

Skeletons in the Rhodes Cupboard: What Should Be Done about Them?

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In January this year, I wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes, Dr David Woods, explaining that I had obtained the documents in my Department of Justice security file – number 3016 – after *THISDAY* newspaper published a list of the files and dubbed the names on the list as ‘the enemies of the apartheid state’.

Much of my file was about my time at Rhodes University – 1967 to 1970 – and my involvement in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the SRC. It was an absurd file, not often accurate and had me involved in such revolutionary activities as attending a memorial service for Martin Luther King. I wrote an article for *THISDAY* on the file, which is attached.

What I did not write in the article, but which alarmed me, was an item marked ‘GEHEIM’ (Secret). Item 49, dated 19 November 1970, stated: ‘His name appears on a list sent by the authorities of “Rhodes University” of students who have yet undertaken military training’. Not only was the information factually incorrect – I had actually spent nine months in the South African Navy in 1966 – but it confirmed in writing what many of us suspected at the time – that the Rhodes University authorities, or at least senior people in the university administration, actively collaborated with the apartheid regime and the Security Police, who in the Eastern Cape and Grahamstown were a particularly nasty and vicious bunch, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and various applications for amnesty have confirmed.

In my letter, I told David Woods that now that this collaboration had been confirmed, it was high time for the university to come clean about the levels of co-operation with the Security Police in the apartheid era. In my own case, this information was used to justify a banning order against me, which for some unexplained reason was not executed and subsequently withdrawn. Other students in my time at Rhodes University were detained and deported, presumably on much the same kind of information.

I also said that today Rhodes University was very much part of an open and democratic South Africa. ‘It portrays the image of always having been anti-apartheid, yet its administration, or elements of it, were collaborating with the Security Police, at the very least telling them about who they thought had not done military service’.

I also suggested that as the university celebrated its centenary consideration should be given to the appointment of a local truth and reconciliation committee into this shameful collaboration with the Security Police would be appropriate. 'Indeed, we need liberation from this dark period of the university's history', I wrote in the letter.

David Woods was cautious but correct in his reply: 'I am not in a position to speak on behalf of, or take responsibility for the Rhodes University authorities or individuals from the 1970s. I can only apologise for what was a totally unacceptable form of conduct. On the positive side, there is no doubt that the Rhodes University of 2004 is very different from 8 years ago, let alone from the 1970s'.

I fully accept his position as the Vice-Chancellor in 2004 but what should be done about 'totally unacceptable' forms of conduct by the university authorities in the dark days of apartheid? Paintbrush them out and pretend they didn't happen? Or confront and deal with those actions, even if some of the key perpetrators ended up with honorary degrees?

In my own experience, the first indication of the university's vacillation on apartheid came in the days before the 1967 NUSAS congress at Rhodes University. Despite months of planning, the Acting Vice-Chancellor Professor J.V.L. Rennie bowed down at the last moment to government and Security Police pressure to announce that no black (then 'non-white') students would be allowed to stay in the university residences. Although the accommodation of black students was always an issue at NUSAS congresses, this was the first time a 'liberal' university had taken such a stand. And it was to have long-term and far-reaching consequences. The black students demanded that the congress be adjourned but most of the white delegates decided that they would continue under protest. The black students felt this demonstrated a lack of commitment in the fight against apartheid and the compromise position of 'liberals', particularly white liberals.

One of those black delegates was Steve Biko. He and his colleagues effectively resolved then that a separate black student body was needed and by the following year they had decided to establish the South African Students Organisation (SASO).

The second demonstration of the university's compromise with government structures was the appointment, conduct and report of the Munnik 'commission' by the university council to investigate a student civil disobedience campaign against antiquated and unpopular residence rules. It used information supplied by the Security Police, published a secret report which white-washed the administration, and blamed NUSAS for the student revolt. The report was clearly defamatory of student leaders, but the Rhodes establishment defended it and embraced it. It wasn't 'a commission' despite the fact that Judge George Munnik was appointed to be chairman; it was a committee appointed by the council. It duly developed a wonderful conspiracy theory –

‘the voice was the voice of the SRC but the hand was the hand of NUSAS’ – despite the fact that 1000 out of 1200 students in residence at the time, well over 80 percent, participated in the civil disobedience campaign.

I shall return to the Munnik ‘commission’ later.

In the wake of the controversy after a selected release of the Munnik report, the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, Dr J.M. Hyslop, admitted to the *Sunday Times* that the Security Police obtained information about students from university files. ‘But this information is usually of routine nature which they could get from other sources anyway’.

The *Sunday Times* continued: ‘Dr Hyslop said he was aware that the Security Police sometimes requested information from the administration about certain students, but he told me they never approached him personally. “We are obliged to give the Security Police information about students if they ask, as indeed we are obliged to give the ordinary police information. But to say the university administration ‘works hand-in-glove with the Security Police’ is going too far. I personally do not like the idea of telephone tapping”’.

