

COMMENTARY

# Signs of new South Africa foretell bright future

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

I first visited South Africa in 1982, back in the days when apartheid was strong.

I saw the soldiers or police on every corner with guns. I was in cars stopped by the police when they shut down Soweto.

I stayed in Soweto when it was illegal for tourists to even visit that place and when most white South Africans had never seen where their workers lived.

I visited the pass courts where blacks were tried for violations of the pass codes which required them to get permission to be in the cities. I visited the so-called homelands, those non-arable, far-away places where blacks were moved forcefully. I visited with those who lost sons and daughters, husbands and brothers.

Thus, every time I visit the new South Africa, I do so with those ugly pictures in

the back of my mind. I am always awed by the beauty of the people, by the optimism and patience of the people. And I do see the changes, some tiny, some massive changes in that nation close to my heart.

On a recent trip, I visited Tiger Kloof, a church-sponsored educational institution five hours away from Johannesburg and two hours or so away from the gold district of Kimberley.

Founded around the turn of the century to educate blacks in both South Africa and Botswana and at the request of local kings, Tiger Kloof educated many leaders in both countries, including two presidents of Botswana.

But during the darkest days of apartheid, the government decided blacks should only be educated for menial jobs in the mines and in white homes, and the church was forced to close

## Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson



the school. In 1995 Tiger Kloof was re-opened.

As I sat a few weeks ago in the grand, nearly-century old stone church built by the students, I looked at the large signs painted by today's students showing freedom of speech, freedom of education, freedom to vote and freedom of the press.

Those weren't the only signs that things have changed in South Africa. As the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa celebrated its 200th anniversary, we marched through the town of Vryburg.

Clearing the way in front of us was a police truck, which only a few years ago would have been chasing us.

During the celebration in the soccer stadium we were visited by the mayor, a black man from the ANC in a community known for its ultra-conservative white population.

Peppered along the highway as we drove from Johannesburg were new housing settlements being built by the government. Many still live in squatter camps and the tiny corrugated-tin shacks of the

old South Africa without running water or electricity, but the government is building small homes as fast as it can.

North of the city of Johannesburg new suburbs are springing up and middle class blacks are often the inhabitants.

I visited one new friend's home in an area of the city called Florida Lakes, an area which only five years ago was white-only. It's a lovely home with flowering trees in the front and a pool in the back. Signs of a new South Africa.

Multi-national corporations are returning to South Africa, some which left during the dis-investment campaigns of the 1980's, others which never had been there before.

Another friend's son-in-law now works for an American corporation which provides automated teller

machines and which consciously decided to hire staff that reflected the new South Africa when they came a year or so ago. More signs of the new.

Tourists - several thousand every day - visit Soweto and Robbin Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned.

And then there is the new conversation among liberal white South Africans about their identity in the new South Africa. Should they be called "African," a term once synonymous with black in South Africa, since many of their families have lived on that continent for generations?

A spokesman for President Mbeki responds that color is not important in defining who is African. "True Africans black and white are the people working for a better society," he says. (See South Africa, Page 13)

## Carl Rowan's Commentary

### Bush could show bravery by dissing GOP, OKing wage hike

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

The 35 million Americans who live in poverty haven't found much sympathy among the nation's political rulers for a couple of generations.

That's why it is refreshing, almost astonishing, to hear Texas Gov. George W. Bush assail the current Republican-

controlled Congress for trying to "balance their budget on the backs of the poor."

Bush, the odds-on favorite to become the GOP presidential candidate next year, purports to be outraged by a GOP scheme to cheat America's working poor by spreading their earned income tax credit payment over 12 months instead of giving the usual lump sum at tax refund time. A couple of Texas terrorists, Republican Reps. Dick Armey and Tom DeLay, are behind this scheme, which supposedly would save \$8.7 billion in the fiscal 2000 budget.

