‘Wretched folk, ready for any mischief’: The South African state’s battle to incorporate poor whites and militant workers, 1890-1939

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Discovering the poor as political problem

Between the 1870s and 1913 the idea took root that South Africa, with the exception of areas of dense African settlement, was a white man’s land, although the white community was only 340 000 strong in the late 1870s in a population of 2,2 million, and just over 1,25 million in a population of 6,4 million in 1915. Most of those who propagated white supremacy accepted that a consolidated white group was needed to dominate the black majority. The main obstacle to such a consolidation was the presence of growing numbers of very poor white people on the land and in the towns and cities. Some were destitute and unemployable; others were unskilled or barely skilled.

In the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War, Alfred Milner, High Commissioner of South Africa and Governor of the Transvaal and Orange River Colony wrote that South Africa could not turn itself into ‘a white man’s country’, if it was ‘full of poor whites’. He added:

> We do not need a white proletariat in this country. The position of the whites among the vastly more numerous black population requires that even their lowest ranks should be able to maintain a standard of living far above that of the poorest section of a purely white community. [1]

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1. C. HEADLAM, *Milner Papers* (Cassell, London, 1931), vol.2, p.459.

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His goal was 'a largely increased white population [who] can live in decency and comfort'.[2]

For a ruling class to regard poverty as a political problem, it first had to 'discover' the poor. When this happened poverty had not become worse or more widespread, but the perceptions of the ruling class of it had changed. The term 'poor white' originated in the American South, during the 1870s, when several million whites were almost as wretchedly poor as the emancipated slaves. Some thought that a lack of 'ambition' prevented poor whites from practising diversified or scientific agriculture. The enduring effects of the Civil War and particularly the devastation by the earlier invading armies were not given due weight.[3] In Britain, which strongly influenced the thinking of Cape politicians, poverty was discovered in the 1880s, giving rise to a flood of publications on the subject. Earlier the ruling class had attributed the existence of poverty to the poor's own inability to overcome their lack of enterprise and other moral deficiencies. Now, however, they concluded that the poor deserved assistance because they faced problems that were not of their own making. [4]

In European colonies across the world the concern about white poverty intensified during the 1880s and 1890s. It was connected to a more modern sense among Europeans of racial exclusivity. To prevent the white poor from losing caste and to facilitate their rehabilitation, administrators and politicians delineated the criteria for membership of the dominant white community more sharply.[5] Among South African whites in general there was no consensus about dealing with white poverty. There were many who thought that the poor were themselves responsible for their poor sad condition. They want the church to deal with the problem as part of its pastoral obligations. The matter only became urgent when desperate elements among the poor threatened white supremacy.

Singling out the white poor

During the late 1880s the Rev. B.P.J. Marchand, minister of the Knysna parish of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), was travelling in the Karoo. A

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2. *Ibid.,* vol.2, p. 459.
3. C. VANN WOODWARD, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge Louisiana State University Press, 1951), pp. 109-110; 176-77.
4. G. HIMMELFARB, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pp.14, 391-92.
5. See the articles of A. STOLER in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1989, pp.134-6; 1992, pp.514-51.

storm forced him to take shelter in the miserable, one-room dwelling of a desperately poor *bywoner* or tenant farmer. Dismayed to find numerous children were not attending school and probably never would, he struggled to think of how to save them from a life of poverty.[6] Marchand's own parish had founded schools for children of white woodcutters, whose poverty had been recognised since the 1850s. But not until the 1890s did the Cape Synod of the DRC identify poverty among some of its members as a looming crisis.

During the same decade Transvaal newspapers and government reports also began to discuss the incidence of poverty among burghers of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* (ZAR). It mainly treated it as an urban phenomenon and made special mention of the poor congregating in Velschoendorp in Pretoria and in the Johannesburg suburbs of Fordsburg, Braamfontein, and Vrededorp. A 'Rand Relief Committee' said of the Vrededorp people that

> most of them seem starved, they live from blood and guts discarded at the slaughtering-places, they exchange their clothes for food, children go naked.[7]

The mining commissioner told government that he saw no reason for the state to intervene since the churches and charity organisations themselves were doing nothing. His view represented the conventional wisdom of the time, which attributed the state of the poor to idleness and left it to private institutions to aid the most miserable among them.

In the two Boer republics, where citizenship and racial identity were identical, there was no need to justify concentrating relief efforts on only a section of the population. The ZAR spent a third of its budget on poor relief; in relative terms it surpassed that of European countries until deep into the twentieth century.[8] President Steyn of the Republic of the Orange Free State, along with President Kruger of the ZAR, believed that the mining capitalists and the absentee landlords had no sympathy for the Afrikaner poor and would be happy to use black labour at extremely low rates to undercut them. As a result they would become a destitute proletariat in the cities. Steyn declared, in 1898, that the struggle to survive had become fiercer since 'capital, the enemy of [white] labour, had made its appearance.' He opened an industrial school in Bloemfontein, where, as in other towns, Free State sons had to learn the

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6. R.A. LEWIS, A Study of Some aspects of the Poor White Problem, (MA, RU, 1973), p.61
7. A.N. PELZER, 'Die Arm-blanke' in die Suid-Afrikaanse Republiek tussen die jare 1882 en 1899', *Historiese Studies*, 2,4 (1941), p. 192.
8. J. BOTTOMLEY, 'Public policy and white rural poverty in South Africa, 1881-1924, (Ph.D., Queen's University, 1990), p. 127.

'gospel of labour' and help the republic to become self-sufficient in its labour needs.[9]

In the Cape Colony providing superior social services to whites and assisting only the white poor militated against the liberal Constitution and the non-racial membership of the DRC. As early as 1861 several leading Cape clergy asked for compulsory education without mentioning race, nearly twenty years before compulsory education was introduced in Great Britain. In 1870 its Synod called on government 'to take the necessary measures for the teaching of those poor who had a claim on the care of the Reformed Church, whites as well as coloured.'[10] But the church itself was now rapidly becoming segregated and soon the 'mother' or predominantly white church focused only on Afrikaner poverty.

The term 'poor white' was probably first used in the Cape Colony during the early 1880s. In 1883 'D.V.', a correspondent based in a Western Cape town, wrote in the DRC journal, *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode* (also called *De Christen* then), that the problem was not so much 'poor whites' as 'heathen who live in our midst and who were of our colour.' Subsequently a correspondent in the Karoo town of Aberdeen proposed that missionaries hold separate services for 'our poor whites' living out of town.[11] Soon white poverty was seen as a social danger. In 1892 a school inspector in the Karoo wrote that it led to increasing social decline, racial degeneration, and crime.[12] Government officials had already begun to define social reform and social maladies in explicitly racial terms. In 1889 Sir Langham Dale, Cape Superintendent of Education, declared that whites 'should have at least such an education as their peers in Europe enjoy with such local modifications as will fit them to maintain their unquestioned superiority and supremacy in the land.'[13]

But there was no ready-made justification for white privilege in the state's provision of social services. The chairman of a 1894 Select Committee on a bill for relief to destitute children asked the crucial question.

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9 T. KEEGAN, *Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa* ((Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986), p.43; *De Express*, 1 March 1898.

10 M. DU T. POTGIETER, Die NG Kerk en die Onderwys van Blankes van Blankes in Kaapland, (Ph.D., US, 1961), p.354.

11 B. BOOYENS, *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode,*1849-1923, (Ph. D. US, 1992), p.180; *De Christen*, 28 September and 26 October 1883, pp. 452, 498.

12 E.G. MALHERBE, *Education and the Poor White: Report of the Carnegie Commission* (Stellenbosch: Pro: Ecclesia, 1932), vol.3, p. 471.

13. V. BICKFORD-SMITH, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), p.121.

> *M.C. Neethling (Chairman)*: Taking it now as a question of common justice between man and man, why should the Europeans be preferred?
>
> *Dr T. te Water (witness)*: I, for my part, would like to see the country in the hands of Europeans; that is why when I find that a section of the European population is falling back in the race, I say let us come to their help.[14]

Others rationalised that per capita wealth was too low to afford a modernised system of education for the entire population, yet others that it was best to concentrate resources first on whites, to turn them into a 'healthy group', and then later they could help to rehabilitate the rest of society. John X. Merriman declared: 'The white population was a minority...and if their brethren were to sink in the slough, as they saw them doing, it would be impossible to maintain their dominance.' Whites were the 'garrison'. They held 'the country in the interests of civilisation and in the interests of good government and general enlightenment of South Africa'. Here were two justifications almost in the same breath: whites deserved to dominate, but a healthy white group would ultimately be in the interest of all South Africans. [15]

There were several reasons why white poverty was predominantly an Afrikaner problem. The first related to large-scale immigration from Europe. Between 1875 and 1904 some 400 000 whites entered South Africa, more than the entire white population by 1875. Increasingly the Afrikaners, who began moving to the towns and cities in the 1890s, found that skilled and semi-skilled work, the professions and civil service positions were already filled by local or immigrant English-speakers.[16] The British section had the advantage of better education, better skills and their command of English, the language of trade and industry. Invariably they had a longer experience of the cash economy and saving money. Although there was always approximately one-fifth of the white poor who was English-speaking they were never as visible as the Afrikaner poor and some even assumed an Afrikaner identity. In the early 1930s a DRC minister remarked that 95 per cent of the poor whites in his parish were 'Dutch' and that the English-speaking poor tended to become 'Dutch' in outlook and language.'[17]

In a racially homogeneous society the Afrikaner poor would have become the urban proletariat and worked their way up from that position. But there already was a proletariat: between 200 000 and 300 000 male Africans who

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14. CAPE OF GOOD HOPE PARLIAMENT: Select committee on the Destitute Children's Relief Bill, 1894, p. 45.
15. DEBATES OF THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1894, cols, 345-46.
16. C. HEADLAM, *Milner Papers*,vol.2, p.459.
17. R. MILLAR, 'Social Science, Philanthropy and Politics: The Carnegie Corporation in South Africa', unpublished paper, 1992.

moved from the reserves to the towns and cities as migrant workers. Employers paid them as single men, arguing that the reserves provided for their family's subsistence. Africans did the unskilled work at a rate far below that for which whites were prepared to work. The term white developed in this context. The white elite did not define poverty in terms of physical or economic data, but relationally – how a white person by virtue of being white *ought* to live in comparison to non-whites. The idea of a proper white wage was defined accordingly.

Commissions that studied white poverty over a period of close to 60 years were nearly united in the view that a willingness to do manual labour, together with a superior white education, was essential for alleviating white poverty. However, after nearly 250 years in which almost all the Afrikaners farmed, there was a strong prejudice against doing work that could be done by slaves or servants. A young OFS farmer who watched a Dutch immigrant ploughing his own land said: 'No, doctor, that I have never done yet, to hold the plough myself; what did onze lieve Heer (our good Lord) give us the natives for?' The Reverend A.J.L. Hofmeyr explained: 'The young of Afrikaners of our time consider it a scandal to work.' Poor white boys given jobs on the railways quickly left because they found the discipline of regular work in the employ of others intolerable. They wanted to oversee the work of blacks or coloured people instead.[18]

Most farmers saw no need for a proper education for their children and were even more reluctant for their children to receive training in skills. An investigation showed that between 1890 and 1905 there was an 'enormous increase' in the number of coloured and black school pupils with a 'by no means proportionate increase in the attendance of European children.' More black and coloured children than whites attended school in the Cape Colony. J.W. Sauer observed in 1896 that 79 per cent of the white children in Carnarvon and 52 per cent of those in Prieska (both Karoo towns) were not at school.[19] The Rev. Andrew Murray told a commission that many white parents wished to be paid for sending their children to school.20 In remote areas, like Namaqualand, teachers considered it imprudent to give mid-morning breaks since children ran away. In 1891, it was found that the average white child in the Transvaal spent only two years in school.

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18. G.D SCHOLTZ, *Die Ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner IV,* (Johannesburg: Perskor, 1977), pp. 68-71.

19. T.R.H. DAVENPORT, *The Afrikaner Bond* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 389.

20. TRANSVAAL COLONIAL GOVERNMENT, T.G. 13-08 Report of the Transvaal Indigency Commission, 1908 (further references to TIC), p.55.

The Cape government established industrial schools for coloured and black people in 1854, but not until the 1890s for whites. Afrikaners were reluctant to attend such institutions, not the least because existing legislation projected them also as places for rehabilitation of criminals and the mentally deficient. Coloured people entered manufacturing and commercial occupations long before the Afrikaners. Coloured people dominated half the trades by the end of the century. By the 1890s Afrikaners seeking work in the towns were untrained and in many cases unemployable.

In 1892, a Cape school inspector said it was

> sad to see a class who were once land-owners, endowed by nature with greater possibilities than the natives, allowing their heritage to slip from their hands, and sinking into the class of unskilled labourers.[21]

In the following year J.H. ('Onze Jan') Hofmeyr, leader of the Afrikaner Bond, introduced a motion in Parliament. It was, he said, 'the most important issue ever to be submitted to the House'. Indigenous people were making sacrifices so their children could be educated: 'If the white race desired to maintain its supremacy in the country they would have to submit to sacrifices in order to provide that the next generation would be a thoroughly well-educated one and not a lazy, useless class of the community.' He urged the introduction of measures like compulsory education and the founding of industrial schools especially for children of poor whites to teach them habits of industry, orderliness, obedience and discipline.[22]

In 1893 the Rev. Marchand was among a group of Cape DRC ministers who issued a manifesto warning that those with only the traditional rudimentary education were doomed to becoming 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', serving the steady stream of incoming European immigrants.[23] Shortly afterwards Marchand and the Rev. A. Moorrees published a prospectus for a school in Cape Town to offer poor white children the chance to learn trades. When the school opened a year later Merriman called the DRC the most appropriate institution to teach 'poor whites the great and indispensable truth that there was no shame attached to labour'.[24]

The DRC felt compelled to expand its activities. Its Synod appointed Marchand to chair a committee; in 1897 it recommended the founding of a

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21. E.G. MALHERBE, *Education and the Poor White: Report of the Carnegie Commission*, p.46.
22. J.H. HOFMEYR, *The Life of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr (Onze Jan)* (Cape Town: Van de Sandt De Villiers, 1913), pp.495-97.
23. G.D. SCHOLTZ, *Die ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke, IV*, pp.70-72.
24. M. DU T. POTGIETER, Die NG Kerk en die Onderwys van Blankes van Blankes in Kaapland, pp. 342-44.

labour colony for poor whites at Kakamas on the Orange River in the north-eastern limits of the Colony. At Kakamas and three other rural settlements for the Afrikaner poor the church trained 800 families. Between 1894 and 1922 it also established and maintained several industrial and agricultural schools that taught 1 500 children, and founded 160 state-subsidised boarding houses, which, between 1917 and 1932, made it possible for more than 7 000 indigent children in remote rural areas to attend school.

