

A State of Denial: White South African's Attitudes to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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The assumption of responsibility by all parties involved is essential to the reconciliation process. A survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation suggests that the majority of white South Africans are unconvinced that they played a role in apartheid abuses. And over 40% of those surveyed think apartheid was a good idea, badly executed.

In the interest of reconciling South Africa with its troubled past, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has called on the entire country to remember, acknowledge and admit their role in past crimes. Specifically, it has focussed on white South Africans, the security forces, the armed wings of the liberation movements, the past government, and specific sectors (e.g. the medical profession, the business sector) all of whom have been called upon to carefully scrutinise their complicity in the apartheid system.

This has proved to be a difficult task, however, perhaps because most people would like to forget their role in a system that has been internationally condemned as a crime against humanity. In light of this, the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) set out to investigate the extent to which white South Africans have embraced the TRC process and acknowledged their role in the apartheid system.

In May 1996, shortly after the first public hearings of the TRC, the CSVR conducted a random nation-wide telephone survey of 124 white South Africans (Theissen 1997). The CSVR wanted to gather information on how white South Africans feel about the TRC, and also to assess their views on the social and political changes that had taken place since April 1994.

Support for Apartheid

In order to answer these questions, it is important to first determine the extent to which white South Africans supported the apartheid government. Evidence for this support is unequivocal.

Election results indicate that white South Africans increasingly supported the former government and its apartheid policies from 1948 onwards. In 1977, one year after the Soweto uprising, support for the NP regime was at its peak - 67% of all white votes went to the NP that year.

White opposition to the apartheid system was confined to a small minority. During the years of the state of emergency, parties with a moderate position, such as the Progressive Federal Party (later the Democratic Party), only accounted for a maximum of 20% of white votes (Van Rooyen, 1994).

In addition, during the 1980s white South Africans were repeatedly asked how they felt about the apartheid legislation. A survey conducted by the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) in February 1984 revealed that the vast majority of white South Africans were in

favour of the exclusion of black South Africans from the political system, white schools, residential areas and public amenities.

Even the more obvious forms of racist legislation, such as the 'Immorality Act' and the 'Mixed Marriages Act', were supported by 60% of the white population in 1985 (Rhodie, De Kock & Cooper, 1985).

White South Africans also generally supported government and security force actions. In November 1977, for example, after nearly all black consciousness organisations and the Christian Institute of Rev. Beyers Naudé had been banned, 68% of all white South Africans approved of the government's actions. In 1984, 90% of white South Africans felt that the government's combating of 'terrorism' was good or very good (Rhodie et al. 1985).

Four years later, 85% supported "stronger action against the ANC and its fellow travellers to prevent or to reduce terror attacks," (Hofmeyr 1990). During the 1980s, the South African Institute for International Affairs (1982-1990) repeatedly evaluated whether white South Africans thought that the government should militarily attack ANC 'terrorist' or 'guerrilla' bases in its neighbouring countries. Generally, vast majorities approved of the policy of cross-border raids.

Furthermore, in May 1989, shortly before the collapse of apartheid, 57% of white South Africans were still in favour of "detention without trial for suspected violators of security laws" (Hofmeyr 1990). This came at a time when reports about severe ill-treatment and torture in detention were fairly widespread.

Thus, it can be concluded that white South Africans did not only turn a blind eye to the ongoing human rights violations, but many supported the way the security forces dealt with black opposition.

The New System

Since 1990, change has been rapid in South Africa. It is not clear, however, how whites feel about the so-called "new South Africa", particularly given the overwhelming support of the past regime by white South Africans.

The CSVr survey found that although most respondents accepted some of the outer manifestations of the new South African patriotism (e.g. the new flag), a large number of white South Africans were not content with the new political system (58.8%).

Although the CSVr survey found that very few whites would like to reinstall apartheid (or at least would not openly admit to it), some 44% claimed that the former political system was not unjust. The same percentage believed that apartheid was a good idea but was badly carried out, and every third respondent held the view that apartheid has done more good than harm to South Africa (33%).

This indicates that, aside from some limited attitudinal change, there are still many white South Africans who remain uncritical of the apartheid past and do not see the system as inherently problematic.

Blame for the Past

Only 14 percent of white South Africans surveyed by the CSVR felt that those people who supported the NP in the past were, at least to some degree, responsible for the repression of black communities. Instead, they saw only those directly involved to be blameworthy.

Responsibility for the atrocities of the past was mainly placed on the doorsteps of anti-apartheid activists and 'troublemakers' in black communities (57%). To a lesser degree on the security forces (46%) and the former NP government was also seen as responsible (46%). Eighty one percent of respondents claimed that there is no moral difference between an act committed in defence of the apartheid system and an act committed as part of the liberation struggle.

Clearly, therefore, the white South African respondents did not see their personal support for the NP government and its actions as integrally linked to the violations that occurred in the past.

Support for the TRC

Although several surveys conducted prior to the TRC hearings have indicated widespread support for a Truth Commission among black South Africans, most white South Africans seem to have had an ambivalent or negative perception of the TRC.

A significant number of the white South Africans surveyed (46%) believed that "the TRC was an ANC-inspired witch-hunt to discredit its enemies", although the same percentage disagreed and 8% had no opinion.

In May 1996, only 36% of the 128 surveyed said that most of the allegations made by victims to the TRC were true, 41% of the respondents believed that the incidents victims spoke of were being exaggerated. Perhaps predictably, mistrust and rejection of the TRC was found to be more common among older white South Africans. The only group surveyed to show overwhelming support for the TRC was that under 30 years of age.