His reference to telephone tapping arose out of a disclosure in the *Sunday Times* the previous week that the secret Munnik ‘commission’ report had access to information about phone calls to and from the Rhodes University SRC offices. The ‘commission’ unsurprisingly did not disclose how the information was obtained, but in support of its accusation that NUSAS was to blame for the disturbances quoted in its report details of a ‘nine-minute phone call at 9.07 am from the farm at Howick’ (where the NUSAS executive was meeting) to the Rhodes SRC office’. It also said that I had made a phone call after 2 p.m. to ask about agenda for the student body meeting that was to be held that night. (At that stage, I was secretary-general of NUSAS’s educational wing, NUSED, and I was also a vice-president of NUSAS.) The ‘commission’ claimed, without the slightest evidence, that these calls were to give ‘instructions’ to the SRC.

The East London *Daily Dispatch* commented at the time – undoubtedly by its then editor, Donald Woods – that the 9.07 pm phone call was not disclosed by any SRC member but was ‘discovered’ by the commission itself. It continued: ‘Curiouser and curiouser. Now who could have told the commission about this phone call? Surely not the Special Branch. Although they are the only well-equipped phone-tapping agency, what interest would the Special Branch have in an investigation involving students. Obviously there must be some explanation. Maybe a member of the telephone department was co-opted at some stage on to the commission. Or maybe the members of the commission are psychic’.

These telephone calls were crucial to the ‘commission’s’ conspiracy theory, and Dr Hyslop did not like them, but he was happy to let the Security Police examine student files.

The *Sunday Times* also found that the chairman of the Rhodes council, Mr Justice J. Cloete, was not the slightest bit perturbed. Asked about Security

Police activity on the campus, he said: 'As a judge I do not interfere in police activities'. I would have thought that if a chairman of a university council thought he could not comment on secret police activities on his campus, he would have been instantly dismissed, but no such thing happened to Judge Cloete. Instead, he issued an outrageous statement defending the Munnik 'commission' report and then when he was publicly criticised – by me, I should disclose! – he said: 'I am not making any more statements. It would be improper for a judge to join issue on this level'.

What this incident demonstrated was that the university at the highest levels admitted and condoned the administration's collaboration with the security police. They were not even embarrassed by it. When what is known today about the police, and particularly the security police, this collaboration really is astonishing. While the student activists on the Rhodes campus and NUSAS throughout the country were fighting for a democratic South Africa, the Rhodes University authorities were co-operating with the other side, the people using every means possible to perpetuate white minority rule.

Perhaps it wasn't that surprising: on 13 February, 1971, it was reported that the government had made a grant of R100,000 to Rhodes University to help it out of its financial difficulties. This was announced after the Minister of Education, Senator J.P. van der Spuy, had gone to Grahamstown to acquaint himself personally with the university's development. After the Munnik 'commission' report was partly released, what did van der Spuy say at the Orange Free State congress of the National Party? He praised Rhodes as a university trying to 'keep its house in order'. 'The commission found NUSAS to be agitators. The University Council stood firm and fined students who were found guilty. I appreciate the Council's actions and the fact they stood firm. This is what the government wants', Van der Spuy said.

However, it wasn't only this level that the authorities supported the status quo. My father, Frank Streek, was appointed to the Rhodes University Council in the early 1970s. He says today that his position on the council was 'difficult. I had an activist son and an editor who delighted in tearing strips off the Rhodes University pussyfooters'. (He was managing director of the East London *Daily Dispatch* at the time.) He had been involved in studies of poverty levels, particularly in the Eastern Cape, and had helped in an Adam Raphael exposure in *The Guardian* about the appalling salaries paid by the British- and Quaker-owned Wilson Rowntree sweet factory in East London. Various academics, including some from Rhodes, had published studies about the poverty datum line (PDL) and the minimum income families needed to survive.

When he joined the university council he was shocked to find that black workers were paid below PDL wages and did not receive pensions. At one meeting where increases to professors were passed without comment, he and another progressive member of the council, CK Rowling, raised the issue of black salaries. But they were brushed aside, particularly by Kitty Richardson

(incidentally, a member of the Munnik 'commission') and Dickie Ginsburg of King William's Town, on the grounds that if Rhodes increased black wages this would disrupt everything in Grahamstown and the Eastern Cape.

My father says: 'The facts were there and the liberal Rhodes University, instead of setting an example, dodged things until I believe the students forced the issue and embarrassed the council by collecting money for African workers'.

What is clear from this account is that the Rhodes University authorities were far from progressive, and not only in their relationship with the security police and the government. And I don't believe this should be forgotten or deliberately paintbrushed out of the university's history.

I indicated I would return to the Munnik 'commission' report because even today I still find it extraordinary that the whole university council and the senate (which unanimously supported the report) could have fallen for such arrant nonsense. Any fool had to know at the time that the students in the residences, many of whom did not, incidentally, support NUSAS, were getting increasingly frustrated by the extraordinarily antiquated residence and dress regulations. The 1970 SRC had raised the matter regularly and I personally warned Dr Hyslop that there was going to be trouble.

