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# THE HSRC AND THE GOVERNMENT IN THE 1980s: THE INVESTIGATION INTO INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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In 1985, the HSRC released its report on an investigation into intergroup relations in South Africa. The overriding conclusion was that ‘... the political ordering of intergroup relations according to the original apartheid model has reached an impasse’. The report became instant headline news. *Dr Hendrik (Bok) Marais*, former deputy president of the HSRC and director of the investigation, shares some of his experiences during the period 1981-1985. He believes that the research programme, the release of the main report and its subsequent dissemination contributed, in a modest way, to the thawing of intergroup relations in the country and the national positioning of the HSRC.

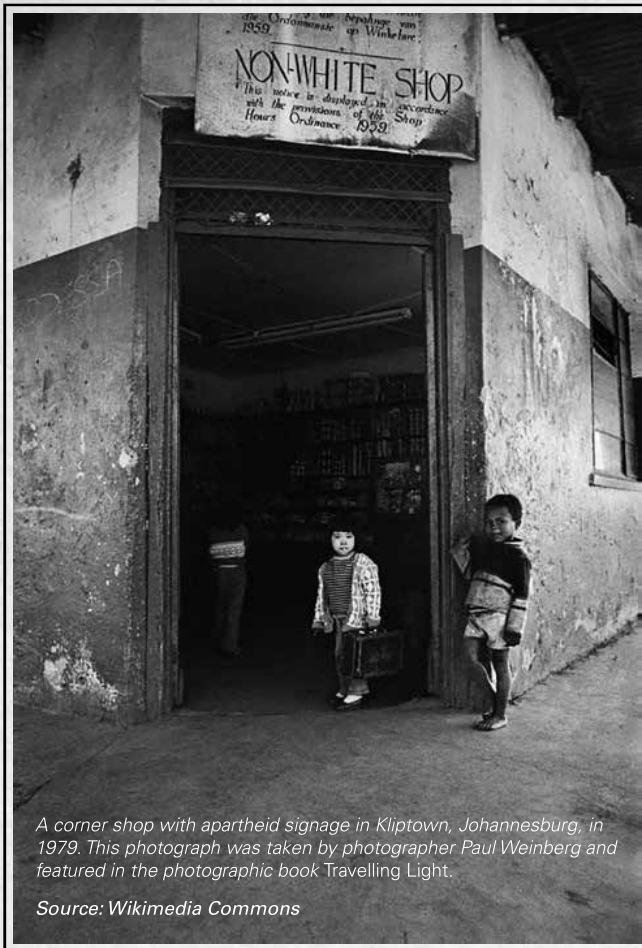
**A** social sciences and humanities (human sciences) research organisation by definition deals with political processes and very often with the substance of government policy. Often, the relationship between the government and a research organisation – especially if it is a statutory body – is tested during times of heightened political tension. The 1980s in South Africa was characterised by an intensification of liberation activities against the apartheid policy of the National Party and of government initiatives, actions and responses.

In the latter part of the 1970s and in the 1980s, the HSRC launched several national collaborative

research programmes. The first two programmes were commissioned by the government, namely the HSRC Investigation into Education and the HSRC Sports Investigation. The third one, initiated by the HSRC, was the HSRC Investigation into Intergroup Relations.

### **The research team**

In 1980, the HSRC identified intergroup relations as the top priority endangering the welfare of South Africans and for which solutions were urgently needed to improve the quality of life of all.



The primary aim of the investigation was to describe intergroup relations, based on scientific research, the findings of which could be used to improve relations and reduce conflict in South Africa. The research programme was managed by a main committee comprising 16 senior academics, 7 HSRC staff, 3 government officials, and 4 individuals from civilian bodies, which first met in May 1981. In addition, 11 field-specific work committees were responsible for the demarcation of fields of research, the calling for and evaluating of tenders, the integration of the research, and the consolidation of that research into a work committee report. Another 208 researchers were contracted to undertake 116 research projects identified by the work committees. The director of the research programme was assisted by two senior project managers/coordinators and two administrative assistants.