Already in the 1890s W.P. Schreiner's Cape cabinet was so concerned about the problem that it proposed compulsory education, with state subsidies, for indigent children of European parents only. The matter was taken further after the election victory of the Progressive Party under L.S. Jameson in 1904. By now children of a third of the white community in the Cape Colony got no schooling at all. In 1905 the Jameson government passed legislation to enforce compulsory education up to the sixth school year (Standard 4), but only for children of European parentage and descent. A court later ruled that the Act meant 'pure' white, thus ruling out coloureds. The African Political Organisation, established in 1902 to promote primarily the interest of coloured people, protested vigorously against coloured exclusion, but to no avail.[25] By the early 1920s white and coloured education in the Cape Province was fully segregated and white schools were invariably better.

A poor country

Agriculture provided a livelihood for the overwhelming majority of Afrikaners. Farming in the Western and Southeastern Cape was relatively prosperous. Since the final decades of the nineteenth century there had been a steady increase in the Western Cape in the demand for its wheat and dairy products, with fruit exports a promising option. Wine farming, hit hard by phylloxera in the 1880s, and stagnating to 1910, started to pick up in the first two decades after Union. In the Eastern Cape and Karoo midlands the more successful Afrikaner and English wool farmers shared in the steady expansion of wool exports, up from £4 million in 1904 to £20 million in 1919.

But only 14 per cent of South Africa is arable land that can be used to plant crops. Large parts are semi-desert with frequent droughts, and other parts get enough rain but have extremely rugged terrain. Some two-thirds of all of South Africa is today used for grazing.

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25. G. LEWIS, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African 'Coloured' Politics,* (David Philip, Cape Town,1987), pp. 30-33.

Stock farming developed as a way of life and means of subsistence and only in the twentieth century as a commercial enterprise. A wasteful exploitation of agricultural resources contributed to a crisis in pastoral farming. Overstocking, together with grass burning, destroyed the natural vegetation, and thunderstorms swept topsoil away. Farmers had been accustomed to move on to new grass and fresh land when pastures were exhausted, but, by the 1880s, the frontier of expansion had closed. Spread thinly over the great landmass of South Africa, farmers had accumulated little capital and most were deeply in debt to traders. In 1886 a Bloemfontein paper reported:

> Formerly nearly everyone owned his farm of 2 000 or 3 000 morgen of land and most of it was unencumbered; now the great mass of the country people lack land and those who own it have many mortgage bonds on it.[26]

The problem of white poverty in South Africa was predominantly a rural problem that manifested itself after two centuries of subsistence farming. It was, as a prominent Afrikaans author and social worker writing under the name MER, remarked, 'a natural and inevitable process' that had occurred among the Afrikaner community. In a folksy way she described the process:

> A handful of whites saw the chance of farming the gigantic South Africa… We never took into account the way in which the *veld* would react, and the effects on us of the great space, the loneliness, the solitude, the isolation.[27]

Many farmers were unable to make the transition to the cash economy and market-oriented farming. Some did begin applying scientific methods of stock breeding and diversified their farming by breaking in land, planting crops, and marketing their produce effectively, but the majority were not prepared for such a major venture and carried on the tradition of largely subsistence farming. J.W. Gunning, a Dutch physician in the southern Free State, observed:

> The idea of breeding better sheep than one's father has done, to feed them differently, to till more soil, to work and manure the soil differently and more carefully than one's ancestors have done occurs alas! to very few as yet.'[28]

The switch to risk-taking commercial farming in a country with poor soil and a fickle climate was extremely difficult without a government available to stabilise prices, to provide specialised training in new agricultural methods and to extend credit at low rates. Not until the end of the 1930s did the South African government have sufficient revenue to provide such support.

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26. G.D SCHOLTZ, *Die Ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner IV,* p.70.
27. A letter by her published in ERIKA THERON, *Sonder Hoed of Handskoen* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1983), p.21.
28. *The Friend*, 30 November 1894.

The crisis was exacerbated by the Roman-Dutch Law of inheritance that compelled the division of a farmer's property among his children. In operation in the Cape Colony until 1874 and in the Boer republics until their demise, the law left children on farms sub-divided into parts too small to farm efficiently. The Carnegie Commission report of 1932 documented several case studies, of which the following case was fairly typical: A farmer divided his farm of 11 000 morgen equally among his ten children. None could make a living from farming such a small lot and some of the children became poor whites.[29] The availability of a large reservoir of native labour, cheaper and also more docile, kept the poorer sons of farmers and the *bywoners* from becoming a class of wage-earning farm labourers. An entire Afrikaner underclass formed on the farms, increasingly unable to feed their large families properly, many stunted in mental and physical development.

During the 1890s a natural and a man-made disaster greatly intensified the problem. The natural disaster was the devastating rinderpest of the mid-1890s, which wiped out cattle in large parts of South Africa. In the Transvaal alone it destroyed half of farmers' cattle herds. Then came the Anglo-Boer War, in which the British used scorched earth tactics to break the spirit of the Bittereinders. Some 90 per cent of all farmhouses had been damaged in the Orange Free State and in the Transvaal homesteads were also destroyed on a large scale. Most of the herds in the republics were decimated, with crops and implements destroyed. In the Transvaal 80 per cent of the cattle, 75 per cent of the horses, and 73 per cent of the sheep were destroyed; in the OFS the figures were 59 per cent of the cattle and 55 per cent of the sheep. Some 15 000 Boer fighters, unable to be resettled on their farms, became part of the reservoir of urban unskilled labour.

Milner wished to rebuild the shattered republics and unify South Africa on the basis of white supremacy. But his priorities were in conflict with each other. He wanted rapid economic growth, but that required 'a large amount of rough labour', particularly to work the low-grade ore of the gold mines. Whites were too expensive to do such work. The growing dependence on black labour steadily eroded the prospect of developing South Africa as a white man's country. Large-scale white immigration would increase the skills base, but initially would make it even more difficult for urbanising Afrikaners to find work. There was little place for most Afrikaners in Milner's scheme.

C.W. de Kiewiet, the most gifted historian writing in the 1930s, identified three major factors that acted as constraints on economic growth during the first three four decades of the century:

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29. J.R. ALBERTYN, *Verslag van die Carnegie-Kommissie: Sociologiese Verslag,* (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia, 1932), p. 7.

> its low- grade ore, its low-grade land, and also its low-grade human beings.[30]

Much of South Africa's low-grade gold-ore, sold at a low, fixed price, could only be mined by very cheap black labour. Low-grade land was responsible for much of agriculture's problems and low-grade human beings the product of low spending on education and the large distance many rural children had to travel to school. By 1917 one-fifth of white children were not in school'.

De Kiewiet highlighted an important social aspect of a stagnant economy and small domestic market:

> It was not the natives alone who were depressed in their power to earn. The country could not afford a high standard of living for the entire population with the result that, in addition to the native population, a very large proportion of the white population was also depressed to a low level of income and livelihood.[31]

White artisans, in fact, received a better pay than their counterparts in any country of Europe. Real artisan wages were higher only in the United States of America (USA), Canada and Australia.[32] Ralph Bunche, a distinguished black American on a visit in 1937-38, observed that the standard of living for whites was 'much too high for the poor white group to live under'.33

At the bottom of the labour market was a mass of migrant black workers without rights and with little choice but to sell their labour cheaply. The goldmines of the Witwatersrand, the dynamo of the economy, were based largely on black migrant labour. By 1911 more than 90 per cent of the black population of Johannesburg was male working at very low wages; if they were paid more they would work less, so the justification went. Intending to return to the reserves, many blacks lived temporarily in wretched shacks or labour compounds. As a source of ultra cheap labour they were a constant threat to unskilled and even semi-skilled Afrikaner workers.[34]

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30. C.W. DE KIEWIET, *A History of South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p.212.
31. DE KIEWIET, *History,* p.214.
32. ERIC WALKER, *A History of Southern Africa* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957), p.577.
33 . ROBERT EDGAR, *The Travel Notes of Ralph J. Bunche* (Athens; Ohio State University, 1992), pp.160-62.
34. WILLIAM BEINART, *Twentieth-century South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp.59-67.

A traumatic early urbanisation

The first three decades of the twentieth century saw the problem of poor Afrikaners at its worst. Urbanisation was a rapid, chaotic and almost always traumatic process. By 1890 fewer than 10 000 Afrikaners (2 or 3 per cent) were urbanised; thirty-six years later, in 1926, 391 000 (41 per cent) lived in towns and cities, in 1936, 535 000 (50 per cent). In the urban environment the employers and their managers invariably spoke English, a language many Afrikaners did not understand at all or only poorly.

The Afrikaners who came in the first and second waves of urbanisation suffered most. Artisans had organised themselves in trade unions in mining, commerce and industry, hence it was difficult for employers to reduce their wages. This meant that there was very little left for the semi-skilled white workers and unskilled blacks.[35] The first Afrikaners in the cities could not get entry into the trades because they lacked the necessary educational qualifications. They did not have relatives who could help them to find work and had no experience of trade union organisation. Unions operating on the closed-shop principle often admitted only people who had been proposed by family members. Until 1907, English-speaking mineworkers on the Witwatersrand excluded Afrikaners from all of the most desirable positions.

Those Afrikaners excluded from the formal job market tended to become the urban poor whites. A 1926 commission referred to urban white workers who

> have no alternative but to swell the ranks of unskilled industrial labour; in other words to put themselves in competition with the native.[36]

An early 1930s survey found that of 462 poor white families, half had attended only primary schools, two-fifths more could hardly read or write, and one-tenth were totally illiterate. They could not sell their labour at the lowest levels because Africans were preferred. [37]

Some of the urban white poor managed to find unskilled work. Throughout the first four decades of the 1900s white unskilled workers demanded three shillings and six pence a day, and sometimes five shillings, for the same work for which the unmarried black migrant received two shillings.[38] A white

35. D. YUDELMAN, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa,* (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1983), pp.53-54.
36. Report of the Economic and Wages Commission, 1926, para. 144.
37. J.R. ALBERTYN, *Verslag van die Carnegie-Kommissie: Sociologiese Verslag*, pp.19-21,169.
38. Report on the National Conference on the Poor White Problem, 1934, pp.163-65.

mineworker with a family, between 1902 and 1908 received about 10 shillings per shift; a black migrant got between 2 and 3 shillings a day. [39]

The urbanising Afrikaners were expected by their fellow whites to live like whites. A witness commented on their grim struggle to the Transvaal Indigency Commission:

> Every white man was undersold. The white man had got his rent to pay and had to wear a shirt of some sort and had far more expenses...and had to keep a family and consequently was undersold.[40]

Many white workers preferred unemployment to degrading work or menial wages. Decent jobs paying a living wage were few. In the immediate aftermath of the war most Afrikaner men in Johannesburg worked as a cab or trolley driver, some became brick makers, others off-loaded the wagons delivering farm produce. Girls found work at hand-laundries and boys as messengers or newspaper sellers. Prostitution and crime were common alternative ways of earning a living. Most white youth criminals and street thugs were Afrikaners for many years to come.

Johannesburg and other Witwatersrand towns had some of the worst slums in the world There were no government housing schemes in the beginning and many of the urbanising Afrikaners had to find accommodation in slums. A white woman testified to the indigency commission on poor whites squatting on government or town lands in and around Pretoria just after the war:

> There are no sanitary arrangements. They are most miserable, huddled together in little tin shanties – married couples, young children and grown-up young people, all living together, sometimes in one little room or tent.

The Rev. D. Theron observed to the same commission:

> I feel very strongly that it does not help to keep a child five hours under the influence of a school and then send it back for the rest of the day to the same hovel from which it comes.[41]

The traumatic Afrikaner urbanisation had cultural and political dimensions as well. A study depicted the scene:

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39. ROBERT DAVIES, *Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1979), p.59.

40. TRANSVAAL COLONY, Report of the Transvaal indigency Commission (TIC), (1906 – 1908)*TIC*, p.12.

41. J.J. FOURIE, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, 1886-1924,* (Pretoria: HAUM, 1978); Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand: New Nineveh* (London: Longman, 1982), pp. 111-170; for some the contemporary comments see *TIC*, pp.116-19.

[Urban Afrikaners] were working like black people, taking orders like black people, living in shabby residential streets adjacent to black shanty towns, and having to speak a foreign language – English – like a conquered race.' Their better-off fellow-Afrikaners did not know whether to avert their eyes or rush to their help, but, whatever they did, the poor represented an acute embarrassment. In the view of English-speakers the Afrikaner usually appeared as

> the poor, uneducated railway worker, the ignorant policeman...vacant low class beings. A stigma of poverty and ignorance was attached to the whole group.[42]

Yet the Afrikaners who began to settle on the Witwatersrand during the 1890s as a poor and downtrodden people were not crushed by the experience. The studies of Charles van Onselen, J.J. Fourie and E.L.P. Stals paint a vivid picture of how the most enterprising of them managed to adapt to the Johannesburg environment.[43] People who had been bywoners became self-employed as transport riders, cabdrivers, and small-scale brick manufacturers. Many of these opportunities disappeared as trains and trams made their appearance. By 1907, with the introduction of self-government for the Transvaal, a crowd of Afrikaner and English unemployed marched from Johannesburg to Pretoria to put pressure on the new Colonial Secretary, Jan Smuts, to 'employ white labour at fair wages'. When the immigrant white miners struck in 1907 Afrikaners acting as scabs entered the mine labour force.

