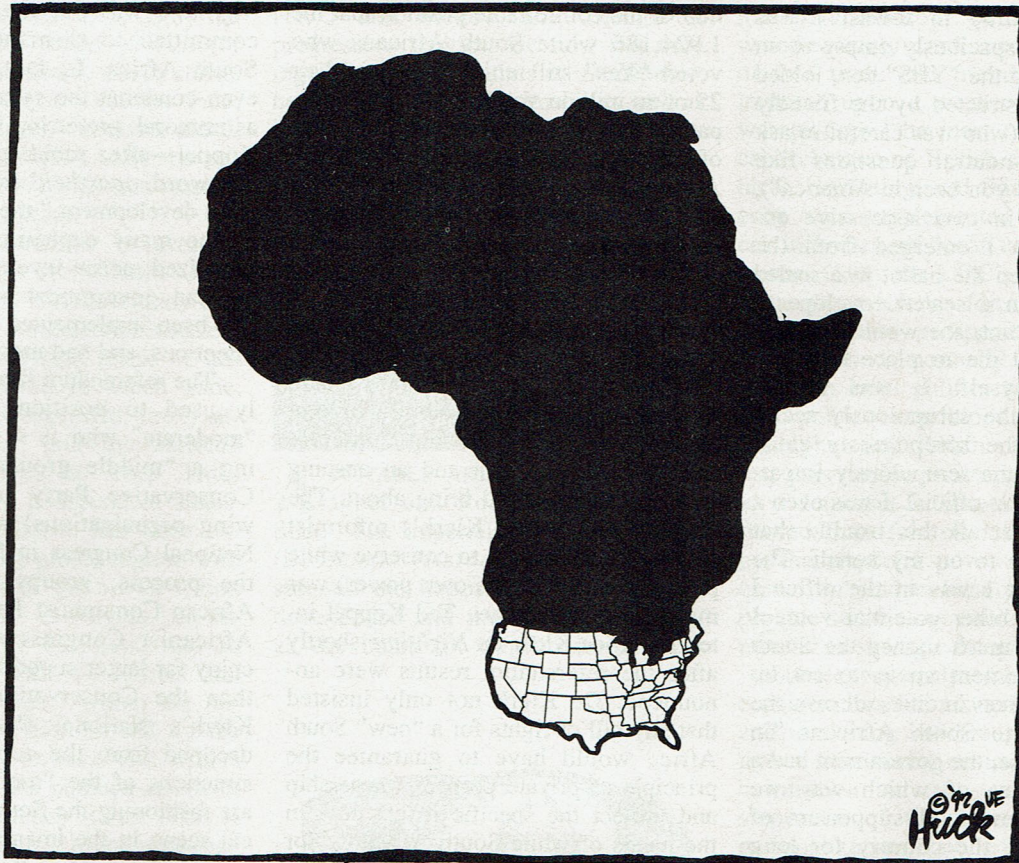


## SOUTH AFRICA

# A NEW SOUTH AFRICA?

BY IAN BARNARD



I WAS one of countless white South Africans living in the United States who voted in the recent referendum in which 68.6 percent of those who voted gave President F. W. de Klerk a mandate to continue his reforms in South Africa. The irony of my participation in this referendum were not lost on me. Because the ANC officially encouraged white South Africans to vote, and to vote "Yes," and because I was even more fearful of a white right-wing takeover in South Africa than I was of contributing to de Klerk's growing prestige and popularity outside the country, De Klerk success-

fully forced me to support him in the referendum. Not only did I vote this time, but for the first time in my life I found myself voting the same way as my parents still living in South Africa, enthusiastic and long-time supporters of the South African government. They were, needless to say, delighted at the happy coincidence of our vote, and assured me that it was not a disgrace that I was voting "for" de Klerk. De Klerk had also manipulated me into legitimating a patently illegitimate political process. He had made it quite clear from the beginning that this would be a Whites Only referendum. And to en-

sure the racial purity of the vote, election officials would have to rely on the 1950 Population Registration Act, that old cornerstone of *apartheid* which assigns every South African to one of four racial categories from birth. The white minority was deciding on whether the white minority should continue to make decisions for all South Africans—the situation was as bizarre as any in recent South African history.

Nevertheless, despite reservations, I dutifully produced my Book of Life at my designated voting office in La Jolla, California, complete with identification number that designates me as "white,"

and even an official slip of paper that certifies my whiteness.