While the youth worldwide were going through the so-called cultural revolution from the Beatles to free love onwards, Rhodes University was stoically trying to maintain obsolete dress codes. The incident that sparked the civil disobedience was after a boy was, horror of horrors, found in bed with a girl in Oliver Schreiner residence. When the authorities increased the penalties imposed by the warden of Oliver Schreiner, the students rebelled, invaded Hobson and then threatened a vote of no-confidence in SRC unless they took action. And that had little if anything to do with NUSAS and its leadership.

The Munnik 'commission', however, ignored the clear mismanagement of the situation by Dr Hyslop and his administration in order to develop the NUSAS conspiracy theory. The report was so weak and poorly argued that I was advised by a senior SC in Cape Town that it was defamatory of me and it had effectively made a finding that I was dishonest, but that I was advised not to sue the council because the publication of the full report was privileged and that in law I was remediless. The same applied to SRC President John Whitehead and other members of the SRC.

So, we had no legal case and we could only fight the report through the media. But how was it possible that the university council at the time could appoint someone like Judge George Munnik to head the committee? When I gave evidence to the 'commission', I insisted that I be given a copy of my evidence. Reading it some 33 years later, I am still astonished that someone with such right-wing and pro-Nationalist views could have been appointed by the council to head the 'commission', and the other members (Kitty

Richardson, the liberal Professor D. Hobart Houghton, and Grahamstown attorney A.P. Cole), the council and the senate could all endorse its report.

In my evidence, for instance, Judge Munnik expressed surprise that there was provision in the prison regulations for the education of prisoners and that NUSAS should have a fund for this purpose, particularly for political prisoners on Robben Island.

‘Have you ever been to Robben Island?’, he asked me.

‘No’, I replied.

Munnik: ‘I have been. It is a fantastic set-up. It is one of the best prisons I have seen from a structural point of view’.

Streek: ‘I don’t know whether they would allow me, as a NUSAS man, to visit’.

Munnik: ‘Each of the leaders has his own cell and desk and books. The only mistake was in allowing them to study through any university. Had it only been UNISA it would have been simpler’.

Remember this was an inquiry into the civil disobedience campaign at Rhodes!

Later he asked whether we didn’t have a joint executive meeting with SASO – a ridiculous assertion – and then he moved onto black students within NUSAS. Munnik asked me about coloureds and Indians and I responded: ‘They prefer to be called black rather than non-white’.

Munnik: ‘Most of them dislike being classed with the Africans’.

Later he explained: ‘Some authentic Africans cannot bear a coloured person’.

Earlier in the evidence I received other some pearls of wisdom from Judge Munnik: NUSAS would like to see a complete change in our society, wouldn’t they? A complete abolition of the present set-up in South Africa, and to see the rules completely changed, and black power come, because this would mean majority rule... If ever there was a society which is an authoritarian one it is the Bantu society, from Chaka onwards’.

Enough. Clearly, a residence revolt at Rhodes had far wider implications that anyone could have thought possible. Yet, this was the sort of person the university council appointed to head the ‘commission’ into the civil disobedience campaign.

Rhodes University has moved into a very different place now, as David Woods said in his letter to me, and we should welcome this. But there are some disturbing skeletons in our cupboard. They can be buried now but they should not be forgotten.

Students at Rhodes under Apartheid

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Introduction

During the period 1969 to 1978, while I was an undergraduate and postgraduate at Rhodes University or studying externally in Grahamstown, apartheid determined the entire student experience at Rhodes. Apartheid defined our life experiences before we entered Rhodes, our development as young adults during our time as students as well as our expectations of the lives we would enjoy as adults once we had left both Rhodes and Grahamstown. I hope, in this contribution, to explain why the ideology of apartheid and the power of the apartheid state was so pervasive throughout and determinant of the student experience.

I suggest that the 'liberal white English-speaking universities' cannot claim that they existed untouched as independent islands of critical thought and action within the apartheid waters of South Africa during the period of which I write. It is my view that the demise of apartheid as the determinant of who could study, who could teach, what could be taught, what could be done with knowledge was not the outcome of efforts of students from this university and others like it. The destruction of the apartheid project is, to my mind, a tribute to the sacrifices of other men and women. They were young people who were never permitted to enter any university, who went to so-called 'bush' or 'tribal' colleges established for those excluded from the white liberal universities. There were the liberation movements and other organisations which were not the product of nor peopled by white liberal universities and their graduates. There was the international community. Only peripherally do we find a few individuals who refused to absorb or be obedient to the lessons of an apartheid lifetime which lessons included this university experience.

