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the past does the Waterfront present?

While the Waterfront claims to restore elements of Cape Town's past, University of Cape Town historian Nigel Worden says the Capetonian past presented by the Waterfront is one of a particular form of power and privilege.

"The past of the Waterfront is an intensely British colonial one...No wider interpretation of the history of the city which was linked to the sea is permitted. Little is said about the town or its harbour before 1860. Van Riebeeck receives an obligatory but passing mention in the audio-visual show as the builder of a jetty..." said Worden.

He argues that "the sailors, soldiers, slaves, Khoi, political exiles and fishermen who crowded the harbour before then are conspicuous by their absence".

But it is not only the Dutch or French white settlers who are missing from the image of the past presented by the Waterfront. Worden says even more strikingly absent are the workers who constructed the harbour and the working class Capetonians who made a living working at the docks.

In addition, the first African migrant labourers in Cape Town, who had been recruited from the Transkei and Eastern Cape from the 1870s, were employed at the Alfred and Victoria basins. It was these workers, says Worden, who provided the nucleus of Cape Town's first segregated township at Ndabeni.

What is also missing from the history of Cape Town's waterfront as portrayed by the Victoria and Alfred development is any sense of conflict or tension in the past.

"There is no mention, for instance, of the fierce opposition to the building of a breakwater put up by the Port Elizabeth representatives of the Eastern Cape in the 1850s. Strikes, convictism, slavery, migrant labour and racial tension are all missing from the Waterfront displays. The myth of Cape Town's racial harmony is thus confirmed," says Worden.

He argues that the broader appeal of the Waterfront would be greatly increased were the developers to restore the history of *people* – of ordinary men and women – as well as the few "great figures" who are presently represented.

Whether the developers can or will attempt to attract different visitors to the Waterfront and offer some insights into the past with which they can identify will, says Worden, reveal much about the future of privately funded public history in the "new" South Africa.

Pressure is on for affirmative action

Many of the stock negative responses to affirmative action are of little consequence, according to WARREN KRAFCHIK. He argues that it is time to discard the myths and start debating implementation.

THERE will be substantial political pressure on any new government to introduce affirmative action in favour of blacks and women. The roots of this can be seen in the current distribution of senior positions in the South African commercial and government sectors.

For example, in the top 100 companies only 2,2 percent of all managers and less than 1 percent of senior managers are African. Although women represent 36 percent of the workforce in these companies, they comprise only 13 percent of management and less than 1 percent of board members. Of the 3 239 top civil servants, only 4,5 percent are black and only 0,6 percent African (recent comparable figures for women are not available).

The repeal of racist legislation in South Africa will not in itself create equality of opportunity. Those who have traditionally been advantaged are likely to continue to inherit privileges, particularly through the exercise of economic power, over time. To prevent this it is necessary to consider the further empowerment of the disadvantaged. Affirmative action is a general term for a variety of such measures characterised by attempts to redress racial and gender imbalances. The aim is to establish the basis for effective competition and participation in society.

Affirmative action programmes may refer to the extension of additional financial, educational and training facilities to disadvantaged groups, as well as to accelerated promotion. It has been used to refer to both the redistribution of resources and to social responsibility programmes through which the private sector extends financial and other assistance to black communities. For the sake of clarity, I will limit discussion to affirmative action programmes at the workplace, whether in the private or public sector.

One of the arguments traditionally levelled against affirmative action is that it inevitably leads to falling standards and tokenism. While many programmes do end up as expensive window-dressing exercises, this is a fault of their design and implementation rather than an automatic consequence of affirmative action.

One reason for tokenism, lowering of standards and consequent programme failure is an over-reliance on quotas. This detracts from the importance of the supportive mechanisms required for successful affirmative action programmes. Such programmes must be accompanied by training sufficient to ensure that newcomers are equipped with the necessary skills, ability and expertise. But training of the individual is not sufficient in itself. As Professor Linda Human of the University of Stellenbosch Graduate School of Business argues, not only do newcomers need orientation, they cannot be expected to simply integrate into an organisation which remains otherwise unchanged. Current organisational members have a critical role to play in the success of affirmative action programmes and managerial expectations are an important component of this. Affirmative action must therefore be aimed not only at the target group, but also at those with whom they will have to work if it is to succeed.