They also used their political power to put pressure on their political representatives to provide relief work. Het Volk, the ruling party, provided menial jobs to the white poor on the railways after 1907. The poor were shocked when Smuts told an Afrikaner delegation in 1908 that there was work for them on the Pietersburg railway line for 3 shillings and 4 pence a day and a bag of mealy meal. Haas Das, editor of *De Transvaler*, told an Afrikaner audience in the poor white suburb of Vrededorp that such an offer 'was most insulting to the Afrikaner nation'. The sting of the whole thing lay in the offer of mealy meal. 'It was placing them on a level with Kaffirs.'44

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42 . L. SALOMON, "Socio-Economic Aspects of South African History, 1870-1962', doctoral diss., Boston University, 1962, pp.106, 117.

43. C. VAN ONSELEN, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886 and 1914* (Longman, London, 1982), pp.111-170; J.J. FOURIE, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, 1886-1924*; E.L.P. STALS**,** *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, 1924-1961*, (Pretoria: HAUM, 1986).

44. C. VAN ONSELEN, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886 and 1914* (Longman, London, 1982), p.147.

The loyalties of the Afrikaner poor were still up for grabs. Most supported Het Volk, but some considered the Labour Party as a political home. They entered trade unions despite the opposition of the church. In 1914 the Johannesburg Town Council grudgingly acknowledged the mobilised power of the predominantly Afrikaner community of Vrededorp.

> Every political party truckled to this mass of voters and endeavoured to find employment for them. The mass had overturned every political party, and would overturn any political party which might be in power unless a remedy was provided to remove their appalling poverty and degradation.[45]

From an early stage the Afrikaans church played a vital role in offering spiritual succour. By 1909 in Johannesburg's Afrikaner suburbs of Vrededorp and Fordsburg, the church services were reported filled to overflowing.[46] Afrikaner poverty remained a feature of the urban landscape until the early 1940s, but this should not lead to the conclusion that the poor failed to improve their situation. In fact they moved up the ladder and their place was taken by a new wave of poor Afrikaners. By the 1920s the urban Afrikaners in general were still poor but they formed a vibrant community that had moved beyond the depths of despair. They had settled down by organising their community around Afrikaans schools and churches. The incidence of social evils, like prostitution, gambling and alcohol abuse, was much lower than in the period between 1900 and 1920. They were overcoming illiteracy or semi-literacy, were putting their faith in education and training, and were expressing their power at the ballot booth in a way no politician dared to ignore.

Disputes over a solution

Providing superior education to whites to equip them for the most desirable jobs was an issue on which white political leaders across the political spectrum agreed. But Generals Smuts and Hertzog, and Dr. D.F. Malan, along with Botha the main Afrikaner leaders of the first four decades of Union, had major disagreements about other issues relating to the poor white question.

The work of the Cambridge economist, Alfred Marshall, author of *Principles of Economics* (1890) strongly influenced the government commissions of inquiry on poverty that sat in South Africa. Marshall's work laid the foundation for neo-classical economics, the dominant economic creed in

45. *Ibid.*, p.158.

46. J.J. FOURIE, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, 1886-1924,* p.148.

Britain and its empire over the next four decades. It argued that government intervention to solve poverty, particularly by artificially creating jobs, made a bad situation worse; governments had to accept that an economy had its own equilibrium and that they had to allow it to adjust itself. They could assist this process by providing for a free market, low trade barriers, and a balanced budget. Through introducing compulsory education the state gave the new generation the chance to break free from the proletariat.

Smuts arrived in Cambridge just after the work appeared and made some of the insights his own. A comment he made at the end of the Boer War captured his basic inclination. Gordian knots, he wrote, could not be solved by

> some master stroke of diplomacy or statesmanship... Time and the free play of the social and economic forces alone can solve [South Africa's] racial and economic problems.[47]

In 1907 he entered politics as a member of the Het Volk government in the Transvaal colony. Smuts was a white supremacist. While firmly insisting on the rehabilitation of the poor whites, he placed his emphasis on education and training. He would offer the whites the first choice of jobs, but the government should not, like Paul Kruger's republic, succumb to excessive demands for assistance. The priority of the new Transvaal government was to assist mining, promote export industries, introduce lower tariffs and encourage an efficient agriculture to lower the cost of food. The poor would benefit in the rising tide of growth and prosperity.

The Transvaal Indigency Commission, dominated by members of Milner's Kindergarten, expressed similar views. Its report, tabled in 1908, stated that the demand for state intervention was extensive, farmers expecting government 'to remove all difficulties'.[48] It concluded that it was futile to try to solve poverty by keeping on the land whites lacking in enterprise, capital, and modern farming skills. The rural poor would have to become manual labourers in the towns and cities. The commission urged government to refrain from protecting the white poor from reasonable competition from black and coloured people.[49]

In 1923, Smuts, now Prime Minister, met a DRC delegation at a time of high white unemployment and high inflation. He told them that 'the present dismal situation', was only temporary. It was inevitable that some whites would be pushed out 'and lie there as wounded on the battlefield'. Attention had to be focused on the next generation, ensuring that it received proper industrial

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47. *Smuts Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), vol.1, pp, pp. 484-90
48. *TIC*, p.181.
49. T.G. 13-'08, p.197.

education to face the future. The response of the ministers is not recorded, but the defeat of the ruling South African Party a year later was widely attributed to its lack of sensitivity with respect to the poor white issue.

Hertzog had a quite different approach. A biographer, C.M. van den Heever, sees him as 'continental' in rejecting the neo-classicist *laissez faire* policy. While studying in the Netherlands in the 1890s, he almost certainly was influenced by the work of Abraham Kuyper, the prominent Dutch theologian and politician, who urged employers to pay their workers proper wages. Concern for the poor was not a question of charity but an affirmation of the Calvinist principle that man had the right to a decent living.[50] Each church had to assume responsibility for its own poor.[51]

Hertzog, who had become a wealthy man after the war as the result of an inheritance, was one of a small class of *Heere-boeren* or 'landlords'. According to a socialist writer, this class had little influence among the conservative, traditional Boers, who rejected the views of 'towns people and capitalists'.[52] 'These rich farmers', one small farmer wrote in a Transvaal paper, 'these selfish, self-righteous bloodsuckers!… Even our great generals who make such nice speeches, oppress the poor in private and enrich themselves from the impoverished.'[53] In the 1914 election for the Transvaal provincial council the Labour Party attracted strong Afrikaner support in both urban and rural constituencies. Its message was that the 'money capitalist' used farmers to suppress the workers, while the 'land capitalist' employed workers to suppress the burghers on the land.[54] Hertzog was one of those 'land capitalists', but he soon distanced himself from the pro-capital and pro-Empire sympathies of most of the *Heeren-boeren*. The platform of the National Party he had founded in 1914 presented Louis Botha as the 'Prime

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50. A KUYPER, *The Problem of Poverty* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1991).

51. G.J. SCHUTTE, 'Arbeid, die geen brood geeft...' G.J. Schutte (ed.), "*Een Arbeider is zijn loon waardig* (Meinema, The Hague, 1991), pp.10-23.

52. J. VISSCHER, *De Ondergang van Een Wereld* (Amsterdam: A.B Soep, 1903), pp. 32-33; J. BOTTOMLEY, 'The Orange Free State and the Rebellion of 1914' in R. MORRELL (ed.) *White but Poor: Essays in the History of the Poor White in South Africa, 1880-1940* (Unisa, Pretoria, 1992), pp. 29-40.

53. I. HOFMEYR 'Building a nation from words: Afrikaans language, literature and ethnic identity' in S. MARKS and S. TRAPIDO (eds.), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (Longman, London, 1987), p.101.

54. LABOUR PARTY, *Die Nuwe Politiek* (Johannesburg, 1915); D. TICKTIN, 'The War Issue and the Collapse of the South African Labour Party, 1914-15' in *The South African Historical Journal,* 1, (1969), pp.60-69.

Minister of Imperialism and Capital'. Hertzog broke with the SAP, he said, because of its capitalist policies.

For Daniel Francois Malan it was the Christian duty of Afrikaners to care for their poor fellow-Afrikaners. Malan grew up on a farm in the Western Cape, and studied first at the Victoria College and then the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, where he received his doctoral degree in 1904. His theology was shaped by the Cape's Evangelical tradition with its emphasis on prayer, mission, education, and a puritanical lifestyle, by the thoughts of the Irish philosopher George Berkeley, the subject of his Utrecht doctoral dissertation. He turned away from the orthodox principle of 'from doctrine to life', meaning that one had to start with the Bible in the search for revelation. Instead he accepted Berkeley's 'ethical strand' of theology, 'through life to doctrine'. Ethical religion had a strong bias towards social activism and modernisation.[55]

At the centre of Malan's interpretation of 'life' stood the Afrikaners' survival struggle. He believed that the DRC as the church of the Afrikaner people had to assist Afrikaners in overcoming their poverty and maintaining their cultural and national character -- this was called the *volkskerk* position. Malan's most crucial social concern was reintegrating the poor in the Afrikaner community. His son, Daniël, wrote:

> My father could be literally moved to tears when he thought of the poor whites who in the trek to the cities went under.[56]

On Malan's returned to South Africa in 1905, he spent six months in the Transvaal, where he encountered the acute poverty of the Afrikaners in the wake of the Anglo-Boer War. For three years he was minister of the Montagu parish in the Western Cape, urging the rehabilitation of the poor whites. In this wine-producing district he also took a brave stand against farmers who deliberately tied their coloured labourers to the farm through an abundant supply of liquor. He moved to the parish of Graaff-Reinet, but in 1915 he resigned from the ministry to edit the newly founded daily, *De Burger,* in Cape Town. He was prompted by his grave concern over intra-Afrikaner political divisions and the abject poverty in which many Afrikaners lived. In his farewell sermon Malan posed the question:

> Do we Afrikaners have the right to exist or would it perhaps not be better to commit collective suicide?[57]

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55. G.W. BRINK, "Daniel Francois Malan, 1874-1959: An ecclesiological study of the influence of his theology", (Ph. D. US, 1997), pp.119-126.

56. US UNIVERSITY LIBRARY (Malan Collection), 1/1/3268, Life Sketch of D.F. Malan by his son, ca 1965, pp.5,48.

57. H.B. THOM, *D.F. Malan* (Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel, 1980), p.13.

In Malan's view the native question lay at the very heart of the poor white issue. Blacks were arduously improving their education and beginning to compete directly with whites for the better-paid jobs. If the 'progressive' blacks were allowed to continue on this course, there was no hope of South Africa's remaining a 'white man's country'. He believed that industrial segregation had become essential to avoid direct competition for work between whites and blacks. Blacks had to be trained to subsist in the reserves.[58] How much the government would have to spend to make the reserves viable and whether they could be made viable at all, Malan did not say.

A turbulent mining town

The mining industry, concentrated in Johannesburg and some other Witwatersrand towns, created the mirage that South Africa was wealthy. Shortly after becoming a member of the Het Volk government in 1907, Smuts expressed his dismay about the large numbers of urban Afrikaners that were unemployed or working at very low wages: 'The situation is rotten to the core…That a town of 75 000 whites exporting £26 000 000 in gold per annum should have a threatening unemployment question is a sufficient proof of that.' He noted with an air of desperation: 'We are so wretchedly poor'. A policy for agricultural development and irrigation schemes to provide work would be 'enormously difficult to carry out'. [59]

For most of the twentieth century the gold mining industry towered over the South African economy; a 1932 estimate said half of the state's finances were derived from the mines and that half the population's livelihood came directly or indirectly from the mines. In 1907, there were 18 600 whites miners and only 18 per cent were local-born. By 1918 local white miners were the majority and by 1930 they were two-thirds of the white miners. At this point there were some 200 000 black mine workers, all migrants drawn from Mozambique, Basutoland and the Transkei and Ciskei.

Impoverished Afrikaners roamed the streets of Johannesburg and other mining towns, nourishing a bitter grievance about the Anglo-Boer War and a fierce desire to return to the land. Afrikaner workers wanted a republic, but not the sort of socialist republic advocated by the communist activists. They were deeply suspicious of the capitalist class, with good reason to be so. *The Star,* representing the opinion of the mining magnates, wrote just after Union that

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58. C.F.J. MULLER, *Sonop in die Suide: Geboorte en Groei van die Nasionale Pers* (Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel, 1990), p.649.

59. *Smuts Papers*, vol.2, p.336.

> South Africa would never become a white man's land like Canada or Australia, and the best future course was to spur growth by drawing on black labour freely and in the process create more opportunities for skilled white labour.[60]

To aggravate the Afrikaners' position, white trade union leaders were almost all English-speaking and staunch imperialists with little sympathy for their aspirations. *Ons Vaderland* wrote in 1917 that

> the contempt with which Afrikaners are treated on the Rand is deeply etched on the consciousness of the Afrikaners and it is hard for sensitive Afrikaners to collaborate with this class of people.[61]

Mineworkers were the most militant section of the white working class. They did work that was very dangerous and carried serious health risks. A study of Cornish miners on the Witwatersrand mines found an average life expectancy of only 36 years. Of the 18 leaders of a 1907 strike committee, 14 died of phthisis, a wasting disease of the lungs, before the next big strike of 1913.[62]

Both the government and the mining industry attempted to provide some assistance to whites. In 1893 the Transvaal Volksraad established the first legal colour bar in the economy, restricting the job of blasting to whites. After the Anglo-Boer War, Milner tried to satisfy the white artisans before he imported Chinese workers to solve a labour shortage caused by blacks withholding their labour (see p.xx). A list of jobs restricted to whites was drawn up, but the measure was intended to be temporary. After 1907, when blacks began to replace the Chinese, white miners insisted on the retention of the protected jobs.

Employers accepted the colour bar only reluctantly, but the mining companies were willing to use Afrikaners instead of the assertive immigrant miners they thoroughly disliked.[63] At the end of April 1907 the latter struck against management's plans to put blacks in higher-level jobs and reduce the ratio of black to white miners. The strike soon turned ugly. When the Het Volk government called up British troops, large numbers of Afrikaners volunteered as strikebreakers. Mining circles thought Afrikaners would make ideal miners, more docile than foreign miners and 'quick of resource, dexterous, highly intelligent and capable'.[64]

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60. G.D SCHOLTZ, *Die Ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner IV,* p. 303.
61. J.J. FOURIE, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, 1886-1924*, pp.88-89.
62. D. YUDELMAN, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, p.93.
63. *Ibid.,* pp.59-65
64. J.J. FOURIE, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, 1886-1924*, p.84.

