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Denis Beckett took flak for this article. The ultimate Righty, coming across as human! That was sinful! Four years later – 1990 – Beckett briefly thought so too. Passing through the Far Right’s one-horse stronghold he was stopped by “soldiers” and taken to Terre Blanche, who clasped him like a brother and comprehensively informed his army that this was the only upright liberalist around. Hmm. Uncomfortable. For three hours or so. On the way back, from a black village with the glorious name Tshing, Denis was stopped again, by the man himself. Now Terre Blanche used blunt words, about troublemakers poisoning the minds of the blacks. When he turned on his heel and strode away declaring “this man is not welcome”, his army closed in. They seemed a bit confused, understandably. Departure was rapid, and unharmed. But for a moment in there not all internal organs were fully in order

Eugene, the arch-ogre

Denis Beckett tries to figure out what is behind Eugene Terre Blanche, leader of the most right-wing breakaway movement in South African history

Tears well in the eyes of the arch-villain, the super-ogre, the ominous, foreboding figure so often depicted as the South African resuscitation of Hitler. “Why?” He seems conscious of the damp film spreading across his blue eyes, and a little embarrassed. “Why do you want to make him into your mould? Why can’t he have his own? Why can’t he have what we demand for ourselves?”

For whom, I wonder, do those unlikely eyes really water? For the black South African, whom Terre Blanche has just correctly accused me of wanting to have think and behave in something of the same way as I do? Or for himself and his kind, and the awkwardnesses they at least partway correctly – believe would be their lot were the blacks to take their place as an 80% majority of the citizens of a common society?

Either way, the depth of feeling is evident. In vain do I protest that my

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approach is simply part of the normal social process; that anyone who ever propagates any view does so in the hope that some of his countrymen will adopt it. To Terre Blanche, I am an oppressor. I am oppressing the black man, inflicting my outlook on him, refusing him the right to choose his own way, which in Terre Blanche's view is necessarily and totally different to anything a white man could want. And he, Terre Blanche, is the liberator. He is allowing blacks to go their own way undisturbed; to have their own countries where they can do what they will in the patterns of Africa, unfettered by the constrictions of Western expectations.

Not another hundred or another thousand exposures to the stunning power of Terre Blanche's tongue would be likely to convince me that his path is anything other than totally wrong. But one meeting alone gave abundant evidence that however wrong his beliefs may be, he holds them with a genuineness and a conviction of truly rare magnitude.

Getting hold of Terre Blanche involves a batch of contradictions in itself. The *Westelike Provinsie Drankwinkel* on the corner of Prinsloo and Kerk in Pretoria is your landmark. Then find the Deb F Lee Restaurant, *maak 'n draai* down the back alley, past the brake & clutch joint – ah, there's an old Mazda with an *Afrikaner Bewaak Jou Belange* sticker, must be the right track – up a narrow back staircase and along a barren corridor.

It feels incongruous, like a runner trying to throw off the scent on the route to the Fah Fee king's den. After all this, one expects a scrappy little spare room, furnished with kitchen rejects, and a grubby old office litho machine spewing ink in the corner.

But no. A batch of smart offices. Not such as would turn any advertising agency jealous, but businesslike and dapper.

In the inner sanctum that heavy bearded face – so familiar from countless newspaper cartoons depicting its owner as a chain-wielding Nazi thug – rises, greets, and immediately lets me know that everything is being taped and do I have an objection?

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Not at all, but the smart off-the-peg suit is so different from the accumulated image, the soft courteous voice so removed from the thunderous roar I've heard on recordings of his speeches, that it takes me a minute to recover enough composure to say so.

Cards are best laid on the table, I resolve. So I kick off by advising Terre Blanche that my own attitude is that South Africa should proceed with all possible dispatch towards a fully common society, with no holds barred. I am mindful that this is probably the first time a sentiment of this nature has been expressed in these portals, and that it might not be well received. I don't rationally expect leather-jacketed heavies to come rushing in and apply the cosh, although some thought to that effect flits across my mind. I do expect some sort of critical reaction. Wrong. Barely a shadow shows in Terre Blanche's features. "I respect your honesty," he says

Two hours later, the feeling is reciprocal.