### An impasse that needed urgent attention

The main report, *The South African society: Realities and future prospects*, was released in July 1985. The overriding conclusion was "... that the political ordering of intergroup relations according to the original apartheid model has reached an impasse and that constructive relations cannot be developed further along these lines ... The relations between groups in South Africa is a crucial matter that

demands the most urgent attention. Delays in addressing the issue could have catastrophic consequences"

During the time between the approval of the report and its publication, the HSRC held a number of briefing sessions for interest groups, including its own staff, the full cabinet of the tricameral parliament, caucuses of the parliamentary parties and press interviews with a number of senior journalists (on condition that the information was embargoed until 2 July). The *Sunday Times* broke the embargo by publishing a front-page report on Sunday, 30 June 1985 under the headline, "Topple the race barrier"

### Headline news

The HSRC's report instantly became headline news. Some 290 newspaper articles and 29 editorials appeared in the South African and international press within three weeks of its release. The large majority were positive, including an article with the headline "HSRC declares apartheid bankrupt". A few reports were critical, mostly from a section of the Afrikaans press that quoted far-right politicians with headlines such as "Die verslag herhaal bloot oorbekende dwaashede" (The report merely repeats well-known stupidities). Furthermore, 30 academics released a statement rejecting the report, claiming it bore "the stamp of liberalism" and that the report was prejudiced "by preselecting the academics involved"

Other indications of the newsworthiness of the report included reactive telephonic interviews with Radio Freedom, RAI, Voice of America, the SABC, Dutch radio and the BBC. Also, within the first six weeks after 2 July 1985, about 20 invited papers were presented at meetings of a range of interest groups, including labour movements, church groups, and civic organisations. An informal enquiry was also received from a senior Commonwealth source as to what the HSRC expected the government's response to the report would be since it could have an impact on further sanctions.

### Official reaction of the South African government

The then-president, PW Botha, responded publicly to the report in a media release of about 4 000 words on 12 September 1985. He welcomed the findings and conclusions that correlated with the government's policies, strategies and plans, but he criticised those that were not aligned with the government's views or those that were critical or resembled views of local and international critics. The following four quotes from the Greenwood Press edition of the report (pp. 191-202), published in the USA, reflect some of the content:

- "The Report will undoubtedly contribute to the efforts of all involved in fostering good relations, and every responsible South African should take due note of its contents"

- "The Government deplores the lack of a correct historical perspective in the Report as regards the policy of segregation (...) apartheid was already enforced in the colonial era; (...history) shows that the Afrikaner and the National Party (...) were not its creators or the only ones to apply it"
- "The Government has noted the real problems that were identified in a variety of spheres and has already undertaken (...) to take action to remove obstacles in the way of sound intergroup relations" (#6; 194) using approximately six of the 10-page media release describing "matters and steps in this regard that are already enjoying attention in certain spheres"
- "...the Report does not properly spell out the steps and processes in which the Government is already engaged."

### International conference

The release of the government's response followed a day after the HSRC had organised a two-day national conference to be held on 10 and 11 September 1985 to validate the scholarly quality and the evidence base of the policy implications of the report. Speakers included senior committee members and 10 international experts in the constitutional and race relations fields, who had accepted their invitations weeks earlier. Approximately 150 conference delegates, including quite a few senior civil servants, were expected to attend. Shortly before the conference, the HSRC received a suggestion by a senior member of the government to call the event off, since it might provide a platform for further criticism of the government's 'reform' initiatives. But the HSRC did not yield to the suggestion. In the end, only two or three government officials attended the conference.

The Cape Times

## Third official language mooted

Political Correspondent

THE government should give urgent attention to the recognition of a third official language on a regional basis to help bridge the gaping communications gap between South Africans. The HSRC has urged. Few whites, Asians and coloureds had any knowledge of an African language, according to the HSRC report on intergroup relations. In turn, two-thirds of Africans indicated that they had no grasp of either English or Afrikaans. Two thirds of Asians indicated they had no knowledge of Afrikaans. Further analysis reveals that 2.2 percent of whites, 0.6 percent of Asians and 59.8 percent of Africans could not speak, read or write

# TOPPLE THE RACE BARRIER!

Revealed: Sensational report on SA's future

FORCED separation of the races in South Africa is out. Freedom of association at all levels of society is in — if the Government accepts the thrust of a major report to be released this week.