After the strike the Afrikaner scabs kept their jobs and even more Afrikaners entered the mines. They soon became a militant labour force, thoroughly radicalised by the fear that the employers would undercut them with cheaper black labour or using even larger teams of blacks under their supervision.[65] In 1911 the Union government passed the *Mines and Works Act* that protected whites in some categories of work, and Smuts used the Act to write regulations that limited a range of jobs to whites only.

In 1913 another strike on the gold mines occurred over union recognition, with riots, arson, looting and near anarchy across the Rand. The police and the army were unable to contain the disturbances and the new Active Citizen Force (ACF) still too poorly organised to be effective. The stability of the state itself would be at risk if strike leaders linked up with disaffected rural Afrikaners.[66]

Soldiers shot and killed a hundred strikers and bystanders before the strike ended. The government had to sign a humiliating accord with the strike leaders, only to be challenged again six months later. A 1914 strike on the coal mines spread to the railways and harbours and culminated in a general strike. This time the government was ready. It declared martial law and sent in units of the newly formed Permanent Force and ACF commandos. The English-speaking leadership of the trade union federation were arrested; Smuts deported nine of them summarily and illegally. To break the strike Smuts relied on the support of men with whom he had fought the Anglo-Boer War. Rural Afrikaners called up for commando duty enthusiastically took up their weapons 'to shoot Englishmen' in Johannesburg.[67]

In the Rebellion of 1914-15 the rebel leader General Christiaan de Wet enlisted inhabitants of a poor white settlement near his farm and many *bywoners* also participated in the rebellion. He acknowledged that his supporters were not 'gentlemen' but 'slumdwellers'. Albertus Brand, son of President Brand and magistrate of Lindley commented that people in the northern Free State who rebelled 'were on the "loot"…they were not people of standing and responsibility.' Most of them were *bywoners*. Their target was merchants to whom they were in debt or richer farmers who cared little about their troubles.[68]

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65. D. YUDELMAN, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa,* p.133.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-108.

67. J.J. FOURIE, *Afrikaners in die Goudstad, 1886-1924*, p. 86.

68. UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA, UG 42-1916, Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Rebellion,p.323, see also p.127; S. SWART, 'Desperate Men: The 1914 Rebellion and the Politics of Poverty', *South African Historical Journal*, 42 (2000), p.175.

The Rebellion was suppressed, but the SAP as ruling party was deeply concerned that the combination of white poverty, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism posed a serious threat to the social order. Deeply concerned, John X. Merriman, wrote to Jan Smuts at the end of 1915 about the implications of the rebellion. He referred to the rebels as these 'wretched folk… ready for any mischief.' They threatened 'the very foundation of our national existence'. There were two dire possibilities: the 'insidious teachings of the international Socialists' and a 'not impossible alliance with the Natives'. He did not share the thinking that the white poor found themselves in a hopeless situation. 'No cause is hopeless if one only hits on the right plan.'[69]

The Rand Strike of 1922

The suppression of the Rebellion threw the SAP back on a shrinking support base of mostly richer and older Afrikaners. Hertzog's National Party, founded in 1914, captured half the Afrikaner vote in 1915. Except in the Western Cape, it drew predominantly the vote of the rural poor and debt-ridden farmers. It was generally accepted that landless *bywoner* had attached them to the NP cause.[70]

To break through to the urban Afrikaners, NP supporters in 1915 established two newspapers, *Ons Vaderland* in Pretoria, and the much more substantial paper *De Burger* (from 1922 *Die* Burger) in Cape Town. From the start *De Burger* combined the themes of anti-imperialism and anti-big capital, powerfully assisted by D.C. Boonzaier, one of the most brilliant cartoonists South Africa has had. Boonzaier moved from a farm in the Karoo to cosmopolitan circles in Cape Town (he wrote his diary in English). His cartoons were inspired by a fierce hatred of the greed of mining magnates and the sycophantic admiration he believed Botha and Smuts displayed towards them and the Empire. He depicted the bewildered urban poor whites as scorned and exploited by the unscrupulous capitalists, portrayed by a repulsive Hoggenheimer figure, who regularly got Botha and Smuts to dance to his tune. Although Boonzaier denied it, Hoggenheimer was unmistakably

69. This is drawn from two letters that Merriman wrote on 20 December 1915 to Smuts. See BOTTOMLEY, 'The OFS and the Rebellion of 1914' in in R. MORRELL (ed.) *White but Poor: Essays in the History of the Poor White in South Africa, 1880-1940*, pp.29-40; *Smuts Papers*, vol.3, p.329.

70. For a case study see R. MORRELL, 'The poor whites of Middelburg, Transvaal' in R. MORRELL (ed.) *White but Poor: Essays in the History of the Poor White in South Africa, 1880-1940*, pp.1-28.

Jewish, and the cartoons stimulated the populist opposition to big capital, to Jews in business, and the culture of materialism.[71]

The NP tried to win the vote of the white working class voters, but many Afrikaners supported the Labour Party. With its defence of worker rights the Labour Party won 21 seats out of 134 in the 1920 election, the NP won 44, the Unionist Party 25, and the South African Party 41, which Smuts now headed. Labour's appeal, however, was diminished by its strong insistence on the retention of ties to the British Empire, and by its almost wholly English-speaking leadership, of whom a large proportion was immigrants. It had no Afrikaner among its parliamentary representatives.

Trying to capture the labour vote, Hertzog startled South Africa by declaring in 1919 that the attempt by Western powers to crush the Bolshevik Revolution had been inspired by their thirst for economic exploitation. The Communist revolutionaries in Russia, he said, combined worker and national aspirations. Bolshevism as an idea – that a people had a right to be free, to govern itself, and to resist an alien conqueror – was 'excellent'. 'If we say that we have the right to govern ourselves and we say that it is our duty to see that this right is expressed, we are in fact also Bolshevists'.[72]

In response, *The International*, journal of the International Socialist League – it was the forerunner of the South African Communist Party – said Hertzog was simply using any whip to beat the 'top capitalist class' (a reference to the mining magnates). 'The National Party', it wrote, 'is not a working class party, though it has workers in its ranks. Its mission is not to make the workers the ruling class, but to institute the political regime of the small farmers.' The *Labour World* also claimed that the NP's support for farmers would push up food prices. The strife it was fomenting within the white group would delay solution of the poor white problem. Only a socialist order could do that.[73]

In the aftermath of the First World War the young South African state entered its most perilous phase. The economy was stagnating. Between 1920 and 1932 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP declined in monetary terms, with almost no increase in industrial output. The industrial sector and the railways shed jobs. At the same time, largely as a result of the post-Anglo Boer War

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71. MULLER, *Sonop,* pp.348-370; Milton Shain, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa* (University of Virginia Press, 1994), pp.60-63, 90-99.

72. *Hertzog-Toesprake,* IV, p.141; C.M VAN DEN HEEVER, *Generaal J.B.M. Hertzog* (Johannesburg: APB, 1943), p.212.

73. W. VISSER, 'Die Geskiedenis en Rol van die Persorgane in die Politieke en Ekonomiese mobilisasie van die georganiseerde Arbeidersbeweging in Suid-Afrika, 1908-1924', doctoral diss., US, 2001, pp.352, 494.

baby boom, the number of white youths entering the job market jumped by 50 per cent between 1921 and 1926, compared to the first two decades of the century. White unemployment rose sharply. In Johannesburg alone an estimated 3 000 families lived on the point of starvation. To compound matters, rampant inflation prices pushed prices up by 50 per cent between 1917 and 1920.

The mines were the flashpoint. Large numbers of immigrant miners had left to return to Europe to fight in the First World War, removing an ageing, more conservative element from the labour force. By 1918 Afrikaners were the majority of white miners in the dangerous underground jobs. They would soon prove to be the most radical force the mines had ever employed. The distance between workers and the government of the day widened after 1920 when the SAP absorbed the Unionist Party with its strong support of the mining houses. Smuts, Prime Minister since 1919, struggled to find his feet after a prolonged absence abroad fighting the First World War. His government soon resorted to tough methods. In 1921 security forces shot down 163 Israelites, a black religious sect, near Queenstown in the eastern Cape. In South West Africa, which South Africa governed under a League of Nations mandate, a government force in 1922 killed more than 100 of the Bondelswarts tribe who were resisting taxes. Aeroplanes that bombed the tribe's flocks also killed women and children. When Smuts used similar methods in the 1922 strike on the Witwatersrand, Hertzog said his footsteps 'dripped with blood'.

This 1922 showdown took place in a context in which both blacks and whites miners were disaffected. Black miners, who had willingly agreed to refrain from industrial action during the war, found that inflation depressed their wages and struck against poor pay and the colour bar. In 1920 police and troops put down a strike of 71 000 black workers. Then the gold price began to fall from 130 shillings per fine ounce in the beginning of 1920 to 95 shillings at the end of 1921, while production costs rose by one-third over the 1915 figure.

The Chamber of Mines acted abruptly and recklessly, afraid many mines would have to close. In 1918 it had concluded an agreement with the white unions that fixed the ratio of white to black workers at 7,4:1, but it now announced its intention to abandon the 1918 agreement and scrap the colour bar in semi-skilled work. It expected that no more than 2 000 white workers would have to be dismissed, but it was clear that many more ran the risk of losing their jobs over the longer term. The employers' organisations and the mining houses threw caution to the wind by openly suggesting a thorough revision of the position of the white workers. The Chamber called job cuts

part of the struggle to ensure the survival of the industry and the colour bar an immoral practice.

South Africa's antiquated system of industrial relations was an accident waiting to happen. In Australia, with a history of militant labour action, the government had realised the importance of compulsory arbitration and other conflict-solving mechanisms. In South Africa worker action was legally curtailed, leaving mine workers with no real alternative than a militant strike. A strike started on 2 January 1922 when the coalminers came out, followed about a week later by the gold miners, engineers, and power-workers. Denys Reitz, a cabinet minister, thought 90 per cent of the militant strikers were Afrikaners; a government commission said it was 75 per cent, of who most were Nationalists. Most of the 2 000 police reinforcements sent from the rural areas to the Witwatersrand were also Afrikaners, and the burgher commandos, a major part of the force that crushed the strike, were Afrikaners too.[74]

Two main tendencies could be discerned among the revolutionary strikers. A commission of inquiry concluded that 'the majority of the revolutionary forces' belonged to the NP and had as its aim 'the destruction of the existing order and the formation of an independent Republic.' There were also the Communists, hoping to get underway their revolution leading the 'general uprising of the people against all form of capitalism.' The Commission noted that the 'divergent aims were accountable for the haphazard, spasmodic, and irresponsible features of the outbreak.'[75]

The republican strikers presented the conflict in atavistic terms as a re-enactment of the frontier struggle between white and black. Speakers told a huge outdoor meeting that they had to be 'unanimous in standing by the victory of the Voortrekkers over [the Zulu leader] Dingaan in 1838. It was nothing short of cheek for the Chamber of Mines to reverse this position.' Bernard Sachs wrote that a mineworkers' strike had degenerated into a rebellion against British imperial authority.[76] In court cases evidence was offered that strike leaders referred to the Union Jack as 'nothing but a dirty cloth', and formed commandos as in the days of the ZAR. They promised that the *Vierkleur*, the Transvaal republican flag, would soon fly over the province

74. D. YUDELMAN, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, p.184.

75. Report of the Martial Law Inquiry Judicial Commission (Pretoria: Wallachs, 1922), p.32.

76. Bernard Sachs cited by A.G. OBERHOLSTER, *Die Mynwerkersstaking: Witwatersrand, 1922* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1982), p.3.

again and approved of violent methods to achieve the objective.[77] . But many strikers were opposed to an Afrikaner republic.

The Communist revolutionaries, who were all English-speakers, attempted to take over the leadership of the strike and use it to promote a proletarian revolution. Red rosettes and ribbons appeared in many processions and some participants sang 'The Red Flag'. Communist and racial appeals got intertwined. An issue of the *International,* the Communist paper, appealed in Dutch to the policemen and armed civilians on the government side:

> Are you prepared to serve idiotic capitalists as their stupid underlings and accomplices in suppressing your fellow Afrikaners? It is their intention to replace us and also you with cheap black labourers.[78]

The white miners' union warned Afrikaner farmers that the workers' defeat would mean that 'the Kafir in future will take up the place of the white man and then we are doomed to national annihilation.'[79]

By no means all the radical, non-Afrikaner workers were dogmatic Communists. They tended to see the strike as a fight between free white labour and black slave labour. They believed victory alone could prevent white 'race suicide'.[80] One of the best-remembered symbols of the strike was the banner 'Workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa'. But vague calls for a white South Africa were not popular among large sections of the strikers – the capitalists, after all, were also white. They wanted a South Africa in which the interests of white workers dominated. Semi-skilled white workers demanded 'civilized wages' for their 'civilized labour'. That meant white labour, but the colour line was not yet firmly drawn. The term, 'civilized' labour, originated with the Labour Party, which used it in the 1924 election to attract coloured voters. The NP toned down the call for a republic and also made 'civilized' labour its main plank.

A striking feature of the strike was the radicalisation of Afrikaner women, reported to be 'out in force' in the commandos. Women in Germiston headed a parade of hundreds of strikers on horseback. The Governor-General reported to London that ' in the attacks on scabs, women have played a prominent part on several occasions.' In trying to rally Afrikaner farmers to their cause, the strikers played on sexual and as well as racial fears; one

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77. JEREMY KRIKLER, 'White Working Class identity and the Rand Revolt', paper presented to the History Workshop, University of Witwatersrand, 5-8 July 2001.

78. H.J. AND R.E. SIMONS, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p.299.

79. SIMONS AND SIMONS, *Class and Colour,* pp. 285-86.

80. *Rand Daily Mail,* 11 January 1922; Francis Wilson, *Labour in the South African Gold Mines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p.11.