My Personal Experience

I entered Rhodes as an undergraduate at the beginning of 1969, enrolling for the BA degree, which was interrupted in two respects. I left Rhodes for a year in the United States of America over the period July 1969 to July 1970, and I enrolled for and completed the then postgraduate National Higher Education Diploma whilst I was SRC President. Accordingly, I completed my BA at the end of 1973, majoring in Anthropology and 'Bantu' languages. I completed an honours degree in 1974 again in Anthropology and African languages. I was happily in residence in Hobson House for a full three year period, and thereafter

was an Oppidan for two years. I eagerly joined NUSAS and was an active member of the NUSAS Local Committee, and various sub-committees over a period of years. I was elected as SRC President at the end of 1971 and occupied that position for part of 1972 until the entire SRC resigned and was not replaced by a new SRC for some years.

I started working at the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) in 1975 from which I had to resign, due to the refusal of the then authorities to grant permits required for me to conduct research in the Transkei on behalf of ISER. I enrolled for the LLB through UNISA, and I continued studying through UNISA and living in Grahamstown until the end of 1978. During this time I held a series of odd-jobs, including working in the stacks in the University Library, teaching at night at the Technical College, and during the day at Diocesan School for Girls. I have lived and worked in Johannesburg since 1979.

I cannot claim that my own experiences as a Rhodes student were typical of my generation. Perhaps my comments reflect some of the alienation which I felt at that time and still feel in retrospect. I have chosen in this contribution to discuss broader student life as I observed it rather than focus on the small group of which I was a part. My contribution therefore contains generalisations about an entire student body based on my own observations over a specific period in the history of Rhodes.

Who were we? Where did we come from?

All Rhodes students¹ were classified as 'white', almost exclusively South African, with many Rhodesians. The majority were the product of Christian National Education. Undergraduates were all born subsequent to the election victory of the National Party in 1948. Most of us came from affluent backgrounds in that our families could afford the luxury of allowing us to delay entering the job market or could afford to send us to university.² Our attendance at Rhodes confirmed that, as matriculants with university exemption, we were already successful members of South African society.

The parents of the 1969 intake of undergraduates, no matter their own national origin, had either applauded and supported the ideology and development of statutory apartheid or they had reconciled themselves to living thereunder and bringing their children up within such an environment. Our parents were the beneficiaries of the apartheid system. They were not violently opposed to it – if they had been, they would have been in jail, in exile or they would have emigrated.³

Christian National Education was proclaimed as the educational environment appropriate for all South Africans. Classification and division was the order of the educational day: we attended whites only schools, we were taught in either English or Afrikaans (occasionally both), Jews were separated from the rest at school assemblies. Structure was highly valued and exhibited in

school uniforms, compulsory games, rigid timetabling, and required school subjects for matriculation. The 'Great Trek' was studied at least three times during High School but never the attempted annihilation of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and communists by the Nazi regime less than twenty years earlier. English and Afrikaans were compulsory languages in a country where the majority of our fellow South Africans communicated in other vernaculars. Obedience was applauded and independence considered problematic. If your goal was not a matriculation certificate you were guaranteed employment in the civil service, on the South African Railways and Harbours (SAR&H) or in your father's business. If you were privileged, intelligent or ambitious then you worked towards a University Exemption which was virtually guaranteed because of the inequitable allocation of funds and resources towards the education of white children.

We spoke or chose to speak none or very little of the despised language of Afrikaans. That was the language of the 'poor white', the civil servant or the bureaucracy. The English came from an altogether more refined and proud heritage. To a certain extent, the antipathy towards Afrikaans may have reflected our real sense of marginalisation from the seats of power in this country. It is possible that some of us (rather misguidedly) were antagonistic for political reasons. Our separation from other white South Africans was easily expressed in such derogatory nicknames as 'hairyback' or 'rockspider', which were easily reciprocated, I am sure, at the Afrikaans universities.⁴

The religious demographics meant that students were Christian with a small minority of Jews. Muslims were 'coloureds' or 'Indians' and they studied, if at all, at newly established 'tribal colleges'. Atheists were not the intended products of our Christian National Education, although they fast emerged as we left compulsory church attendance with our families and at boarding schools for Sunday lie-ins in residences or digs.

What we knew of the South Africa in which we lived, was exactly what we were meant to know. Our parents passed on to us their own attitudes and beliefs explicitly as well as through the schools chosen for us, the churches attended, the newspapers received at home, the life experiences offered. We knew nannies and labourers but not black South Africans; we knew two of the languages imported into this country but none of the indigenous languages spoken by the majority of South Africans.

What we had learnt of the South Africa in which we lived was carefully circumscribed by Big Brother. There was no television. Radio was firmly controlled by the Broederbond-managed SABC. We all remember the early morning 'Current Affairs' as written and read by Red Metrovich. The English press was constrained by the imperatives of apartheid and security legislation, the requirements of its owners for maximum profit, the needs of its advertisers and the interests of its readers. It is not surprising that we read newspapers which talked about a world divided into people and 'Bantu', a world committed

to rule through a whites-only ballot box, a world comprising 'braai vleis, rugby, sunny skies and Chevrolet'.⁵ Cinema and magazines were subjected to strict censorship.⁶ We had been taught that we were on the side of those fighting against communism but no more than that communism was 'ungodly', destructive of civilisation and would stir up the natives.