I couldn't help wondering whether the business office that I was sent to—bustling with workers with South African accents—hadn't been some sort of cover for a South Africa consulate all along, given the vulnerability of South African consulates in the U.S. to loud and violent *anti-apartheid* protests. After filling in forms, I was ushered into a sparsely empty room where I checked the "YES" box, folded my ballot as instructed by the friendly office assistant (who was careful to ask me politically-neutral questions like "how long have you been in America"), and sealed it in two successive envelopes. When I emerged from the room and handed the ballot in a sealed envelope within a sealed envelope to the office assistant, she wouldn't touch it, and directed me to place it in the ballot box myself. It was all so "democratic": the scrupulously secret white ballot, the scrupulously clean white election, the scrupulously impartial white election official. I was even a little flattered at all this trouble that was being gone to on my behalf. The entire time that I was in the office I didn't see one other potential voter. I wondered how much money the South African government spent to set up these voting offices in cities all over the world for white South Africans "in exile." Of course, the government had a fairly good idea of which way we would vote—few avid supporters of *apartheid* leave the country for long periods of time—and so it had an interest in encouraging us to vote. Not unsurprisingly, the South Africa Consulate in Beverly Hills was not quite as helpful when I had attempted to vote by mail in a previous general election. This time, however, I would be "supporting" the government.

After the referendum results were announced, the jubilation in much of the media in the U.S. about the end of *apartheid*, about the generosity of a group of people (for the first time ever in history, we were told) voluntarily giving up their hold on power, and about de Klerk's courage, only made me more suspicious. (The South African government is good at teaching suspicion.) Since the release of Nelson Mandela from 30 years of imprisonment, a number of "reforms" have been legislated by de Klerk and his govern-

ment. But the fact that white South Africans supported de Klerk so overwhelmingly could be taken as clear corroboration of the failure of his "reforms" to actually bring about any substantial change in South Africa. The failure of these reforms to produce any material effect were dramatically enacted by the referendum. If anything, white support for de Klerk is an indication of the comfortable position that the 1,924,186 white South Africans who voted "Yes" still enjoy *vis-a-vis* their 25 or so million voteless black counterparts. Perhaps their vote was indicative of the cynicism with which most South Africans regard the supposed dismantling of *apartheid* by de Klerk? Perhaps they would not have been so supportive of De Klerk if his changes had hit closer to home? Perhaps their "Yes" vote was a vote to continue bolstering the unchanging *status quo*, complete with its rhetoric of reform, rather than face the undeniable possibility of real change that a far right-wing Conservative Party government and an ensuing black backlash would bring about. The extent to which de Klerk's reformist postures are designed to conserve white power (and de Klerk's own power) was made quite plain when Ted Koppel interviewed de Klerk on *Nightline* shortly after the referendum results were announced. De Klerk not only insisted that any bill of rights for a "new" South Africa would have to guarantee the principle of private property ownership and protect the specific assets now in the hands of white South Africans "for this generation and for those after it," but also claimed to have persuaded Nelson Mandela and the ANC to have come round to his way of thinking.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of that *Nightline* program was to actually hear de Klerk's words. Over the last year or so in the U.S. de Klerk has been touted as the great reformer, hailed as the next Nobel Peace Prize winner. Almost everything we have heard about him has emanated from someone else. Everyone in this country has heard of him, and most people have been told what to think of him, but very few people have actually seen or heard him. With the brief exception of de Klerk's visit to the U.S. in September of 1990, the U.S. public's image of F. W. de Klerk has been shaped in absentia by the network media, and by a federal administration determined to ra-

tionalize the lifting of sanctions (as inadequate as they have been) against South Africa, and to foster the normalization of relations between the U.S. and South Africa (a financially lucrative move for both governments). It was thus instructive to hear de Klerk's words, rather than a paraphrase or interpretation of him. The de Klerk who spoke with Ted Koppel on *Nightline* was not the great reformer committed to dismantling racism in South Africa. In fact, he refused to even condemn the system of *apartheid* as immoral, preferring instead to assure Koppel—after scolding him for using the word *apartheid* rather than "separate development," the latter being one of the many euphemisms for institutionalized racism invented by the South African government—that the system had been implemented with the best of intentions, and had merely gone awry.

The referendum has been masterfully used to position de Klerk as a "moderate" who is skillfully negotiating a "middle ground" between the Conservative Party (and other right wing organizations) and the African National Congress in South Africa. In the process, groups like the South African Communist Party and the Pan Africanist Congress (both of which enjoy far larger support in South Africa than the Conservative Party and de Klerk's National Party) have been dropped from the debate. These constructions of the "moderate" de Klerk are fashioning the South African political scene in the image of the mythical two party system in the U.S., where the mainstream media relentlessly posits Democrats and Republicans as *the* parameters of political choice. Other candidates, views, and parties are systematically rendered invisible, as is any alternative to the interests of corporate capitalism that the Republican-Democrat conglomerate represents. Opposition is constructed only *within* this Republican-Democrat conglomerate. Republicans and Democrats are always only in opposition to each other.

Without a shift in the terms of political debate in the U.S. about South Africa (and about this country), the ANC is going to be forced to make irreparable compromises with de Klerk in order to maintain international support, and the "new" South Africa will be just another country subject to U.S. control and intervention. Z