

Put an end to stupidities of the past

Events during apartheid made very little sense; it was all about oppression without much thought



By Crispin Hemson

A RESEARCHER from New York met me to understand the assassination of a friend in 1978. He knew in great detail the events of the time – he even had the Security Police records of the same events, a mixture of useful factual information, cold hostility and paranoid ramblings.

At some point though, he said, “It is hard to know what it must have felt like to live under apartheid.”

Indeed it is hard to explain to younger generations how it felt to be under a regime both oppressive and bizarre.

The system generated immense hardship and suffering. But it also required stupidity and silliness in generous measure, and when some people get nostalgic about it, they need a reminder.

One of my more treasured possessions is a sign from a bus shelter that I confess I liberated in 1974. It states “Europeans Only. *Slegs Blankes*”, this, of course, before whites began arguing that we are naturally part of Africa. Young people now find it hard to make sense of the sign, and more so of the idea that people felt compelled to organise their lives around such confusing ideas.

To give a fuller sense of the craziness, let me recount a story from 1976. Early that year a friend and I moved to the village of Impendle near the Drakensberg, a place of remarkable quiet despite being the formal centre of a major rural settlement.

We rented five acres of land on the main street for R25 monthly. Technically, the village was part of KwaZulu-Natal, and had its own magistrate, a charming man.

When the car of an elderly visitor became bogged down in the mud of the main street, a group of men pushed the car free, each of whom was rewarded with 5c, including the magistrate.

Later that year, against a background of growing unrest sweeping the country, the police called a civil defence meeting in the Farmers Hall. So the whites of the village assembled there.



Young people who have no recollection of living under apartheid may never have a full grasp of what it was like to live with enforced racial segregation, but there are other aspects of the system which still fester in a democratic South Africa, like the militarisation of the police, argues our columnist.

The chairman of the health committee opened proceedings, and was immediately ambushed by one Roy Pine, who lived alone in the village.

“I am prepared to patrol the streets at night,” he said, “but first I want to know who burnt down my pigsty – I think it was in 1961.”

The chairman flushed in embarrassment – this had clearly been a sensitive issue in the life of the local community. We must rather listen to the captain from the police station, he said.

The captain got up and spoke

sternly of the significance of civil defence.

Earthquakes, fire and flood were the key concerns he raised with the uncomprehending villagers.

This was perplexing. Was there a hitherto unknown Impendle Fault? And since nothing was built anywhere near the local streams, we had no knowledge of flood.

At that point the local carpenter got up, puffing his pipe, and said, “Isn’t this actually about the unrest in the country?”

At this the meeting sprang to life.

The captain became dramatic: “We need to realise that there are 80 000 of them and 23 of us.”

We all had no doubt as to the “us” and “them”, the racial dynamics of the area.

“Our police station is vulnerable. All you need to do to isolate Impendle is to cut the line from the station to the radio aerial.”

While the couple of radicals present made a mental note, he stated sternly, “In the event of an attack, our instructions are clear.”

He paused, and we waited to

know what our police would do to defend us.

“Our priority is to defend the police station. You will be on your own. So, arm yourselves!”

A buzz of discussion about handguns and self-defence followed. It was the language of the laager, of us against the world. Just at the point at which the police captain was about to tell women what handguns to get, we were overtaken by events.

In a pattern that has survived the end of apartheid, Eskom intervened and the electricity failed.

After some confusion, we stumbled out into the clear night, ready to confront the 80 000, no doubt whooping with joy at seeing their targets neatly clustered together. But they were strangely absent.

Somehow they had chosen sleep over their task of slaughtering the innocent.

When violence did come to Impendle, it was unleashed not on the village, but on the neighbouring settlement, largely at the hands of those armed by the apartheid state.

So I have no nostalgia for this

regime. Its stupidity should live on only in memory and documentation. Yet some of what was ridiculous and nasty about it still survives – racialised thinking, authoritarianism, militaristic police, paranoid intelligence services, and compulsive official secrecy; the task of ridding South Africa of apartheid’s worst legacies is not yet complete.

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