

South Africa: The Enduring Divide

An enduring legacy of South African apartheid; STEPHANIE NOLEN offers a glimpse at two bankers who couldn't be closer - or farther apart

April 10, 2004
The Globe and Mail

Johannesburg, SOUTH AFRICA -- They are two young men driven by their careers. They arrive in the office, on the swank 17th floor of the Rand Merchant Bank tower, by 7 a.m., and they stay until long after nightfall. They run marathons to relax. They live in posh northern suburbs of Johannesburg, and they earn more money than either could have imagined a decade ago. They have adjacent offices, and they yell back and forth through the day, to the amused frustration of their secretary. They work intimately on major bank deals, conferring over confidential financial statements. They make the same hand gestures.

It's hard to imagine how James Formby and Toko Mncube could be closer - or farther apart.

South Africa marks 10 years of freedom from apartheid this month, and extraordinary changes have occurred since Desmond Tutu declared its citizens would be the "rainbow children of God." The governing African National Congress, the certain victor in next Wednesday's general election, has had remarkable success in tackling the poverty in which the black-majority population lived in 1994. Electricity, piped water, education and health care extend to almost every corner of the country. All vestiges of legal apartheid are gone.

And yet the most striking thing about South Africa, 10 years on, is the vast gulf that endures between its black and white citizens.

They are two nations occupying a single country. Only among children, at the increasingly mixed schools, is there any sign of colour-blindness.

The country has two elites, the black political figures and the white business titans. Cricket or rugby games on a Saturday afternoon draw an all-white crowd. At the soccer pitch down the road, fans are almost entirely black. Patrons at the jazz clubs in the heart of Johannesburg are almost all black; plays at Montecasino, a pleasure palace in the north of the city, attract white audiences.

And why? Well, take Mr. Mncube and Mr. Formby. Each admires the other as competent, professional, a good guy. And each comes from a past the other cannot fathom. They can talk all day about structuring a financial buyout. They never talk about race.

Mr. Mncube, 37, grew up in Ohlange, a brutally poor village in KwaZulu-Natal. His father was a telephone operator who scrimped and saved to send his children to high school. Mr. Mncube graduated at the top of his class and was accepted to the chemical engineering program at the University of Natal, a rare honour for a black student in the apartheid era. But the university took only two black students a year into that program, and they had their two already. Mr. Mncube spent a year in limbo before he was rescued by an American philanthropist who offered black South

Africans scholarships to a private high school in Andover, Mass. He arrived in winter, speaking only his native Zulu, to repeat the last year of high school. He did so well he won an engineering scholarship at Yale University.

And when Mr. Mncube returned to South Africa in 1992, the end of apartheid was looming. He worked for four years as an engineer before enrolling in an MBA program; there were no longer quotas on blacks. And for the past three years he has been the sole black professional in the 42-person corporate finance division at the bank. (There are, of course, black security guards, janitors and tea ladies.)

Could he have imagined this, back in Ohlange? The normally reserved Mr. Mncube laughs out loud. "Every single step of the way here has felt like a miraculous turn," he said, frankly.

He has no false modesty about the fact that he is very good at what he does. But he faces a set of challenges on the job that Mr. Formby never does. "It's still fairly white here," Mr. Mncube said with delicate understatement. "And it's not just the institution, it's the clients we deal with. There's still that element of distrust: when they see you as a black guy, they don't want to trust you and give you confidential information. And you have to get that level of trust with colleagues, which is an issue."

And when he goes down to the ground floor for coffee, he stands in line and listens to tables full of wealthy white men talk about how they can't get ahead in today's South Africa because they are not black. "They say they're joking," Mr. Mncube said dryly.

But he feels inured to such things. "The steps I've gone through have trained me to deal with it."

He has sat in on hiring committees trying to bring in more black bankers, and heard his colleagues reject someone as inappropriate for reasons he doesn't think are valid. "The way we look at things is totally different. Our frame of reference is totally different. I'll understand what a person is getting at . . . and I can see their potential. But they [his white colleagues] see what they want to see."

Still, Mr. Mncube has never discussed any of this with his partner, Mr. Formby, who opens a discussion about race in their workplace by drawing attention to the black tea lady, commenting on what a happy person she is, how she "brings tea with a smile every day."

Interactions between black and white South Africans tend to be limited to the workplace, he said. "Personal friendships take a lot longer . . . If I look at my close circle of friends, they come from a close background to mine."

Mr. Formby, 34, went to private school during the apartheid years and, of course, the friends he made were white. He earned an accounting degree at the University of Cape Town, articulated with Deloitte and Touche, and went off to Cambridge University in 1994, a time when many white South Africans were reassessing their futures.

"From 1985, I was convinced there was no positive future in staying in the country," he said. White South Africans saw educational standards plummet, crime skyrocket, and their standard of living begin to erode.

But he returned in the late 1990s and joined the bank, and in the past few years he has begun to feel

optimistic about his homeland. "I read Nelson Mandela's autobiography, and you know, for the first time in a long time I felt I could be proud of being South African."

He feels that because issues of "reconciliation are so emotional for both blacks and whites," the past 10 years have seen little true integration of the communities.

Mr. Formby also spoke about his personal commitment to trying to bring more non-white staff into the bank, but added that finding qualified people is like "looking for a needle in a haystack."

He said that he and Mr. Mncube never discuss race but that he has "watched quite carefully" as his black partner took over accounts with clients, and later checked with the clients to see how they felt. "They're very comfortable with me, so they'll tell me, and they like him. They say, 'What a good guy, he knows his stuff.' "

Mr. Formby said that the one time the issue of race came up with his partner was last year, when their team of bank workers planned an outing to the black township of Soweto. "We said, 'Toko, won't you please pick a restaurant for us, and guide us?' "

Mr. Formby still seems bemused that Mr. Mncube, who lives not in the township but in a ritzy suburb like his own, was put off by the request.