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To the outside world and to most of their subjects, the old South African government seemed united, solid. Their business was keeping the blacks down; that was that. Re-reading **Hermann Giliomee** 25 years later betrays a truth that was disorienting then and is disorienting now. There were people inside the monolith; individual flesh-and-blood, and the worst of the Apartheid bad-guys had redeeming features. Moreover, with the advantage of an extra quarter-century of hindsight, an extraordinary thought comes up: was all that them-or-us stuff, justifying anything in the name of survival, the way that Afrikaners were made to be? Or was it the personality of a few John Vorsters that shed an aura over the entire tribe?

BJ Vorster and the sultan's horse

*At his peak John Vorster was the most powerful man South Africa has ever known. Had he wished to he could have led the country into directions which are not open to his successor, who lacks his stature as volksleier. Yet finally, like General Smuts before him, he ended up leading the country nowhere in particular at all. Why not? **Hermann Giliomee** looks at the man and at the legacy he left us.*

Mr John Vorster's death has a special element of poignancy. In the mid-1970s he assumed a degree of control over white politics that was unrivalled in our recent political history. But the great potential of his power was never fulfilled and he died a tragic figure.

Like Louis Botha, his last years as Prime Minister were characterised by political impasse and disquiet. Brought down by political scandal, he went, like Hertzog, into retirement an embittered man, feeling himself betrayed by his

closest political allies. Like Smuts, he died with much he sought to build (detente with Africa, regional stability and Afrikaner unity) either greatly impaired or in ruins.

In his nearly 20 years of high visibility in public life, Mr Vorster left no one cold – to use the words of Jimmy Kruger, his worst political appointment. In the single interview I had with him conducted after his fall, he made a stronger impression upon me than any other South African politician. Even if one disagreed with his views there was no way of escaping the force of his personality. Nor could one fail to note his masterly way of building an argument and probing for weaknesses in that of his opponent. He had a unique personal approach to politics. Piet Cillie once correctly noted: “His priority was to win over people – not people as an abstract mass but YOU”. When I argued the case for drawing the Coloured, Indian and African middle class closer to the whites he stopped me short in my tracks by gruffly remarking, “That’s what the English tried to do: they wanted to take the Cloetes and Van der Byls but they did not want to take the Vorsters, the Giliomees”.

Unlike Verwoerd, he was not in an aloof and cerebral way concerned with proving the validity of a political dogma. Vorster’s point of departure was emotional. He considered a warm-blooded loyalty to one’s people, one’s friends and one’s colleagues as the highest political value. Apartheid, he believed, was built upon this and was thus the only recipe for stability in South Africa. He had a disdain for those on the left whom he believed had turned their backs on their people and for liberals who in his view only wanted to “skim off” the cream of other peoples. He could be as contemptuous, too, towards those who opportunistically tried to promote and exploit Afrikaner chauvinism. It was he who coined the scornful phrase *Super Afrikaners* for elements in the *Broederbond* who attacked him from the political right.

What struck me most about Vorster was that he was at the same time both a very charming and a very chilling man. The charm, of course, worked in the first place for the Afrikaners. By the mid-1970s he was among Afrikaners by far the most popular leader of this century. Down-to-earth but yet unmistakably a leader, serious but a masterly deadpan joker, someone with the approachability of a favourite uncle but never one to allow any liberties. He could draw on all these qualities to impose complete control over an audience, whether it be Parliament, the National Party caucus or a student meeting.

But the charm also worked for English-speaking whites, even for some liberals. It was never more apparent than when Donald Woods visited Yale University in 1977 just after he had fled South Africa. Three hundred students packed the hall to hear about the brutal South African regime and the death of Steve Biko. Woods, it is true, delivered a powerful indictment but towards the end of his speech began to recall almost fondly his encounters with Vorster and told some favourite Vorster jokes, superbly mimicking Vorster's voice. I can still see the puzzled student faces – it was hardly the way a recent exile from Russia or Iran would talk about Brezhnev or Khomeini.

The chill came through when he started to talk about the white-black power struggle. If there was any compassion for his black opponents or any sense that they were fellow South Africans I failed to detect it. Alan Paton once wrote, “It is one of the deep mysteries of Afrikaner Nationalist psychology that a Nationalist can observe the highest standards of behaviour towards his own kind, but can observe an entirely different standard towards others, and more especially if they are not white.”

It would be a mistake to assume that Vorster shared the explicit racism of Strijdom or the implied racism of Verwoerd. He was in fact the first Nationalist Prime Minister who unambiguously said that there were no inferior South Africans, who allowed black diplomats and sportsmen into South Africa and who permitted (rather reluctantly) the first integrated South African sports team.

