

# The Freedom to Exist

DONALD WOODS

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I COME TO YOU from the market-place, and from a rough and ready market-place at that — the Eastern Cape, once known here in Cape Town as the frontier — and as editor of a minor if militant newspaper I assume I am invited here in my capacity as a sort of frontier philosopher.

The market-place from which I come is the most important area of the country. It is second only to the Reef in population, with nearly three million persons, and it is there that the ultimate accommodations with reality in South Africa will stand or fall. It is there that the supreme test of our nation — whether or not it will continue to exist — will first be resolved.

I plan to talk to you about the freedom to exist, because without the freedom to exist, all other freedoms — such as academic freedom — are purely academic. The freedom to exist, to be, to live, is not only under threat in South Africa, it is under sentence of death. We South Africans, as a nation, are under sentence of death not at the hand of the real or fancied enemy abroad or the real or fancied enemy within. The sentence is being carried out by ourselves, because our crime is national suicide, and the process is well under way. Our nation — the land and the people — are being destroyed in a horribly real sense.

When I say the land, I mean that literally, — the soil, the earth, the ground. And when I say the people I mean all the people, physically, mentally, spiritually.

What I am going to say will be shocking. It will be what politicians like to call sensational. But not in an unbalanced sense, and not obsessively — because the facts and figures I am going to give you do not relate to pet subjects of mine. They constitute a new theme for me, emerging from a study of the state of the nation as it is today, and the result is a picture of such impending tragedy that I am grateful for this chance to communicate it.

I want to weave for you a pattern of thoughts relating an idea to South Africa — the idea that when you are given much, much is expected of you; the idea of a sense of duty in proportion to one's assets.

There are South Africans who feel they must render service in proportion to the gifts with which they have been endowed. But surely there is also a national obligation. Surely a nation should also render according to its gifts. Surely the idea that much is expected of those to whom much is given must apply

also to countries. Let us look at South Africa in the light of this.

Has any country in the world been given more than South Africa — and returned less? The answer is no. No country in the world has been given the gifts our country has been given. And no country in the world has done less with these gifts. No country in the world has squandered its natural assets as systematically and as wantonly as ours has. No nation has matched our steady and relentless progression toward total self-destruction.

What is a nation? It is the land and the people and we are destroying our land and our people with suicidal certainty. This is no flight of rhetoric, it is the cold and horrifying truth, and I will give you facts to prove it.

First let us survey these assets of ours as a nation — the land and the people — for it is only with a full grasp of what we have been given that we can comprehend the awful extent to which we are destroying it.

Climatically and in our mineral wealth and agricultural potential we as a people came into the best country in the world — the most favourable of all for human habitation. Free of the crippling snow and icebound winters of the northern hemisphere, free of the extreme heat and humidity that sap the energies of the peoples of central and North Africa, South America and Asia; only seldom and lightly visited with the awful catastrophes of cyclone, tornado and earthquake which regularly and predictably afflict so many other parts of the world, this land was and is in its natural assets the kindest of all and the gentlest of all to human beings.

As if this were not enough, it provided the greatest supply of mineral wealth ever found on the face of the globe — 80 per cent

of the world's gold, more than half the world's diamonds, uranium, coal, copper . . . And as if even these amazing natural assets weren't enough, the land offered the most exciting agricultural and pastoral potential — in its very vastness and promise enough scope to provide a home for at least sixty million well-fed meaningfully-employed human beings.

All this, without even the need to accommodate such numbers of persons. All this, with only eighteen millions to provide for. And the people? The eighteen million themselves? What assets were to be found in these . . .

Here came a natural group of political leaders — the Afrikaners. A people with a sense of mission and the will to direct, to grow, to spread and enlighten. And here came a natural group of commercial leaders — the British settlers. A people with a sense of industry and the will to develop, to exploit, to consolidate and stabilise. And here was a natural group of builders — the Blacks. A people with great physical strength, endurance, amiability, adaptability and an instinctive reverence for knowledge and learning. In other words, a uniquely ready-made labour force with great capacity for individual advancement from worker-class through middle-class to elite-class.

So there, concisely, were our national assets — the wealth in diversity of our land and the strength in diversity of our people. Land and people. What have we done with these assets? What have we done with the land? What have we done with the people? What are we doing with the land? And what are we doing with people. We are destroying the land and we are destroying the people.

