

MOTION AT OXFORD UNION DEBATING SOCIETY - 7th MARCH, 1985"THERE SHOULD BE AN IMMEDIATE END TO ALL LINKS WITH SOUTH AFRICA."OPPOSED BY DR. F. VAN ZYL SLABBERT MP

The motion as it stands, is silly, if not quite ridiculous. It clearly reads that all links should be ended immediately. Thus stated it cuts across all political, ideological, religious, financial and cultural positions. Literally interpreted it is devoid of any useful debating content. For example, in terms of it one could argue that the Anglican Church in Britain should cut off all links with the Anglicans in South Africa; the Red Cross should have nothing to do with anything that goes on in the prisons in South Africa; that students who are studying at Oxford at this very moment should return immediately to South Africa; that no letters should be posted to and from Britain; that Moscow, Eastern Bloc countries, the United Nations or any other organization should immediately cease assisting the ANC in the liberation struggle.

Clearly this is not what the proposers of the motion could have had in mind.

2. Usually in debates of this kind the underlying assumption is that some outside force or external factor can be mobilized to bring about a significant change inside South Africa.

It is further assumed that if some external factor acted in a particular way this would somehow -

- (a) compel the South African Government to behave in a way;
or
- (b) strengthen those who struggle against it so that a more desirable state of affairs for the oppressed or the suffering would be the consequence.

These two assumptions usually cover a host of other assumptions which I believe have very little supporting evidence. It is important to keep the distinction between the actions of an external factor and the consequences of such actions domestically clearly in mind.

3. What are the external factors usually mentioned in this kind of debate?

The following three are the most common -

- (a) Foreign Governments;
- (b) Foreign business
and
- (c) Foreign special interest lobbies, such as churches,
sporting bodies and universities.

Take foreign governments for example. It is hypothetically correct that if all governments shared the same abhorrence of the domestic policy of the South African Government and collectively decided on the same foreign policy action, this could have a significant impact on the South African Government.

And so we hear of a total strategic fuel embargo, an international refusal of landing rights, withdrawal of communication and postal privileges, etc. All this is premised on the assumption that Governments, in the case of South Africa, would make an exception and base their foreign policy action on a shared moral rejection of apartheid or separate development and a desire to assist those who suffer from it to the exclusion of all other considerations. This is of course, sheer unadulterated nonsense. I have yet to hear of any government that does not base its foreign policy approach on its own perceived domestic and internationally strategic interest. These differ widely among governments depending on their geographic location, internal resource base, spheres of influence and strategic significance to the super powers.

4. When it comes to business as an external factor, it surely does not need to be argued that there is no such thing as a collective international business ethic concerning the domestic affairs of any foreign country. Business pursues profit - not morality. Even if some business firms are more sensitive to domestic pressures concerning foreign investments, there is abundant evidence that if there is profit to be made, and for whatever reason, some withdraw from South Africa, some will take their place, provided that the investment climate is favourable.

As far as I am concerned, I prefer that a foreign company be sensitive to its own domestic pressures concerning fair employment practices in another country, than one which is not. It is futile to rant and rave about the immorality of foreign firms buttressing a vicious system by their involvement in South Africa, in fact if it is quite clear from available

from available / ...

evidence that foreign governments and business are not going to act as prime movers in changing the domestic situation in South Africa, the morality of keeping alive the hope or the fiction that they can play such a role is equally questionable.

5. Special interest lobbies as an external source of pressure would appear to be more effective in their own domestic situation, than on the foreign target area. Thus, multi-nationals in the United States can sometimes find themselves spending a disproportionate amount of time explaining or justifying their small percentage of investment in South Africa because of the so-called "hassle" factor. Generally speaking, special interest lobbies sustain a kind of moral climate against Apartheid and racism, rather than completely managing to change any specific policy. For me, there is one very clear exception, and that is in the area of sport, where there is no question that the sports boycott was effective in bringing about some changes in sport in South Africa.

Ironically, however, these very changes are dismissed as "inconsequential and cosmetic" by those who believe that such changes could be brought about by external pressure in the first place. One thing is abundantly clear though, anyone who pursues the external factor as a strategy for internal change will find a ready and enthusiastic audience with guaranteed media coverage precisely because of the institutionalization of such special interest lobbies overseas. Fighting apartheid from outside has become a growth industry with its own bureaucratic needs and vested interests.

6. The other dimension to the role of the external factor which has to be considered can be put as follows :-

Assuming that some external factor could be mobilized as effectively as possible, what would be the presumed beneficial consequences for resolving the internal problem in South Africa ? As I have suggested, there appears to be two general answers - the South African Government will "come to its senses" or "see the error of its ways"; or be "forced to the negotiating table"; or be sufficiently weakened to succumb to other domestic pressures, etc. etc.

The other side of the coin is never seriously considered, namely that the South African Government could become more repressive, more obdurate and less inclined to rationality. When it is considered, it is done in some tortuous logic which argues that somehow this is also necessary because it has to get worse so that it can become better. One clear case of a reasonably successful external embargo somehow fails to impress those who persist with this kind of strategy. Through Armscor, South Africa is now not only almost self-sufficient in supplying its own weaponry, but is successfully exporting arms.

