

WITH the change in attitude of the ruling National Party towards race relations has come a marked softening of black antagonism towards Afrikaans — seen by many at the height of the struggle against apartheid as “the language of oppression”. ANTHONY HEARD, former Editor of the Cape Times, examines the significance of this change, particularly in its possible influence on cultural relations between the Netherlands and South Africa.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

IN the past year or so, there have been dramatic breakthroughs for Afrikaans.

These were marked, for instance, by rapprochement between Afrikaans writers and the African National Congress: a visit by State President F. W. de Klerk to the Netherlands last October; bold moves in the Dutch Parliament, once strongly opposed to South Africa because of apartheid, to lead Europe in relaxing sanctions against Pretoria; the award of the premier Netherlands literary prize to a South African who writes poetry in Afrikaans. The list grows by the day.

It is obvious that a major cultural shift is under way, with implications for the Nederlands and Afrikaans languages, the book, magazine, and other trades — and business generally, not to mention politics and diplomacy.

A superficial assessment of what is under way is to believe that there will be a return to the Dutch-Afrikaner links of the days before apartheid was codified, which sundered cultural and other relations. On this reading, the wayward but now reformed Afrikaners will go back to the bosom of their “stamland”. That is, many believe, wishful thinking.

A different scenario can be expected. A democratizing South Africa, throwing off the apartheid repression which was particularly embarrassing to the Dutch, will establish links of a far wider and more durable nature.

There is no doubt that the Dutch, if they grab the opportunity, can — through their affinity to Afrikaans, which is spoken by millions of blacks as well as whites — forge lasting links with the total South African community. That means links with non-racial democracy, not apartheid repression or any modern refinements or aliases.

There are obvious long-term benefits in store for a trading nation like the Netherlands if such things happen.

The point has not been lost on the Dutch, it seems. Witness, for instance, the statement to Parliament by Foreign Minister Van den Broek on March 18, and also a letter he wrote on December 21, in effect making clear that detente was aimed at the whole South African population. Officially, at least, the Dutch are committed to doing nothing which will imply approval of the old apartheid era. That is very sensible.

There are obviously people in the

Dutch and white South African communities, mainly of the conservative or, indeed, reactionary persuasion, who would seek an exclusive relationship — to the exclusion, that is, of South African blacks (or at least militant blacks, many of whom are fluent and versatile in Afrikaans).

University feelers were put out from the Netherlands to certain universities in South Africa which gave the impression of favouring the “old” relationship and not the “new” one.

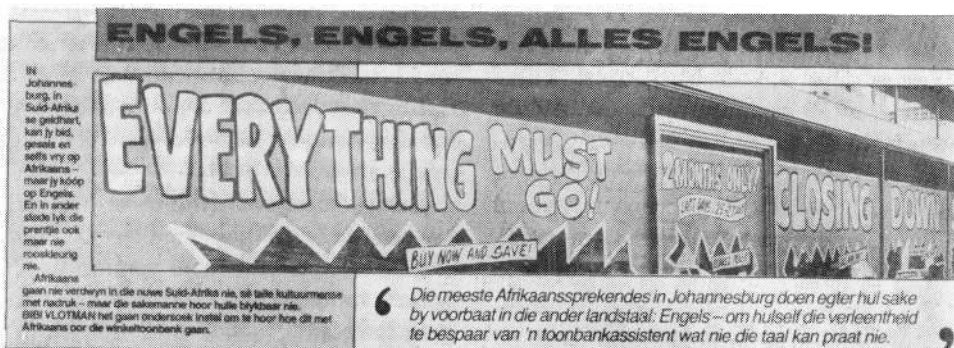
President De Klerk has shown himself to be conscious, at least to a degree, of the need for a comprehensive future relationship, on the part of all South Africans, with the Dutch and their language.

Speaking at the Nederlandse Klub in Cape Town in May he showed an Afrikaner’s understandable delight at the “rediscovery of old friends and family members”. He went on to remind his audience that “Afrikaans is not a language spoken only by two and a half million white South Africans, but is also spoken by millions of black people and the biggest part of the coloured population.”