Young white men were obliged to serve in the South African Defence Force.⁷ There was conscription for 9 months, then for 1 year, for 18 months and finally for 2 years. There were 'commandos' and 'camps'. There were exemptions for students.⁸ The conscription obligation loomed large over those who had not yet served and were vulnerable if they 'dropped out' of university. It was a reality for those who had already served and continued to be eligible for 'camps'. Rhodesian students had fathers, uncles and brothers fighting on one side of a civil war. They had themselves served or gained exemptions.⁹ I do not recall any concern or agitation around this topic in the same way as was experienced during the 1980s when so many young South African men left the country in order to avoid conscription whilst others declared themselves objectors to service in the South African Defence Force.

In short, we were unknowing beneficiaries of the apartheid system, we were achievers entrenched within that system and we were certainly not revolutionaries in any sense of the word. I would therefore be surprised if anyone had expected that the response of students at Rhodes University, during the years about which I am writing, was anything other than accustomed to comfort, respectful of structures, acquiescent of direction, conformist and, on the whole, indifferent to and accepting of the apartheid regime. We were the children created by apartheid and when we came to Rhodes we were students within and under apartheid. We knew and expected nothing else.

What did we find?

On leaving home, and usually travelling away from our own cities, towns and farms to Settler country, we did not find a new and exciting world of different people, varied experiences and complex challenges.

As far as the student body was concerned, scholars who had been at single-sex schools (which private schools then exclusively were and a great many government schools usually were) were now confronted with men and women, although carefully segregated in separate halls and houses of residence. But we remained all white and mainly English-speaking and we were all from the privileged classes.

Our teachers, whether instructors, lecturers or professors, were also just like us. They too were white, and, on the whole, English-speaking. In the main they were South African although not the product of an exclusively apartheid regime upbringing. Many of the academic staff had studied abroad. They would have been our parents' generation, a bit older or a bit younger, and would perhaps have known a less restrictive environment, more greatly influenced by

international developments. Where they were non-South African one tended to find that they were not interested in parochial South African affairs or they lived here subject to bureaucratic discretion and were careful not to offend or they saw no need to offend. We certainly did not meet black South Africans who knew more than us and had come to teach us or who knew as little as us and had come to share the learning experience. Of course, there were a number of generous, thoughtful, critical thinkers amongst the teaching faculty who did participate in discussions about the wrongs of our society. But those who felt very strongly usually emigrated whilst others were obliged to be cautious since 'banning' in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act was a potent weapon against individual members of the academic community.¹⁰

My generation of undergraduate students fitted into residential life very comfortably when we arrived at Rhodes. We were not surprised to be an all-white enclave (with a few, very few, noticeable Chinese faces) in the country of the Mfengu and Thembu. The few black people we met at Rhodes were domestic staff in their purple and white uniforms in the halls of residence and, whose names frequently unremembered, were addressed generically as 'sisi'. Arriving at Rhodes did not disturb our comfort zones to any great extent. We had 'nannies' at home and now we had 'sisi's' in Res; we came from white group areas and middle-class comfort to private rooms and three square meals a day in the halls of residence. The only complaint would be the filthy little heaters, collected at the beginning of the second term each year, on which we melted marshmallows during the winter months, and the guaranteed loss of electricity during any cold spell and immediately before June exams. We seldom chafed against fairly rigid structures – we were sheltered at home and in boarding school and women's residences had strict clocking-in and clocking-out times. There was also the opportunity for endless and all-night games of bridge in the common room, discussions about relationships (but never sex, and certainly never homosexual relationships), agonising over the difficulties of certain courses and presentation of assignments on time. My residence, Hobson House, was filled with former head girls – we were intelligent and sometimes assertive, but we were respectful of authority because it had served us well. I recall no political discussions of any sort and no critique of apartheid at any level during spent three years at Hobson.

One unexpected outburst of student activism which challenged University Administration, particularly in respect of Residence Rules, was the May Civil Disobedience Campaign of 1971. Led by the SRC, hundreds of students defied rules on wearing of ties to lunch, academic gowns to evening meals, women's clocking-in times. Thousands of Rands in fines were accumulated within a week. In retrospect this was an explosion of volcanic proportions but entirely parochial and without broader political content.¹¹

In those days, the Students' Representative Council at each English-speaking university participated in an automatic affiliation to the National

