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THE CITIZEN

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Saturday Column

Rather rich of

By Martin Williams

Tutu

IT was rather rich of Archbishop Desmond Tutu to ask businesses to cough up R10 million each for the Truth Commission's reparations fund.

Especially as he did so even before the first submission at this week's TRC hearings on business. He did not need to know what anyone was going to say. The wise Arch already knew that business was guilty of aiding and abetting apartheid and would have to pay up. Why bother with hearings?

Archbishop Tutu's appeal was widely ignored. But even if he had been sympathetically received, no whip-round of half a dozen conscience-money contributions of R10 million each would undo the large-scale economic damage he wrought by spearheading the campaign for sanctions against South Africa.

Sanctions

When it comes to business and victims, Archbishop Tutu should rather remain silent. Many thousands suffered through job losses and other hardships because of his obsession with sanctions. However, you won't see them on TV because no forum has been set up for them to come forward to weep, wail and beg. Most will never know or understand the connection between the screws that were put on South Africa and their own plight.

After Archbishop Tutu's opening gambit at the TRC this week, the versatile Sampie Terreblanche, who supported the Nats in the bad old days, did some serious sucking up to the new order. This economics professor from Stellenbosch suggested that those with net worth of R2 million or more should pay wealth tax.

Sampie pressed all the right buttons to

impress the new masters, but it was an impracticable and silly idea. Firstly, there was the unmistakable element of race, which should, in theory, be unacceptable in a non-racial democracy. How could you inflict a tax on wealthy Whites but not on Blacks? Is it assumed that Blacks could not possibly be beneficiaries of apartheid?

Why another tax? We have been burdened long enough with a "transition levy" and exceedingly high rates of direct and indirect taxation. Adding another tax would encourage successful people to hide their wealth or emigrate with their skills, and it would discourage others from investing.

Sasria

The Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut chimed in by reiterating a suggestion that the R9 billion Sasria fund be used for TRC reparations. This is what Tutu and the ANC want to hear, but perhaps the Sasria fund should not be plundered just yet. The possibility of damage through riots and similar disorder, originally envisaged by the fund, has not entirely dissipated. Stick around.

All these money-grabbing suggestions should be rejected for what they are: attempts to add respectability to organised looting based on the false presumption of collective guilt on one side and deserving innocence on the other.

If "truth" and "reconciliation" are indeed the aims of the TRC, why does there always have to be this expectation of payment? Is that what reconciliation comes down to? Not something moral or spiritual but the reconciliation of financial accounts?

The principle of handouts, eagerly encouraged by Archbishop Tutu, is not a good one. It discourages individual effort to

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work for reward. In this way it fosters a mentality that will undermine Thabo Mbeki's Gear strategy. Why should people work harder if they can keep preying on guilt to extract material reward?

The question also arises, where is it going to end? The TRC has been able to extend its own life several times, always seeking more money. In the same way the transition levy is being followed by wealth tax proposals, plans to use the Sasria fund, and direct appeals from Archbishop Tutu for big hand-outs. If reparations are a high priority for the government it should cut back on other areas of wasteful expenditure and make payments from existing sources.

If not, the whole TRC/Tutu/reparations scenario threatens to become a bottomless pit. Can you honestly envisage a point where those who are now making demands will say: "Yes, thank you, that is enough, you can stop giving now"?

Apart from all of this, the relationship between business and apartheid is not the simple, evil partnership Archbishop Tutu seems to imagine.

Barriers

One counter-argument is that economic growth, driven by business, was the undoing of apartheid because it broke down artificial barriers. Unlike Archbishop Tutu, who reduced the number of available jobs, business created job opportunities.

If Tutu does get hold of piles of money in one of his begging expeditions, perhaps he should be repaying businesses which suffered under sanctions. How about R10 million apiece for those who resisted pressure to disinvest?

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