget that”.

And yet, much of the humanism that underpins the liberation struggle is bound up in the non-racial project, flawed as it is. Which is why it must be released from the polite, self-absolving multi-racialism that still hounds it. “It calls for a lot more self-questioning,” says Rassool. “Whatever political construction or concept we tie to it, it’s about understanding and fighting racism — that struggle needs to continue.”

Ultimately, though, the necessity to revitalise non-racialism seems to be political. “My bottomline,” Maphai acknowledges, “is to prevent racism from becoming the basis for a political project.”

Polls suggest next year’s election will produce an ANC victory based almost exclusively on black votes, the bulk of them African. Governing with the ANC will be an NP buoyed by white, coloured and Indian votes. “The overall effect,” Patrick Bulger wrote recently in *Business Day*, “would be to entrench racial opposition as the defining character of SA democracy.” We’re haunted.

Given the prospect that very limited transformation will occur in the lives of the majority of the dispossessed, “race” is liable to take on far greater political significance in the traditional constituencies of the liberation movements.

Already, the Pan-Africanist Congress is trying to position itself as the channel for racially-tinged resentment and hostility rising on the margins. If such initiatives are left unchallenged, our struggle for democracy and social justice might find itself bouncing down a sideroad of racially-charged fundamentalism that can last another 40 years.

It’s only a small part of the antidote, but revitalising non-racialism as a *progressive* project, investing it with some meaning, might spare us from that detour. ■

## The Congress tradition: Equal but separate?

The content of the ‘non-racialism’ that entered our discourse in the 1950s was rather tame. By recognising the existence of political organisations that corresponded to different racial groupings, it generally stuck to the contours of apartheid ideology.

The guiding principle of ‘separate but equal’ was graphically expressed in the four spokes of the Congress Wheel: the ANC, SA Indian Congress, SA Coloured People’s Organisation and the Congress of Democrats. The core principle was ‘cooperation’.

Fervid debates broadened the meaning of the concept. But, as Rupert Taylor notes in his paper *Taking Non-racialism Seriously*, it retained ‘a reactive nature, synonymous with non-discrimination, and indistinguishable from the dominant one of multi-racialism’.

What we require is a non-racialism that dissolves racial boundaries — as opposed to transcending them — and ‘leads to a sense of wholeness which encourages diversity’, says Taylor. And that, as Neville Alexander reminds, requires that we acknowledge ‘the scientific fact that ‘race’ is a non-entity’. An increasingly stout body of writing supports that approach.

French thinker Etienne Balibar describes contemporary racism ‘as a system of thought and a social relation, the condensed expression of a whole history’. Sure, this doesn’t make ‘race’ any less real a feature of our lives in SA. But it debunks the notion that ‘race’ is a biological or psychological inevitability of human existence, and confirms that racial categorisation — and its abolition — is a social decision.

Today’s pipedream can be tomorrow’s routine. ■