Afrikaans pamphlet read: 'As the Kaffirs will get higher wages when they start to do the work of white people they will also take up a certain position in society, with the result that many white girls will enter into marriage with coloured people.'[81]

Smuts' greatest fear was that white strikers might provoke an uncontrollable outbreak among black miners. Strike leaders had been spreading rumours of an imminent black uprising. As a study notes, 'even the most reluctant striker was prepared to defend his family against such a threat'. Extremists among the strike leaders tried to use the 'black peril' argument to radicalise the strikers and some strikers assaulted individual blacks. Fights between whites and blacks broke out in several places in and around Johannesburg, ending in several deaths.[82]

In the end no party or faction controlled the strike. On 10 March 1922, more than two months after it had started a force of workers, estimated at 10 000 men, attacked Johannesburg, concentrating on police stations, mines, and railway lines. It was a small-scale civil war in one of the richest spots in the world. Smuts feared a 'red revolution' and the establishment of a Soviet republic.[83] He declared martial law and rushed in government forces, supplemented by air support, bombs and artillery, machine guns and tanks. The Benoni strikers' position was machine-gunned from the air and the miners' hall in the town bombed. The strikers were forced to surrender after heavy artillery shells fell on their strongholds; 214 people were killed in five days of fighting.

Although the government was badly shaken by the strike, it decided against extending the colour bar on the mines. It saw improved training for whites as a better option. Minister for Mines and Industry F.S. Malan explained to Parliament in 1923 that he did not wish to extend the colour bar. 'It was degrading to the white man to say that [he] should be artificially protected against the native and coloured man...The reason why a number [of white miners] were in danger today was that so many were not efficient miners.' The white workers had not availed themselves of the opportunities at the mining schools to become trained workers. They went into the mines as learners, Malan said, 'and learners they remained'.[84]

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81. JEREMY KRIKLER, 'Women, violence and the Rand Revolt of 1922', *Journal of Southern African Studies,* 22,3 (1996), pp.350-55.

82. OBERHOLSTER, Mynwerkersstaking 1922, p.156.

83. House of Assembly Debates , 21 March 1922.

84 . PETER KALLAWAY, F.S. Malan, the Cape Liberal Tradition and South African Politics, 1908-1924, *Journal of African History*, 15, 1 (1974), pp.121-23.

After the 1922 strike Tielman Roos, Transvaal NP, leader said: 'The country would always be on the edge of a volcano as they had large numbers of unemployed. If they did not help to absorb the unemployed they would have recurrences on the Rand on a bigger scale than they yet had.'[85] Hertzog also identified the position of the poorer whites as an issue that was of prime importance. 'In the 1924 election campaign he said that the position of the white laborers merited the most serious attention since it was 'the most important issue for the survival and welfare of the country.' [86]

While Smuts was prepared to accommodate white labour, he felt that they must not 'tyrannize everything'. A legal colour bar was an admission of defeat by whites that they could not compete against blacks, and had to take recourse to laws that violated right and fairness. He did not contemplate giving blacks the vote, but he also believed that 'no statutory barrier should be placed on the native who wishes to raise himself in the scale of civilisation.'[87] Government, he said in a private letter, ought to be seen as fair towards all population groups. [88] It was an 'impossible scheme' to suggest, as the NP did, to allow blacks to perform only unskilled work. He had no objection to helping 'our poor whites' but it was necessary to see that 'no injustice was done to any other section of the community'. [89]

The Smuts government nevertheless embarked on a major shift in the system of industrial bargaining that legalised a superior bargaining position for white workers. Under the old system unions were barely tolerated and destructive strikes erupted over the colour bar. The Industrial Conciliation Act, passed by the Smuts government in 1924, provided for reaching legally binding agreements in industrial councils consisting of employer associations and white or largely white trade unions. Employers could not lock out striking workers and workers could not strike before the council had tried to resolve a conflict. But unionised workers had to sacrifice the lightning strike, their major weapon. On the other hand the Industrial Conciliation machinery favoured whites and coloured workers by excluding 'pass bearers' (i.e., Africans) from trade union membership, giving white-led unions a

85. *Cape Times*, 13 April 1922.

86. J.H. LE ROUX *et al, Generaal J.B.M. Hertzog* (Johannesburg: Perskor, 1987), vol.1, p.272.

87. DEBATES OF THE JOINT SITTING IN PARLIAMENT,1926, cols.9,33-34; J.C Smuts, Africa and some world problems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930) , p.94.

88. BOTTOMLEY, 'Public Policy and white rural poverty', p.279.

89. G.D SCHOLTZ, *Die Ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner VII*, p.305.

commanding role in determining occupational structures, and access to training and wages.

The Pact government that came to power in 1924 added a weapon the state could use against employers that wished to undercut white labour, the Wage Act of 1925. It empowered the responsible minister 'to set the same minimum wages for whites and blacks'. The assumption was that if black and white wages were set at the same level employers would prefer whites. The government and its successors used these weapons sparingly. The priority was to enable the economy, particularly the mining industry, to grow and to provide jobs.[90] Various trade-offs were made between the government and the mining industry. It was not expected of the latter to help solve the poor white problem by employing them or even to pay white miners particularly well. (White wages only began rising towards the end of the 1930s, but those of black miners did not increase in real terms before the early 1970s.) But the government would not tolerate unilateral decisions by the industry to reduce its white labour force sharply. An amendment to the *Mines and Works Act* was added, which protected white mineworkers from displacement. In 1932 the Chamber of Mines told a commission that the mines could manage with 'a materially smaller number' of whites, but such a policy was no longer an option. White miners rose in number from 22 099 in 1922 to about 28 000 in 1930.[91]

These measures enabled the government to buy off the white workers. As Yudelman remarks, the white unions continued to growl, but like a lion without teeth there was no bite. Both employers and the white working class no longer considered the state as a mere watchdog but as an active player, shaping the fortunes of everyone from the mining magnate to the most menial labourer. Both began to see their salvation not in independent organisation as a class or in aggressively expressing their interests, but in developing a symbiotic relationship with the state. Both made it their business to get behind the government of the day as soon as possible.

The state increasingly defined the relationship between white prosperity and white supremacy.

From the state point of view the crisis of white unemployment was acute. In 1922 the Unemployment Commission estimated the number of unemployed poor whites at 120 000 in an economically active white population of 540 000. Hence it would do nothing to seriously harm profits or threaten jobs.

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90. D. YUDELMAN, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa,* pp.223-25.

91. M. LIPTON, *Capitalism and Apartheid,* (Wildwood House, Aldershot, 1986), pp.112-116.

However, it also insisted that employers and the trade unions had to play their part in uplifting the poorer section of the whites and incorporating them fully into the dominant white group. Margaret Ballinger, a prominent liberal, wrote in her memoirs:

> It is difficult now to remember or to appreciate the dark shadow which poor whiteism cast over this country in the 1920s and 30s of this century. Yet it was the formative force in standardising the relationship of black and white in this country.[92]

A remark by Hertzog highlighted this observation: 'It was in order to deal with [Poor Whiteism]', that he advocated his so-called segregation policy.[93]

The Pact government and 'civilized labour'

Before the 1924 election Hertzog's NP entered into an alliance called the Pact with the Labour Party not to oppose each other. Both parties expressed some sympathy for the very low wages of blacks at the bottom of the labour ladder. Keen to attract Cape African voters, the NP approached Clements Kadalie, a charismatic black leader who had grown up in Malawi. Shortly after moving down to South Africa he founded a black trade union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). Africans enthusiastically embraced the ICU's call of 'Africa for the Africans'; it had enlisted 100 000 members by the end of the 1920s, but then fell apart. Hertzog professed sympathy for Kadalie and his organisation and even sent a donation to the ICU. He told Kadalie that their task was to establish 'between white and black Afrikander that faith in and sympathy with one another which is so essential for the prosperity of a nation.' D.F. Malan, the Cape NP leader, went even further. Before the election he sent this message to a meeting of African voters in Queenstown:

> No race has shown a greater love for South Africa than the native and in that respect he is certainly an example of true patriotism. He should therefore take his place alongside the nationalist in the same area.[94]

The Pact alliance drew a level of support that exceeded its wildest dreams. In the early 1920s the NP was still a party that, in Hertzog's words, represented the 'non-industrial' section of the population that is the farmers. The SAP government's brutal suppression of the 1922 strike cost it much of its labour

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92. J. BOTTOMLEY, ' "Almost bled to death": the effects of the Anglo Boer War on social transformation in the Orange River Colony', *Historia*, 44,1 (1999), p.191.

93. THELMA SHIFRIN, ' "New deal for the Coloured People: A study of NP policies towards the Coloured people, 1924-1929' B.A. Hons diss., UCT, 1962, p.10.

94. EDWARD ROUX, Time longer than rope: a history of the black man's struggle for freedom in South Africa (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), pp.184, 199; HAD, Joint Sitting,1936, col. 325.

support and even some black and coloured votes. Segments of black opinion opposed the Pact, but the black leadership also had little stomach for the SAP, which lacked a clear racial policy. 'No policy no vote' was the call that went out from the Cape African National Congress (ANC). The ANC sent a telegram to leaders of the black and coloured voters to cast their ballot against the SAP. *The Star* reported that some Communists had decided to back the Pact. These developments prompted Smuts to declare that 'the Red Flag has come to South Africa', which was being given a foretaste of what the country would be reduced to under a Pact government.[95] *Die Burger* said most coloureds voted for the Pact. Some white English-speakers also looked sympathetically at the NP's policy on segregation. Edgar Brookes, later a prominent liberal, thought Hertzog's policy rightly aimed at uplifting not a few individuals but 'the Bantu as a whole.'[96] As late as 1927 he considered the reserves 'a useful subsidiary measure to facilitate administration'. [97]

In the 1924 election the NP won 63 out of 135 seats against the SAP's 52 and Labour's 18. Smuts was defeated in his own seat. Soon after coming to power the Pact government began preaching a harsh message of segregation. Hertzog said that Africans were 2 000 years behind whites in development, but also maintained that their progress in education represented a threat to white society. F.W. Beyers, Minister for Mines and Industries, in 1926, called a colour bar an essential defence mechanism to protect 'civilization from ruin'.[98]

The Pact had toyed briefly with recognising the ICU, but decided that the time was not ripe. In 1928 Kadalie pleaded for a South Africa with no doctrine of supremacy of one race over another, one 'where Kadalie's children and General Hertzog's children were equal.'[99] But, by now Kadalie was largely a spent force and some of Hertzog' s ministers attacked his ICU fiercely. Tielman Roos, leader of the Transvaal NP, referred to a 'native menace' in South Africa. 'We will rule the natives', he exclaimed. 'Every

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95. C.M. O'DOWD, 'The General Election of 1924', *South African Historical Journal*, 2 (1970), pp.54-76; C. MARAIS, 'Toenadering en Samewerking', O.Geyser and A.H. Marais (eds.), *Die Nasionale Party* (Bloemfontein: INEG, 1975), vol.1, pp. 559-76.

96. CYNTHIA KROS, 'Economic, political and intellectual origins of Bantu education', doctoral diss., Witwatersrand University, 1996, pp.93-97.

97. TOM KARIS *et al* (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1972), vol.1, p.122.

98. KROS, 'Origins of Bantu education', pp.91-93.

99. HELEN BRADFORD, A Taste of Freedom: the ICU in rural South Africa, 1924-1930 (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), p.174.

white man in South Africa is an aristocrat and people who are rulers and governors cannot be proletarians.'[100]

During the 1920s and early 1930s, when the country was still backward and the economy struggling to take off, various alternatives to a policy of protecting the small white population through an industrial colour bar were discussed. One was large-scale white immigration. Under the Smuts government the Director of the Census warned that if the white growth rate did not increase white South Africans would be unable to maintain themselves in the face of an 'increasing, and at last, an overwhelming [black] majority.'[101] Smuts argued for stepped-up white immigration. The larger markets that would ensue would solve the problem of poor whites, he said. 'We suffer for our very smallness.'[102]

But immigrants hardly ever voted for the NP. Besides, the NP leadership did not accept the liberal economic creed that skilled immigrants would create new jobs in a stagnant economy and would benefit all by expanding the domestic market. Instead the NP believed that immigrants would jeopardise the effort to rehabilitate the white poor and unemployed. Hertzog referred to state-assisted immigration as 'this insane longing for a big census', benefiting only the capitalist class with its demand for cheap labour; it would impoverish the Afrikaner people.[103]

Another option was to free up the labour market and allow the very low wages of migrant blacks to rise by forcing employers to pay the same rate for anyone on a similar job. A liberal historian, W.M. Macmillan, argued that the existing policy created a vicious spiral. By restricting blacks to remote reserves and imposing pass laws on them they were forced to work for very low wages. It was not their blackness but their cheapness that threatened white workers. If the curbs on blacks were removed the domestic market would grow and the wages of whites as well as blacks would rise[104] The Labour Party leader Colonel Frederic Creswell, in 1924 Minister of Labour in Hertzog's Pact government, had long argued that paying the same rate for all would lead employers to replace blacks on the lower levels with whites. But artisans rejected the proposal as detrimental to their interests, while the Chamber of Mines opposed it because it did not want a large body of white miners that was certain to organise themselves. In the 1920s the NP rejected it

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100. EDWARD ROUX, *Time longer than rope* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964) p.203.

101. U.G. 37-24 *Third Census, 1921*, pp.27-29.

102. *Cape Times*, 20 February 1920.

103. L.E. NEAME, *General Hertzog* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1930), p.108

104. W.M MACMILLAN, *Complex South Africa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), p.16.

because they wanted to do two things at the same time: save the poor whites and ensure white survival by keeping most blacks in the reserves.

The most radical option was that proposed by the communists, who wanted a socialist system that aimed at eliminating both migrant labour and unemployment. Once socialism was established everyone, white and black, would be paid a proper wage. The most gifted Afrikaner to take up this cause was Bram Fischer, the grandson of Abraham Fischer, the Free State Prime Minister and Union cabinet minister. Growing up in Bloemfontein, he had showed every sign of becoming an Afrikaner nationalist. But as a 25 years old student at Oxford, at a Dingaan's Day ceremony in London, he pointed out that while the Voortrekkers had separated themselves from the colony and its peoples, the great present need was of an 'integrating' kind, the 'drawing together of not only the two different European races, but [to] see to it that these two advance together with our vast black population.'[105] But while many Afrikaner workers were radical, they were not interested in such calls for socialism. They wanted a white supremacist state that protected white workers.

