

Manuel and Manyi –drawing the line

Without doubt this is the biggest political story of the year so far. At its heart is where non-racism starts.

Background

The Dept of Labour has proposed a package of four labour Bills. So far all the attention around these Bills has been focused on what they say about labour brokers. Yet the Bills also say a few things about employment equity, in particular that national and not regional demographics should apply in employment equity appointments. That means that employers in the Western Cape will have to look at the national population make-up when striving for employment equity targets in the Western Cape. Predictably this does not go down well with the Coloured population in that province.

At this point the trade union Solidariteit released on You Tube an interview conducted with Jimmy Manyi on the TV channel kykNET a year ago. Among other things, he said Coloureds were over-concentrated in the Western Cape and should move elsewhere in the country where there is a need for their services. Trevor Manuel then penned a response to Manyi's statements – and by implication the labour Bills. The rest is history.

From reversing discrimination to a new racism?

Actually, the origins of the dispute go back much further than the proposed labour Bills or the kykNET interview. It lies in SA history, including the history of the Western Cape as a "Coloured preference area". In terms of that policy, only limited access to the Western Cape was granted to Black South Africans. In short, apartheid tried to keep Coloureds and Blacks out of the "white" labour market and Blacks out of the Western Cape.

To reverse this state of affairs we got the employment equity legislation of the mid-1990s. The aim was to reverse the institutionalised discrimination of the past.

Most South Africans supported this aim. Some felt equality should rather be achieved through aggressive education and training, but many more felt the coercive power of legislation was needed. So Tito Mboweni, when he was still Minister of Labour in Mr Mandela's cabinet, introduced legislation to Parliament.

That legislation certainly helped to drive transformation. White women, Coloureds, Indians and Africans were the categories in respect of which corrective (affirmative) action had to be undertaken. For most Whites the change has been too quick, for most Blacks too slow, but the country certainly looks very different from 20 years ago – although still far away from reflecting the national population composition.

Now we have reached an interesting point. The labour Bills suggest that reversing past discrimination now involves corrective action, not just against White men, but against Coloureds and Indians as well (the position of White women is left unchanged!).

This approach is supported by the likes of Jimmy Manyi and the ANC Youth League. Trevor Manuel clearly thinks differently and suggests that the Bills perpetuate racism. Reversing discrimination is one thing, discriminating anew against all South African minorities is a different matter all together. Has a line been crossed from non-racialism to an exclusive Africanism?

Non-racialism and Africanism

The supporters of Jimmy Manyi do not see it like this. To understand their position we have to go back to definitions of non-racialism.

One definition entails a complete disregard for race. One should simply treat people as individuals. Whether you are looking at the workers in a workplace or a mixed married couple in a restaurant, you should only see the individuals, not the race of any particular person. It is the classic liberal view of the world.

The other view holds that non-racialism means that Black people (as in Coloured, Indian and African) must be proportionally represented amongst the rich and poor, professional classes and workers, farmers and lawyers – only then would non-racialism exist. In theory, and to illustrate the point to the absurd, as a percentage of the population there should be as many Whites in squatter camps as Blacks, and as many Blacks in upmarket suburbs as Whites.

These are two different views of the world. Unsurprisingly, their proponents differ vehemently. Perhaps they do not have to differ so vehemently. The two views could be two sides of the same coin – the one describing an ultimate goal, the other measurable progress.

Afrikaner nationalism made peace with its English compatriots and became “non-racial” in a language sense as Afrikaners improved their position after the devastation of the Anglo-Boer War. However, in the run-up to that improved position, political power was used unashamedly to promote Afrikaner interests. No Englishman ever became head of either the IDC or the SABC. (The words “non-racial” and references to “two races” for two language groups were actually used in the language-political debates of the 1920s.) It was when Afrikaner nationalism claimed SA for Whites only that they lost the plot. A critical line was crossed.

In current-day SA we are at that line again. Where does positive discrimination end and a perpetuation of racism start? The Manuel/Manyi fight is about where that line should run.

Pragmatism, not ideology

For my own penny’s worth, whatever the definition of non-racialism, legislation can only achieve so much. Legislation is necessary and important, but there are limits to legislative power.

Legislation is in place. Employers must have employment equity targets, and there is a political and economic momentum around equity. The chairman of a large listed company told me last year that non-executive directors on his board are increasingly asking for Black African numbers in employment equity, not just Black numbers (as in Coloured, Indian and Africans combined). On the negative side, but as another example of unfolding normalisation, Whites in squatter camps are also increasing – exactly

what one would expect in a normalising society. The transformation of SA society to a more normal distribution amongst all races is underway and can only gain momentum, not slow down.

Further progress to non-racialism in the workplace will depend on education, training, mentoring, support ... in short, the development of human capital (coupled with a continued vigilance against racial discrimination). No legislation can compensate for human capital that does not exist. Neither can it compensate for the small matter of economic growth so that there is a big enough economy to absorb the new human capital.

Political fallout

It is safe to say that Manyi's comments have been a huge bonus for the DA.

The DA accused Manuel of engaging in opportunistic politics with an eye to the upcoming local government elections. The DA itself was not slow out of the starting blocks: it proposed a motion in the ANC-controlled Northern Cape legislature condemning Manyi's comments – and it was passed. Clearly the ANC in the Northern Cape is feeling the heat, why else would they support a DA motion?

The Northern Cape is firmly in the DA's sights as one area where it hopes to make progress outside its Western Cape stronghold. The last thing the ANC wants to see is the DA capture two provinces – the Western and Northern Cape; they are already upset enough that they have lost the Western Cape.

The Coloured and Indian constituency are very important to the ANC. I suspect the party will try hard to retain their support, but it will be a hard slog.

What now?

So will it be Africanism or non-racialism? The answer is neither, it will oscillate between the two positions. Drawing the line is a process, not one definitive action. Do not expect the ANC or Mr Zuma to come out and choose the one or the other; if you look for a final answer, you will be disappointed.

Social change is directed by a myriad of forces all conspiring to shape values and choices. It is reasonable to expect forces currently at work like robust debate, looming elections, Court interpretations of the constitution, international relations, economics, the Charter tradition and above all hard practical experience, to again shape values. Over time that may very well swing the pendulum towards more non-racialism, as it did in the case of Afrikaner-nationalism.