The logic of De Klerk’s acknowledgement is that far more “non-white” South Africans, in the long run, will be involved in rapprochement with the Nederlands language than whites.

He listed eight spheres of “positive change”:

1. Decisions of the Dutch government and parliament ending years of isolation of South Africa and polarization, and particularly the end of the Netherlands economic and general boycott of South Africa;
2. university contacts and consultations, including exchange visits by rectors;
3. student and private youth exchanges;
4. renewed Dutch interest in trade and investment — some disinvested



Engels, Engels, Alles Engels!
 In Johannesburg, in Suid-Afrika se grootste stad, gaan al die winkels nou toe. Die meeste Afrikaanssprekendes in Johannesburg doen egter hul sake by voorbaat in die ander landstaal: Engels — om hulself die verleentheid te bespaar van 'n toonbankassistent wat nie die taal kan praat nie.

Afrikaner sensitivity over the predominance of English as the language of the business centres in the country is reflected by this article in a recent issue of Rapport. “English, English, everything English!” proclaims the headline to the illustration. The headline of the article itself declares: “Afrikaners dig their own (language) grave”.

companies putting out feelers to return; 5. greater interest in tourism; 6. Dutch music and choral groups planning to visit; 7. cultural bonds, based on the “stamland” and “taalwortel” principle, being resumed — and he mentioned the P.C. Hooft prize recently given to Elisabeth Eybers and an invitation to the South African representative in the Hague to become involved in the Nederlandse Taalunie; 8. what he termed “positive” appreciation in Dutch church circles for the reform initiatives in South Africa.

However, one might take issue with some of De Klerk’s statements — for instance, his failure to see that the partisan and high-handed way his government is going about its policing and security business is still strongly criticized in church and other quarters, and his tendency to emphasize “kith and kin” factors in relations with the Nederlands.

De Klerk is unique among Nationalist leaders in having some justification for his optimism. But only to the extent that he can earn black support for his controversial security measures, and above all nurture a truly democratic culture in South Africa, can De Klerk maintain the momentum of changed perceptions, at home and abroad.

Two recognized anti-apartheid figures from the Western Cape have, in interviews with me, stressed the need for changed relationships to take place in the “new” and not the “old” South African context.

Dr Allan Boesak, former president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches who was awarded his doctorate in the Netherlands and who is gravitating towards a political role in the African National Congress, said: “There is no way that there will be a resumption of cultural and linguistic contact between Netherlanders and white Afrikaners only. The links will be with the whole South African community, including the millions of blacks who speak and use the Afrikaans language.

“Afrikaans is not the possession of white Afrikaners. Their use of the language — eg. in the universities, the church, the bureaucracy, the law and the security forces — can be a very limiting version of Afrikaans, very formal and “correct”; not the living language spoken so spontaneously by millions of blacks, who borrow unselfconsciously from other languages in a remarkably expressive way.”

