

REVIEW**Bobby Godsell**

has a BA in Sociology and Philosophy from the University of Natal and a Master of Arts in Liberal Ethics from UCT. He chairs Business Leadership South Africa, an organisation of the CEOs of South Africa's 70 largest public and private companies, and co-chairs the Millenium Labour Council with Zwelinzima Vavi. He is the co-author, with James Motlatsi, previous President of the National Union of Mineworkers of "Do it! Every South African's guide to making a difference", published by Jacana in November 2008.

The Origins of Non-Racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s

By David Everatt, Wits University Press: 2009, pp. 273

Race and Nation: critical challenges from our history

David Everatt's *"The Origins of non-racialism: white opposition to apartheid in the 1950's"* is a compelling example of the value of history. Everatt's book started life as a PhD thesis completed in 1980s. Yet the story that it tells has direct relevance for the society South Africans are seeking to construct in this second decade of a new century.

Everatt tells the story of the role and relationship of individuals drawn from South Africa's racial minorities (but in particular white) in the ANC-lead struggle to end white minority rule, in the period 1945 to 1960.

It is the story of how political leaders, both black and white, defined their interests, and constructed their constituencies in the face of the tsunami race project of Afrikaner Nationalism. It is the story of a contest between a non-racial concept of the country (where individuals and class was central) and a group-centred and African nationalism-accommodating concept, where race remained the defining category.

The ascendancy of race-defined mobilisation, in large part due to growing influence of the new leadership of the Youth League of the ANC, saw the construction of a race defined alliance of organisations. Thus in the 1950's resistance to the racist policies of the new Afrikaner Nationalist government was organised around a "race" alliance, with the ANC representing black South Africans, the South African Indian Congress representing Indians, the South African Coloured Peoples Organisation representing Coloureds and the South African Congress of Democrats representing White South Africans.

Everatt's story is one of missed opportunities and unfinished business.

One of the missed opportunities was the rejection by both the Liberal Party and the South African Institute of Race Relations of the invitation to be co-sponsors of 1956 Congress of the People.

This convocation of organisations was intended as a second National Convention, an idea which Race Relations itself had proposed. The Liberal Party and Race Relations were offered equal representation (with the four race based organisations mentioned above, which constituted the ANC led alliance) on the organising committee, but both organisations declined involvement in designing the event, or attending it, in protest (and perhaps fear) of the dominant role that communists were playing in the ANC alliance.

In terms of the unfinished business around race there is a poignant symmetry in the efforts of white South Africans to determine the role of their black compatriots, and that of black South Africans to decide the role of whites.

The first is well illustrated by the alternative which both the Liberal Party, the Institute of Race Relations, and like-minded individuals offered to the Apartheid Project. The alternative offered to the proposal to divide South Africa into 9 or 10 race-defined nation states was not a single, united non-racial society; it was, instead, a concept of citizenship that for black South Africans was constrained by issues of education and economic status, in contrast to the universal political rights of white South Africans.

Indeed from the earliest moments of cohabitation in this strange and wonderful country, white South Africans have been on a journey of a kind of creeping, reluctant, hesitant and conditional acceptance of their black skinned compatriots. This journey is well illustrated by the Liberal Party's journey from qualified franchise to universal franchise – a journey which the Progressive Party was to follow two decades later.

This white dilemma as to what to do about blacks finds its echo in the struggle of African nationalism as to what to do about whites. Everatt is compelling on the influential role that the Colonialism of a Special Type idea had in terms of this struggle. Those who doubt the power of ideas should read Everatt's book for this alone.

With the ANC, this issue (what to do about the whites – Indians and Coloured also) had organisational expression. In 1969 a few whites were permitted to join the ANC, including Joe Slovo. However it was as late as 1986 (the Kabwe Consultative Conference) when white members were allowed to stand for the organisation's National Executive Committee.

There is more unfinished business in regard to these issues of race and class. How do people in a society understand their interests and organise themselves to promote and defend these interests? Equally where is the centre of ethical, or decision-making gravity to be located? In race-defined (or class defined) groups, or collectivities, or in the individual?

Though expressed here in conceptual terms, these questions remain vital political issues both in the organisation of political activity across the political spectrum. It can be argued that clear definition has been given in the South African constitution. However much of opposition politics involves a mobilisation of race-defined minorities around "minority interests". Equally the tensions between a non-racially structured South African Communist Party and the ANC where (black) African Nationalism remains a mobilising value, indicate unfinished business on the issue of race.

Amongst white South Africans, though the political settlement has broad support, most continue to define both their own interests and the society they inhabit through a race prism.

Everatt puts the contemporary challenge of race well in his introduction:

"The current generation of political leaders – and many of their voters – were all affected by apartheid, and may have a race-bred consciousness that will never entirely fade away. But the next generation – those born long after apartheid's demise – deserve so much better. Our challenge is to find the courage to break decisively with the past, the mindset and identities it created for and ascribed to us all, and enter a new discursive space where it is, indeed, enough merely to be."

And again:

"...it has also become clear since democracy was ushered in, in 1994, that a critical weakness was the failure to define non-racialism, to give it content beyond that of a slogan or self-evident 'good thing'."

Perhaps Everatt expects too much too quickly. The 16 years since our society adopted non-racial rules of the game is about half a generation. Prior to this race constituted the bricks with which the inhabitants of this strange society had to construct their own identities, define their own interests and decide how they were going to relate to those who were (racially) different from them.

However, Everatt is spot on in identifying both the centrality and urgency of finding a new dialogue and national conversation about race, citizenship and perhaps most importantly about patriotism. We need to develop a new and constructive vocabulary and grammar that deals with race in ways that add value. We need to distinguish the different contexts in which we need to talk about race.

Clearly there is an ongoing need to use race categories to measure our country's journey from its race structured past to an effectively non-racial future. In this, race becomes a measure of proportionality and fairness. At some stage the need for these measures will fall away. It is useful to think about when that time will be (clearly not now!).

We need to think and talk about race very differently when we think about both diversity and unity in our society. Our national motto, in a language which has the merit of being difficult to pronounce for 99% of South Africans, *!ke e: /xarra // ke* urges the diverse people of our country to unite. Building both understanding and respect for the country's diverse peoples, cultures, faiths and languages clearly requires a quite different attitude towards, and use of race.

Finally, when we think about race in terms of citizenship and patriotism, we need to work with this concept in a different way again. If we are indeed to become one nation, and share a common patriotism then we will need to develop a "hyphenated" identity. Most whites would comfortably describe themselves as South Africans. Many blacks would prefer the identity of African. Indeed the word African is often used as a synonym (perhaps even camouflage) for black. Yet a common citizenship and a shared patriotism requires a shared and inclusive African identity. So the particular, immediate and important "clothes" of language, culture and belief (so often confused and conflated as race) will need to co-habit a shared and inclusive identity as both South Africans and Africans.

This is the challenge of our history. Everatt's book is a fine example of the benefits of a thoughtful look back in defining the desired way forward.

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