

Life On A Seesaw

By Leigh Barrett, *Executive Editor: Perspective Publications*

In 2016, after 18 years in America, I took the plunge and returned to South Africa. I left the country in 1998, not due to any of the usual socio-economic or political reasons: I've always been in love with South Africa, but the opportunity to travel and live somewhere different was irresistible, so I packed up my five dogs and headed across the ocean.

At the time, South Africa was still in the afterglow of the 1994 election, and in some cases an increased level of elation after the Springboks won the Rugby World Cup the following year. The outlook was rosy. Democracy had arrived.

I was cautiously optimistic: it was always in mind, and sometimes repeated out loud (which cost me a potential job in the USA . . . another story) that now the ANC had won the election, South Africa was faced with the potential of repeating history. What I saw was a future of 40 years of ANC rule, just as we'd been through 40 years of the National Party, and policy ideas that had good intentions, but I was afraid that they would not "re-balance" the country, and instead favor only those who had been disadvantaged in the past.

My argument at the time, and still is today, is best described using the analogy of a seesaw. For decades, during the National Party/apartheid-era and in colonial days, the seesaw had been weighted to one side with the advantaged, and on the other side, unable to touch the ground, were those who had been disadvantaged. When the ANC came to power in 1994 promising equity,

it appeared initially that the seesaw would finally move into balance, but increasingly the policies enacted started to merely look like the reverse of what had been – and a society out of balance comes with a host of problems.

On my return to the country this year, I paid attention to the attitudes of the people I encountered, whether family, friends, or hosts on my 6-week road trip from Johannesburg to Cape Town, and strangers-in-between. Mostly white South Africans, who generally considered themselves liberal-minded, and all in the middle- to upper-middle class income bracket, I heard repeated frustration with the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies. Much has been made of late (in both USA and South Africa) of "white privilege". And yet, when I broached the subject, I was met with everything from complete misunderstanding ("we're not privileged; we had to work hard for everything") which misses the entire point, to general frustration with BEE policies: the government's attempt at redressing the wrongs of the past and in the process creating another race-based policy that appeared to favor a small minority.

CORRECTIVE RACISM

For all the good intentions of transforming the country into a racially equal nation, a place where opportunities were no longer based on appearance – or as Warren Buffett calls it, "winning the ovarian lottery" - BEE seemed a complete hypocrisy. It was

puzzling to many that, in trying to abolish racism and the basis of apartheid's policies of reserved opportunities for whites, the government merely instituted it in a new way.

“Black” was redefined to include black-skinned Africans, Coloreds, Indians, and Chinese, and certainly, the intention of redressing the past discrimination against these population groups was honorable. The Codes on which BEE (modified in 2007 to B-BBEE or ‘Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment’) was based were well-considered: ownership, management control, skills development, enterprise and supplier development, and socio-economic development.

The results, however, have neither been impressive, or welcomed, by the vast majority of South Africans, regardless of the color of their skin.

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these new advantages for all they were worth, creating a small black elite who became exceptionally wealthy due to the color of their skin.

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Drawing the obvious economic parallels between BEE and apartheid was not lost on leaders like the Zulu Inkatha Party's Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who pointed out in 2005 that of the R42 billion worth of BEE deals thus far, R25 million had been allocated to two oligarchs in the ANC and he drew attention to the “government's reckless implementation of the affirmative action policy” creating a skills shortage by “forcing many white people to leave the country”, and asking whether BEE and affirmative action “has given rise to a new version of racial pride?”



Nor did it escape the attention of the always outspoken, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who hit the proverbial nail on the head back in 2004 when he stated that BEE policies served only the minority black elite “that tends to be recycled”, leaving millions in “dehumanizing poverty”. “We are sitting on a powder keg”, he said.

To focus on skills development is an absolute necessity in a country with a failing grade in black education. Successive political dramas played out over the decades of apartheid as well as the new democracy resulted in a “white brain drain”, with many skilled whites leaving the country to find a more welcoming base overseas for the privileges they had experienced in South Africa. Unfortunately, it appears the government has failed to focus on raising the level of education and developing the proper partnerships whereby those who go through the apprenticeship programs are actually able to find work after qualification.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

Driving through the country in February and March of this year, the inequality is stark. The intensity that is Johannesburg and its glittering, ultra-First World malls beyond anything I saw in America, contrasts with the grinding poverty one sees in every small town throughout the country. Miles of shacks and basic, uninspired housing in areas frequently polluted with trash and scores of plastic bags decorating the landscape, reveal a country still very divided between the haves and have-nots: a result of many generations of creating a socio-economic reality where blacks were kept out of the benefits that the country has to offer, but not improved by the cur-

rent ruling party's focus on black empowerment.

To compound the confusion over “privilege”, I often came across a frustration amongst those I spoke to, that “the people” (meaning “black people”) aren't willing to “lift themselves up by their own bootstraps”, that the government is creating all these “opportunities”, that all “the people” have to do is work harder. There was no answer when I asked about those who do not have “bootstraps” after generations of living outside the economic system.

At almost every traffic light, there are beggars, holding signs asking for work, for money, for the chance to feed their family. One person suggested they take the money they earn (and it's astounding how many don't give because they feel the beggars are probably earning thousands in begging) and “go get a job”. There is usually uncomfortable silence when I describe a time in my life when I had to make a similar choice: do I use the little I have to buy food for a few days, or do I use it to get a bus to town and hope that somehow, if I'm lucky, it results in work that will pay me in a month? When one's choice is that stark, no level of government policy is going to positively impact your life - certainly not in the short term, which is when one needs it the most.

It therefore shouldn't come as a surprise that a recent report by the respected think tank, Institute of Race Relations, shows that 85% of South Africans feel they gain nothing from these policies. When Vice-President Cyril Ramaphosa stated the government's intention to double down on BEE policies, and those who don't like it, “tough for you”, the majority of the population sighed in frustration.

Ironically, before coming to power, the ANC had made very clear its opposition to affirmative action. That position didn't last long, and the reins of power merely opened the door to an opportunity to re-weight the seesaw. While many leaders in the ANC are openly acknowledging that BEE policies have not worked the way they were intended, it's difficult to see how the governing party is addressing the failure of a policy that has already cost the country an estimated R21.1 billion, without showing the necessary results for the majority of South Africans.

One cannot correct the racial seesaw by simply sitting on the other side of it. "Corrective racism", as tempting as it might be, simply is not working.

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