

# Drought, Water and Politics in Southern Africa

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IT IS A central feature of present-day South African government propaganda to maintain that, however bad the country's political problems, the economy is being properly managed. Not only the government information services but numerous business and financial organizations such as the South African Foundation assiduously spread this picture of South Africa. Glossy and sophisticated magazines and advertisements costing thousands of rand to produce, repeat the theme ad nauseum.

Most of the propaganda reflects the usual capitalist's short-sighted view of economic progress as confined to quick turnover of capital and easy profits. In the gold-mining and other extractive industries, ruthless exploitation of the wealth of the country regardless of the consequences for future generations is extolled in headlines of the 'another record year' variety. The vast majority of the people of South Africa are kept artificially bound hand and foot by racially discriminatory laws, and thus prevented from developing skills and creative abilities. The oppression of the main economic base of any country—its people—is called '*proper management of the economy*'!

Perhaps it is asking too much of the White Supremacists to expect them to consider the interests of the country, not just their own. But no matter how it is viewed, the irresponsibility of the white minority government is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in its attitude to the water resources of South Africa. The white minority governments of South Africa bear as heavy a responsibility as their British imperialist allies for the criminal neglect of proper planning for conservation of the soil and water of Southern Africa.

It is fashionable to refer constantly to the apparently inexhaustible wealth of the Republic of South Africa. The country is undoubtedly highly developed and has vast untapped human and material resources which can only be brought into full service of the people under a popular democratic government. But the country has an Achilles heel. This is the absence of adequate water potential. The problem affects not only the Republic of South Africa but the whole vast area of Namibia (South West Africa) and the Republic of Botswana (formerly Bechuanaland).

In a statement reported in the *Star* of July 23rd, 1966, Dr. N.

Stutterheim, Vice-President of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, called the lack of adequate water supplies 'a great weak link' in South Africa's development. The issue has been sharply raised in the last five years by the worst drought for a century. Except for Southern Natal and parts of the Eastern Cape, rainfall has been well below average since 1961. The losses suffered in production of crops and stock run into hundreds of millions of rand.

The Minister of Agricultural, Technical Services and Water Affairs, Mr. J. J. Fouche has made an impassioned appeal to South Africans to conserve more water. As he put it: 'On the Rand in particular we are fighting for our economic existence' (*Sunday Times*, July 26th, 1966). Both in this statement and in reply to questions in parliament Mr. Fouche vaguely mentioned various schemes the government had in mind to tackle the shortage of water, including the costly and uneconomic one of desalination of sea water on a large scale. He also referred Parliament to the progress of the expensive prestige project—the 'Orange River Scheme' whose cost is estimated at R450 million. All this might suggest that something adequate is about to be done on conservation of water. Nothing could be further from the truth. Selfish short-term considerations which will not solve the problem are dominant even in regard to this Orange River project.

### **PROBLEMS FOR LESOTHO**

But it is not only the White minority government of South Africa whose conduct must be scrutinized in this connection. Throughout the whole period of their rule in Botswana, Lesotho and elsewhere in Southern Africa, the British have done almost nothing to save the land and water for posterity. In Botswana there are available water resources in the North-West of the country especially in the Okavango area which, if properly regulated and distributed, could do much to alleviate water shortage in that country. When such a scheme was first suggested by Chief Tshekedi Khama British officials laughed at what they considered a completely unrealistic idea. It now turns out he was right, and that it was deliberate British policy to prevent development of Botswana, as this would interfere with the flow of labour to the mines of the Republic.

In South Africa itself, in the same way, some of the best watered areas have been deliberately starved of state development funds, and kept in under-developed condition to be reservoirs of labour. The so-called Reserves were and are so small that they are unable to support the population forced to live in them; the object again is to maintain these areas as reservoirs of labour for the mines. The fact that

this has resulted in overcrowded, overstocked and overworked land, and harmed the whole future of South Africa has meant nothing to those in power.