None of these alternative options won favour among mainstream politicians who considered state intervention essential for addressing white poverty, the most critical social socio-economic problem. The more concerned the state became with alleviating white poverty the more 'racialised' it became. The NP did exploit the issue for political purposes, but the problem of poor whites went far beyond narrow Afrikaner nationalist concerns. As Leader of the Opposition, Smuts probed for a system that would safeguard white domination but would enable some blacks to advance so that the 'iron of oppression' did not enter the 'native soul'. In 1928 he and Hertzog privately exchanged views on the franchise. Smuts proposed a Union-wide non-racial franchise with a qualification of £75 income a year and an occupation qualification of £100, enabling a 'decent' white unskilled worker earning the standard minimum of 5*s* a day to qualify. Coloureds and blacks who met this requirement could pass an additional civilisation test for 'non-Europeans'. Hertzog rejected the proposal because it would exclude unskilled and unemployed whites.

Twenty years earlier Smuts had taken Hertzog's position in an exchange with Merriman, and in the 1928 exchange he did not put up much of a fight. But even the liberal *Cape Times* realised how difficult the issue of de-racialising the Constitution was in a country where there was not only an increasingly bitter white-black conflict but also a sharp cleavage between the two

105. STEPHEN CLINGMAN, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998), p.99.

communities in the dominant group. The paper wrote that expanding the African vote would eventually mean 'either a Parliament dominated by black voters or the break-up of Union, possibly by way of a bloody civil war.'[106] With a qualified franchise ruled out as an option to bring in more Africans, the reserves became the centrepiece of the solution to the racial question.

Protecting industry and white labour

South Africa remained a poor country until the mid-1930s. S.P. Viljoen, a leading economist, makes the observation: 'It is seldom appreciated today how poor a mining and agricultural country South Africa was until [the 1930s]'. By 1925 South Africa had a GDP of only R537 million, agriculture contributing 21 per cent, mining 16,2 per cent, industry only 7,8 per cent. Viljoen remarked:

> Since industry tends invariably to act as the growth sector in a newly developing country, South Africa's economic structure was then as undeveloped as those of most African countries [during the early 1980s].[107]

Industry was starved of capital, more than half the profits of the mines sent abroad as dividends. Government levied a tax of only five per cent on the value added by the gold mines. Under the next government, based on a fusion of the parties of Hertzog and Smuts, the tax on the mining industry rose sharply, to 15 per cent by 1936.

The protectionist policy introduced by the Pact government did not represent a sudden change of course. The mines offered only limited opportunities for whites. This made it essential for government to stimulate the development of secondary industry to help provide employment for a turbulent white labour force. The Smuts government had made a half-hearted start to support local industry through tariffs and it provided sheltered employment for whites on state projects, like the railway lines and irrigation works. In the early 1920s the mining houses began investing a greater share of their profits in the local manufacturing sector.[108]

The Pact's 1924 victory accelerated the trend towards economic nationalism and industrial protection. For the first time since Union the government took a stand against the mining industry. Very sensitive to costs, the industry tried to keep expenses on stores, wages and food prices as low as possible. But that

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106. *Die Burger*, 16 May 1929 citing *Cape Times*, 14 November 1925.

107. S.P. VILJOEN, 'The Industrial Achievement of South Africa', *South African Journal of Economics,* 51,1 (1983), p.31.

108. JILL NATTRASS, *The South African Economy* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp.138-150; D. YUDELMAN, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, pp.235-43.

road led to what a minority report of a commission called a South Africa reduced to 'a plantation and raw materials economy'.[109] It meant that local industry and agriculture would never become viable. An export-driven economy was not an option for South Africa with its small market, lack of skills and distance from European markets.

Protection gave local industry a major boost. Raw materials were in abundance for an iron and steel industry as the core around which a manufacturing sector would develop. De Kiewiet notes:

> Few other South African industries enjoy such natural advantages as the industry which was established in 1929 by the Iron and Steel Industry Act.[110]

Soon after the founding of the Iron and Steel Corporation (Iscor), state plans for a national electricity corporation (Escom) were also completed.[111] Iscor and Escom spearheaded the steady expansion of a state sector in secondary industry. Iscor began production in 1933 with an all white complement. Although the policy of protection was not designed in the first place with a view to white jobs it did boost white employment. A commission reported in 1932 that the policy of import-substitution provided work to thousands of the white poor and called it 'one of the most potent means of bringing about their economic rehabilitation'.[112]

As a result of the Pact's policy of protection agricultural prices were maintained at a considerably higher level than world prices. The country built up its manufacturing industry and agricultural enterprises behind high tariff walls. South Africa would establish a high degree of industrial self-sufficiency, but the policy also had drawbacks. Little effort went into becoming efficient enough to widen the export base significantly. By 1990 South Africa's manufacturing exports per capita were lower than any upper-income country except Brazil.

White employment was another Pact priority.[113] The establishment of a Department of Labour to co-ordinate the government's activities was testimony of the seriousness with which it approached the issue. Despite the fact that the Labour Party, the NP's coalition partner, represented mainly unionised, skilled labour, Hertzog wanted to get unskilled or semi-skilled

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109. D.E. KAPLAN, 'The Politics of Industrial Protection', *Journal of South African Studies*, 3,1 (1977), p.78.

110. DE KIEWIET, *History*, p.266.

111. J.H. LE ROUX and P.W. COETZER, *Die Nasionale Party, 1924-1934* (Bloemfontein: INEG, 1980) pp.74-87.

112. Verslag van die Carnegie-Kommissie, Die Armblanke-Vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia, 1932), para 81.

113. D. YUDELMAN, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, pp.238-39.

whites in jobs at a 'civilized' wage level, even if it meant that other white workers would have to pay part of the price. Under Pact rule white wages would fall in real terms, suggesting that skilled white workers paid part of the price of the employment of less skilled white workers.[114]

The government drew a distinction between two types of labour. Those who performed 'civilised labour' had to be remunerated in such a way that they could maintain 'the standard generally recognised as tolerable from the European standpoint.' Those engaged in 'uncivilized labour' required wages to afford only the bare necessities of 'barbarous and underdeveloped peoples'.

The newly created Department of Labour had interpreted the policy of civilized labour as applying to all workers, blacks as well as whites, but some employers protested – they would be crippled, they argued, if 'civilized' subsistence wages were applied to blacks since whites had higher living standards than Africans.[115] Other employers resisted hiring whites at artificially high rates. In 1925 a journal for employers in the manufacturing and commercial sectors proposed that wages be set down for each occupation:

> Should a native prove physically and mentally capable of doing a certain kind of work, he will receive the wages laid down for such work.[116]

The government used sticks and carrots in the attempt to achieve its objective. Employers who hired only whites received preference for state contracts. Protected industries under the policy of import-substitution were informed that customs on imports would be relaxed unless they employed a certain percentage of whites. A Wage Board permitted the state to enforce minimum wages, which could be used to replace large numbers of cheap black labour with semi-skilled whites. As a result the manufacturing sector replaced many unskilled blacks with poor whites. The proportion of blacks employed for each white in this sector declined from 2,11 in 1920 to 1,49, which mean that 14 000 fewer blacks were employed than would have been the case if the 1920 ratio remained constant. With the state providing some industrial training to unskilled white workers, industry could absorb them more readily.[117]

The biggest impact of the policy was on the state sector. The government instructed state departments to replace 'uncivilized' labour with the 'civilised type', particularly in the railways, harbours, post office, and local

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114. *Ibid.*, p.238.

115. M. LACEY, *Working for Boroko,* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981), p.224.

116. M. LIPTON, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, pp.114,140.

117. I. ABEDIAN and B. STANDISH, 'Poor Whites and the Role of the State', paper presented to the Carnegie inquiry into black poverty, UCT, 1986, p.5.

government. Many whites received some training in the public sector and then left to find better jobs in the private sector. The railways made the greatest effort to absorb poor whites at civilised wages. Between 1924 and 1933 unskilled white workers rose from 9,5 per cent to 39,3 per cent, while unskilled blacks fell from 75 to 49 per cent. By the early 1950s more than 100 000 mainly unskilled and semi-skilled whites worked for the railways, the biggest employer of white labour.

Blacks had to carry the burden of the policy. The argument that they could be paid less than a civilized wage because their needs were less was a spurious one since they faced the same high living costs as whites. In addition, the trades were closed to blacks as a result of the *Apprentice Act* and the controls the unions exercised through the closed shop and specified wage rates. The *Riotous Assembly Act* of 1930 made it possible to crush protests by banning meetings and banishing the recalcitrant. In an emergency assembly in 1932 the African National Congress denounced the government for 'the increasing burdens and disabilities inflicted on the race by retrograde and medieval laws'.[118]

Coloured people had good reason to expect to be beneficiaries of the civilized labour policy since the NP in the 1924 election promised to treat whites and coloureds as people who politically and economically belonged together. However, the policy did not change matters materially for the coloured working class. Although coloureds as well as whites were to be given preference, government circulars urged departments to employ white youths as much as possible in order to solve the poor white problem. Nor did the civilised labour policy change the policy of paying coloureds wages half or less than half those of their white counterparts. In 1926 C.W. Malan, Minister of Railways and Harbours, announced that the civilised labour policy had never intended to pay coloureds equal wages: 'The Coloured man is different from the white man in his standard of civilisation ...and must be treated accordingly.' Ten years later the mayor of Johannesburg declared that he interpreted the civilized labour policy to mean the employment of whites.[119] White trade unions, too, used their power on Industrial Councils to edge coloureds out. Only 36 coloureds were among the 641 apprentices entering into contracts in Cape Town between 1932 and 1935.[120]

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118. M. LACEY, *Working for Boroko*, p.248.

119. G. LEWIS, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African 'Coloured' Politics*, p.162.

120. S. VAN DER HORST, *Native Labour in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1942), pp.244-45.

Confronted with the charge that it was legislating for white privilege, the NP cited white survival as its reason. Many lesser skilled whites could not otherwise compete with cheaper black labour. Any collapse of a white civilisation would injure all groups, including blacks and coloured people, spokesmen for the party argued. S.P. le Roux, who would become a cabinet minister in 1948, said that the civilisation level of those not white could be raised only if the survival of white civilisation was guaranteed.[121]

On the farms the government did little to intervene in the exploitative relationship between many farm owners and their *bywoners* or other poor whites still on the land. Unlike the advanced regulation of the urban labour market, there were no regulations for farm wages and working hours, or the provision of housing and other work conditions. 'The man without land, the bywoner, whose condition is becoming ever more desperate, has never been the subject of specific legislation', a researcher observed in the early 1930s.[122] No body existed to which a bywoner could appeal if he was wronged. Parliament never heard an appeal related to unprotected poor whites on the land.

White poverty and white purity

By 1930 white poverty was predominantly perceived as an urban problem and as such much more visible. Afrikaner women's welfare organisations increasingly made the plight of the urban white poor an issue of public concern. These women's organisations were established in the wake of widespread poverty and suffering in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War: the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging (ACVV) in the Cape, the Oranje Vrouevereniging (OVV) in the OFS, and the Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie (SAVF) in the Transvaal. Some redoubtable women, of whom Miems Rothman (MER), was the most outstanding, led the ACVV, the largest and best organised. The organisation was as much concerned about white poverty as racial mixing and the exploitation and oppression of women. Rothman described the situation in 1925 in these words: 'Receiving inadequate wages and forced to rent the cheapest rooms or houses, poor [white] people often have to live with coloureds ... they sometimes chat like neighbours, they help each other when there is illness (it is especially the coloureds that help the whites), their children play together in the streets.' Fearing that the white poor in the mixed slums would be lost to the *volk*, the ACVV sought to persuade

121. HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY DEBATES, 1924, (Dutch edition) pp. 87-91, 302-04, 319-20; *Debates of Joint Sitting*, 1926, p.33-34. 114-115.

122. J.R. ALBERTYN, *Verslag van die Carnegie-Kommissie: Sociologiese Verslag*, p.124.

Afrikaner families to move out of houses they shared with coloureds. They tried to 'rescue' the children by placing them in institutions or as domestic workers with middle-class Afrikaner families. For Rothman the survival of the Afrikaner volk depended on its working class's becoming consciously white and consciously Afrikaner.[123]

The rapid urbanisation of the Afrikaner poor had given rise to widespread fears of sexual mixing across racial lines. The sexual imbalance on the Witwatersrand compounded these fears. In 1921 there were only 28 735 African women but between 200 000 and 300 000 migrant African men. The 111 708 white women (in 1921), many of them working for very low wages, outnumbered white men. They often could not afford to live anywhere but in the mixed slums. There were widespread fears among Afrikaners that Indian shopkeepers hired Afrikaner women in order to seduce them. The committee of a hostel for white women warned that young women could become 'spiritually lost in the city and become a burden and curse to the volk instead of a blessing'. In 1936 J.G. Strijdom, the NP Transvaal leader, told the provincial congress that his party's responsibility was to keep the white race white. It could only be done under compulsory residential segregation and a stop to mixed marriages.[124]

Nor were such sentiments about race restricted to Afrikaner nationalists. A leading liberal like Alfred Hoernlé considered 'race purity' as essential to 'racial respect and racial pride'; it was the view of 'the best public opinion, the most enlightened racial self-consciousness, of natives no less than of whites.'[125] *The Forum,* a journal founded to support the views of Jan Hofmeyr, a liberal UP politician, abhorred miscegenation and, as a remedy, advocated residential and social segregation.[126]

In 1928, the government passed a law prohibiting marriages between whites and blacks (though not whites and coloured people). The widespread fears of miscegenation were greatly exaggerated. During the 1930s marriages across the racial line fluctuated between a low of 72 in 1934 and a high of 101 in 1937, the vast majority between white men and coloured women.[127] In 1936 a bill to ban marriages between a white and a coloured person was introduced

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123. M. DU TOIT, 'A Social History of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging', (Ph. D., UCT, 1992, pp. 242,356.

124. J. HYSLOP, 'White Working-class women…' *Journal of African History* 36 (1995), pp.67.

125. *The Star,* 25 September, 1931*; Die Vaderland,* 18 June 1935.

126. A. PATON, *Hofmeyr* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.232.

127. J. HYSLOP, 'White Working-class women…' in *Journal of African History* 36 (1995), p.65.

by the NP member for Vrededorp, a Johannesburg constituency with a large proportion of poor whites, but a Commission of Enquiry into the coloured population recommended against it.

Poor whites and the Carnegie report

Before 1924 Hertzog often expressed outrage at the government's lack of sympathy for the plight of the poor whites. After becoming prime minister he was soon exasperated by their incessant demands. His government had found work for 13 000 whites on the railways, he reported in 1928; the only still unemployed were those 'who did not want to work – the weaker section'. He thought the poor white question had been solved.[128] Now it was Smuts who complained that the wages of white railway workers were too low to live a decent life.

