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Comment

TRC PROBE INTO BUSINESS: DID IT PROFIT FROM APARTHEID?

National Party an 'easy scapegoat'

Business was under the spotlight at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission this week to explain its role in the apartheid era. But, writes Daily News Correspondent ROBERT BRAND, the roots of injustice go back much further than the previous regime.

IFEEL rather glad that the labour question here is connected with the native question," Cecil John Rhodes said during a debate on the Glen Grey Act, the precursor of the infamous Land Act, in the Cape Colony Parliament more than 100 years ago. "If the whites maintain their position as the supreme race, the day will come when we shall be thankful that we have the natives in their proper position."

The Glen Grey Act sought to drive squatter-peasants and share-croppers off the land to turn them into wage labourers for the burgeoning mining industry on the Witwatersrand; in 1913, the Land Act would extend this process throughout the Union of South Africa.

"The Land Act," said Professor Sampie Terreblanche in a submission that set the tone for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's business hearing this week, "was more successful than any other measure in proletarianising a very large percentage of the African population and in creating the very

exploitative and unjust system of labour repression." The "proper position" of the "native" was to be as a cheap labour source for the min-

ing industry and agriculture; this situation continued well into the last quarter of this century.

The TRC's business hearing attempted to provide answers to two questions: did business profit from apartheid, and what should be done to redress the economic wrongs of the past? The weakness of the hearing was that the period under review by the TRC started in 1960, a watershed year in politics in South Africa but not necessarily in business.

To understand the true role of business in the establishment and consolidation of the apartheid system, Prof Terreblanche argued, one had to go back to last century, long before the institutionalisation of apartheid by the National Party government.

The starting point of 1960 provided an easy way out to business institutions which testified before the commission: by then, the NP had become an easy scapegoat for all that went wrong, but the patterns of

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INSTITUUT VIR EIETDSE GESKIEDENIS

Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat



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economic exploitation which endure, in some instances to this day, were already well established.

The submissions tended to focus on business' response to the political system of apartheid without tackling the economic issues which underpinned it.

With few exceptions, white business institutions which testified at the hearing argued that they had opposed apartheid because it was inimical to their interests.

"Assocom (the predecessor of the SA Chamber of Business) held the view that apartheid was a violation of human rights and was economically unsustainable.

They believed it would eventually collapse under the weight of the demands made on it by rapid economic growth," said Sacob director-general Raymond Parsons.

This view was echoed by other corporate submissions: Mike Rosholt, former Barlow Rand chair-

man, said the long-term difficulties of apartheid far outweighed the short-term gains it brought business; the response of many businesses was to "act against the injustices of apartheid ... through efforts such as public statements and calls on government".

Business sponsored many initiatives, specially during the 1980s when it had become clear that apartheid had driven the country to the brink of disaster, which undoubtedly helped bring about change.

The Urban Foundation, which protested vigorously and with some success against influx control, is one example. But as could be expected, black business institutions in their submissions proposed an entirely different view. "Business had no choice but to oppress and exploit blacks," said Lot Ndlovu of the Black Management Forum.

In a thoughtfully written submission, former First National Bank chief executive Chris Ball said business leaders during apartheid simply did not understand the social and political dynamics of the country. "In particular, there was not an understanding of the techniques of power and their management and

manipulation by the apartheid regime."

As a result, Mr Ball said, business allowed itself to become co-opted or at least compliant with the apartheid regime, even while expressing opposition to its policies.

The Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut (AHI) came closest to displaying an understanding of the present-day political and social dynamics in its submission, which apologised for the hurt caused by apartheid and made constructive suggestions to redress past wrongs.

Although apartheid in the long run was bad for business, the AHI said, business did not recognise this until fairly late.

White business undoubtedly benefited from the system at the expense of black business in the short-term, and during the 1960s many businesses supported separate development from an ideological point of view and were prepared to pay a price for it.

The AHI's proposal that part of the R9-billion SASRIA fund should be used to finance the TRC's proposed reparations policy was the only practical suggestion made in this regard by any business institution.

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