The richest region of South Africa, the Northern Free State and the Witwatersrand complex, has a population of approximately five million. Over two-thirds of South Africa's industrial enterprises are in this area, producing almost half the country's goods. The largest gold-mining industry in the capitalist world lies here. The giant steel towns of Van Der Bijl Park, Vereeniging and Pretoria are in this region, producing more steel than perhaps the whole of the rest of Africa put together. So too is Sasolburg, the largest oil producing plant and the 'maize belt' which is one of the most valuable farming areas in the Republic. This is the richest industrial and commercial region on the continent and is expanding at a rapid rate. For its water resources this vital region depends on the Vaal River. The maximum supply of water available from the Vaal River is 650 million gallons a day. In twenty years time it is estimated that the need of Johannesburg and surrounding areas alone will require all the 650 million gallons. This is assuming that the present rate of expansion is maintained. Then what?

### **VAAL AND ORANGE**

And there are other parts of the Republic equally vital to its development. The Southern Free State, Karroo and North West Cape are always most adversely affected by any drought, with disastrous results for the wool industry. (The hometown of the present Fascist Prime Minister—Mr. B. J. Vorster—is in Jamestown which is situated in the North West Cape in the middle of this treeless, dry and waterless farming area.)

The characteristic of the plans and suggestions made by the government for these regions is that they are terribly expensive and involve spending money on the White farmers who are the main political support of the governing party. But, perhaps for these very reasons, they do not constitute a solution of the problem, which requires fundamental changes in political and economic attitudes in the Republic.

This can be clearly seen in the political background to the Orange River Scheme and to the Ox-Bow Lake Scheme. The Orange River Scheme lies wholly within the Republic of South Africa, the Ox-Bow Scheme within Lesotho. Both are concerned with the usage of the waters of a single river, the Orange, which rises in the mountains of Lesotho, is fed from the snows of Lesotho's peaks, and flows thousands of miles across South Africa to the Atlantic.

In 1963, the Verwoerd government announced its decision to embark on what has become known as the Orange River Scheme. The plan is to dam the Orange River near its confluence with the Caledon inside South African territory. From this point on, through a series of dams and large-scale irrigation works, vast tracts of territory all occupied by white farmers would benefit. In addition water would be pumped to the industrial complexes further North. The scheme is estimated to cost some R450 million, but will almost certainly run to more. And the consequent cost of water in the vital industrial heart of the country will become prohibitively high. Already water pumped to Johannesburg from the nearby Vaal River costs thirty cents per thousand gallons. Orange River Scheme water will cost considerably more.

The vital aspect of the matter however is that the water thus freely planned for and disposed of by the South African government comes from the river's source in Lesotho. According to estimates made for the Lesotho authorities, 1,500 million gallons per day flow from Lesotho into the lower reaches of the river within the Republic of South Africa. It is this water which the Pretoria government, with typical white South African arrogance, has decided to drain off and allocate, without so much as a 'by-your-leave' or any negotiation with the Lesotho government.

For Lesotho, the Orange River Scheme cuts right across the national interests. Lesotho is the one part of the sub-continent which has abundant water. Water is its main national resource, and on the use to which it puts its water depends, in large measure, the future of the country. The Ox-Bow Lake Scheme is the most significant proposal ever put forward for the harnessing of Lesotho's water resources, which at this time go unchecked and virtually unused down the mountain slopes to South Africa. The Ox-Bow Lake Scheme was fully investigated and reported on by a Cape Town engineer engaged by the authorities some years ago, before Lesotho won its independence. Mr. Shand's report was widely publicized inside South Africa at the time, well before the Orange River Scheme had been fully considered. The South African government was fully aware that Lesotho had under consideration a scheme to dam the head-waters of the Orange. Yet the British authorities were never consulted by South Africa about its rival Orange River Scheme; nor in fact did the British authorities ever protest against that scheme and its arrogant assumptions that Lesotho would willingly continue to pour its wealth out at the feet of white supremacist South Africa.