Honesty, yes, but common sense, no. Either way. The gulf is about as great as it is possible to be. From black to white with no shades of grey, or browns or creams, to moderate it.

It's not, however, as wide as it would be if I was Jewish.

Am I? Terre Blanche asks.

Why, would it matter?

Yes, because the gulf between us would be greater.

How come? There are Jewish people who believe in apartheid.

That wouldn't change it. The gulf between a Christian and a Jew is still greater than between a Christian – and another Christian with opposite beliefs.

Is it true then that the AWB would discriminate against Jews?

No. No. No. That's false from top to bottom. Terre Blanche can't imagine how that story got about. It's a total distortion, he asserts. In his South Africa, Jews would be citizens like all other whites. The difference is there, but it doesn't mean anything. Jewish South Africans have nothing to fear.

Hmmm.

Despite the gulfs, there are a surprising number of points of agreement. For instance: that either you have apartheid or you don't have apartheid, that all these half measures and attempts to provide for a mitigated form of apartheid are really just straws in the wind of history.

For another: that getting rid of apartheid is no simple task. Would I, Terre Blanche demands victoriously, deny that the alternative to apartheid is conflict? Not at all, I say. He's taken aback. I expand: "There's conflict either way. But hanging onto apartheid means more and worse conflict, just a little delayed."

Terre Blanche agrees that there's conflict either way. His entire vocabulary is constructed around it. *'n Volk moet stry. As jy nie stry nie dan gaan jy dood.*

There are only two choices: *Stry, stry, totdat jy wen. Of toeaee, toegee, totdat jy omgee.*

End of agreement. For me, it is simply impossible to look upon democracy as "*omgee*". To me it's a matter of basic morality and good sense, and all else is selfishness. And quite apart from the moralities, there is simply no possibility of "*wen*", in the end. The harder the stryd, as Terre Blanche defines it, the surer the ultimate *verloping*.

To him, the perspective is completely different. It strikes me that if I were to suggest to a Frenchman, say, that he ought to enter into a shared democracy with China, he would look at me in much the same way as Terre Blanche is. (And wrong though it is, I don't take that perspective to be unreasonable. White and black South Africans have no more consciousness of commonness than do Frenchmen and Chinese. It is sheer accident that has made an indissoluble omelette out of the unlikely collection of tribal eggs we consist of. Not for nothing is it so that after three centuries of joint possession of this sub-continent we still do not have a single shared national symbol.)

Terre Blanche harps heavily on the *totale verskil* between whites and blacks. And nearly as heavily on the fairness of it all. Separation does not mean oppression, he repeatedly states. It's even. It applies to everyone. They can't have rights in our land; we can't have rights in theirs. Fair and square. And insofar

as it's possible to accept that anyone can truly believe that excluding an Mphedu from rights to South Africa is the same thing as excluding a Botha from rights to Venda, I'll accept that Terre Blanche does believe it.

There's plenty of contradiction though. Terre Blanche repeats over and again that he's not claiming that whites are any better than anyone else – just different, that's all. Yet at the same time the rhetoric of the barbarism and primitivity of Africa is rampant. "You can't talk of the benevolence of blacks; there is no such thing. . . When the black man gets power he removes whites and Africanises Africa. . . There are despots everywhere in black Africa... The black man wants to be *baas*, he does not want to share power. . ."

Terre Blanche's whole and sole motivation, he says, is Christian. "The Bible does not tell us to love your neighbour more than you love yourself. It is not Christian to create circumstances where you are going to be destroyed."

He makes much of his own benevolence. When he's away from home, the black kids cry – "*Morena is weg van die huis, . .*" "I even help kids whose fathers don't work for me. I buy them clothes and so on. I'm not a racist not in the least. Ask the blacks at the filling stations in Ventersdorp. They'll tell you."

By sheer coincidence, I happened to be in Ventersdorp a few days later – an unusually unspoilt little dorpie, not yet homogenised by the identical architecture and facings of the chain stores or fast-foods franchises. Nats and CPs eye each other balefully across the tiny stoep which their respective offices share.

Haberdashers and grocers drowse in the winter sunshine, placidly awaiting the handful of customers they need to pay the rent and stay in business. The lettering in the shop windows is hand drawn, as often as not, and not always spelled right.

