

BECKETT'S SOUTH AFRICA

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It is not only true that those who ignore history may be condemned to repeat it. They may also be condemned to miss the possibilities for profound change and renewal that it discloses.

I first visited **South Africa** back in 1979. Those were the days when there were still pass laws, homelands, forced relocations, "Whites Only" signs on beaches and buses, bannings for politically-offensive books and newspapers, and local YMCAs and churches that were not open to blacks or coloreds. Many of my white friends in Joburg were decamping for graduate school in the US, heading over the border to Swaziland to join the underground, or asking me to send them bullet-proof vests. The "Spear of the Nation (MK)" was not the name of a leading [South African travel agency](#), as it is today, but the ANC's military wing.

Indeed, back then, just three years after the Soweto uprising and Steve Biko's death, the overwhelming consensus was that the country was headed for a bloody "zero-sum" apocalypse, or, at best, an endless civil war.

After all, South Africa's white minority was armed to the teeth, with Africa's most powerful standing army, navy, and air force, and an arsenal that included nuclear weapons. A tiny white elite -- presided over by "day-time liberals" like Anglo-American's Harry Oppenheimer, the head of the DeBeers diamond cartel -- controlled almost all the country's real estate, minerals and financial wealth. In any conceivable representative system, this elite would have been forced to yield

power to the 90 percent of the population that was (as the minority liked to put it), "non-white."

All this made it very hard to envision any sort of compromise that could bridge the gap between black majority power and minority rights.

Accordingly, on the left, two decades after Sharptown, most blacks had given up any hopes for negotiating an end to apartheid.

On the right, a substantial number of whites, especially hard-line ("verkrampste") Afrikaners, clung to an almost religious vision of their own entitlement to South Africa's land and wealth. As usual, the combination of economic and political inequality with religion-based theories of entitlement was explosive, and profoundly unhelpful.

Many white liberals that I met around the country, especially those of British descent or from the professional classes, had already concluded that the outlook was hopeless, and were making plans to depart for Australia, Canada, the UK, or the US. Many politically-conscious blacks had also arrived at the same conclusion, but their emigration options were limited. The more militant among them were headed for the "frontline states" to join the MK.

Meanwhile, a curious symbiosis had grown up between the world's most prominent neoconservatives and South Africa's extremists on the right and the left. Leaders like the UK's **Margaret Thatcher** and US President **Ronald Reagan** had become convinced that the only alternative to apartheid was a black-dominated Communist dictatorship. The depressing fact is that they opted for apartheid -- or, at best, supported black homeland leaders like KwaZulu's **Chief Buthelezi**.

One cannot resist recalling that then-Congressman, now-Vice President, **Dick Cheney** also shared this short-sighted, hard-line pessimism. He voted [ten times against anti-apartheid sanctions](#) while a member of the US House of Representatives from 1985 to 1988, and even opposed

a House resolution that **urged South Africa to free Nelson Mandela from jail.**

But Cheney was not alone. By the mid-1980s, in the US, the original civil rights alliance between blacks and progressive whites had long since fractured. It was really only a very dedicated group of liberals like Allard Lowenstein and Steven Solarz, plus the Black Congressional Caucus, supported by outsiders like Jesse Jackson, Randall Robinson, and some dedicated student leaders, that kept the anti-apartheid movement's fires alive.

Ultimately, therefore, while anti-apartheid boycotts and foreign financial pressures certainly helped to encourage change in South Africa, the heavy lifting had to come from within. Fortunately, as resistance to the system spread across South Africa's townships, an enlightened group of black and white leaders happened to be available who were able to seize what was probably the very last chance for a decisive break with the past.

AGAINST THE ODDS

Back in 1979, there were a few South African voices who, while totally opposed to apartheid, also had a kind of irrepressible faith that, some how or other, a relatively non-violent transition to a democratic society might be achieved.

Among blacks, we now know that Nelson Mandela, still in prison, had concluded that a constitutional democracy, with protection for minorities, property rights, and a market economy, was the way to go. Other influential figures with the same basic outlook were Episcopal leader Desmond Tutu and then-union leader Cyril Ramaphosa.

Among white South Africans, one of few who was far-sighted enough to believe in the prospects for a democratic society, way back then, was a courageous and outspoken Johannesburg-based journalist, **Denis Beckett**. Second cousin to the renowned playwright, Denis inherited his family's aptitude with the pen. But he also brought the journalist's keen eye for the fine

points of daily life, a passionate concern for his country's future, and a contagious optimism.

One wishes that old Sam, who never really outgrew his Parisian-fed doubt that people had little to say to each other, had spent a little more time with his cousins in the warm Joburg sun.

Denis Beckett

Since the early 1970s, Denis has been one of South Africa's most prolific and talented journalists. He's the author of eight books, the latest of which is the delightful, irreverent [Redeeming Features](#), published this March by Penguin Books, a series of essays about life in post-apartheid South Africa. Along the way, he's managed South Africa's first black-owned newspaper, [The Voice](#); started two magazines, [Frontlines](#) and [Sidelines](#), had a very successful TV show, "[Beckett's Trek](#)," and also written columns for several leading South African newspapers. In addition, he and his lovely wife, who also happens to be a child psychologist, have raised three wonderful children in Joburg.

After all this Denis has hardly become a Polly Anna. He's acutely aware of the dire problems that the country faces, and has been focusing hard on several of his favorites, especially the tough tradeoff between granting blacks "instant empowerment" and making sure that South Africa remains competitive in a demanding global economy.

However, as its third free nation-wide election since 1994 went off largely without a hitch this month, and as the country observes its tenth anniversary with multi-racial democracy, perhaps we should indulge South Africans in general and this white South African in particular a little pride for what they've already accomplished -- certainly by comparison with the alternatives, and by comparison with other endemic conflicts around the world.

As [Denis says](#), "Many South Africans forget that we have much to celebrate. We have not acquired utopia, but we have acquired a solid foundation. A lot of building lies ahead. We could do well, as we build, to revel a little in what has already been done."

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