

## 2. NGOTSHE

Ngotshe is one of the most remote and conservative farming districts of Northern Natal. In the 1880s it became part of the New Republic which was set up by the Boers in that area and which was later incorporated into Paul Kruger's South African Republic.

Hardly a promising setting for the development of liberal attitudes one would think, yet on August 8th something quite remarkable happened there. Ten thousand people came together at the small town of Louwsburg to seal a pact protecting the land rights of black farm-workers living on white-owned land. Such a thing has never happened before anywhere in South Africa, where blacks living on white-owned land can be

given three months notice to get off it, even though their families may have been there for generations.

Now, in Ngotshe, things will be different. Mr Tjaart van Rensburg Chairman of the local Farmers Association told the gathering "The pact recognises the rights of blacks in the district . . . We are bound together as neighbours and partners; one cannot be successful without the other." And the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini told the crowd "We have come here as Africans – black Africans and white Africans – on the face of Mother Africa, to pioneer a new thing in human relationships."

If such words can be spoken in Ngotshe, all is far from lost. □

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by David Welsh

## THE HOUW HOEK CONFERENCE ON LIBERAL VALUES

It is quite striking how various groups of South African liberals have independently recognised the urgent need for liberal values to be restated or recharged for the South Africa of the 1980s and beyond. There has been a sense that liberal values were going by default, under the sustained onslaught of both right and left.

Historically, the most forceful attack has come from the right, with liberals being forced to fight battles in defence of shrinking rights. So tough have these battles been that few liberal theorists have had the time or capacity to stand back from the immediate struggle and think out afresh what liberal values mean in a society such as South Africa. From the writings of Alfred Hoernlé in the 1940s there is a long break in systematic liberal philosophising, broken by the publication of the Spro-cas Political Report (written largely by André du Toit) in 1971, but thereafter seemingly lying dormant until the mid-1980s.

Now we have a flourish of activity, both cerebral and practical. Beginning with the delivery of Charles Simkins's seminal restatement of liberalism (the publication of which is anticipated), carrying on with a conference convened by the S.A. Institute of Race Relations and, most recently, the Houw Hoek conference which was organised by Jeffrey Butler, Richard Elphick and myself. In addition there has been the Grahamstown conference in mid-1985, which examined the history of the Liberal Party (whose history, by the way, is beginning to be mangled by the left), and subsequent attempts to establish a Liberal Association.

The Houw Hoek conference was born out of the recognition, shared by many liberals, that liberal values had for too long been taken for granted, both by protagonists and antagonists. Few people, including academics, could articulate a forceful and coherent statement of what liberalism was all about. Moreover, the sustained attack from the left and from the Black Consciousness movement had tended to sap the self-confidence of liberals and to put them on the defensive.

In the English-language, predominantly white universities, the left occupied the high moral ground, if not the support of the university communities at large. The intellectual discourse on South Africa's past and present was dominated by neo-Marxist and Marxist thinking, even if this thinking has become increasingly fragmented.

Our conference sought to achieve three basic aims: first, to review the history of liberals, liberalism and liberal activity in South Africa – partly with a view to rescuing this history from interpretations currently being placed upon it by revisionists, but more importantly because it is a significant history that deserves empathetic analysis. Secondly, we tried to take stock of the critique of liberalism emanating from the left. This was, in general, not undertaken in any combative, 'Marxist-bashing' spirit. As the published papers will show, their tone was sober, analytical and refreshingly free from any sense of wounded **amour propre**. Generally speaking, I would say that most of the liberal scholars took the sensible and balanced view that the