Support for Compensation

In terms of paying compensation to the victims and relatives of gross human rights violations, an HSRC survey conducted before the TRC began showed that 60% of white South Africans felt that victims of apartheid should not be compensated for the ills they suffered in the past (HSRC 1995). The CSVR survey conducted in the early months of the TRC showed that 56% of the respondents felt the same.

In addition, two out of three respondents felt that it was better to forget about the past than to prosecute people who committed crimes against anti-apartheid activists. Most white South Africans in this group were not inclined to redress the socio-economic injustices of the past. Only a few respondents supported measures like affirmative action (25%) and the return of some farmland to the black majority (13%).

According to the CSVR survey, more than two out of three white South Africans still believe that "there are times when detention of political prisoners may be necessary to maintain social order." Every second respondent said that police should be allowed to use their guns

more frequently and 80% supported the death penalty. Seemingly, human rights violations may still be tolerated by many South Africans as long as the violations can be justified.

Glorification of the Past

The CSVR survey indicates that there is a strong relationship between racism, the denial of past injustices and the glorification of the apartheid past. Respondents who scored high on the racism scale included in the survey, tended to be dissatisfied with the new democratic order. They also denied past injustice and romanticised the apartheid past.

While support for openly racist statements was low in the survey, implicit racial prejudices were voiced repeatedly. For example, "it is certainly best for all concerned that interracial marriages should not take place" and "it is crucial for the stable development of the country that whites retain economic control", received 57 and 54% approval respectively.

It was also fairly common for white respondents to complain that black South Africans were deliberately using the apartheid past to discriminate against whites. More balanced language broadcasting, affirmative action and land restitution were often referred to by respondents as "apartheid in reverse".

Germany after WWII

Interestingly, the results of the survey do not differ considerably from the political culture of West-Germany during the first decades after the end of the Nazi regime. During that time many Germans still believed that Germany had not been responsible for the outbreak of World War II (54% in 1951) and that National Socialism was a good idea that was badly carried out (57% in 1948).

Furthermore, Hitler was still seen as one of Germany's greatest statesmen in 1955 (48%). In an attitude similar to that of white respondents towards compensation for victims of apartheid in South Africa, 66% of the German public opposed reparation for Jewish holocaust survivors in 1952 (Bergmann & Erb 1991).

Perhaps like the German public after World War II, the CSVR survey indicates that many white South Africans remain unconvinced about the unjust nature of the past system and certainly do not see themselves as highly complicit. Apartheid is generally viewed as a system which was not inherently bad but was carried out in such a way that "mistakes" occurred.

Most white South Africans, according to the CSVR survey, are more likely to blame anti-apartheid activists, or perhaps the security forces, for the atrocities that occurred, than to acknowledge their own role in maintaining the system that allowed these violations to occur.

On the other hand, the results of the CSVR survey, as with survey research done in Germany, confirmed that the younger generation (those under 30 years of age) differed remarkably from the older generation in their perceptions about the past and in their attitudes to the future.

Younger white South Africans were generally more satisfied with the new South Africa, had a higher human rights awareness and were more committed to undoing past injustices. There

is hope that the white community may become more democratic and unprejudiced as those who were not directly involved in the conflict mature.

Has the TRC Helped?

The CSVN survey was a small exploratory study, carried out at the beginning of the TRC process. Perhaps over the past 18 months, the TRC has assisted in convincing more white South Africans that apartheid was fundamentally unjust and that its victims have a right to some form of reparation.

Clearly, there has been some white interest in the TRC, despite their relative absence at most hearings. The "TRC Special Report" TV programme has had up to 1.2 million viewers a week. Although it is more popular among black South Africans, a sizeable number of its viewers are white, and the programme often captures a greater audience than the English news at 8 p.m.

The CSVN survey found that 23% of the white South Africans claimed that they had heard about the atrocities committed by the apartheid regime for the first time through the TRC, while 55% said that they knew about the atrocities but were unaware of their severity, and 22% said they had been more or less fully aware.

While those claiming complete ignorance may simply be in denial, the high percentage of those saying that they were unaware of the extent of the atrocities suggests that the TRC may have opened up a number of eyes to the full evil of the apartheid system.

Nonetheless, the question that remains unanswered is whether the exposure created by the TRC has had a positive attitudinal impact on white South Africans. Despite white interest in the TRC, the CSVN survey suggests that assumption of responsibility is not forthcoming.

One of the most disturbing findings of the survey was that general human rights awareness remains low, despite the TRC. This is not a finding confined to white South Africans - it has also been shown that democratic values in black communities are not as strong as they should be in a consolidated democracy (Gouws, 1993).

Even if the TRC convinced the white population that political human rights violations are morally unacceptable in the months since the CSVN survey was conducted, it is questionable whether the TRC has helped convince the nation that all human rights violations are wrong.

Therefore, the real challenge facing the TRC is for it to make recommendations that help ensure that ongoing abuses (for example, the torture of criminals or violations committed by the police in pursuit of criminals) are not accepted by the general public. In so doing, the recommendations will need to address the human rights culture of white and black South Africans in a concerted way. However, much still needs to be done by white South Africans themselves.

As long as many white South Africans still glorify the apartheid past, reject responsibility and the need for compensation, and claim that "too much is done for blacks at the expense of white people nowadays" (a statement that received 54 % support) the road to reconciliation will remain a difficult one.

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