This drastic reshaping of the social and political order is outlined by the massive long-awaited Human Sciences Research Council inquiry into intergroup relations in South Africa. The inquiry turns the philosophy of statutory racial segregation on its head. Its constitutional findings have major implications for the population registration and cornerstone of all apartheid laws. One of the most significant parts of the report, however, was a far more preparedness among whites to accept political integration. In a national opinion survey conducted by the HSRC, 80 percent of whites said they would support South Africa to be fully integrated in 30 years.

## Reform of 'suspect' legal system needed

Political Correspondent

and application of security legislation in itself would be a great cause for concern, especially in the case of the anti-apartheid struggle.

### Regering is te stadig, sê 25 p.s. konserwatiewes

Die Regering beweeg te stadig met sy hervormingsplannings, het sowat 25 persent van Afrikaanssprekende respondente in drie oorwegend "baie konserwatiewe" dorpe in 'n steekproef gesê wat as deel van die RGN se ondersoek na Tussengroepverhoudinge uitgevoer is. In Verdere 54 persent van die respondente was van mening dat daar reeds jare gelede al begin moes word met die pogings om die lot van ander kulturele groepe in Suid-Afrika te verbeter. Meer as die helfte van die blanke Afrikaanssprekendes wat aan dieselfde steekproef deelgeneem het, het saamgestem met die stelling dat toenemende kontak met die mooklikheid van konflik tussen die onderskeie groepe sal verminder. Volgens die RGN-verslag kan daar dus "met die nodige versigtigheid" afgeword dat die basies konserwatiewe houding van Afrikaanssprekende blankes nie noodwendig beteken dat veranderinge in die rigting van "konsruktiewe" en "akkommodatiewe" verhoudinge teengestaan sal word nie.

# HSRC declare apartheid bankrupt

By ANTHONY JOHNSON Political Correspondent

APARTHEID is bankrupt — and must be ditched before it robs all South Africa of the prospect of a peaceful future, a study by the authoritative Human Sciences Research Council has found. The ground-breaking HSRC report published yesterday makes it clear that the policy which has dominated South Africa's political, economic and social life for decades is nothing short of a recipe for escalating race and class conflict. The report, which provides a detailed review of the government's recommendations for reform, says it is still unclear whether, as had been the case in previous major HSRC studies, the government will incorporate the recommendations.

Mr P W Botha It is still unclear whether, as had been the case in previous major HSRC studies, the government will incorporate the recommendations.

## Hoofkomitee eens oor finale verslag

ONDER die lede van die hoofkomitee wat die ondersoek na tussengroepverhoudinge in Suid-Afrika gedoen het, was daar in die breë eenstemmigheid oor die finale verslag, of skoon die lede uiteenlopende politieke oortuigings aan die US, dr. H.P. Fourie, hoofdirekteur: maatskaplike beplanning van die Departement van Staatkundige Ontwikkeling en Beplanning, dr. J.G. Garbers, president van die RGN, mnr. R.M. Godsell, nywerheidsver-

die Universiteit van Zoeloland, prof. B.G. Ranchod, hoof van die departement privaatreg aan die Universiteit van Durban-Westville, prof. L. Schlemmer, direkteur van die Sentrum vir Toegepaste Sosiale Wetenskappe aan die Unive Natal, prof. A. hoof van die sosiologie aan mnr. G.A. Th tuut vir Kommissie van ondersoek van die mnr. J. Tshabamulige burgemeester van Atteridgeville, van die Sentrum groepestudies aan J.D. Venter adj. direkteur van die RGN, mnr. P. Viljoen, departe-

## Dit wys konsensus is moontlik - Yanks

2- Van Ons Politieke Redaksie

DIE feit dat 'n groep akademici van uiteenlopende vakkiesdisciplines en lewensbeskouing tot 'n verskillende konsensus kon bereik, maak hulle dat dit ook moontlik is in die land in geheel omdat die hoofkomitee van die ondersoekspan bestaan het uit 'n mikrokosmos van Suid-Afrika. Afrika se probleme deur onderhandelings opgelos kon word. As 'n heterogene groep akademici van verskillende akademiese vakkiesdisciplines konsensus kon bereik, maak hulle dat dit ook moontlik is in die land in geheel omdat die hoofkomitee van die ondersoekspan bestaan het uit 'n mikrokosmos van Suid-Afrika. Hulle beskou die verslag as bruikbaar omdat dit feite verskaf waarmee deur wetenskaplike navorsing gekom is. Sonder om oplossings voor te stel.

