



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. ■