Union of South African Students (NUSAS). This was often a contentious issue as, from time to time, it was felt that the NUSAS head office in Cape Town had become divorced from the interests of students on local campuses. However, in retrospect, it was a valuable and important strengthening of student opposition thinking and organisation. I eagerly went in search of NUSAS when I arrived at Rhodes. I was encouraged so to do by my parents, who had every hope and expectation that I would engage with the complexities and the challenges of our very troubled society. I was surprised to discover that the majority of students in my residence, and in the courses which I was taking, had been warned-off having anything to do with NUSAS. Through meetings of Local Committee I met like-minded students. In our youthful arrogance we knew that apartheid was wrong because it denied black people the vote and the opportunity to fully participate in South African society and we were firmly opposed to detention without trial and deplored deaths in detention. However, we did not articulate any vision for a new society. Our concerns and protests were shared exclusively with other white English-speaking students at other such universities and – on occasion – with a Cabinet Minister to whom we would address lengthy and earnest petitions. Sometimes we shared our concerns through public protest. On a national level, and at other universities (such as UCT and WITS) I experienced a greater degree of sophistication, anger, commitment and connection to a world of ‘struggle’. In a sense, NUSAS provided young South Africans with a more developed and angry critique of the apartheid regime as well as the funding for activities which were certainly intended to challenge the foundations of apartheid. At some stage NUSAS divided its various activities into cultural affairs under the rubric of ‘Aquarius’, economic/emerging trade union/underground Marxist activities under the rubric of ‘Wages Commission’, and examination of education under apartheid within an ‘Education Commission’. I certainly met personalities who had a clearer sense that they were working towards undermining the structures of apartheid. At Rhodes our NUSAS activities were directed towards attempting to conscientise the rest of the student population or towards trying to learn from those sophisticated genuine radicals at Head Office, WITS and UCT.

We had absolutely nothing to do with students from neighbouring universities. UPE was Afrikaans and seen as the National Party challenge to Rhodes, while Fort Hare was perceived as being rather alien. Black students and University Colleges had been members of NUSAS but in 1968/1969 a group of black students formed the South African Students Organisation (SASO). It was led by people like Barney Pityana, Steve Biko and others. White liberal students felt somewhat puzzled and hurt by what they perceived as rejection of our good intentions. Although there had been minimal contact between white and black students, I never met anyone who expressed understanding of the reasons for black students forming SASO and exploring the position and response of black people to apartheid through organisations such as BCP and

BCM. Through the University Christian Movement, there was contact with other South African students in a non-racial context where the message was fundamentally challenging and opposed to all the premises of the apartheid regime. I think that in all the years I was a student, the only engagement I had with black students was either through the Federal Theological Seminary (FedSem) in Alice, UCM, and individuals working in BCP.

The Students' Representative Council was never, during the years that I was at Rhodes, a body that appeared particularly conscious or expressed itself to be representing the students at a university created by, existing for and operating within, an apartheid regime. SRCs tended to attract the ambitious and the well-intentioned. That ambition and those intentions were always couched in terms of dedication to local student issues, ranging from the requirement of wearing gowns each evening to dinner, the provision of sufficient funding for important sporting activities, co-ordination of house and hall balls in Great Hall. There was always one member of the SRC whose portfolio was that of 'NUSAS chairman', and there were certainly positions which tended to be more overtly political. Those politics were understood and expressed within very clear parameters: parameters were defined by our own life experiences and expectancies, our perception that it was important always to act within the law and our appreciation that students had not come to university to be political. It is then little wonder, that I, in my capacity as SCR President, in February 1972 welcomed new students to Rhodes, informed them they were entering a new society, quoted John F Kennedy that: 'Knowledge speaks a universal language', and, at (and now embarrassingly) boring length, addressed them on academic freedom. I piously rejected the proposition of a former State President, Mr C.R. Swart, that the government was entitled to interfere with what was taught in the universities and how it was taught. However, having done so, I stressed that should we engage in student action and protest it should always be responsible and lawful. Although I am now horrified at the platitudes contained in this address I suspect that it was novel for arriving Rhodes students to be told that universal brotherhood was important, and that we should not be bound by the narrow confines of Nationalism and racism. I do recall that it was considered sufficiently contentious for me to say that while organisations such as UCM and NUSAS upheld and propagated the truths and ideals of academic freedom through their activities, that this was a 'personal opinion' only. I also remember that the stress on the lawfulness and responsible nature of all proposed student activity arose out of the real concerns and fears which existed at the time for the powers of the state and the might of security legislation.

The university hierarchy and its administration was little interested in wider South African affairs and certainly not in the injustices of apartheid as found within our own quadrangles. We had a tradition of academics from the United Kingdom elevated to administrative positions whose own families remained or returned 'home' and who probably found 'separate development' a logical

extension to the Empire of which they were a part. In my dealings with Admin I was always given to understand that student politics and disturbance were messy, distracting and expected of youth, but not really the concern of mature administrators. In 1972 the then Principal and Vice-Chancellor addressed the same students as I did, and managed to avoid expressing any view on the impact of the apartheid regime on student life, academic teaching and university administration by saying that it would be 'presumptuous for any group within the university to express the views of the university personality as a whole'. It should be remembered that the University Administration operated subject to the influence of University Council who, comprising High Court Judges, businessmen and alumni, were obviously concerned to ensure the retention of a status quo which was then the successful experiment in white capitalist exploitation of indigenous resources.