His government was tackling white education with vigour as the main means of rehabilitating whites. Between 1912 and 1926 spending on education as a proportion of the budget and the number of white pupils had doubled.

Education: expenditure and coverage, 1912-13 1925-26[129]

	1912-3	1925-6
Education as % of budget	14%	26%
Total white pupils	179 000	384 000
% of post-primary white pupils	6%	13%

By 1931 vocational and industrial schools were functioning all over the country.130 Boarding schools for indigent children helped ensure that virtually no white child was out of school. State spending was heavily in favour of whites. In 1943 one estimate said that the state would have to multiply its current spending on black education 36 times to bring it to the

128 . *Hertzog-Toesprake,* vol.5, p.171; LE ROUX *et al*, *Hertzog*, vol.1, p.278.

129 . E.G. MALHERBE, *Education and the Poor White: Report of the Carnegie Commission*, p. 43.

130. *Ibid.*, p.43.

level of white education; 60 per cent of black children were not in school at all.[131]

White privilege was boosted by coupling education to access to the trades. The *Apprenticeship Act* of 1922 was a watershed; it stipulated a pass in the eighth school year (Standard 6) as a minimum qualification for entry as an apprentice for 41 trades. This entry qualification fell within the minimum level set for white pupils but very few coloured schools went as far as the eighth year. Coloured artisans in the Western Cape, who had dominated over half the skilled trades in the 1890s, were down to dominating only one-thirteenth of the trades by 1961.

For two reasons the question of white poverty became a national issue in the late 1920s. The first was the global economic crisis that began in 1929 and the prolonged drought that destroyed crops and livestock in the early 1930s. Desperate to avoid a huge wave of impoverished farmers leaving the land, the Hertzog government made loans available to farmers. At the same time it boosted unemployment relief and subsidies for temporary employment on public works.[132] Relief measures, 2, 6 per cent of the budget in 1930, rose to an astounding 15,8 per cent in 1933. These schemes provided some training to unskilled labourers, educated and trained their children so they might escape the poverty cycle, and provided free housing and medical services for those working on public projects. Many schemes contributed significantly to strengthening the infrastructure of the country, e.g., forestry settlements, irrigation works, and road and rail construction.133 By 1939 the crisis was largely over and the sum allocated to relief measures was down to 4,1 per of the budget.

The other reason why the white poverty was given more attention was related to developments in the academic world. Scholars across the world were becoming more scientific and activist in the approach to the study of social ills. In the USA attempts to address social questions through scientific enquiry and management was heralded as 'social engineering'. Afrikaner social scientists began to do the same. During a visit to South Africa in the mid-1930s Lord Hailey observed that 'South Africa regards itself as USA in the making.'[134]

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131. ROUX, Time longer than rope, p.343.

132. UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA (U of SA) *Official Yearbook*, 1932-33, no.15, p.180.

133. The figures and analysis in this section is largely based on Abedian and Standish, 'Poor Whites and the Role of the State'.

134. R. MILLAR, 'Science and Society in the early career of H.F. Verwoerd', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19(4), (1993), p. 646.

During the second half of the 1920s the Carnegie Corporation of New York became interested in the problem of white poverty in South Africa. Many commissions and select committees in South Africa had earlier studied white poverty, but they only heard evidence and did not commission research or do field work. The South African who brought the issue of white poverty in South Africa to the attention of the Carnegie Corporation's staff was E.G. Malherbe, a son of a DRC minister and post-graduate student in education at Columbia University's Teachers College in New York. Malherbe was one of the first Afrikaners who were well-trained as a social scientist, but while his contemporary, H.F. Verwoerd, at an early stage identified with the Nationalist struggle, Malherbe remained a strong supporter of Smuts. His views can be read as an indication of how much white poverty became the concern of most whites in South Africa and even of funding agencies abroad. Malherbe formulated the general white thinking as follows: The poor whites were

> 'a menace to the self-preservation and prestige of the white people, living as we do in the midst of the native population, which outnumbers us 5 to 1'.[135]

They were a 'skeleton in our cupboard, raising questions about the capacity of the ruling white race to maintain its dominance'.[136]

In 1927, when the president and secretary of the corporation visited South Africa, several bodies requested them to investigate white poverty. Since more than four-fifths of the poor whites were Afrikaners the DRC played a leading role. In 1929 it formally requested the Carnegie Corporation to fund a study on poor whites. When the request was granted it became the main body represented on the Board of Control supervising the Carnegie Commission on the Poor White Problem in South Africa. In 1932 the Commission published five comprehensive reports. In 1934 the DRC organised a *volkskonges* or national conference and subsequently published a report, called *Verslag van die Volkskongres*, in which the findings were discussed and ways suggested to make white poverty one of the top priorities on the national agenda.

The Commission recognised that the problem of black poverty was as acute as that of white poverty. To justify a focus only on whites, it was suggested that solving the poverty of whites would ultimately also benefit other communities. W.M. Nicol, a prominent Dutch Reformed Church minister in Johannesburg, told the 1934 conference:

> [We] can do little about a solution for the native question before making progress with the poor white question…Once whites stand firmly on their own feet they would have a better chance to help the native in his turn.[137]

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135. E.G. MALHERBE, *Never a Dull* Moment, (Timmins Publishers, Cape Town, 1981), p.119.

136. *Cape Times* 24 July 1929.

Malherbe, who wrote the report on white education, warned against using white poverty as an excuse for intensifying segregation. At the 1934 conference he remarked: 'To maintain our superiority by pushing the Kaffer lower down would not only be unfair but the height of folly, even seen from our point of view.'[138] But both the Commission and the 1934 meeting made recommendations for alleviating white poverty that would widen the gulf between whites and blacks.

The Carnegie Commission and the follow-up activities brought much greater clarity about the scope of the problem. Earlier commissions tended to define poor whites simply as very poor people unable to raise themselves and their families without outside assistance.139 J.R. Albertyn, author of a report on the social condition, presented a compelling picture: They were generally law-abiding, showing respect for religion and the religious authorities, keeping the family together as a close unit, honouring their traditions and forebears, but also lacking in ambition, thrift, and prudence, and inclined to be gullible, dishonest, deceitful, irresponsible, lazy, and listless.[140]

In his education report Malherbe defined a poor white as a person

who has a mental attitude towards life, owing for example to lack of intelligence, lack of education, temperamental defects or to physiological conditions, which prevents him rising to or maintaining a decent standard of living when exposed to the economic forces around him.[141]

But he also defined white poverty in relative terms. 'A very appreciable portion of our white population,' Malherbe wrote,

> is sinking below the economic standard of living which we consider that a white man should maintain by virtue of his white skin over the native.[142]

Before the Carnegie Commission started its work there were only informed guesses about the numbers of South African poor whites. In 1916 the number was thought to be 106 000 (7,5 per cent of the white population), and in the early 1920s General Hertzog spoke of 150 000. A 1924 government report

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137. Verslag van die Volkskongres oor die Armblankevraagstuk gehou te Kimberley, 2-3 Oktober, 1934 (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1934), p.13.
138. Verslag van die Volkskongres oor die Armblankevraagstuk, 1934, pp.216, 222.
139. A 1906 Cape Select Committee cited by Lewis, 'Aspects of the poor white problem', p.1.
140. J.R. ALBERTYN, *Die Armblanke en die Maatskappy,* (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia, 1932), V, pp. 17-21.
141. E.G. MALHERBE, *Never a dull moment*, p.128.
142. E.G. MALHERBE, *Education and the Poor White: Report of the Carnegie Commission*, p.22.

classified 200 000 people as poor whites. The Carnegie made the first proper attempt to research the issue before concluding that there were 300 000 poor whites (17 per cent of whites). Hendrik Verwoerd, a future Prime Minister, first gained national prominence through his analysis of the Carnegie report for the 1934 conference. He stated that the poor whites were 'for a very large part of Afrikaans-speaking descent' and put the figure at 250 000 or a fourth of the Afrikaner population.[143] Malherbe, who did not share Verwoerd's nationalist sentiments, also thought that the problem of Afrikaner poverty was huge. He referred to a 'flood of poor white-ism which threatened to overwhelm *ons ou volkie*.'[144]

But the Commission's greatest contribution was debunking the mythology surrounding the issue of white poverty. There was the conventional myth, also found in other countries, that very poor formed a natural sediment immune to social intervention. There was the myth of geographical determinism, popular as a result of the work of Ellsworth Huntington, an American scholar, who maintained that so many people were poor in South Africa because the climate was too pleasant. Most hurtful to Afrikaners was the myth that there was something wrong with their poor. As a newspaper reporter M.E. Rothman heard Sir Curruthers Beattie, Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, blithely tell a public meeting that poor whites were 'intellectually backward and that there was something inherent in the Afrikaners that resulted in the phenomenon [of poor whiteism] assuming such alarming proportions in their case'.[145]

The Afrikaner researchers undertook their task with great empathy. The Commission's report heralded a new understanding of the crisis of large-scale poverty. It was not a problem by itself for which the poor were responsible but the result of social and economic processes over which they had little control. Intelligence tests undertaken by the Commission found that the poor whites compared well with the rest of the population. N.P. van Wyk Louw, who reviewed the report in *Die Huisgenoot,* called the rejection of this 'scornful reproach' the Commission's most important contribution.[146]

The report's general message was that retaining the rural poor on the land was not a solution. The poor white problem had to be solved in the towns and the cities through more, and more appropriate education for the poor. About a quarter of whites were leaving the schools inadequately educated or trained

143. Verslag van die Volkskongres, p.30.

144. Verslag van die Volkskongres, p.221.

145. MER, *My Beskeie Deel* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1972), p.236.

146. It appeared in two instalments in *Die Huisgenoot*, 19 May 1933 and 15 September 1933.

with few or no marketable skills. Nearly half of the white male youth leaving school (and a far higher proportion of Afrikaners) were going into farming at a time when possibilities for small and medium scale farmers were rapidly contracting. Another survey at the time found only 18,6 per cent of Afrikaners receiving training to become artisans compared to 33,1 per cent of non-Afrikaner whites.[147]

For the Commission the remedy lay in better education, the acquisition of skills and work opportunities in the towns and cities. It called for improved conditions of employment and for development of local industry through tariff protection. It proposed the establishment of a department at a university to train professional social workers and a bureau of social welfare in the central government. Although educational authorities welcomed the report, they did not extend the period of compulsory white education. More emphasis was now put on vocational guidance and a strong message undoubtedly went out that farming was an option for only a steadily shrinking number.[148]

The Commission did not really produce findings that the NP in introducing apartheid incorporated, as a study claimed.[149] In important ways its approach and recommendations ran counter to that of apartheid. It concluded that increased self-sufficiency for whites was vital to the resolution of the problem of poverty. It saw the danger of a dependency syndrome with whites dependent on the state for free education, cheap housing and medical service, and job protection through 'civilized' labour and a colour bar. Much of this dependence was rooted in the political system that granted universal franchise to whites but denied it to the majority. Among the white poor, a sense of collective power had developed. A researcher, R.W. Wilcocks, typified the underlying attitude of the poor as one that saw the government and the rich as having a duty to aid the white poor. He quoted some who said that 'charity was the right of the poor [white] man', and others who declared: 'government is the father of us all--it must help us.'

Other researchers confirmed this. J.R. Albertyn, a DRC minister in Kimberly and author of the report on social work, said he often heard this view: 'The state cannot afford to make the poor work too hard because they have a vote.' He concurred with the view of a visiting American sociologist that, with the possible exception of Russia, in no other society did a greater dependence on

147. D. WELSH, 'The Political Economy of Afrikaner nationalism' in A. LEFTWICH (ed.), *South Africa: Economic Growth and Political Change* (Allison and Bushby, London, 1974), p.251.

148. E.G. MALHERBE, *Education in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta, 1977), vol.2, p.165.

149. F. WILSON and M. RHAMPELE, *Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989), p.x.

government exist. 'A spirit of dependency on the state on the part of the [white] poor and even those better-off had assumed such proportions that it can almost be called a national pathology.' He proposed that the right to vote be withdrawn if a person became wholly dependent on state support.[150] Malherbe told how the poor abused the special care bestowed on them on a government road building project designed to provide work to poor whites at five shillings a day. 'What many of the poor did was to hire Coloureds at two shillings and six pence a day to do the work, while they sat around supervising.'[151]

Wilcocks felt it would be fatal if state protection prevented whites from being able to compete with black and coloured workers, and hoped the day would soon come when white and blacks received the same minimum wages so that they could compete on the basis of performance.[152] The Commission did recommend reserving certain jobs on the basis of race as a temporary expedient, but unfortunately did not specify a specific period. J.F.W. Grosskopf, author of one of the Carnegie studies, insisted on the application of the principle of pay according to results. 'It is entirely wrong to talk as if it were the higher rate of pay for white men that constituted "civilised labour" (a favourite catchword). All signs are there that we should be justified in striving to make "civilized labour" mean better organised labour, producing work of a superior quality, and thereby meriting a higher pay.' [153] It was on this point that the ways parted of Grosskopf and D.F Malan, soon to become National Party leader. During the 1938 commemoration of the Great Trek Malan said: 'South Africa expects of its poor whites that they remain white and live white', but in the labour market the competition for the white man was killing,'154 The NP was committed to use both formal and informal means to enable poor whites 'to live white'.

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150 . J.R. ALBERTYN, *Verslag van die Carnegie-Kommissie: Sociologiese Verslag*, pp. 83-88,121, 156.

151. E.G. MALHERBE, *Never a dull moment*, p.126.

152 . R.W. WILCOCKS, *Die Armblanke* (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia, 1932), p. 93.

153. J.F.W. GROSSKOPF, *Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus* (Stellenbosch Pro-Ecclesia, 1932), p.241.

154. For this and a similar speech see D.F MALAN, *Glo in u Volk: D.F. Malan as Redenaar,* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1964), pp. 117, 121-130. See also HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY DEBATES, 1939, col.5524.

