

Adventure playground

Africans have good reason to be suspicious of British involvement in their affairs

Here's how one estate agency, promoting homes in Mark Thatcher's Cape Town suburb, Constantia, describes the benefits of living in South Africa. "A weak rand gives you tremendous buying power if you're paying with dollars or sterling," EscapeArtist.com <<http://www.EscapeArtist.com>> reveals. "Around R8,000 [£663] a month will do for a married couple. What kind of lifestyle will this buy you? A villa with a pool, a car and a daily maid... South Africa is one of the few places in the world where you'll find first world comforts and infrastructure, and third world prices on everything from food, to diamonds, to real estate ... South Africa has problems, but that's what makes for opportunity."

Africa, to the British upper classes, remains an adventure playground, a deer park and a treasury. And Constantia is one of those many enclaves of apartheid – to be found everywhere from Table Mountain to Mt Kenya – prospering in a post-apartheid continent. What happier roost could there be for Mark and his mother? Margaret Thatcher found that permitting British companies to break the sanctions against the apartheid regime turned South Africa's problems into our opportunities. When Mark was asked what he thought of his mother's position, he replied: "My sympathy is with the struggling white community."

In 2001, Lady Thatcher announced that she would spend part of every year in Constantia with her son. Here they could live, not far from Earl Spencer and Ian Smith, as the members of their adopted class lived in Britain before the second world war. For

some of their neighbours, that era has never passed. The language in the begging letter sent from prison by Thatcher's friend Simon Mann (Eton, Sandhurst, Scots Guards), comes straight from PG Wodehouse. "Smelly and Scratcher," he moaned, weren't helping their old chum. "It may be that getting us out comes down to a large splodge of wonga!"

Mann and Thatcher (Harrow, too thick for anywhere else) belong to a class which still believes it has a God-given right to oversee the lives of the Africans. Among Lady Thatcher's friends with homes on the slopes of Table Mountain was John Aspinall (Rugby, Oxford, Royal Marines), the gambling millionaire, zoo-keeper and remnant of that species of upper-class British fascist that used to keep the Duke of Windsor company. Aspinall believed that most of the human population should be culled by means of "benign genocide". He argued that "medical research should be funded into abortion, infanticide, euthanasia and birth control" and described his third wife as "a perfect example of the primate female, ready to serve the dominant male and make his life agreeable". Aspinall worked with Mangosuthu Buthelezi to undermine the African National Congress. He argued that South Africa should be split into 30 bantustans.

"Aspers" was the hub of a circle of rightwing extremists who sought to meddle in the affairs of Europe's former colonies. Robin Birley, the son of one of his closest friends, was mauled by one of Aspinall's tigers when he was 12, but this did their relationship no harm. Birley's mother left her husband for Aspinall's chum Sir James Goldsmith, and both Aspers and Birley (who inherited Annabel's, London's poshest nightclub, from his father) stood as candidates for Goldsmith's Referendum party. Some years ago, I had a furious row with Birley after he told me that he believed he had not just a right but a duty to give help to Renamo, the South African-backed force which terrorised the people of Mozambique.

Another of Aspinall's friends was the Spectator columnist Taki Theodoracopoulos. With Carla Powell, the wife of Lady Thatcher's former private secretary, he led the campaign in the British rightwing press to canonise Buthelezi. Taki once wrote of Kenya that "democracy is as likely to come to bongo-bongo land as I am to send a Concorde ticket to my children". He has complained that "Britain is being mugged by black hoodlums ... West Indians were allowed to immigrate after the war [and] multiply like flies". In 1999, Taki and Birley funded the campaign to free Augusto Pinochet. Their PR man was Lady Thatcher's old spin doctor Lord Bell, who worked for the South African National party in the 1994 elections, and is now representing Mark.

Ever since Cecil Rhodes seized Matabeleland, the British right's struggle for ideological control in Africa has been linked to its efforts to seize the continent's resources. Mann's network of nobs had its fingers in mines and oilfields all over Africa.

The mercenaries who provided muscle in return for mining concessions tried to use class connections to make their operations respectable.

Mann founded his company, Executive Outcomes, with the British businessman Tony Buckingham. Buckingham counted among his friends the privy counsellor and former leader of the Social Democrats, Lord Steel. Until 1997 when he resigned, Steel was a director of one of Buckingham's other African interests, a company called Heritage Oil and Gas. He said at the time that his resignation was due to the company's restructuring, but later reports said that he resigned because of its connections with Executive Outcomes.

All this is a long introduction to what is supposed to be a column about Darfur. My purpose is to show that Africans have every reason to be suspicious of British involvement in their affairs. There is no question that the British are, and always have been, "concerned" about Africa, but their concern remains a proprietorial one. When the Sudanese government claims that Britain is after its oil and gold, it is half right: even if the British government isn't, some of its prominent citizens are. Thatcher is said to be among them. Last week Mann's alleged accomplice, Nick du Toit, testified in court in Equatorial Guinea that Thatcher was among them. He said that Thatcher wanted to buy helicopters from him for "a mining operation going on in Sudan". Thatcher denies all such allegations. The Sudanese government appears to be trying to commit genocide by natural causes in Darfur. The Fur, Massaleet and Zagawa peoples are being driven from their homes just as the rains are making survival in the bush almost impossible. Its claim that 1,200 people have been killed is risible. The UN says 50,000 have died; a more comprehensive analysis by the Sudan specialist Eric Reeves suggests 200,000. It's a catastrophe, and it's likely, partly as a result of the UN's disastrous procrastination, to become far worse.

For once, the US and the UK governments appear to be on the right side, pressing Sudan more forcefully than the other members of the security council to disarm the Janjaweed militias and accept a large African Union peacekeeping force. We should support them. But they are hobbled by three massive credibility deficits. First, after the farce in Iraq and the sell-out in Israel, no Arab government will ever again trust them to intervene dispassionately. Second, the institutions they control – particularly the cannibalistic IMF – are responsible for more deaths every year in Africa than the Janjaweed. Third, Britain's colonial history is not yet over.

The British are still hated in Africa, and with good reason. Tony Blair might huff and puff about the continent being a scar on the conscience of the world, but while our own citizens still regard it as their personal fiefdom, it's hard to see why anyone who lives there should take him seriously.