Take the land first, for without the land there can be no people. In 1923 it was estimated that South Africa lost 187 million tons of soil every year washed into the sea by our nine biggest rivers. That is, 91 square miles one foot in depth. And soil is generally only about a foot in depth. Since then the position has grown far worse, and through erosion by water and wind we now lose the equivalent of Table Mountain in precious good soil every year, let alone other soil. Since Jan van Riebeeck landed at the Cape, South Africa has lost no less than a quarter of its arable land. And the process is cumulative and compounded, so that today we are speeding ever more toward the halfway mark of such loss. Since I started speaking to you, South Africa lost

150 acres of fine topsoil. Because we are now losing the topsoil equivalent of a 50 acre farm every two minutes.

### Land of famine

Is this the irreversible work of nature in South Africa? No. No more than it was in the dustbowl of the middle western United States in the 1920s until Franklin Roosevelt, as part of his New Deal, reversed the process. There, as here, bad farming was largely to blame. Here, as there, the land can be cured. But time is short. If we do not do something now, this will be a land of famine within the lifetime of most of us in this hall. If we do not do something now, we can start ticking off the years — not the decades — to a time when literally no food will be grown in this country because we are abusing nature.

The answer is enlightened use of the land generally, and enlightened farming particularly. The resting of land, the planting of grass which binds the soil and acts as a sponge to hold the benefits of rain. But our present economic and political set-up is not conducive to this. In fact, it encourages the plunder of the land. Firstly, we have massive agricultural ignorance. Few of our farmers have even matriculated, let alone studied agriculture. More than 80 per cent have not even got their Junior Certificate. And whereas in America, where they realise that to feed a nation you need sensible farming — which is not always the most lucrative form of farming in the short-term — they have a generous system of farm subsidy so that farmers can afford to let land lie fallow, recuperating, here in South Africa the farmer has to plunder the land for a living, to earn cash now. And the average farmer's mentality — the short-term cash outlook — is powerfully influential in our Parliament because 33 per cent of our MP's are farmers. So the problem is compounded further by complications of pressure-groups and vote-catching. And while today's need and greed is being satisfied, the land is dying at a rate which will mean no tomorrow — not for the next generation, but for this one. So we are indeed destroying the land.

Now what of the people? How are we destroying the people? Well, we are doing so in an extraordinary variety of ways. Look at what we are — and how we came to be as we are. We South Africans constitute the most tense, unhappy, divided and fearful nation on earth. Our upper class, a privileged leader group, has one of the highest alcoholism rates

in the world and is unchallenged for the highest hard-liquor drinking rate in the world. We have more alcoholics than policemen. We are also the world's heaviest smokers, the world's most frequent divorcees and the world's most lethal drivers. Since the Vietnam war began, more South Africans have died in road accidents than American soldiers have died in Vietnam. (67,000 as against 56,000). But our road fatality rate pales beside what the statistics for tuberculosis show — 40 deaths a day, which is three times as many deaths as the Americans have had in Vietnam since that war began. These are deaths I am talking about, not casualties or incidences.

#### Mental health statistics

There are even more horrifying statistics in the sphere of general ill-health. More than two-thirds of all South Africans suffer in some degree from malnutrition, and the privileged group shows a spiralling incidence of heart disease. And our mental health statistics are equally revealing. Over 20 per cent of our people are in serious need of some form of psychiatric treatment — and there are only a couple of dozen psychiatrists available to provide it.

#### A violent country

We are a violent country. Every day at least 25 South Africans die as a result of criminal violence. That is going on for 10,000 victims a year. And while these are being killed, our policemen are running around handling 730,000 pass law contraventions in the same period. Our average daily prison population is 80,000 and just as a matter of passing interest, we execute a higher ratio of criminals every year than any other nation in the world. Mentally and physically, we suffer the diseases of tension, for these are the statistics of tension. Mentally and physically, our people are in deep trouble. We are a sick people, a sick nation. And viewed against countries of comparable circumstances, we are a backward nation. Our telephone systems are inadequate, our road systems are archaic and our industrial development is being strangled. In spite of an abundance of both commodities, industry cannot get workers and workers cannot get work. Physically, mentally, industrially, agriculturally and politically, we appear to be doing our best to wipe ourselves out.