## White voters will reject HSRC's idea of reconciliation — Treurnicht

Political Reporter

The white voters of South Africa would reject the recommendations of the Human Sciences Research Council on inter-group relations, the leader of the Conservative Party, Dr Andries Treurnicht, predicted yesterday. "The reconciliation proposed by the report can only be brought about at the expense of the freedom of the white in the political, social and educational fields," Dr Treurnicht said. He said history had shown that no nation with separate development would mean a loss of power for the whites in South Africa. "This report confirms one important fact and that is that in the event of the rejection of separate development for whites, blacks, coloureds and Asians, a unitary state would be created and whites would surrender their political power." He expressed the opinion that the report foresaw confrontation in South Africa resulting from the introduction of such a unitary state. "But the HSRC is apparently of the opinion that conflict could be avoided if whites surrender their political self-determination in favour of an imaginary democracy for all, with political decisions-making."

## The Natal Mercury WILL HE LISTEN?

WEDNESDAY, JULY 3, 1985

THE Human Sciences Research Council, whose guidance the Government has asked for and, to a large extent, accepted in the past in major policy areas of sport and education, is likely to have given President Botha and his party the shock of their lives with its latest findings. About 200 of the country's top academics and research workers, investigating inter-group relations in South Africa over the past four years, have come to the

exhaustive scientists, extremists of both have confirmed apartheid system later bring dis company. In its place, there should be while recognition ty, allows for ft

“... THE POLITICAL ORDERING OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS ACCORDING TO THE ORIGINAL APARTHEID MODEL HAS REACHED AN IMPASSE AND CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONS CANNOT BE DEVELOPED FURTHER ALONG THESE LINES”

At a press briefing after the conference, the international speakers lauded the HSRC for the research and the report. Prof. Leonard Doob, Yale University and international doyen of social psychology, at the time, congratulated the HSRC “for one of the most impressive multidisciplinary research programmes completed in the world”. In his foreword to the Greenwood edition of the report, he described it as “...a historical document that may be viewed as a significant contribution to the future of South Africa”.

### Subsequent initiatives

The HSRC launched a number of further related initiatives. One that caused quite a stir at a provincial National Party annual conference was an HSRC newsletter that listed some of the implications of the report, especially the need for new inclusive South African national symbols such as the flag, anthem and public holidays.

Another HSRC initiative was a nine-page information brochure, titled, *The demise of apartheid*, published in 1990 in English, Afrikaans, French, German and Danish.

### Possible effects

There is no empirical evidence on how the HSRC investigation into intergroup relations and its main report affected relations between the Botha government and the HSRC.

However, potential indicators included possible changes in the relative size of government funding, contract projects commissioned by the government, public comments by politicians about HSRC research, and personal relations between officials of the two entities.

Public references to the HSRC by members of the government and some members of the National Party reflected a growing critical attitude towards the organisation. Relations with a number of individuals in the government had become more strained. The fact that the HSRC undertook the investigation on its own initiative, with the cooperation of scholars from diverse political

persuasions and published the findings, seems to have led to a degree of disquiet and the realisation that the HSRC was independent in its prioritisation, research methods and commitment to the interests of all South Africans.

The HSRC’s investigation into intergroup relations influenced attitudes of other political role players in the opposition too. Most of those to the left of the government seemed more willing to accept the scholarly autonomy of the HSRC. For instance, some former skeptics were willing to collaborate with the HSRC. At the same time, an intensification of negative attitudes towards the HSRC was shown by role players on the right of the political spectrum.

Directly and indirectly, the investigation also contributed to a realignment of factions in the HSRC staff and deliberate strategies to diversify the staff composition.

Its findings and the responses by the government of the day and other role players must be seen in a historical context. In the early 1990s, the course of South Africa’s history changed radically under former presidents FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela.

Perhaps, the investigation into intergroup relations made a very small contribution to the unfreezing of the national political climate. However, for the HSRC, it was a cloudburst.

**Author:** Dr Hendrik (Bok) Marais, former deputy president of the HSRC and director of the investigation (1981-1985)



Dr Hendrik (Bok) Marais

### Additional sources:

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/liberation-historytimeline-1980-1989>

The main report of the investigation, entitled *The South African society: Realities and future prospects*, published by the HSRC in 1985 and by Greenwood Press in the USA, in 1987