I studied no science and save for one course in each of the Fine Arts and Commerce faculties, I studied entirely in the Arts Faculty. Of course, efforts were made by academics genuinely committed to academic discourse and full exchange of critical ideas. In the subjects and courses which I studied, I can think of few instances where I believe that academic discourse was stifled. I do remember in Economics I it was compulsory to write an essay discussing the forthcoming budget to be presented in Parliament. Mine was returned marked 'too political'. I can think of instances where the course of study or the nature of the debate was truncated in many respects. Students did study Marxist and other critical political philosophy, but they were not permitted, by law, to read certain writers or certain books. Students were encouraged to do original research, but were not entitled to have access to certain original documents produced by banned authors or organisations and could not travel freely, without permit, in much of the country. Social theories were explored but we did not ever really know and understand, in any meaningful way, the society in which we lived. We could study 'Bantu' languages but could not be taught by people who actually spoke the languages so we focussed on linguistic theory rather than the original writings of black South African authors or communities.

The effect of apartheid on students at Rhodes

This university experience was not to create generations of discontented, marginalised revolutionaries but, not unexpectedly, was to effect a reasonably comfortable transition from conforming youth to conforming adults.

The impact was insidious. My generation and others attended Rhodes University without fellow-students whom we should have met, absent important and diverse experiences never shared, ignorant of ideas to which we were not exposed, uncritical of that which we never heard or saw, failing to challenge what we did not know existed, incapable of aspiring to that which we did not comprehend was even possible.

An obvious dislocation of the South African student experience is that we never perceived ourselves as being part of Africa. Our country had left the Commonwealth in 1961, we were never part of the OAU, and there were no links with the rest of Africa other than that regular train each term from Alicedale to Bulawayo or Salisbury. Our country was in Africa but not of Africa. Our university was similarly positioned. Rhodes prided itself on the extent to which it had modelled itself upon and had succeeded in mimicking the Oxford and Cambridge experience. We were certainly the academic legacy of Cecil John Rhodes in Southern Africa.

Students at Rhodes tended to ignore the 85 percent of the South African population who could never aspire towards and were legislatively forbidden from ever attending our university. We were given no reason to value and could not really comprehend the experience of being African. We did not study and we did not know the languages and culture, the law and traditions, the music and dress, the food and the art of the various communities – other than that of white Europeans – who make up the South African population. In many ways the lives of Rhodes students were barren as to African content, because we were not enriched by our own society, and we chose to feed vicariously off foreign cultures in Europe and North America. I do not think we ever conceived of ourselves as ‘African’ – we were English and South African but the heritage of the first overwhelmed the geography of the latter.

I suspect that we were aware of our isolation from the international community. Although South Africans were still, prior to 1976, welcome throughout most of the world, there were rumblings about sports and academic and cultural boycotts. But we knew that we were lagging behind developments on the world stage. In many ways, the undergraduates arriving at Rhodes in 1969 were on the cusp of the international student experiences of Woodstock and hippie lifestyles, opposition to the war in Vietnam, the Paris student revolts of 1968. One bizarre manifestation was to be found when a group of us were arrested after a protest in the High Street in about 1971 or 1972 and we decided to bang on the floors of the police van shouting loudly and rhythmically: ‘Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh!’.

The impetus towards a changing society?

Academic freedom may have been a well-worn mantra trotted out on important occasions. However, there was no suggestion that we, as South Africans with knowledge, skills and expertise, privilege and opportunities, should work towards a change in the political structures or the downfall of the apartheid regime. This was certainly not suggested to arriving students by the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, and it was definitely not pronounced by any honorary graduand at the annual graduation. Neither academic or administrative staff could have safely developed the theme of academic freedom to its logical conclusion by explicitly telling students that both South African society and the

University were unfree and it would have been less safe to have explicitly suggested to students how those chains could have been broken. For a variety of reasons, from total disinterest to fear, the result was little more than platitudes of dedication to academic freedom and lamplit dignified marches to the Cathedral in protest against the so-called Extension of Universities Education Act. Students were never told, and I do not believe that we ever chose to see, that we had entered into a partial university experience: partial by reason of the miniscule portion of society permitted to learn and teach at Rhodes, the explicit and implicit curtailment of the world of knowledge, and expected limitation on life's ambitions and experiences.

The corollary of this abnormal experience in an abnormal society was that we, as apartheid students, were quite unprepared to be leaders of and for change. Furthermore, we were not prepared for the changes which would undoubtedly come. It was hoped that Rhodes students would become leaders in South African society – managing directors and chairmen of companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, members of Parliament, Judges of the High Court, scientists of international renown. But I recall no overt discussions about our participation in changing the apartheid regime. On the one hand, such discussions would have been against the law. On the other hand, such discussions would have been presumptuous since such leadership roles are earmarked for those who have the experience from which to lead and communities who desire to be so led. Certainly, such planning would have been very premature: after all, the period 1969 to 1990 still remained with the oppression of school children during the terrible years of 1976 to 1979 and with States of Emergency, detentions and killings over the period 1980 to 1990.