In the past, other nations have succeeded in destroying themselves, but the ghastly difference about South Africa is this — we are

first to do so through culpable ignorance, reinforced by deliberate legislation. And particularly through legislation aimed specifically at most of our own people.

I do not have to tell you of the sickening effects of the Government's race laws, whether relating to group areas or to job reservation or to the dozens of statutes aimed at creating legislative and material obstacles to real advancement for millions of our people. I do not have to repeat here what has been said in so many speeches, articles and books, showing not only the gross injustice of racism but also the gross folly and the gross danger inseparable from it. All these are surely obvious to any intelligent person. But this outline of the sicknesses of our nation would be incomplete without mention of some of the less obvious by-products of our national obsession with race. For these less obvious consequences show to what extent all of us — and I truly mean all of us — are drifting toward totalitarian patterns of behaviour.

#### A herd

We are no longer a nation of individualists. We are a herd. The pattern of our lives has become sheeplike. Here I repeat I am not even going to mention the obvious examples of totalitarianism, such as detention without trial, intimidation by political police, radio propaganda and the like. I am going to take ordinary little everyday instances of totalitarian mentality. Take a cricket crowd at the Wanderers during a recent Test against Australia. All it needed to move hundreds back from the boundary was the wave of an official's arm — because that official was wearing an official armband. Your South African official today is even more than a father-figure. He is a police-figure and an ultimate-authority figure. He is no longer there to help — he is there to bark out orders. And the worst of it is, not only the crowd believes this, he himself believes it. I can imagine the response such an official would get at a sports stadium in the United States. It is the same with cinemas. No country in the world is more advertisement-conscious than America — but again, the customer is paramount. While advertising is everywhere it is never beamed to a captive audience. Television commercials can be ignored. There are many things to do around the house during a commercial — get more beer, for instance, or make coffee. Yet they won't have it in their cinemas because they pay to watch the movie, and leave home to do so. But here captive audiences are blatantly

imposed upon in our cinemas, so that what should be at most a two-hour absence from home turns into a three-hour excursion — thanks to cinema adverts. These are different from newspaper or magazine adverts, which can also be ignored. Do our cinema-goers protest? They do not. They think this outrageous sort of imposition is normal, and besides, South African society will do anything to avoid a fuss.

Two simple little examples of cowed crowd behaviour, but they are more ominous than is realised, for in these ordinary little ways, we show we have become conditioned to accept inconvenience and imposition as normal. And our general reluctance to kick up a fuss suits our rulers admirably, because it is part of another bit of conditioning as well — the devaluation and discrediting of the larger principle of the right and value of protest in general.

South Africa's population:—

14,893,000	Africans	1,996,000	Coloureds
3,779,000	Whites	614,000	Asiatics
<i>1970 Census</i>			

All forms of protest, no matter how lawful, are therefore made to seem at best embarrassing, and at worst downright subversive. Conformity increasingly leads to a resigned acceptance of impositions. Laurence van der Post, in his book "Journey into Russia", likens the resigned acceptance by Russian peasants — of late trains, incorrect airline schedules and bad service in state-owned supermarkets — to that of the black South African peasant. Nothing suits the authoritarian government better than this conformity of resignation because it protects government incompetence while promoting acceptance of government policy. And there is a lot of incompetence to protect.

In terms of sheer competence, never mind ideology, we have an appallingly low level of performance in government. Our sectional political climate has tended to enshrine incompetence. The blunderer is protected by what one can only describe as his tribal standing, for there is no doubt that the tribal mentality has crept into white politics on both sides of the Nat-Sap fence. This is inevitable, of course, when political performance is measured not in terms of sound and economical government but in terms of attitudes to race. In fact, race prejudice and sensible government are simply incompatible.

### Proliferation of toilets

Groping around for an illustration of this point, I found one that I now communicate to you with relish. In terms of our Factories Act, a separate toilet must be provided in new factories for every 15 members of either sex for every race group. So if your factory employs 225 African males, 225 African females, 60 White males, 60 White females, 75 Coloured males, 75 Coloured females, 60 Indian males, 60 Indian females, 30 Chinese males and 30 Chinese females, your factory is going to end up with 60 toilets. And when apartheid is finally scrapped we will have — thanks to our present government — the highest ratio of toilets to factory workers in the world.

