



The empire's new clothes

Why has it taken so long to figure out that the 'new world order' is exactly the same as the old one?

ON THE LEFT, HERE IN SOUTH Africa, but not just here, we have been suffering from an enormous inferiority complex these past years. The rhetoric of the "new world order" seemed irresistible.

I don't know how often I have heard comrades say "it is time that we grow up." What this usually means is that we should become more cynical, less idealistic.

I don't know how many times I have heard friends in political organisations, or trade unions, or in progressive NGOs refer to "the real world out there". This "real world" is where we are not — it is the world of the JSE, of the corporations, the world of Sol Kerzner and Bobby Godsell. It is supposed to be extraordinarily efficient, even heroic in its marketplace toughness.

In the past few years a whole generation of comrades have been trying to ape this imagined toughness.

I am not about to argue there is nothing we can learn from other places. I am certainly not pretending all is well in our organisations. But I am highly sceptical about just how real the efficiency and relevance of this "real world out there" is.

In the first place, my trite everyday experiences don't quite square with the heroic rhetoric.

It is a thousand times

more difficult to get simple information, for instance, out of my Yeoville branch of First National Bank than out of the (admittedly) labyrinthine ANC head office. Johannesburg General Hospital is in the midst of a massive cutback in spending. But my experience with over-stretched doctors, nurses and staff at the hospital (one of those supposedly inefficient public institutions) is altogether much happier than my attempts to get rudimentary assistance from Stuttafords at Eastgate, or sense out of my car insurers.

Maybe these are just personal experiences? Maybe.

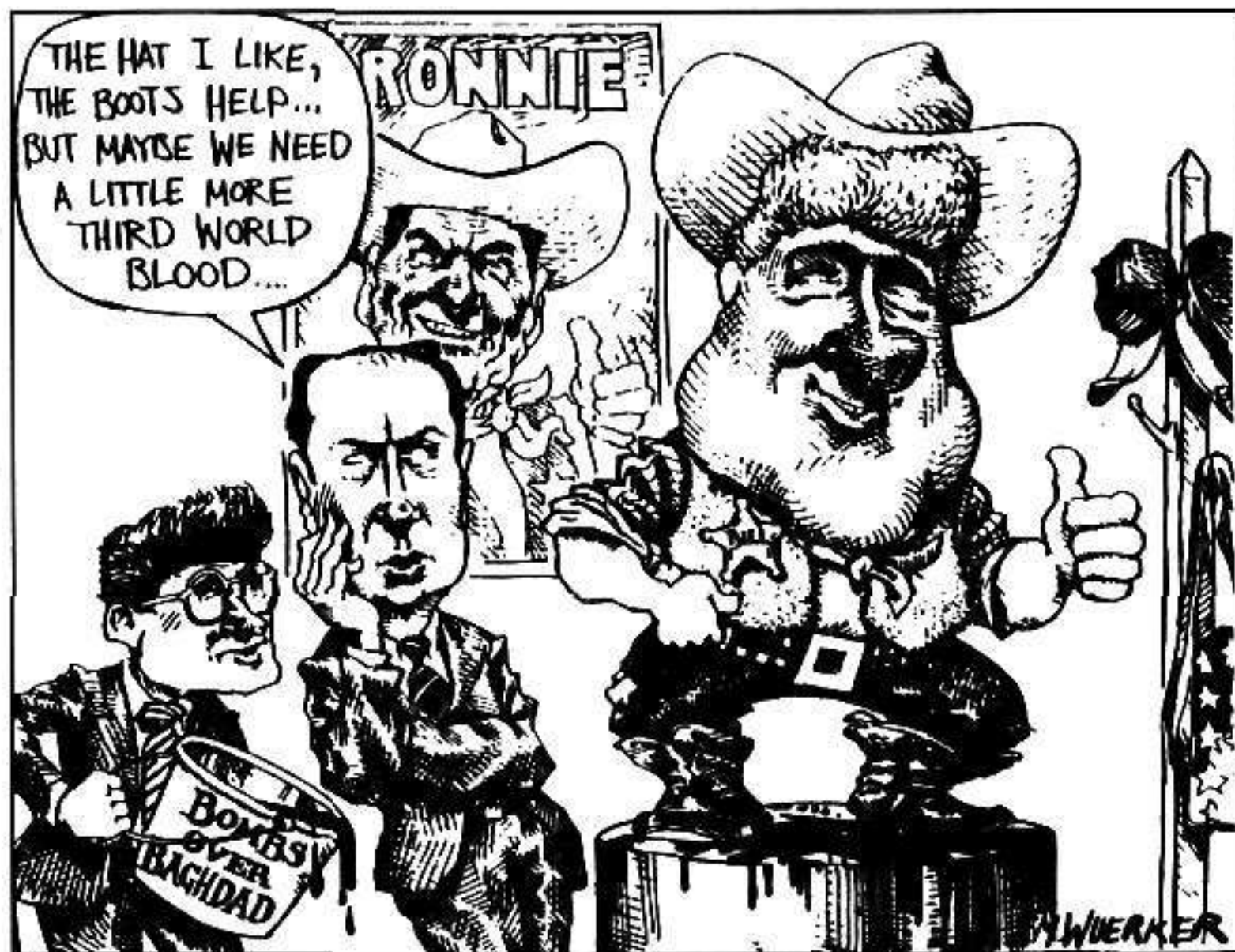
Anyhow, these personal convic-

tions (and irritations) were reawakened by two events at the beginning of October, far away from my small world of suburban banks, insurers and general hospitals.