Around the piles of incredibly diverse merchandise in the dark and ancient general-dealer-cum-village-meeting-place cluster the owners of about half the names on the local voters' roll, or so it seems, amicably passing the time of day with the Indian proprietor, whose sole unhappiness is his uncertainty about how long it will be before he gets group-areaad right out of town at the behest of those same voters. Black kids scuffle in the dust outside, waiting for odd-jobs to come up.

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Terre Blanche's claims come to mind.

Idly, I ask the petrol attendant whether he knows Mr Terre Blanche. (Sorry, Eugene, but I can't get it right to say Baas, let alone Morena.) I confidently expect a blank look and a shrug of the shoulders.

Instead. "You mean Eugene?" says the man without delay. As soon as I affirm, he rattles into a set of pointings and directions of the way to Terre Blanche's house. Surprised, I push it a bit further.

"Do you know him well?"

"Very well. Very well."

"A ha. Is he a good man?"

The head, bent over the petrol cap, peers upward, quizzically. Long look; long pause. Then turns back to the pouring: "It's difficult to say."

"I mean, uh, does he help people?"

The eyes turn up again. No delay this time; no difficulties: "Yes, yes. He helps people."

(Since this conversation sounds almost too made-to-order to be true, may I assure readers that it is as exact an account as I am capable of giving.)

Back in the AWB office, Terre Blanche is going on about his benevolence. It runs in the family, he says. His grandfather put up the first church for blacks in the whole area. It's still there. Anyone can see it. And on the altar, it doesn't say "God is liefde". It says "Geskenk deur A.L. Terre Blanche". The symbolism of this seems a little awkward to me, but I let it pass. Instead, the point puts in mind the rumour about why he spells his name that way. How come he's one of the very few Terre Blancches, and not a more likely Terblanche, Terreblanche or even Terre'blanche? Did he consciously adopt that spelling in order to emphasise the meaning – White Land? Not at all, he says. His family have always kept to the original, never letting themselves slide. He inherited it that way. But he does, he lets on, rather relish the effect.

I tell Terre Blanche about an unpleasant incident I'd seen on the way to him.

A matter of a young white guy in a car purposefully frightening the wits out of an elderly black man by giving the appearance of being about to run him over, and then screaming abuse at him for good measure. Terre Blanche shakes his head sadly. “My attitude towards that sort of thing is one of just as much disgust as yours.” Okay, but accepting that he wouldn’t do that himself, what about his members? Terre Blanche denies it, but without total conviction. “We’re not anti anyone,” he says. “We’re pro-white and pro-Christian and if other people see a threat in that then it’s they who are being the racists. We respect everyone.”

I’d like to believe that, but I’d believe it a lot more easily if I could hear that message coming through Terre Blanche’s public speeches rather than simply and only the message of white is right.

Who are his members anyway, apart from being “the most beautiful young men in South Africa”? Terre Blanche won’t give figures. “That would be doing PW Botha’s job for him.” As to the kind of people they might be, my suspicion is that they’re probably mainly the least fortunate of white people – those who have to rely most heavily on their skins to protect them from black competition. Terre Blanche insists though that they “include” people like lecturers and medical doctors.

And the stormtroopers? “That story has been blown up horribly,” he says. There’s no actual ‘corps’ it’s merely that some of the members wanted to ride their bikes in AWB colours and who is to object to that?” So too has the swastika emblem been “blown up”. In fact it’s not a swastika at all, he says, embarking on a long explanation about how it’s really three sevens, representing various biblical symbols and designed to give an overall image of ... “*n outjie wat hardloop*”. “I’m a Christian Afrikaner Nationalist; not a National Socialist. There’s no connection.” Isn’t it then a touch embarrassing that the emblem so coincidentally happens to turn out to have such a resemblance to a swastika? Terre Blanche shrugs this off: “When you’re attacked you get defensive. I’m not going to apologise for it.”

When our talk is done an AWB man – at first I thought he must be the long awaited “heavy”, but it turns out he’s the recording boffin – takes the tape

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away to make a copy.

Terre Blanche wants to know if I'd mind if we use first names. Then he asks, in a by the way fashion, what is my interest in the issues anyhow.