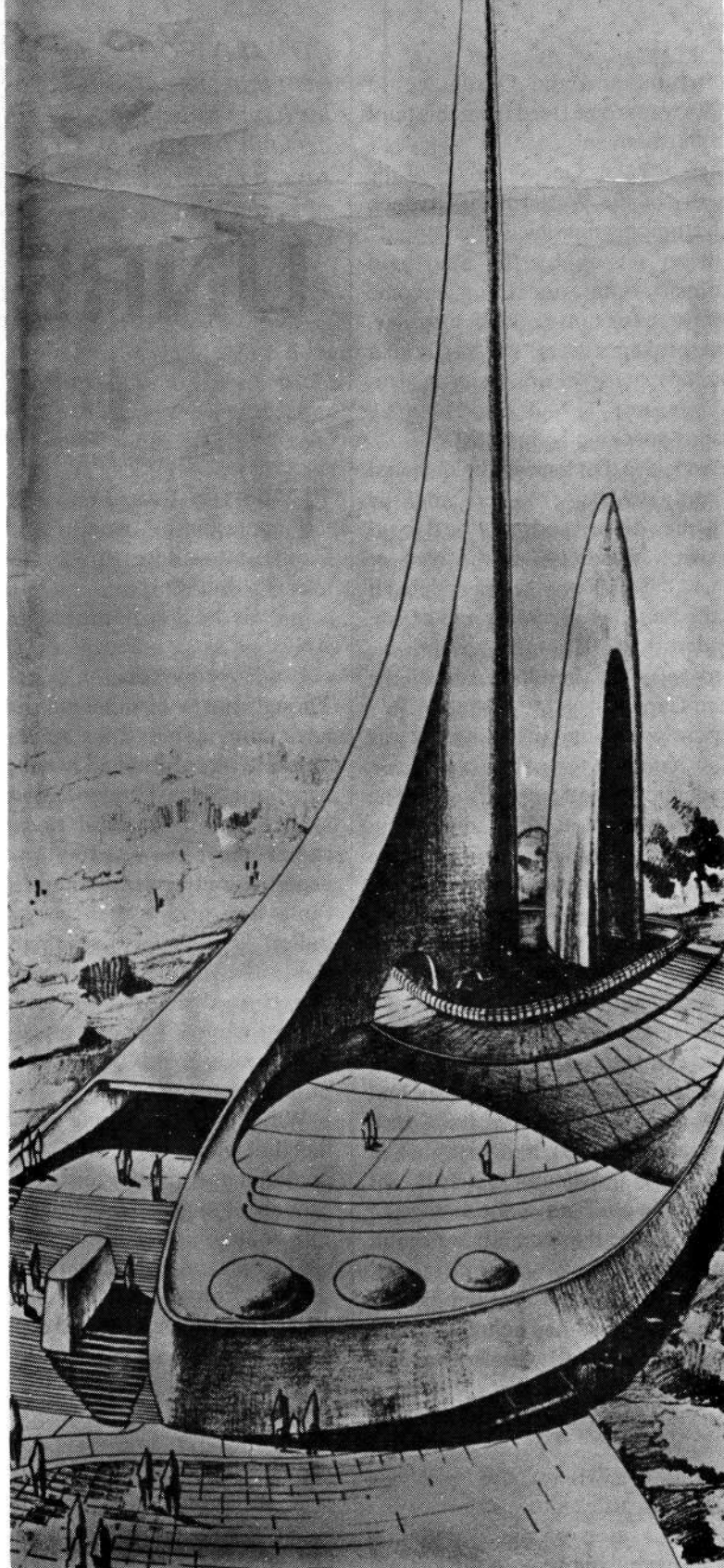
Boesak noted that the first written Afrikaans was a translation of the Koran

by a Moslem leader many years ago, and not the work of a white South African.

Boesak did not see how Nederlands could be desperate to fund a “reinforcement” in the shape of Afrikaans, on grounds of language decline caused by loss of colonial empire and the dominance of other languages in Europe — as Afrikaner journalists have suggested here.

The only sense in which the Dutch needed to be closer to Afrikaans, he

argued, was on the basis of releasing Afrikaans from the role of “language of the oppressor”, which had been a severe embarrassment to the Dutch because of its involvement with apartheid and repression. By contrast, he said, Nederlands was a language of freedom and resistance to oppression — like Dutch society itself. It had taken a Nederlands word, “apartheid”, to earn world-wide



An artist's impression of the Taal monument near Paarl.



opprobrium, and the Dutch would naturally want to be freed from this taint and embarrassment.

Professor Jakes Gerwel, rector of the University of the Western Cape (which — with ethnic beginnings as a “coloured” institution set up by the apartheid government — has, under him, become a main force for non-racial democracy, said the broken cultural ties had been a matter of debate at the university particularly because UWC had a large Afrikaans-speaking component.

The very idea that renewed links should cover only white Afrikaners and the Dutch he dismissed as “cultural narcissism” which lay at the root of apartheid. “This is why we appreciated it when the Dutch government and nation suspended that relationship, even if we were to suffer at the University of the Western Cape.”