However, to Vorster, blacks were different. And they were not South Africans. If they challenged the status quo Vorster would counter with ruthless methods. He knew what solitary confinement meant. As a leader of the paramilitary *Ossewa-Brandwag* movement he was kept for two months in small police cells. During the early 1960s Vorster and General Van der Bergh perfected solitary confinement as an instrument to fight subversion by Communists, liberals and black nationalists alike. Vorster tended to believe in “it's them or us” and that the Afrikaner nationalists would not get any better treatment from their black nationalist opponents if they were to seize power.

In my interview with him I argued that he would be condemned by history for his failure to take stronger action over Steve Biko's death. Was it not his duty to sack Jimmy Kruger? No, one does not “drop” a colleague in a crisis like

that; loyalty comes first. Did he not feel remorse about the circumstances of Biko's death? Yes, he was sorry he had to die in such circumstances but at the same time Biko was an "agitator" of the kind he got to know in the early sixties who would have no mercy at all for the Afrikaners.

I challenged him on the 1976 Soweto uprising. Surely that showed that the Afrikaners could not hope to continue imposing their will upon blacks. Vorster was unimpressed. Soweto 1976 was simply a "security failure" – the police had failed to recognise that schoolchildren could be a security threat. But the police force had learnt its lesson: next time it would be ready.

We had our interview in a house just next to De Waal Drive in Cape Town. "Just think", said Vorster, "what would happen if I get a *klomp klonkies* together, arm them with nice big stones and tell them to let fly at the passing motor cars. Just imagine the damage we shall cause. But of course, there won't be a next time – the police will come for us."

In one breath: Soweto 1976 and *klonkies* pelting cars in De Waal Drive.

Chilling.

The same quality was present when Vorster went on to tell of his negotiations with black leaders about homelands independence. Verwoerd came up with the idea that blacks would enjoy political rights only in the homelands. It was Vorster's idea to take away their South African citizenship. Like a chess player, he was prepared to wait patiently till his opponent gave the game away. Here's how he recounted the negotiations about Bophuthatswana independence:

"Mangope and I agreed about everything as far as independence was concerned. Then Mangope came up with the idea that he wanted to take only those people who were within Bophuthatswana territory. I then said to him the policy of my party is not to make territories independent but to make nations independent. I said to him that if he expected to take only some Tswanas and expect me to take the rest and give them South African citizenship then I was not prepared to come to an independence agreement with him. On the eve of independence Mangope again came with a proposal: he was prepared to take all the Tswanas but they should be allowed to exercise a choice whether they wanted to accept his citizenship. I then said to him I was not prepared to give to blacks South African citizenship. And that was that."

So politics for Vorster was a naked struggle to safeguard and maintain the power of a people and in particular that of one's own people. He personified the tough, uncompromising side of Afrikaner power. He not only fought the black nationalists but also Albert Hertzog's *verkramptes* who undermined his policies and threatened Afrikaner unity, the source of Afrikaner power. During the seventies he assumed almost complete control of the Afrikaner nationalist movement. Sadly, the more he succeeded, the less he was prepared to use that power in grappling with the rising crisis of apartheid. Afrikaner unity had become an end in itself. Separate development was the final answer. "*Ons het klaar gpraat*", he said during the Soweto riots of 1976.

Yet John Vorster always knew that a small embattled Afrikaner people clinging to a universally condemned apartheid policy could not survive alone over the long run. For that reason he sought to attract English support, abolished the most blatant forms of racial discrimination which became known as petty apartheid, launched his *detente* policy towards Africa and tried to persuade the West to reduce world pressure upon South Africa.

It was his "opening to Africa" which aroused the greatest interest and gave him the most satisfaction in his career. The collapse of the Portuguese empire in 1974 had created a dangerous power vacuum in South Africa. Could South Africa fill the breach by becoming a vigorous regional superpower, prepared to give generous development aid and in turn being accepted by the black African states as a stabilizing force?

Vorster thought so and was prepared to take considerable risks to achieve it. He believed that the conservative African states would accept South Africa provided he could deliver three things: an acceptable settlement both in Rhodesia and Namibia and a modification of apartheid. "Give us six months and see where South Africa would stand," he said by the end of 1974 and sparked off a frenzy of speculation.

As Robert Jaster, reputed to be African head of the CIA, noted in a fascinating study of South Africa's narrowing security options, Rhodesia was the major test for *detente*. To force the intransigent Mr Smith's arm and convince a sceptical Africa of South Africa's *bona fides* as an honest broker, Mr Vorster in 1975 withdrew the South African forces from Rhodesia, slowed down through traffic to Rhodesia and had the nationalist leader, the Reverend Sithole, released

from jail. Given Rhodesia's and Smith's popularity in South Africa, Vorster was quite courageous in these initiatives.