I tell him. I've got two little daughters, I explain. I want them to grow up in a society of safety, security, and justice. To live in peace as respected citizens of their society, not to spend the first half of their lives defending the indefensible and the rest being harried as hated representatives of an overthrown oppressor. I get quite emotional about it. A voluntary and orderly end to apartheid, I say, is not only what justice and morality call for; it also gives my daughters a chance, the best chance there is. He and his like are endangering them. His approach is a surefire guarantee that South Africa eventually comes unstuck.

Terre Blanche – Eugene, now – listens intently. When I wind up, he *skommels* in his desk and comes up with a handwritten sheaf. "I've never read this to anyone," he says, "but the circumstances are appropriate."

It's a poem. He too has a daughter. An adopted one – a direct gift from God, he says. She's two years old now. I know how fathers of two-year-old daughters feel. He's written this poem for her.

For her, he reads, he must do what he has to do. He must defend her, he must protect her. He must do what God has told him to do for her. He must dedicate his life to securing peace, safety, and justice for her. He cannot let her down. He cannot deliver her into a fate at the hands of a barbaric horde.

The poem is moving. He reads it softly, with a little quiver in that voice which has spellbound packed halls with its deep roar.

Thus do we part. Not exactly bosom brothers, but at least one of us – and I think both – surprised at the degree of sympathy for the other's position.

No matter what, I think, he's doing what he thinks is best for his *volk* and his *vaterland*. His heart is in the right place. It's just a pity he's got the sense of it upside down.

Terre Blanche is a one-man attitudes factory, which is largely why the Nats fear him so much. ("Every time he holds a meeting he converts a few hundred ordinary people who thought they were just coming along to see what is was

all about” as a leading *verligte* laments.) It strikes me that he’s like a powerful engine which has slipped into reverse gear and is charging backwards creating chaos. The power unit is in terrific working order. All that’s needed is a change of gear. If Terre Blanche could come merely to accept that despite the *verskille*, and the dangers and the awkwardnesses, the only true route to the goal of white security is by co-operating with the course of history rather than vainly trying to defy it, what a powerful boost that would be for the prospects of my daughters and his.

True, that’s not easy, but then what is, in the South African equation? And after all it’s only the direction which needs adjustment. The commitment and the dedication are already there. I’d rather look to the Terre Blanches to change direction than hope to see commitment instilled where there is only cynicism, as in the case of the slick operators who just want a quick buck, and who knowing and agreeing that the system is terrible nonetheless live with it happily, relying on it lasting long enough for them to make a useful pile to take with them when they head for foreign parts.

Which is where this story ought to end. A touching tale. South African patriots meet across a chasm and find that their common patriotism binds them.

The trouble is: as I’m leaving, all handshakes and farewells, Terre Blanche gives me a copy of his magazine *Sweepslag*.

Which changes the picture. *Sweepslag* is without doubt the most offensive piece of writing I have ever come across. The hysteria about “international jewry” seems to me a certain sign of derangement. And the references to coloureds and mixed marriages are sheer racist poison.

Can one still in such circumstances nurture any respect for the perpetrators, or any distant hope that their crazy racism can be converted to a reasoned or reasonable form of approach? It’s difficult. God knows it’s difficult.

Editor’s Note: *It’s hard to believe, in 2008, how fearsome a factor the heavy Righties of the AWB once were in South Africa. Several factors knocked them off their perch. The rational factor: the last old (i.e. white) president ballsily called a*

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white referendum to ratify the giving up of power. The Rightist opposition was trounced, to its stunned surprise. Confronting the fact that it did not represent even the Afrikaner constituency that it claimed, the wind in its sails dropped to doldrum. The tragic factor: when the Righties swashbuckled their way into a rustic black region that they claimed to be recovering in the name of God and Righteousness, they came short. Two injured guys sitting on the ground were rather horribly “executed”, a.k.a “murdered” by a black soldier with a rifle, in front of cameras. This was really not uplifting, but it may have saved one heck of a lot of other lives. The image of white/right invincibility took a severe and speedy dive. Then the farce factor: Eugene Terre Blanche fell off his horse, in front of a barrage of cameras. Rightism was never the same again. Nowadays, despite vast quantities of crime and cock-up, the old Righties as far as I can make out are mainly running garden maintenance companies, and buying quadbikes.