However, change did happen. Another generation came after us. There were students who entered Rhodes University after 1976 when even white South Africans were beginning to acknowledge that everything was not all right, that wrongs were being done, that there were voices that did need to be heard, that gunshot was not the way to stifle legitimate aspirations. There were academic staff who had also now been exposed to the same whisperings and murmurings, who had travelled, perhaps had learnt that beyond the borders of South Africa, liberation movements were growing in numbers. Certainly, the administration entered a new era with younger, indigenous, liberal leadership. I remember how impressed many of us were when Derek Henderson, early on in his reign as Principal and Vice-Chancellor, was prepared to debate Ian MacDonald in the GLT on his, Henderson's, decision to ban something or other. That such a debate could even take place was previously unheard of.

The world outside Rhodes was developing apace. The 1976 generation of scholars left school. Some went to universities from which they were expelled and went into exile. Others remained at university and qualified to make their contribution, during the waiting period, either in South Africa or abroad. Others of that generation went into exile immediately. No-one who was a youth in

1976 in South Africa could fail to have been unaffected thereby. The trade union movement was organising from the early 1970s. As workers organised, so did management respond and the intimidation and violence which ensued often led to greater energies in worker organisation and trade union development. NGOs sprang up everywhere, attracting people of all races and with common goals. The international community was involved and targeted specific areas for change, whether in employment standards, business practice, sporting activities, cultural events and head-on politically. The liberation movements organised, lobbied and attacked the apartheid regime.

Rhodes University and its graduates were involved at a number of levels. I lived in Johannesburg from 1979 onwards and I cannot speak of what was happening at Rhodes. I do know that some of my friends from Rhodes were to be found in NGOs, journalism, publishing, teaching, industrial relations and other areas making their contribution towards change. I also met Rhodes graduates of my generation who were influential in every field of endeavour in South Africa and who were completely oblivious to the need for change and the inevitable demise of apartheid. In recent years I have travelled much abroad and continually bump into Old Rhodians everywhere – Perth, Sydney, Delhi, New York, Vancouver, Toronto, London – and I wonder ‘Why are you not at home?’.

I must end though by acknowledging those whom I did meet at Rhodes who were important in my own personal development in comprehending that nothing less should be achieved than the total destruction of the system of apartheid – when and how was agonising to speculate. But I shared banned books and magazines with some students, discussed earnestly with a couple of lecturers the contribution I personally wanted to make to a changing South Africa, fretted over the security police with close friends, joined the Black Sash and met women of integrity and commitment, made friends who were anguished over what was happening and who went into exile to return one day, joined a women’s group and learnt that ‘the personal is political’, worked on a detainees support programme and so on. My own journey is, in some ways, a typical South African experience – confused, conflicted, critical – but enormously pleased to have been a part of the struggle against apartheid and even more pleased to be here today.

Notes

1. Save a few ‘non-White’ Chinese attending on grudgingly granted special permits.
2. Rhodes, as a primarily residential university not situated in a metropolitan area, was more expensive since students did not live at home and the opportunities for employment during term time were almost non-existent.
3. If our parents were mildly opposed then they had joined the Liberal Party or the Progressive Party, which still advocated a qualified franchise. If our parents had wanted a more ‘civilised’ or ‘refined’ system of treating the ‘native’, then they had

joined the United Party. That of course, presupposed that they had any interest at all in the political system which determined their day-to-day privilege.

4. 'Rooinek' and 'soutpiel' were terms mainly applied to English-speaking males – I don't know what English speaking females were called.
5. With a few exceptions such as the *Daily Dispatch* of East London and the *Rand Daily Mail* of Johannesburg.
6. As I learnt in later years when I appeared on numerous occasions before the Publications Appeal Board.
7. Of my four brothers, one served in the elite Parabats, two on the Border and one in the Police Force and one of them did extended camps in black townships during the States of Emergency.
8. Rhodes recognised that a significant proportion of male undergraduates would have obtained such 'exemption' and they were housed in one residence (Adamson) whereas those who had already completed national service were housed in another (Jan Smuts).
9. Surprisingly, I recall no discussion whatsoever of the issue of service in the South African Defence Force. It was no more than some dispute happening far away on an unknown border. I doubted many of us could have found the Caprivi Strip on the map. I do recall moans and groans about the petty miseries of time doing 'Basics' and then other training but no-one ever spoke to me about fighting and killing and occupied territories such as South West Africa.
10. Victims at white liberal universities included Bill Hoffenberg of UCT, Terence Beard of Rhodes, Rick Turner of UND, while Basil Moore of Rhodes had not been reappointed to a teaching position resulting in the 'storming' of the Senate Chamber at Rhodes in 1968.
11. Save that John Whitehead, the SRC President, was subsequently dramatically deprived of his passport whilst attending his LLB graduation and rendered unable to return to Rhodesia to complete his articles of clerkship.