

ETHICS

Who wins if racial solidarity trumps the impulse for justice?

Bryan Rostron

It is a recurrent riddle why decent people often fail to speak out against injustice that occurs right under their noses; not something, in other words, that involves an intangible ideology but rather an act that they have personally witnessed – racial abuse, say, or sexual harassment.

It is all the more astonishing when the echoing silence emanates from public figures whose entire careers and rationale are based upon opposition to exactly that which they have chosen to overlook.

At Oxford University in October, during the annual lecture in memory of Bram Fischer, Siphos Pityana gave a pithy summary of the fallout from President Jacob Zuma.

"That he remains the president of the country today – despite the growing catalogue of crimes of which he stands accused – is a stain on our nation's history.

"That the ANC – the party of Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela – has not only not moved decisively to recall him but has unscrupulously defended him is a disgrace from which it may never recover."

One of the most bizarre manifestations of current convoluted thinking is the response of some militant black students demanding free university education. Instead of venting their anger principally on a president and his venal cronies who have looted enough from the public purse to subsidise most of their desirable demands, they damage buildings and attack other students.

The South African Special Risks Insurance Association recently revealed that payouts increased 16% in 2016, mostly because of students trashing their own campuses. So far in 2017, the student

protest bill accounts for 42% of special risk payments.

Simultaneously, the statistician-general revealed that the percentage of black students progressing at universities was higher in the 1980s than it is now.

There are far more university students today, but many drop out, frequently because they can't afford it. In ratio to enrolment, the proportion of black graduates has decreased 10% over the past 40 years.

No wonder many black students are angry. Yet why do they avoid attacking the government that actually holds the purse strings?

One explanation might be found in a just published book, *Rhodes University, 1904-2016*, by Paul Maylam.

There was a glaring omission at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Maylam points out: "There were several sectors of society – such as the media, faith communities and the legal profession – that did make submissions to the TRC, acknowledging their role in upholding, tacitly or otherwise and perpetrating apartheid. One party that did not make a submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the university sector."

Rhodes University was founded in 1904 with funds from the Cecil Rhodes estate. Leander Starr Jameson – Dr Jim of the notorious raid – declared that it would be "the Oxford of SA".

By the time I was a student at Rhodes in the late 1960s, there were still smug boasts of "dreaming spires" totally out of kilter with the nearby wretched township.

In his well-balanced account, Maylam refers to the era of high apartheid as, "inglorious years in the history of Rhodes".

For most of this period, he

says, "the Rhodes authorities appeared to readily acquiesce in the government's apartheid policies and at times, through certain gestures, such as the award of honorary doctorates to high-profile government figures, appeared to endorse apartheid". The collusion ranged from the absurd, such as banning Abdullah Ibrahim (then Dollar Brand), to the outright sinister: handing over information about students to the security police.

Maylam is also absolutely clear about the indifference of most students to the cruelty all around them, content to enjoy their privilege. But those few white students who opposed that racial tyranny were certain where the real blame lay: with the white nationalist government.

In other words, as with Fischer, the brilliant Afrikaans lawyer who turned his back on a glittering career within his own "tribe" to fight injustice, there was no snare of race solidarity.

But the inclination of most student rebels now to trash (colonial) buildings rather than take on Zuma seems to involve an ominous element of discomfort over denouncing a black leader.

Recalling Fischer in his Oxford lecture, Pityana declared: "When Afrikaner anti-imperialism became racial chauvinism, he took the difficult step of breaking ranks with his fellow Afrikaners to become part of a liberation movement."

The same should apply today: when former anti-apartheid fighters become state looters the time has come to break ranks.

Otherwise acts of racial solidarity represent a posthumous coup for apartheid.

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