The consultant, Mr. Ninham Shand reporting on the Ox-Bow Lake

Scheme in Basutoland in 1962 stated: 'The water is of a very high standard of chemical purity and of very low turbidity. Owing to the sparse animal and human population it also has little or no bacteriological contamination. These are all ideal attributes for domestic and industrial supplies.' Water could be supplied to any part of the Witwatersrand region by gravity and still leave sufficient to develop substantial blocks of hydro-electric power. In fact Lesotho can without difficulty supply water as far afield as the Botswana Republic.

The first stage of the scheme for supplying South Africa would be the construction of a dam on the Malibamatso River, one of the sources of the Orange, at a place known as Oxbow. By means of a tunnel bored through the Drakensberg mountains the flow of the Vaal River could be increased by 75 million gallons a day at one stroke. The construction of two more dams in the Maluti heights would give South Africa a supply of water sufficient to meet the requirements of the Rand at its present rate of growth for over a hundred years. The building of a dam at the Seforong gorge in Lesotho would be an even bigger undertaking which would solve the problems of the North West Cape at comparatively little cost. These schemes besides revolutionizing Lesotho's agriculture could also serve as the basis for industrialization. But more vitally from South Africa's point of view they would solve that country's problems. A report on the Ox-Bow Scheme alone states that the Rand Water Board could be supplied with up to 145 million gallons a day and a possible 400 million kilowatt hours of electricity every year. Estimates of the cost of constructing Ox-Bow Lake Scheme range from R24 million to R60 million (*Star*, February 28th, 1966). The cost of the water would be about five cents per thousand gallons. This would be compared with the South African government Orange project of R450 million and whose water will cost six times as much.

Thus the Ox Bow project would not only be of tremendous value to Lesotho, it would also be a priceless asset for South Africa considered as a geographic region; and help to alleviate the curse of water scarcity which always depresses living standards and development and periodically faces hundreds of thousands with famine. On straightforward economic grounds it is infinitely preferable to the far more expensive (so much so that in fact it has been shelved) and impractical Pretoria 'Orange River Scheme'. Moreover the Orange River project of Pretoria is grossly inequitable in terms of international law and procedure concerning waterways which cross frontiers—always a potential source of strife. It proposes to drain off 97 per cent of the waters arising in the mountains of Lesotho; leaving only 3 per cent for

the Basotho themselves in whose country they have their source. Such an arrangement could never be acceptable to any genuinely independent and patriotic administration in Maseru.

### **NEGOTIATE—OR SWINDLE**

At first the British imperialists and the White minority government have sought to give the impression that South Africa does not need water and certainly not from Lesotho. Alternatively it was suggested that long investigations were required to establish the 'feasibility' of the Ox-Bow Lake Scheme. So far there have been several of these so-called investigations and a 'final' one has just been launched which will cost the Lesotho government R300,000, quite unnecessarily. This is part of the political aim of trying to deceive the people of Lesotho as to the value of their tremendous water resources. The South African government itself has studiously refrained from making any public pronouncements on the possibility of utilizing Lesotho's water resources. The image that Lesotho and other African ruled countries neighbouring on South Africa are 'dependent' on her is being desperately clung to for economic and political reasons.

But as the pretence that South Africa does not need Lesotho's water wears thin, a new approach can be expected. South Africa hopes to enter into negotiations with a weak stooge government such as that of Leabua Jonathan with the object of winning control of Lesotho's water resources by guile, cunning, and bribery. A vital aspect of this would be to ensure that the installations become a joint asset jointly owned by South Africa and Lesotho. The installations would, of course, be situated on the South African side of the border. There is evidence that Leabua is willing to negotiate on these lines. Hence the bitter conflicts that have developed between the Lesotho Premier and the Head of State whose signature would be required for any agreement to be valid. The moment is one of very great danger for Lesotho, because South Africa will use any pressure and any pretext to gain control of the new state's water.

The desperate need of South Africa for water and power and the possession by Lesotho of great water resources could form the basis of mutual trade for the benefit of both countries. But only if Lesotho exercises its independence fully, does not play stooge to white supremacists, or allow itself to be bought off or cheated. Drought and water are very serious politics in Southern Africa.