'While many programmes do end up as expensive window-dressing exercises, this is a fault of their design'

A second argument often cited against affirmative action is that it amounts to reverse discrimination which is unacceptable in a society striving towards a code of non-racialism and non-sexism. This argument misses the point. A clear definition of affirmative action reveals it is a short-term, tactical measure – not a principle. It recognises that to achieve equality of opportunity it is essential to level the playing fields first.

Two related problems are of greater concern. If the beneficiaries of affirmative action are defined in terms of racial groups, policies

Barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen....women do the work but don't get the positions.

may entrench ethnic differences at the expense of nation-building. Further, affirmative action may cause the formation of vested interest groups which will resist the withdrawal of any advantage. Elsewhere in the world the beneficiaries have come from disadvantaged minorities whose power to prevent a withdrawal of privileges is limited. In South Africa, the beneficiaries comprise the majority of the population who will have secured political power by the time discussion focuses on withdrawing privileges. An instance of the potential problems involved is offered by Malaysia, where racial and demographic factors are similar. Various attempts to phase out affirmative action have failed and these measures have recently been extended indefinitely.

One suggested solution to both of the above problems is to define the beneficiaries in terms of objective socio-economic criteria such as living conditions, schooling or income levels rather than in ethnic terms. A programme designed on this basis would not perpetuate ethnic differences while benefits would automatically expire as individuals no longer meet the prescribed criteria. A further advantage of this arrangement is that it provides a check that programmes are carefully targeted at the really disadvantaged rather than dominated by the more vocal urban middle-classes.

A final set of arguments against affirmative action stresses that it has negative effects at both micro-economic and macro-economic levels. The South African experience of affirmative action programmes since the 1930s has been mixed. In general these programmes, following from the first Carnegie inquiry, established a firm footing for Afrikaners in the public (and later private) sectors and significantly enhanced the skills base of the country. On the other hand, political affirmative action, applied since 1948, in favour of National Party or Broederbond members, spawned inefficient bureaucracies and nepotism.

At a micro-economic level affirmative action is required as a response to changing consumer profiles in the South African marketplace. The black population already provides over 40 percent of the value of all retail sales in South Africa; by the year 2000 it is likely to account for well over 50 percent of such purchases. If our economy is to grow, it will rely increasingly on meeting the demands of this market sector which, from an affirmative action point of view, requires appointing and training a whole range of staff, from managers to sales people, who are familiar with new clients' needs.

'It is not a precise instrument capable of fine-tuning gender and racial balance'

At a macro-economic level, affirmative action is required to redress skill shortages which have played an important role in curbing periods of strong economic growth in South Africa. By 1988, despite 12 years of sluggish growth, there were over 40 000 vacancies in professional, technical and managerial positions in the country. By the year 2000, the Institute for Futures Research estimates that there will be a shortfall of 200 000 senior managerial employees. Obviously we cannot expect to fill all these positions from the declining white male population. We have to expand our recruitment base to upgrade the skill base of the country. Simultaneously, however, we must ensure that we meet this objective without encouraging a large-scale skills flight of qualified whites who feel they have no promotion prospects. One solution to the dilemma is to view affirmative action as a once-off procedure applied together with supportive training on entry. Beyond initial entry, promotion will continue to take place on merit.

NEVERTHELESS, despite economic logic, a sufficient response from the private sector is questionable. Training is expensive, golden handshakes even more so and the benefits from affirmative action programmes are likely only in the medium to long-term. It is for these reasons that many consider legislative intervention a necessity to encourage the process. Indeed, the ANC, PAC and Inkatha are very clear on this matter. The South African Law Commission has stated that an affirmative action clause can be included in a bill of rights to give effect to an equal opportunities clause. The State President himself, in the context of the agricultural sector, has recently made reference to the fact that "much more is needed than the repeal of discriminatory legislation". In short, companies that practice affirmative action now are likely to be better equipped to deal with legislation should it arise.

In sum, many of the stock negative responses to affirmative action are of little consequence. The real problems emerge in the design of a system which effectively channels temporary assistance to those who need it without undermining the current productive and skill base or degenerating into nepotism. Affirmative action is not a precise instrument capable of fine-tuning gender and racial balance and it takes time to train good managers. Thus it is urgent that we discard the myths and begin to shift the debate away from principles and towards practical design issues. One way is to recognise that many companies have eight to 10 years' experience with what has been termed black advancement programmes. Even though the results are often less than satisfactory, these experiences are very valuable as a basis for future programme design. The creation of a forum, including all stakeholders in the debate, to share and evaluate these experiences, is perhaps the way to proceed.

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