The visions of Verwoerd and Malan

South Africa's decision to leave the gold standard at the end of 1932 soon led to a fusion of the parties of Hertzog and Smuts (the NP and SAP) and to the election of Hertzog as leader of the UP as new ruling party. A sharp rise of the gold price triggered a period of high economic growth at an average rate of five per cent over the next 40 years. The official opposition was now the Purified National Party (NP) under the leadership of Daniel F. (DF) Malan spearheading a broad nationalist movement, consisting of an array of Afrikaner nationalist organisations. The NP soon tried to outflank the UP on the issue of the poor whites. Smuts had brought into the UP the support of the mining houses long insensitive to the deplorable working conditions and wages of unskilled or semi-skilled labour.

The NP soon attacked the government for allowing mining companies to keep a large part of the 'gold premium' – the 60 per cent increase in post-tax corporate profit from 1932 –1934. The NP called for the premium to be redistributed in South Africa.[155] The UP government was already greatly stepping up the efforts to provide relief and assistance but Malan's NP argued that the state could do even more. By the mid-1930s the Afrikaners had come to speak generally of 'our poor'. One of the few to express doubts about this was the writer MER. In her column in *Die Burge*r MER asked pointedly:

> Are we not going astray if we think of the welfare of the Afrikaner or of the white population as our only task?'[156]

The changed tone of the debate on the poor whites could be heard at the national conference on the topic, which was held in 1934 to discuss the Carnegie report and develop additional recommendations. The Carnegie Commission did not favour expanded statutory protection for white workers, which the apartheid system later would do, and the chairman of the 1934 conference, the Rev. W.M Nicol, stressed that attempts to rehabilitate the white poor had also to be seen as 'fair and healthy' towards blacks. [157] But some speakers offered a justification for concentrating on whites that was intertwined with the ideology of apartheid.

One of them was Hendrik Verwoerd, who helped to organise the congress and became one of the principal authorities on the poor white issue. His Dutch parents had emigrated from the Netherlands when he was two. He was a brilliant student at the University of Stellenbosch, then spent 1926 in

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155. D. YUDELMAN, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, pp.250-55.

156. J. TAYLOR, ' "Our Poor"; The politicisation of the poor white problem' in *Kleio*, 15(1992), pp.42-49.

157. Verslag van die Volkskongres oor die Armblankevraagstuk, 1934, p. 13.

Germany and part of 1927 in the USA before returning for an academic career. There is no evidence that he had been infected by the racial ideology of the National Socialists in Germany. His lecture notes and memoranda at Stellenbosch stressed that there were no biological differences between the big racial groups (or for that matter between Europeans and Africans) and since there were no differences 'this was not really a factor in the development of a higher social civilisation by the Caucasian race.'[158]

Unlike the historian W.M. Macmillan, who recommended integrating the reserves into the economic and social system to resolve poverty, Verwoerd paid virtually no attention to structural factors in the impoverishment of blacks. His focus was on individuals, and how, despite adverse conditions each could be rehabilitated. Verwoerd was energetic, hugely ambitious, exceptionally well organised and methodical in anything he undertook. He had an unshakeable confidence in the right of the state to make decisions not only for whites, but for the rest of the population as well. All that was required to solve the problem of white poverty, he believed, was a leadership with the necessary drive, vigour and commitment. He had a great ability to marshal arguments for white privilege so as to appear that it was not actually the intention for whites to be the principal beneficiaries. In his speech to the 1934 *volkskongres* Verwoerd advanced the most contentious arguments with great intellectual composure. He started with the generally acknowledged premise that one could not solve white poverty in a way that made the coloured and the native problem worse. Yet, he went on, discrimination in favour of the white poor was in the interests of the country: 'If someone has to be unemployed, a white man or a native, it is best in the current circumstances and with the existing differences in living standards more economical for the nation that the native should be unemployed.' He left the matter there as if the idea was self-evident and uncontentious.

Verwoerd's analysis of the reasons for the parlous state of things was, however, contentious and indeed, erroneous. He claimed that blacks pushing into the labour market had edged out coloured people who, in turn, had squeezed out whites. It was in the country's interests to restore whites and coloureds to their old jobs. He conceded that it might 'superficially' look like 'having the appearance of privilege', but assured his audience that no privilege was at stake because the difficulties could be surmounted by employing South African blacks on the mines in the place of foreign blacks or by stepping up the development of the reserves. A resolution for the 1934 conference, which Verwoerd helped to edit, took an even more extreme view:

158. R. MILLAR, 'Science and Society in the early career of H.F. Verwoerd', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19(4), (1993), p. 650.

if there was any unfairness in the situation it lay in the competition whites, coloured people and 'detribalised Natives' faced from 'the tribal native from the Native reserves'.[159]

Verwoerd took the position at the 1934 conference that 'the only organisation in the country with the power to address the problem properly was the state.'[160] He pleaded for the re-organisation of welfare work and the provision of greatly extended state assistance to the white poor. It was vital to get proper administrative structures in place and to achieve optimal co-ordination between private and public bodies. Social workers had to be trained to become professionals with one stationed in every constituency of the country. He made many other proposals, among them for: employment centres, a permanent unemployment fund, the establishment of public works, the provision of vocational guidance, health services and housing, the establishment of social clubs for the unemployed and settlements for the lowly paid, the introduction of pensions for poor mothers, imposition of minimum ratios of 'civilised' to 'non-civilised' work in industry, an efficacious regulation of 'tenant and bywoner systems' and improved employment opportunities for women. Establishment of a national Department of Welfare was singled out as of prime importance. There was virtually nothing he left out.

Verwoerd scarcely referred to the fact that the state was already providing assistance to white poor. Under the new social welfare measures nearly half of whites now received old age pensions or sick or disability grants. One Carnegie report noted: 'Nearly all state departments, and specifically Labour, Lands, Home Affairs, Education, Health, Agriculture, Railways and Irrigation spend a large part of their time and funds on social rehabilitation.'[161] In 1937 an examination of social welfare provisions concluded:

> Today the provision for [the] European population…is scarcely less complete than that of Great Britain.[162]

Verwoerd, who served as secretary of the *Volkskongres'* Continuation Committee, considered the government's response to the crisis of the poor white most disappointing. When the government failed to respond to his request for a separate Department of Welfare he exploded in a speech to students: despite 'resources for research and the ready spirit of reform in the volk, the state with all its financial resources had done virtually nothing for

159. Verslag van die Volkskongres, p.301.

160. Verslag van Volkskongres, pp.30-38; Die Burger, 15 February 1935.

161. J.R. ALBERTYN, *Verslag van die Carnegie-Kommissie: Sociologiese Verslag*, p. 86.

162. J.L. GRAY, 'The comparative sociology of South Africa', *South African Journal of Economics,* 5 (1937), p.270.

the rehabilitation of our social need.'[163]. In 1937 Verwoerd became editor of *Die Transvaler*, a nationalist newspaper in Johannesburg, and focussed on the regulation of the labour market, and even the labour division in white society.[164]

D.F. Malan saw the problem as a pastor, caring for his entire flock, would. The report of the Carnegie commission concluded that ending the social isolation of the poor was a requisite for rehabilitating them. Speaking at the 1934 *volkskongres*, Malan stressed the Carnegie report's recommendation that the poor had to be rescued from their isolation. 'They must not be merely objects of study and even less objects of charity … We must consider him and treat him as part of our *volk*.'[165] It was intolerable that, despite the wealth of the land, the poor white question remained unresolved.

During the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938 the Reverend J.D. ('Father') Kestell of Bloemfontein, called for a mighty Reddingsdaad or Rescue Action to save the descendants of the Voortrekkers 'living in hopeless poverty, sunken materially, morally and spiritually.' No government charity or outside help would solve the problem; the answer lay in ethnic solidarity: 'A people is an integrated whole –the poor and rich. There is no unbridgeable gap between them. If pauperism were not curtailed it will mean the ruination of the entire nation. *`n Volk red homself!* – A people rescues itself.'[166]

On 16 December 1938, the culminating day of the emotion-charged commemoration of the Great Trek, D.F. Malan spoke in vivid historical images at the scene of the Blood River battle a century before. He singled out the plight of the poor urban Afrikaners as the greatest challenge to Afrikaner survival. Whites were outnumbered in the towns and cities, in schools and in the industrial labour force and many worked for the same wage as those people who were not white and in the same trade union. There was no reason to be confident that Afrikaners with low incomes and few skills could hold their own. 'The odds in the struggle are changing, but to the detriment of whites', Malan cried out. The Afrikaners of the new Great Trek to the cities 'were meeting the non-white at his Blood River, partly or totally unarmed, without a ditch or even a river to separate them, defenceless on the open plains of economic levelling.'[167]

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163. *Die Burger,* 30 June 1936.
164. H. KENNY, *Architect of Apartheid: H.F. Verwoerd - An Appraisal* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1980), p. 31.
165. Verslag van die Volkskongres, p.124; Hertzog-toesprake vol. 5, p.171.
166. A 1939 FAK pamphlet cited by J.L. SADIE, 'The Fall and Rise of the Afrikaner in the South African Economy', unpublished Ms, 2001, p. 32.
167. D.F MALAN, *Glo in u Volk: D.F. Malan as Redenaar*, p.127.

The question whether enough was being done to address white poverty remained a vexed one. When Malan spoke, the condition of the white poor had not yet improved dramatically. The extent to which government could substitute white 'civilized' labour for blacks was limited and the private sector did not allow government to push it too far. Black labour was much cheaper and white women and child labourers could be taken on at much lower rates than white men. Between 1930 and 1940 the number of whites in the manufacturing sector rose from 91 024 to 115,292, while that of blacks increased much faster from 90 517 to 147 399. Despite the high economic growth, white wages did not appreciate materially. In 1939 it was found that there were still 298 000 white persons reporting to be living in 'terrible poverty', all with a monthly income below £12 – an amount considered to be the minimum for the preservation of health.[168]

It was true that the position of the most desperate – those at the bottom of the white labour ladder – was improving. They could get work in land and forestry settlements or on public projects, like dams and railways The Department of Labour reported, in 1939, that it could offer work to every able-bodied white male willing to accept unskilled labour on specific projects designed to relieve unemployment. During the war years the demand for labour was so high that the government could stop supplying jobs specifically for unskilled whites.

A consolidated white group

Between 1890 and 1939 the most burning political issue was the existence of a large white underclass consisting mainly of Afrikaners. On the farms most of the bywoners and tenants had outlived their usefulness and now represented a rural proletariat, passively rotting away. In the cities and towns the poor lived on the periphery of white society, people who were barely literate had few skills and were often unemployed or unemployable. Many of those employed on the lowest levels of the formal labour market feared being displaced by blacks. The challenges from white labour and the white underclass in the strikes of 1913, 1914, and 1922 and in the Rebellion of 1914-15, in which the poor also played an important role, nearly brought the fledgling South African state to its knees. The legislation passed between 1923 and 1926 introduced stability in the system of industrials relations and brought greater security to white workers. Without a militant labour force embarking on violent lightning strikes, the whites poor at the bottom of the

168. L. SOLOMON, 'The Economic Background to Afrikaner nationalism' in J. BUTLER (ed.), *Boston University Papers in African History* (Boston University, Boston, 1964), pp. 234-35.

white labour market ceased to be the 'dangerous classes', as Smuts called them in 1922.

The desperate conditions of the Depression and the drought that ravaged South Africa between 1929 and 1933 prompted the government to intervene on an unprecedented scale. While the 'civilized labour' policy, education and training all helped to incorporate whites in the dominant group, the intensification of residential segregation probably did more than any other measure to bring about a consolidated white group. By the early 1930s racially integrated slums were a dominant feature of all the major towns. Over the next two decades the white elite across party divisions increasingly felt that this omelette had to be unscrambled. It was not the NP but the United Party that took the initiative through the *Slums Act* of 1934, which made it possible to expropriate whole areas. Using the law, the Johannesburg City Council and other local authorities began removing all slum dwellers.[169] They re-housed whites, but settled blacks in new townships at a distance. In Cape Town new coloured townships were established. But there was still no legislation prohibiting coloureds or blacks in the Cape Province from living where they wanted.

Between 1939 and 1945 the war economy mopped up most of the remaining white unemployment and bring the poor white problem to an end.170 By the 1950s economists found that whites were no longer competing with blacks people for the same jobs; blacks were taking the formerly white jobs as now better-trained whites moved up to better jobs.[171] The poor whites had disappeared before the arrival of apartheid, promising yet again to rescue them.

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169. S. PARNELL, 'Slums, segregation and the poor white in Johannesburg, 1920-1934' in R. MORRELL (ed.) *White but Poor: Essays in the History of the Poor White in South Africa, 1880-1940,* pp.115-26.

170. For an analysis see H. FORGEY, 'Die Politiek van Armoede: 'n Vergelyking van die 1932 en 1989 Carnegie-verslag', (MA, RAU, 1994, pp.129-143;.

171. D. BERGER, 'White poverty and Government policy in South Africa, 1890-1934', (Ph. D. Temple University, 1982), pp. 443-67.

Opsomming

'Wretched folk, ready for any mischief': Die staat se stryd om armblankes en militante arbeiders saam te snoer, 1890-1939

In die studie word aandag gegee aan die armblanke-verskynsel in die laat negentiende en vroeë twintigste eeu. Daar word gelet op die wyse hoe bevoordeling van hierdie groepering dikwels ten koste van die swartmense plaasgevind het. Suid-Afrika, strydig met die algemene opvatting, is geleë in 'n landstreek wat nie heeltemal vir die boerdery geskik is nie. Gevolglik het verarming plaasgevind en boerende mense was toenemend verplig om aan 'n verstedelikingsproses deel te naam. Dié proses was traumaties vir die Afrikaners.

Die Afrikaners wat deel van die stedelike proletariat geword het, was in baie opsigte net soos hulle bywoner-ekwivalent op die platteland behoeftig en deel van 'n agtergeblewe segment van die blanke bevolking wat onder omstandighede soos die Rebellie van 1914-5 and die Randse Staking van 1922 bepaalde sentimente gekoester het. Die Paktregering het met die beleid van 'beskaafde arbeid' die weg voorberei om die blankes te akkommodeer Terseftdertyd moes nywerheidsontwikkeling bevorder word. Die Carnegieverslag in die dertigerjare het 'n treffende indruk van die armblankes geskep. Die regering het te midde van ekonomiese herstel, ná die depressie en 'n ekonomie wat besig was om vir 'n oorlog voor te berei, daarin geslaag om werkloosheid onder die blankes te verminder.