This proliferation of toilets will be a most fitting monument to our present regime. Just as the British had their wartime benefits called after appropriate cabinet ministers, such as the Anderson shelter and the Woolton pie, maybe we will have our industrial toilets recorded in our history as the Blaar Coetzee geriewe.

While we as a people are increasingly conforming to the preferred dispositions of our rulers, handing them a blank cheque to do with as they will, they are dragging this already sick nation down their own path to political destruction, a path paved with racial myth, racial fear and racial injustice. They are not only isolating us from the world, they are making us increasingly absurd in our isolation. And overlaying all this looms a hideously false interpretation of patriotism, of the state as the all-knowing, all-wise, always-right concept — the ultimate symbol of all the officials from cricket-ground attendants in armbands, to traffic cops in their righteous and personal indignation, up to cabinet level, where they wear the broadest armbands of all. As super-patriots of course. And this leads us to the theme I wish to end up with — patriotism.

### Constructive criticism

It is said that it is always easy to find fault, that one should never be only destructive, and that all criticism should be constructive. As a journalist I might say in passing that this phrase sticks in my throat. Newspapermen have long realised that when people say they resent destructive criticism but welcome constructive criticism they usually mean they don't want any kind of criticism at all. Just as when politicians claim they have been misquoted they usually mean they are sorry now

that they said what they said then. Still, far be it from me to wish to be only destructive, to do nothing but condemn, to be no more than a prophet of doom. Easy to say we are committing national suicide through abuse of the soil and abuse of the citizen. The question is — what can we do about it? I suggest the answer lies with ourselves, starting with all of us here. We must begin a new patriotism. It can be our version of the new frontier. And the new patriotism I am going to suggest is a radical one.

### Humbug, deceit and bigotry

It is almost exactly the opposite of the old patriotism which was founded on humbug, deceit and bigotry. One of the most immoral sayings ever given currency was the paraphrase of Stephen Decatur's "My country, right or wrong". Yet many nations have based national policy on this ludicrous precept. And for generations whole peoples have followed it blindly. The Nazis brought this to a fine art. They even devised a march that is the epitome of conformity in motion — the goosestep — designed to dull the brain while tiring the body. From this it was but a short step to *ein reich, ein volk, ein fuhrer* and the doctrine of *be-fehl ist befehl* — orders are orders.

But it was not only Germany that traded immorally on the old patriotism. This has happened in all countries at all times. It is happening here today. Among our Whites it is rapidly becoming accepted that attacks on apartheid are attacks on South Africa as such, that criticism of apartheid internally is unpatriotic because it is against our so-called way of life. The real patriots — those whose commitment is to all South Africans — are regarded as traitors. It is therefore time for a new definition of patriotism, so that a new patriotism can be born.

### Healing

The new patriotism must be a new commitment to all that is rightly and essentially South African. The land and the people. It must aim at healing the land, the people, thus enabling the nation to fulfil its obvious destiny — the provision of an inspiring example to the rest of the world of how racial enmity can be turned into racial unity in even the most complex racial society. It must be based on four principles: Liberal democracy, greater communication with all our countrymen, a willingness to yield to their preferences where these are compatible with democratic

principle, and concerted pressure for the future South Africa that we want.

How can students play their part in saving our land and our people, in working for the South Africa that we want — in fact in becoming the leaders of the new patriotism the nation so badly needs? The first step is to agree on and to stand united as students on one common principle — then to employ a new and more meaningful brand of student power. Without that foundation of an unyielding principle, such power will come to nought, because without the fulcrum the lever is useless. That firm foundation is and can only be the unchanging and unchangeable principle of liberal democracy which includes all our cherished freedoms and must include the freedom to exist.

Let nothing budge you from this principle, in spite of the sneers directed at it by ultra-radical students overseas on one hand and ultra-conservative students here on the other. Remember, you are getting a better education than conservative students in South Africa — and you are different from radical students overseas. Your circumstances are different, your challenges are different, your behaviour is different. For instance, student protest in this country is eminently respectable. You are serious, law-abiding and non-violent. You hold demonstrations which wouldn't even annoy Ronald Reagan. The French and American experiences of the last few years have not provoked even a faint echo here. Why?