But first a little background.

New world order

Our collective left inferiority complex came to a head in 1989. In that year, President Bush announced the dawn of a "new world order". The Warsaw Pact was crumbling fast. The super-power, two-bloc Cold War system which had dominated the globe since the end of the second world war, was a thing of the past. The Soviet Union was about to



break into dozens of pieces.

The "new world order", in the eyes of its proponents, is several things. It is a world dominated by the United States, unshackled by its global competition with the Soviet Union. This US dominance, certainly at the political and military level (if not quite so straightforwardly at the economic level), is such that the US no longer has to operate nakedly under its own flag.

Its international politico-military interventions frequently fly the flag of the United Nations, in Iraq, Yugoslavia and in Somalia. They are called UN



■ **READ MY LIPS: Scenes from Big Bad Bill Clinton's election campaign**

peace-keeping missions, or UN famine relief operations, or anti-drug trade campaigns, as in Colombia. The political and military dominance of the US has certainly made our world more unipolar than it has been since Queen Victoria.

Economically, matters are a bit more complex. The arms race played a major role in eventually crippling the Soviet Union. But the US economy has also not emerged from the Cold War in

such brilliant health. The Federal Republic of Germany (until its economy was engulfed by the political "success" of the collapse in the east) and Japan, both unfettered by major arms spending, have increasingly challenged US economic dominance.

But if, economically, the world is multi-polar, it is a multi-polarity that has seemed to be anchored around a global consensus. The "new world order" is one in which the word according to apostles Thatcher, Reagan, the IMF and the World Bank is gospel.

Worshippers of "the new world order" could have been forgiven for their growing arrogance. For almost a decade now, in country after country, the cult of privatisation, of monetarism, of deregulation, of massive cuts in social spending has become absolutely hegemonic.

As individuals we have all been reconstructed in the image of the marketplace. In hospital, in school, even in the post office, we have ceased being patients, or students, or citizens wanting to communicate. We have been told we are "consumers of services". And those providing the "commodities" (health workers, teachers and postal workers) are told to get smart or get out. Efficiency is increasingly measured, not in terms of how effectively social needs are met, but in profit margins.

All of this has become so hegemonic that it has been hard to think against the grain.

Hence our inferiority complex. Hence our silence in front of all those "wise" little throw-away phrases, like: "If we do this, how can we possibly compete with Taiwan?"

Who said we have to compete with Taiwan?

And in any case, what we need in South Africa is, for instance, houses. Unless I am very much mistaken, we can produce houses more cheaply in South Africa than we could import them from South East Asia.

I am not saying we never have to be cost-effective, or competitive internationally. But the assumption that international competitiveness is the be-all of economic rationality is precisely that — a whopping assumption.

The empire naked

Anyhow, at the beginning of October this year, just for a moment, the world

got a glimpse of the global empire beneath its "new world order" clothes. Just for a moment those seamless garments which have dazzled us were a little transparent. Beneath them the empire looked (dare we say it?) naked, and awfully like the old order.

In early October, as Yeltsin shelled an elected parliament with tank fire, western leader after leader lined up to salute him as "the embodiment of democracy". In an official statement the SACP wondered about this. To our surprise, a very wide range of the South African public shared our wonderment — even Denis Beckett, for heaven's sake.

The new crusades

In the same week US troops in Somalia began to take casualties, and suddenly we citizens of the new world order hooked into CNN began to sit up and notice. The old world order used to speak of anti-communist crusades. The new world order speaks of famine relief. To millions of TV viewers, not to mention the people of Mogadishu, the helicopter gunships firing into a bustling city didn't seem to have too much to do with humanitarian aid.

Of course, international opposition to the hypocrisy of the "new world order" has not just begun to emerge in the past weeks. In the past 12 months, for instance, several governments in Latin America have collapsed, thanks to popular struggles against the imposition of neoliberal economics. In Uruguay, a referendum was held on whether to proceed with privatisation. Seventy percent of voters said: No.

Around the globe, people are challenging the hypocrisy and moral standing of the "new world order". Yeltsin is not a democrat because democratisation is not the same thing as a head-long plunge into the "free market". The operation in Somalia is a mess because know-better western arrogance is imperialism, whatever flag it flies.

You don't have to be a fan of General Ruskoi in Moscow, or General Aidid in Mogadishu, to be a critic of the "new world order". To awaken from an inferiority complex is not necessarily to have all the answers.

But let us at least begin to say the obvious about the empire's new clothes. ■