The second kind of answer is that somehow the Blacks or oppressed or those involved in the struggle will benefit by the concerted action of an external factor.

It is very difficult to pin down exactly what specific form this "goodness" is going to take. Examples vary from the arguments that at least the outside world demonstrates its "moral support for the oppressed," to the fallacious assumption that if the South African Government is deprived

is deprived / ...

of commodity Y it will then spend its money on commodity X which will be to the benefit of the Blacks. Example - less money spent on Defence will mean more money spent on Black education. This is, of course, demonstrable nonsense. The most far-fetched if not quite ridiculous argument in this vein is that Blacks cannot suffer any more than they are at the moment and therefore concerted external action will increasingly isolate the South African Government and then weaken it. Eventually this weakening process must be to the benefit of the majority. The other side of the argument is of course that things can get considerably worse without them necessarily getting better at all, and that relatively speaking the South African Government can get stronger and even more coercive than it is at present.

7. All of which leads me to conclude that -

- (a) No external factor, be it Government, business or special interest lobby will or can be the major deliberate determinant of internal changes in South Africa. Such a factor could play a precipitant "last straw that broke the camel's back" role, but then only because of major internal developments themselves;
- (b) Again, all the evidence seems to support the conclusion that to the extent that an external factor has tried to play such a deliberate role, the consequences have been counter-productive to the intentions. In other words, neither have the Blacks benefited in any ostensible sense, nor has the South African Government been weakened.

On the contrary, more often than not, an increased sense of isolation and external moral condemnation has been repeatedly used with great effect by the South African Government to consolidate its support amongst Whites and to foster a "seige-like - us against the world" mentality.

7. There are however, those who persist with an "external factor" strategy towards South Africa because they believe in a certain theory of change regarding the country. The hard-liners who reject all forms of gradualism, or reform, or evolutionary change and are committed and convinced that violence and revolution is the only way in which to resolve the conflict in South Africa will not be persuaded by the arguments I have mentioned.

Therefore, to round off my opposition to this motion, let me make a few observations on violence and South Africa -

- (a) It is generally accepted that there is a clear relationship between the extension of coercive government in a society and the increase in violence in various forms to react to and oppose such coercion. This is so because those who are subjected to such coercion experience it as violence to their person. In this way violence begets violence.
- (b) There is no question that South Africa went through an extremely coercive phase in the initial implementation of its policy of Apartheid/ Separate Development. The defining characteristic of this policy in the constitutional phase was the enforced or compulsory racial segregation and ethnic group membership of individuals for the purpose of politically ordering the South African society. At its core therefore, the policy denies the voluntary association of the individual for social, economic and political activities. Consequently those organizations outside of Parliament which legally and constitutionally opposed this system and were not prepared to accept the assumptions or goals of Apartheid/ Separate Development and appeared to the authorities to have significant or widespread support of the Black population were declared illegal or banned. Thus the ANC and PAC went underground and violence was accepted by them as a means to oppose the system.
- (c) A full blown revolutionary situation or a state of civil war is one where violence becomes the pervading means on either side of the divide to either maintain or change the status quo. I do not believe it is in either stage yet. In other words, there is still sufficient flexibility or "give" in the system for other modes of change to succeed. This of course becomes small comfort if those other modes are not vigorously pursued.

- (d) If the Government prevents peaceful and legitimate protests, if it uses arbitrary arrests and detentions, raids and other intimidatory tactics, we can be certain that an increasing number of South Africans, who are at the receiving end of such methods, will begin to define the domestic situation in such desperate and inflexible terms that violence will be seen as the only way out. Also, if the Government continues to remain insensitive or ignorant of the interactive relationship between coercion and violence in South Africa, it is quite likely that violence and counter violence will become the dominant strategy between itself and many of those who oppose it. I have no doubt that this will be a tragedy beyond comprehension for all of us.
- (e) I say this because I cannot see how the South African situation can be resolved through revolution or by a return to old style racial domination. Those who propogate a transformation of the status quo through violent means are victims of a romantic delusion whatever the legitimacy of their grievances or the intensity of their feelings about them.
- (f) At the same time, I cannot see how those who govern, can do so successfully by also only depending on coercive or violent measures. By "successfully" I mean maintaining a kind of operative stability so that "normal life" appears to carry on. The same kind of logistical and organizational problems which confront those who wish to promote revolution have to be faced by those who wish to prevent it. The point I am making is that the use of inconclusive violence in a country such as South Africa is likely to end in seige.

A siege can last for a long time and we in South Africa can do well to learn from countries such as Lebanon, Sudan and Northern Ireland.