"Banning is not intended as a punishment for previous deeds, but is intended as a deterrent to future subversive acts."

*Mr. Pelsler, Minister of Justice.*

First, admission to a university is easy for you. There is hardly any competition for places and there are virtually no entrance examinations. Matriculation does not filter out great numbers who would never fight their way into a university in Britain, America, France, or Germany. The scholarship boy, aware of his class and concerned with the problem of whether or not he is betraying it, hardly exists here. But many of you do demonstrate. You do act. You build schools and run educational programmes for Africans. You speak out as each of our ever-withering civil liberties is hacked at, and you do these things seriously and responsibly, and not like the wilder fringes at overseas universities. There have been no street riots and there is no hys-

teria in student action here. Perhaps most striking of all, one never sees here that element of desperate fashionable withitness which has characterised so many student manifestations overseas. The reason is that the issues are simpler here — more recognisable, more basic. The intellectual atmosphere of South Africa is that of the 19th century. The moral issues are clear. It was wrong in the 1810's to have slaves in much the same way as it is wrong in the 1970's to shunt around a migrant labour force at wages way below the poverty datum line. It was wrong in the 1850's and 60's to employ child labour in much the same way as it is wrong to deprive Africans of the minimal right to exist as families. The current problems of France, Britain and America are of a different order. No doubt the social wrongs to be put right there are extremely serious and great urgency is felt by those who wish to right those wrongs. But the moral issues are not so clear and the spiritual problems of highly developed and overpopulated urban civilisations seem extremely complex to the naive South African eye. Here, one feels the good and the bad are easily discernible, and they know each other.

#### Catchwords and slogans

So the liberal South African student is not so easily swayed by catchwords and slogans and hero-figures, and he is not so concerned to be with-it. He sees the world created by his parents and he disapproves, but he disapproves in the language of his parents. We need not congratulate ourselves that in this country the generation gap has not caused bloodshed on the streets. We may simply be thankful for it. It is the one benefit that we derive from the fact that we exist, morally speaking, in the 19th century.

We still accept as an axiom that the values of a liberal democracy are worth preserving. But how are we to preserve them. We have unique problems. The enemies of liberal democracy in this country are not so much outside our borders as within them. They are not so much outside our so-called democratic government as within it, in charge of it, in fact. The amazing thing is not that our government is not a liberal, democratic government, but that it is proud not to be a liberal, democratic government. The grasping of a great ideal by the youth of a country can change that country's history. Certainly this is our only alternative to despair, and despair itself is no answer.

Don't fall into defensive attitudes, or be tricked into adjusting your image and your character to the preferences of the old guard. There is nothing to be defensive about, there is everything to go on to the offensive about. Leave tired cynicism to others. Cynics are simply persons with limited intellects and limited reading habits. Don't join their ranks. Don't share their surrender. And don't drop the torch on leaving university.

The future of the nation — the land and the people — truly depends on you. Our very freedom to exist depends on you. Because only when our youth, our thinking youth, know and drive relentlessly for the South Africa we want, the South Africa we must achieve to avoid losing all, the real South Africa, can we achieve a healthy land, a healthy people, a nation with a potential and a destiny second to that of no other nation on earth.

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## The 19

Punishment without trial and Government interference with the administration of justice is fast becoming all too traditional in this country. The banning orders imposed on the nineteen people who have been twice detained, twice charged, twice acquitted is the latest example, so blatant that it has caused a public outcry.

But arbitrary detention, banning, banishment, house arrest, deportation, confiscation of passports have been tools which this Government has used drastically for many years to punish, re-punish, intimidate and silence. Legislation and Ministerial edict excludes the judiciary.

The Courts are a fundamental bulwark of democracy and their independence should be inviolate. The Government has seriously undermined this fundamental principle by treating the Courts as though they did not exist, not only ignoring their findings but actually countermanding them. There is no security for any single individual in a state which denies people the right of safeguard by the Courts.

It is time that the legal profession, individually and through their associations, publicly voiced their rejection of a system which denies the very principles upon which their profession is based.

*(Transvaal Region of the Black Sash)*