He pointed out that his university was alone in having a formal resolution on the academic boycott, supporting it. The document, ratified in 1987, admitted to being in an “ambivalent position” in the debate on academic exchanges; and only supported exchanges if such scholars showed solidarity with the university’s commitment to the struggle for a non-racial democracy.

Professor Gerwel said that, within this framework, some Dutch universities, such as Utrecht (which previously had links with more conservative South African universities) had established links with his university; which meant links with the alternative South Africa.

He noted that the Dutch had been in the forefront of the boycott movement and, now that things were changing, it was hoped that resumed contacts would not be within the “old” white framework. The Germans did not merely have cultural relations with people of German extraction in South Africa. There was no reason why the Dutch should pick out one group for attention.

On the position of the Nederlands language, he said it was naturally interesting for the Dutch people to retain a relationship with Afrikaans which was so similar to Nederlands. But the Dutch had no global aspirations for their language based on a “moederland” concept; there was no language imperialism. The language was a living one, in a sense a polyglot, and not desperate for allies.

Gerwel says Nederlands should not be seen in the “moederland” sense. The true moederland of Afrikaans is other South African languages. ●

DONALD WOODS, former Editor of the East London DAILY DISPATCH went into exile after being banned by Justice Minister Jimmy Kruger. From his home in Britain he continued his campaign against apartheid, winning acclaim for his book Cry Freedom on the life of Steve Biko. There is, he says, no contradiction in being both a friend of the ANC and an

UNREPENTANT LIBERAL

THIS year I was honoured with an invitation by the African National Congress to address its Freedom Day event in London, and made the point that I was doing so both as a friend of the ANC and as an unrepentant liberal.

I see no contradiction in being both. Though not a member of the ANC I have long admired its most positive elements — durability down the years as vanguard of the decades-long campaign against apartheid; commitment to non-racial multi-party democracy and generous outreach to whites — unlike those who preach the “one-settler-one bullet” line. And as I see these positive elements of democratic policy increasingly enshrined in ANC policy I become more inclined to contemplate voting ANC once South Africa becomes a proper democracy.

We liberals have long regretted the fact that whites in the ANC tended to be predominantly communists, though this probably happened by our own default. The communists at least were the first whites to stand up and cast their lot with the ANC on the African nationalists’ own terms, which is why old campaigners like Joe Slovo have a credibility among many blacks that could never easily be matched by that of other whites.

Communist countries, too, were among the first on the international scene to help the ANC, though thanks mainly to Nigeria the non-communist countries of Africa have been steadfast throughout in this regard.

As a liberal I regret that the Western democracies took so long to render practical humanitarian aid, though as a liberal, I am glad that countries like Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Holland in particular over the long haul, contributed far more to the ANC than the Soviets and their satellites ever did. And I am glad, too, that it was a Western country, the United States, that finally applied the most significant economic pressure to end apartheid.

In the long run communist aid was always niggardly — never enough to make a real difference — whereas Western aid was decisive. In financial terms alone Sweden contributed something like nine times more to the ANC than the Soviets and Eastern bloc ever did.

Possibly because of these considerations and possibly because of the calmer realisations that tend to surface once the crisis point of a resistance movement is passed, we are hearing less these days of “the white liberals” in a pejorative sense, and this is to be welcomed.

Although I have had strong disagreements down the years with liberal friends such as Helen Suzman and the late Alan Paton over the issue of economic sanctions, it would be a gross denial of justice to downplay the massive contribution made by these two giants of the anti-apartheid campaign.

Paton blew the whistle on apartheid

Alan Paton was to me and, I believe, to many others, the most important influence in liberal terms to whites not only in South Africa but all over the world. Through his masterpiece “Cry, the Beloved Country” he blew the whistle on apartheid with a lasting blast never matched in the international arena. That one book alone had a permanent effect which persevered to contribute its weight to the crescendo of international repugnance that finally caused the United States and the European Community to pull the economic plug on apartheid to an extent which will probably only be fully realised when historical researches of the period are complete.

Politics never was Alan Paton’s prime concern. He was first and foremost, like Abraham Lincoln, a very great writer of English prose. His second novel, “Too late the Phalarope”, was in a structural