

Midland Chamber of Industries
Port Elizabeth
Oct. 31, 1985
Notes taken by Gail Gerhart (not verbatim)

A local white activist arranged for three white American academics to hold a breakfast meeting with members of the Midland chamber of Industries headquartered in Port Elizabeth. The aim was to explore their views at a time when political protests, labor action and repression countrywide were at record highs. A partial state of emergency was in force in the eastern Cape. Thirteen whites and one black, the personnel manager of a local business, were present.

Director of MCI: Government and business are "Siamese twins," the economy and polity. The Afrikaners worked their way up by climbing economically, but they had to get political power before they really got economic power. So government is aware that Africans want to follow the same route. Afrikaners have now come to the English point of view in business [tolerate gradual changes] and they feel less threatened. History is repeating. But English and Afrikaners are whites, and voters.

Hotel manager: Isn't the lesson that Afrikaners rose through education, and Africans should too?

Director of MCI: No, they used political power to get economic benefits. Africans may have to destroy economy in their fight to achieve political power, whereas Afrikaners didn't have to.

White PE activist: Might the ANC get left behind as too moderate?

Visiting American academic #1: Yes, some blacks see the Freedom Charter as merely a bourgeois liberation document; their sense of urgency about change is far greater.

Director of MCI: Black discontent is unstructured, but like a US football team, it has a common purpose. Once the ball is kicked, you don't know who's going to catch it and run with it.

Visiting American academic #2: Can you live under a black government?

Ex-Rhodesian: One-man-one-vote is bad because blacks breed too fast.

Industry manager: Problem is there's no model anywhere for what could work here. Maybe "Tanzania and Kenya" (he had lived there, Kenya). But in Africa, power is all that counts. But we need a responsible government.

X: The pattern in Africa is one-man-one-vote-one-time, according to a book he read.

Visiting American academic #2: How about future redistribution?

Ex-Rhodesian: This is already happening because we pay very high taxes that go to pay for black services.

Volkswagen man: People talk of how blacks will mess up economy, but at the moment the white government is doing a hell of a job of messing it up! The present government's mess has led to foreign pressure, which leads to economic decline, which leads to pull-outs of business for economic reasons and emigration. And 11,000 more policemen, etc. A banana republic ruled by the white minority is coming.

Some would rather have an incompetent black government if at least he doesn't have to be in the army, even if (like in Botswana) he has to stand in bank queues for two hours. But blacks now are suffering terribly. Of course they're mad. And the whites who have been in police, etc. will have to flee from fear.

Director of MCI: English business under black government will go on as we are. But Afrikaner bureaucrats can't see it the same way, because they'll be losers.

Ex-Rhodesian: Blacks think independence will bring them wealth, but per capita income can't rise because of population growth.

Industry manager: But population growth doesn't fall until there is economic development. Another problem is blacks will never be united. Foreigners think blacks are a homogeneous bloc when Zulus, etc. are not.

Visiting American academic #1: You're full of stereotypes. Why don't you meet real blacks to find out what credible blacks think?

Coloured personnel man: He knows what blacks want and it is all justified. We disparage Africa but we could learn a lot from what's happened there, and here. It's already too late. We want to dictate to "them" but we should find out how *they* want government to work.

Director of MCI: Problem is that whites can't agree how to go about sharing power. That has to be done first.

Hotel manager, ex-Anglo in Namibia: We just need to end race discrimination in every way except vote. Then "nothing will happen" and we can get on with everything else.

Director of MCI: [Dr Nthato] Motlana [prominent Johannesburg African] says it doesn't matter if all apartheid goes; until there's political rights there's nothing.

Volkswagen man: Blacks are "streaks ahead" of white trade unions in negotiating skills, because of their tradition of "*indabaring*" [reaching a consensus through discussion].

Director of MCI: What can business do? We're already solving the labor problem [through negotiation with trade unions]. We want a bill of rights. The "religion of free enterprise" implies belief in a system based on "rights". We'll push for this—let the business sector "fly the kite" of this for the government, "let us take the flack." Government and business are "Siamese twins". They need us a lot and they can't help but listen to us because otherwise things will be disastrous for the economy.

Industry manager: He thinks Africans are now well organized.

Volkswagen man: Our press, etc. feeds us stereotypes. The world is a mess except here. ANC is communist and only [business tycoon] Chris Saunders can quote them—selectively, etc. But when there was an end of [some forms of] petty apartheid, the sky didn't fall. You have to change laws, then behavior will change.

Visiting American academic #2: Why can't business act here in PE to end the harsh use of detention by the police?

Director of MCI: [US Ambassador] Herman Nickel says "indignation is not a policy".

Volkswagen man: Business should tell government to get SADF [the army] and police out of the townships. They *should* listen, but business also depends on the *government*.

White PE activist: The government won't pay any attention to demands for a Bill of Rights.

Visiting American academic #1: Is it just "organized indignation"?

Ex-Rhodesian: Pressure is having the wrong, bad effects. The government is moving to a UDI mentality [Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence of 1965].

Visiting American academic #1: But everyone can see there is no progress until there is pressure.

Industry manager: What to do?

Visiting American academic #1: Voting "yes" for the new constitution [of 1984] is an example of what did *not* help.

Director of MCI: It's true that I and others voted yes, but because we thought it was a step in the right direction, not the end. Even now if there is to be a black house [of Parliament], it's not going to work and that will move things forward. But whites are now facing a right-wing backlash. Blacks, for example bishops we've talked to, fear the government's power and also fear confrontation with young organized blacks who may act in way that will lead to "thousands of deaths, but blacks still won't win."

Volkswagen man: We've misread P. W. Botha as a reformer, when he isn't.

Director of MCI: But business must now take the ball of bill-of-rights and run with it.

Visiting American academic #2: One rumor is that the Nationalists are preparing to become a minority party.

Ex-Rhodesian: Impossible.

X: Isn't the American disinvestment movement just attuned to US domestic political needs?

Visiting American academic #1: Don't make a mistake on that. There is much genuine concern, including from neo-conservatives who want to free the Republican Party from its racist image.