- (g) A siege society is of course a warped society. All its resources, economic, physical and human as well as the most routine aspects of daily life become subject to the predicament of siege. The hallmarks of a siege culture are suspicion, mistrust, defining all situations and actions in terms of threat potential; a kind of "us" or "them" approach to the future.
- (h) In South Africa, we are not quite there yet, but only the myopic would deny that in some areas in our metropolitan communities we are already on that road. The real tragedy about violence as a strategy to bring about or prevent change, is that those who rely on it become immune to reason and the weight of factual evidence against its use. One can point out how unpredictable it is in achieving the desired ends; one can wax eloquent on the horror and despair it causes and even advance the most compelling moral arguments against it, but those who have committed themselves to it, either to change or maintain the status quo, are victims of the highly questionable assumption that by using it they are teaching "the other side a lesson" which can change their actions and convictions. In fact, more often than not, exactly the opposite happens and the familiar spiral of violence and counter-violence is the consequence.

- (i) My life has been contaminated by laws which I did not make and which I abhorred ever since I became aware of my own intelligence. Because of the colour of my skin I have been the beneficiary of the structures and institutions created by those laws, whilst others who do not legally share "my colour" have been deprived. This is going to go on being the case until the system which generates those laws and those who dominate are changed. I believe that any strategy which engages the system to this effect should be seriously considered in terms of its ability to apply and increase pressure and bring about non-violent, rational change. Why do I qualify with "rational" and "non-violent". Rationality is important because it assumes some predictable and logical relationship between means and end. It would be non-rational for me at least to substitute one totalitarian elite with another, or to deliberately change the present system to one that is worse. Violence as an instrument of change increases the unpredictability of the outcome and therefore the scope of non-rational action.
- (j) It could be argued, and no doubt, will be, that this is a conveniently smug position to adopt for a "whitey" in a racially dominated society controlled by others of his skin colour. That I am the colour I am is accident of history for which I refuse to accept blame or feel guilty about. It certainly does not blind me to the fact that totalitarianism, racial domination, exploitation and bureaucratic persecution does not purely depend on a white or any coloured skin.

8. I hope I have made it quite clear that I reject violence and I reject isolation as effective strategies to bring about the kind of non-racial South Africa that I believe it.

I would say that on the balance of aggregates, if an external factor is going to play some kind of strategic role, involvement and interaction with South Africa is perhaps more effective than boycott or isolation. Once you have isolated and expelled something, you no longer have any responsibility or involvement with it. You can forget about it, and you may even feel better for being able to do so. The more South Africa has to interact with the world, the more it has to become involved and interdependent with that world, the greater the likelihood that the absurdity and untenability of Apartheid will be exposed and the more vulnerable the domestic situation will be to external pressures and changes. Generally speaking, I believe this to be so whether the external factor be a government, a multi-national or a special interest lobby.

However, just as I am convinced that an external factor cannot play the determinant role through boycotting or isolating South Africa, so it also will not be a prime mover by becoming involved or interacting with South Africa. The really important and effective change will come from inside South Africa. Perhaps the most detrimental consequence of those who persist with an "external factor strategy" is the illusion that it creates of some cataclysmic, traumatic external event that is instantly going to change the internal situation. In other words, it reinforces the "five minutes to midnight" syndrome

syndrome / ...

because it has a paralytic effect on those who wish to bring about systematic change or reform. Some who wish for such change to come sooner do less because it is only "five minutes" away, others who fear such change, do nothing in order not to make the time pass quicker. Whatever reconstruction, fundamental change, or reform is going to take place in South Africa, will be done by using its resources, both physical and human, internally. The more those resources are destroyed the more difficult it is going to be to bring about a better society. The more those resources are abused, or racially appropriated, the more likely those resources will be destroyed or made useless for the period of reconstruction.

That is why the real debate has yet to start inside South Africa. And cannot depend for the quality of its arguments on motions such as we are talking about this evening. As I said, taken at face value it is a silly motion and I oppose it on that ground alone. But, having tried to give some kind of coherence or sense to it, my opposition only grows.

1. 'Silly motion'

2. External factor / Internal change

(a) Compel Govt.

(b) Benefit oppressed.

Action / consequences.

3. External factors

(a) Govt.

(b) Business.

(c) Special interest lobby. - domestic foreign target area

4. Special interest - sport,
- growth industry.

5. Consequences

A. Govt. (a) Govt will come to its senses

(b) Govt will change policy
* for ✓

(c) Amicor

B. Blacks.

(a) Blacks will benefit

(b) Worse before better

(c) Cannot suffer more.

b Conclusions

(a) No external factor
last straw

(b) Counterproductive

7. Theory of change

- Violence

8. Coercion + Violence

9. No doubt - extensive
coercion in implementation
of Apartheid.

10. Full blown revolutionary
situation / civil war
Violence / change / status quo,
Not there - siege - incoherence

11. Siege - warred society

12. Real tragedy about
violence - teach them
lesson

Personal note.

1. My life has been
contaminated by laws
which I did not make
and abhor.

2. Unless system changes

3. Any strategy which
brings about non-violent
rational change.

4. Coercement position

5. I reject violence / isolation

6. This is an Apartheid
motion