

We'll pay the price for race cowardice

By Neville Alexander

I should like to return to the article (April 21) by Professor Max Price, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, in which he argues that, albeit temporarily, "race" is an acceptable criterion of university admission in post-apartheid South Africa.

Perhaps there have been responses to this article and, if so, I hope that I am not repeating what others may already have said.

Because I am aware of how much thought has been given to this matter at UCT and how much consultation with all the relevant constituencies has taken place, I consider the statement, especially in the context in which it was made, ie, as an introduction to a summit on higher education, to be a disastrous moment in the history of higher education in South Africa.

I shall stick to the essential point, although the entire article, together with its philosophical presuppositions, should be analysed in detail.

Even when considered in terms of the practices and theories of what we, in our student activist days, used to call the "half-open universities", this article represents an incredible retrogression. In the Cape Peninsula Students' Union and other quasi-political student structures, we were always critical of the compromising stance of the liberal establishment at the universities in the 1950s. By way of example: their claim that they stood for "academic non-segregation" merely masked the fact that they stood for non-academic, ie, social, segregation by dint of which "non-European" students were not allowed into university residences and social amenities, including sports teams. Moreover, to add insult to injury, "native" and "coloured" students could not register for courses in certain faculties.

In spite of this hypocrisy, the leadership of these universities spoke out repeatedly against the racist admission policies of the apartheid regime. As is well known, it was a former vice-chancellor of UCT, Professor TB Davie, who formulated the core of university autonomy as meaning "the right of the university to decide who shall teach, who shall be taught, what shall be taught and how it shall be taught". This was taken to be the ultimate in university resistance to apartheid as far as the liberal establishment was concerned.

Today, after the demise of apartheid as a political system, it would seem that the universities, specifically UCT, do not have the guts to stand up to the new purveyors of racial classification, ie, the post-apartheid government and its functionaries.

To put it bluntly but with great respect: Professor Price's argument is the negation of what even TB Davie stood for. In effect, he is allowing Minister Blade Nzimande and his advisers to tell him, among other things, "who shall be taught".

After all, he clearly does not believe in the myth of "race". And this is only the tip of the iceberg. At a much more profound level, ie, without any reference to admissions criteria, this discussion is about the nature of a non-racial society and about the role of the intelligentsia in helping to shape such a society.

If the university leaderships are too cowardly to stand up to Caesar, it is clear that other institutions and forces will eventually do so and have to do so, unless we want to shape a future that is bursting with genocidal potential. Melodrama?

Certainly not! Read up on the history of Nazism and of the Rwandan genocide, to name only two recent examples where, in Professor Mahmood Mamdani's chilling words, "victims became killers", and it will become abundantly clear that it was precisely because of this kind of intellectual and political cowardice that the bulwarks of resistance to race thinking and, therefore, to the vulnerability of the populace to racist mobilisation, were lacking when it mattered most.

The terribly simple fact is that "race" is not real; it is racial prejudice and race thinking that are real.

By making concessions to race thinking, for example, by putting it in little squares with racial labels to be checked on application forms for the alleged purpose of tracking the tempo of "transformation", we are establishing or consolidating the template of a genocidal grid, one that is all too real in the consciousness of those who are so labelled and categorised.

We do not have to do this ever and we should not do so now. It is the merest intellectual laziness to assert otherwise. The argument that a so-called colour-blind approach objectively perpetuates the racial status quo undoubtedly has merit. However, this issue is not about colour or "race"; it is about disadvantage. Which is the reason for the inclusion in the relevant legislation of categories such as gender and disability.

None of these is completely unproblematic, of course, and the use of any of them as a short cut (or proxy) for disadvantage is bound to cause problems. Other factors always have to be considered in conjunction with any of them if we are to come anywhere near equity. At the very least, we should problematise categories such as "race" and allow the applicants to identify themselves in terms that they, and not the authorities, consider appropriate. The National Party and its ideologues used the arbitrary notion of "race" to promote and justify their inexcusable oppressions, but it was not because people were "black" in skin colour that they were disadvantaged; it was, among other things, because they were forced to go to underfunded and generally under-resourced institutions, such as schools and bush colleges, that they were disadvantaged.

It is an insult of the first order to believe, even implicitly, that I am disadvantaged because of the colour of my skin or the texture of my hair.

However, it is difficult in a short newspaper article to canvass the whole argument relating to "race" as a criterion for admission to educational institutions. My reason for writing this is simply to make it clear that not everyone at UCT believes in this dangerous and misleading idea. Few of the academics there would agree with the reasoning proffered by the V-C even if they are not prepared to go public on this.

My plea is that the universities, led by UCT, if necessary, ask the Ministry of Higher Education to institute a committee to look carefully into this issue, which is central to the entire 1994 project of building a non-racial, multicultural, democratic society in South Africa.

In order not to waste time and money, such a committee could be asked to report back to the minister within three months of its appointment and its recommendations should be made public as soon as possible thereafter.

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