The same newspapers that headlined Bush's attack on the GOP Congress headlined a Census Bureau report that we have cut poverty to its lowest rate in 20 years - thanks to the good times brought on by an economy so strong that the unemployment rate is only 4.5 percent. The implications is that all boats are rising with the economic tide, and that the poor will automatically share in prosperity.

That is an absurdity.

Even with the "good times" gains, 34.5 million people still live in poverty, or with annual incomes below \$16,655 for a family of four. Of these, 13.5 million are children, mostly in working families. Certainly that



CARL ROWAN

is nothing to brag about.

And while the overall poverty rate is 12.7 percent for the nation, it is still at a depressing 26.1 percent for blacks and 25.6 percent for Hispanics. National prosperity clearly is not automatically lifting all boats.

Probably more disturbing than the lingering racial inequities is the fact that the prosperous surge of the 1990s has done nothing to reverse the growth in the income gap between America's rich and its poor, or even its rich and its middle class. The Census Bureau report shows that now, as in the 1980s, a "high end" family earns about \$133,000 - or eight times the income of a family at the poverty level.

This raises the question whether the nation's rulers want that gap closed, or whether they think it essential to always have a very poor class to do the drudgery and dirty work of American life.

This also bolsters the arguments that strong action is required to close the income gap in any meaningful way. One such action is to raise the minimum wage, an action that Republicans in Congress have opposed bitterly.

It really would be an act of bravery, worthy of great headlines, if Gov. Bush were to strike a real blow for the poor and ask Republicans to vote to raise the minimum wage.

That would wipe out the need for an earned income tax credit for a lot of the poor souls who stand to get cheated by the Armey/DeLay gimmick.

## New trends for the new politics

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

A number of polls and studies have recently come out attempting to measure and explain disaffection with government and politics on the part of the American public.

Take the 1999 National Opinion Poll for example, sponsored by the Joint Center for Political Economic Studies. The poll shows that the political environment in 1999 has clear racial and ideological divides. However, it also concludes that despite continued favorable economic trends, both white conservatives and African-Americans in general tend to think that things in the country are on the wrong track. When asked if the country is going in the right direction, whites and Blacks both responded in the negative. The poll also noted that, among Black young adults 60% between the ages of 18-25 and 63% between 26-35 were most likely to give the "wrong track" response.

Another article written by Ted Halstead for the *Atlantic Monthly*, goes even further to try to examine these trends, particularly concentrating on the young adults, the so-called Generation X. Says Halstead, "a wide sampling of surveys indicates that Xers are less politically or civilly engaged, exhibit less social trust or confidence in

This Way  
For Black  
Empowerment

By Dr. Lenora Fulani

government, have a weaker allegiance to their country or to either political party and are more materialistic than their predecessors." Halstead's findings affirm the Joint Center's discovery that "Xers" are the group least likely to favor maintaining the current two-party system and most likely to favor candidates running as independents - in fact, 44% of those between 18 and 29 identify themselves as independents. Not surprisingly, young adults gave their strongest support to Ross Perot in '92 and Jesse Ventura in 1998.

What is most interesting in this study, in my opinion, is that the politics of young people surveyed do not fit into any expected or stereotypical patterns. Halstead points out "like conservatives, they favor fiscal restraint - but unlike conservative leadership in Congress, only 15 percent believe that America should use any budget surplus to cut taxes. Like Democrats, they

want to help the little guy - but unlike traditional Democrats, they are unwilling to do it by running deficits." And, while their actions indicate that while volunteerism among young people has increased, their interest in politics-as-usual has decreased.

The results of the Joint Center's study corroborate this. The poll also pointed out that self-identification with the Democratic Party has also continued to decline among African-Americans. In 1999, 68% of African-Americans were self-identified Democrats (down from 72% in 1998) and 23% self-identified independents (up from 15% in 1998). In short, the change among Blacks has been towards independent politics and away from both major parties. The most independent among the Black population, the poll determines, is the 18-25 year age with 30% considering themselves independent.

I agree with Halstead that (See Trends, Page 13)