

Mr Reeve

FROM: E A J Fergusson

DATE: 8 JULY 1985

cc PS/Mr Rifkind
Mr Johnson
Miss Neville-Jones

UK POLICY TOWARDS SOUTH AFRICA

1. The excellent draft paper circulated on 3 July lacks an assessment of what we think is a reasonable pace of internal change in South Africa, towards what goal. At present our policy is largely determined by our need to respond to the ferment of pressures in the world outside South Africa.
2. An informed observer with a sense of history and the ability to compare the situation in South Africa with the way in which other societies have handled or are handling the immensely complex problems arising from the inter-action of widely different cultures would accept two propositions:
 - (a) there is a process of change, even of accelerating change, in South Africa; and
 - (b) there is no model in the developed or under-developed world which offers a satisfactory paradigm for stable evolution in the South African context.
3. The dominant element in South African society (ie the whites) know that they are in the business of survival. They know that if there is to be a place for them in a future and stable South Africa it will require a continuing process of compromise among all parties, including themselves. While there are obvious divisions between Afrikaners and non-Afrikaners as to the degree of their determination for personal survival within South Africa, a large majority of the white population and very probably the coloured and Indian populations also do not see survival as lying within the framework of a unitary majoritarian state. They believe that the determination which they show now is likely to decide the extent to which future compromises take account of their interests. They also believe that one should not make parallels between their situation and that of the white minorities in the ex-colonial world (which were relatively transient elements in their local environments) or the problem of civil rights for non-white minorities in eg the US or Britain (which have never posed a serious threat to the values of the governing group).

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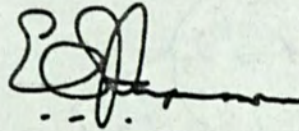
4. The situation in Algeria may be thought to offer rather closer parallels; I do not believe that close study would bear that out.
5. Whatever its Dutch antecedents, the South Africa of today is very largely the product of British influence - two provinces were British colonies for over a century and the First World sector of the South African economy is very largely the creation of British capital, technology, skills, people and effort. So, too, is the legacy of constitutional rule, law, administration, press, etc. I say this without wanting to downplay the significance of the Afrikaner element in society nor the disastrous quarter of a century of Afrikaner ideology from 1948. The Afrikaners are, however, a convenient scape-goat. The collective values of white South African society in the period up to 1948 were more or less indistinguishable from the values of much of British society of the period. The difference is that attitudes in post-war Britain, in the special circumstances of the time, changed very rapidly. Attitudes in South Africa froze (in some aspects of course they turned back, though "apartheid" is more a matter of systematization - of Dutch tidy-mindedness - than a dramatic break with earlier racial attitudes). Although in the last ten years much of the more rigid ideology of apartheid has been got rid of, as Afrikaners have come to realize how unfitted it is for the modern world, and have recognised that it harms their own self-interest (as they too have evolved), the main reason why white South African attitudes have not evolved as quickly as attitudes elsewhere in the West and are not now broadly the same as liberal values in Britain or the US, is because in neither of the latter do white people face the potential threat of domination by different cultures.
6. Many of South Africa's detractors do not themselves have democratic regimes. Partial though the franchise is, the system in South Africa is nonetheless democratic. Any leader, Prime Minister or now President, can only move as fast as he can carry his constituency with him. How to do so - the detailed management of a domestic political situation - cannot easily be determined by outside observers.
7. The pace of internal political movement within South Africa is undoubtedly determined by the conflicting pressures of the domestic political scene. One of the reasons why pressure from outside on South Africa is ineffective or even counter-productive, in the eyes of the dominant group, is that it appears to have only very generalised answers to the question "where should it all end up?" and little or no answer to the questions "how should minority interests be safeguarded?" and "how should Western values be safeguarded?". Yet it is on the answers to those questions, and the reassurance which they need to provide to those who will have to relinquish power, that the vital issue of the pace of change depends. Events elsewhere in Africa, most recently in Zimbabwe, reinforce fear rather than confidence.

8. One answer is what one might call the Oppenheimer thesis. Put crudely, this is that if South Africa can remain stable and grow more prosperous it will in due course become a socially more homogeneous society with more and more blacks assimilating to white society and accepting white values. As they do so the forces of vested interest and stability will grow, and South Africa will increasingly be a class rather than a racially-based society. That is internationally a more normal basis for society. Of course, as - in much easier conditions - the US example shows, this is not an easy aspiration to fulfil. What however are the alternatives? One is some kind of federal/confederal structure, geographically or ethnically based, or both. However much we may dislike it, and however inconsistent at the margins, there was some logic to the notion of separate racial classification and separate development (its principal fault was the grotesque unfairness of its application). There are of course those who explicitly believe that only a unitary state with a majoritarian system will accord with modern notions of fairness. Many informed observers, however, would see that as a recipe for chaos. Some, of course, would not mind that as the price for equality. Many would.

9. These are immensely difficult issues which I have only sketched out in the barest outline. They need to be addressed, however, because if one is getting into the business of applying pressure (we know that this is a slippery slope) one needs to have some clearer notion of "pressure towards what" than I believe we have. What would our answer be to a specific question from the South African Government "What do you want us to do next?"

10. It is possible to take the detached view that our national interests require us to respond to the pressures on us, irrespective of how we view the reality of the situation in South Africa. On this hypothesis we may at some stage have to make a clear-cut choice against South Africa if the balance of our interests there and outside appears to shift decisively in favour of the latter and we look like risking serious damage. I believe nonetheless that there are many people in this country who would be unhappy, at the least, to see us make that choice purely in response to external pressures on us and would believe that our historical responsibility for the situation in South Africa and our continuing close human involvement there would require us, before we do so, to have done as much as we could to avoid such a decision by putting across the positive case for involvement in South Africa. It is, of course, very hard to assess how public opinion as a whole would respond were we faced with the need for a choice of Black rather than White Africa. We need to recognise, however, that UK opinion could be very divided.

11. I believe that Dr Crocker's approach shares some of the above line of reasoning. We might therefore aim to widen the discussion with him on Monday, 15 July, or perhaps over lunch - to consider these longer-term issues.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ewen Fergusson', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Ewen Fergusson