According to Jaster, *detente* began to falter in late August 1975, in the railway carriage on the Victoria Falls bridge when Vorster and his ally, President Kaunda, had finally brought together Ian Smith with Rhodesia's top black nationalist leaders, Nkomo, Sithole, Muzorewa and Mugabe. As Jaster puts it: "Serious dissension among the African nationalists (particularly between Nkomo and Mugabe) enabled Smith to hold out against making any concessions. Nor could South Africa apply heavy pressure on him, since the nationalists offered no credible grounds for assuming that they could provide a stable and orderly alternative to the Smith regime." Shortly afterwards President Nyerere persuaded the other Front Line presidents that peaceful change in Rhodesia was no longer attainable and that the strategy of intensified guerrilla war should be pursued.

If *detente* was already dead in the spring of 1975, South Africa's invasion of Angola during the summer buried it. The full story of Vorster's leadership in that affair still has to be told. Some highly-placed sources suggest that he succumbed to military pressure in approving the invasion while his closest adviser, Van den Bergh, was overseas. However, it was Vorster who decided to withdraw after the South African forces ran into stiff Cuban opposition. The decision was prompted by important military, as well as political, considerations – the Soviets were introducing into the battle sophisticated weaponry which South Africa could not match. Here Vorster showed courage and wisdom in curtailing an operation in which South Africa had become over-extended.

After Angola, South Africa simply had to come up with some real concessions with respect to Namibia. The West (and particularly an initially hostile Carter Administration) gave warning that it was unable to block sanctions against South Africa any longer. By early 1978 it looked as if Vorster had finally decided to go ahead with an internationally accepted settlement in Namibia. In my view he was the last white leader who enjoyed broad enough support to pull it off and justify it to his constituency. Perhaps he really would have settled had he not been overtaken by events in the course of 1978.

In internal policy Vorster was considerably less impressive. He moved far too slowly on the issue of Coloured citizenship and could not come to terms with

the existence of a large permanent black population in the cities.

Why did Vorster not do more? By 1977 he was enjoying the support of more than 80 percent of both Afrikaners and English-speaking whites. It was Vorster whom Afrikaners had in mind when approximately 60 percent of a sample said that they would support their leaders even if they acted in ways they did not understand or approve.

Three answers suggest themselves. Firstly there was in his time not any consensus among Afrikaners about major changes in the apartheid policies, Vorster was not prepared to risk a party split to force the pace of change. He himself was a conservative who did not have any great enthusiasm for starting the process of integration by, for instance, building in an integrated system of industrial relations (it is fair to assume that if in power Mr Vorster would not have been enthusiastic about the Wiehahn recommendations and would have toned them down) and a constitutional dispensation which would include Coloureds and Indians on a basis that smacked of power-sharing.

Secondly Vorster had an exaggerated sense of what the power and force of the state could achieve. Certainly he believed that the state was strong enough to crush any resistance. In this field he believed that the ends justified the means and he allowed the Security Police almost a free hand.

The use or condonation of questionable means ultimately led to Mr Vorster's downfall in the Information Scandal. Quite simply, Mr Vorster was persuaded by some slick operators that, by buying local and overseas newspapers and using other questionable methods, South Africa could gain a favourable reputation abroad – without having introduced major reforms. (The Erasmus Commission delivered its verdict but the jury of history is still out – was John Vorster perhaps compelled to take an unfair proportion of the rap and was that the real cause of his anger and bitterness in retirement?)

Lastly Mr Vorster did not move because he believed that playing for time was the best strategem. He told me a story which vividly demonstrated this aspect of his political temperament. In 1974, Mr Vorster said, he went to Mr Smith with a deal he had concluded with Pres. Kaunda and some other States (Britain?). He said to Mr Smith: "Sanctions will be lifted, the bridge will be opened and you will get a white government for another fifteen years. My advice to you is to take it."

BJ VORSTER AND THE SULTAN'S HORSE

“No,” replied Mr Smith, “I want a white government: for another 30 years.”

And so Mr Vorster, in trying to persuade Mr Smith, told him the fable of the Sultan's horse: A sultan had sentenced two men to death. Just as they were being dragged away, he remarked, he will commute the sentence of the man that could make my horse talk.” The next day one of the men was being dragged to the executioner to be beheaded. He saw the other man standing there free! He frantically shouted: “What did you tell the sultan? I said it was impossible to make a horse talk!”

“No,” said the other man, “I said to the Sultan I can teach a horse to talk. But I need a year. And he then let me go. You know,” the free man continued with a glint in his eye, “a lot can happen in a year – the damn horse can die or the Sultan can die.”

Mr Smith was not persuaded. Did John Vorster perhaps believe that playing for time could make a dreadful, intractable problem go away? A pity, for he was a consummate politician and leader who had the power and ability to steer South Africa to safer waters.

THE BEST OF FRONTLINE