

Skeletons in the Rhodes Cupboard: What Should Be Done about Them?

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In January this year, I wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes, Dr David Woods, explaining that I had obtained the documents in my Department of Justice security file – number 3016 – after *THISDAY* newspaper published a list of the files and dubbed the names on the list as ‘the enemies of the apartheid state’.

Much of my file was about my time at Rhodes University – 1967 to 1970 – and my involvement in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the SRC. It was an absurd file, not often accurate and had me involved in such revolutionary activities as attending a memorial service for Martin Luther King. I wrote an article for *THISDAY* on the file, which is attached.

What I did not write in the article, but which alarmed me, was an item marked ‘GEHEIM’ (Secret). Item 49, dated 19 November 1970, stated: ‘His name appears on a list sent by the authorities of “Rhodes University” of students who have yet undertaken military training’. Not only was the information factually incorrect – I had actually spent nine months in the South African Navy in 1966 – but it confirmed in writing what many of us suspected at the time – that the Rhodes University authorities, or at least senior people in the university administration, actively collaborated with the apartheid regime and the Security Police, who in the Eastern Cape and Grahamstown were a particularly nasty and vicious bunch, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and various applications for amnesty have confirmed.

In my letter, I told David Woods that now that this collaboration had been confirmed, it was high time for the university to come clean about the levels of co-operation with the Security Police in the apartheid era. In my own case, this information was used to justify a banning order against me, which for some unexplained reason was not executed and subsequently withdrawn. Other students in my time at Rhodes University were detained and deported, presumably on much the same kind of information.

I also said that today Rhodes University was very much part of an open and democratic South Africa. ‘It portrays the image of always having been anti-apartheid, yet its administration, or elements of it, were collaborating with the Security Police, at the very least telling them about who they thought had not done military service’.

I also suggested that as the university celebrated its centenary consideration should be given to the appointment of a local truth and reconciliation committee into this shameful collaboration with the Security Police would be appropriate. 'Indeed, we need liberation from this dark period of the university's history', I wrote in the letter.

David Woods was cautious but correct in his reply: 'I am not in a position to speak on behalf of, or take responsibility for the Rhodes University authorities or individuals from the 1970s. I can only apologise for what was a totally unacceptable form of conduct. On the positive side, there is no doubt that the Rhodes University of 2004 is very different from 8 years ago, let alone from the 1970s'.

I fully accept his position as the Vice-Chancellor in 2004 but what should be done about 'totally unacceptable' forms of conduct by the university authorities in the dark days of apartheid? Paintbrush them out and pretend they didn't happen? Or confront and deal with those actions, even if some of the key perpetrators ended up with honorary degrees?

In my own experience, the first indication of the university's vacillation on apartheid came in the days before the 1967 NUSAS congress at Rhodes University. Despite months of planning, the Acting Vice-Chancellor Professor J.V.L. Rennie bowed down at the last moment to government and Security Police pressure to announce that no black (then 'non-white') students would be allowed to stay in the university residences. Although the accommodation of black students was always an issue at NUSAS congresses, this was the first time a 'liberal' university had taken such a stand. And it was to have long-term and far-reaching consequences. The black students demanded that the congress be adjourned but most of the white delegates decided that they would continue under protest. The black students felt this demonstrated a lack of commitment in the fight against apartheid and the compromise position of 'liberals', particularly white liberals.

One of those black delegates was Steve Biko. He and his colleagues effectively resolved then that a separate black student body was needed and by the following year they had decided to establish the South African Students Organisation (SASO).

The second demonstration of the university's compromise with government structures was the appointment, conduct and report of the Munnik 'commission' by the university council to investigate a student civil disobedience campaign against antiquated and unpopular residence rules. It used information supplied by the Security Police, published a secret report which white-washed the administration, and blamed NUSAS for the student revolt. The report was clearly defamatory of student leaders, but the Rhodes establishment defended it and embraced it. It wasn't 'a commission' despite the fact that Judge George Munnik was appointed to be chairman; it was a committee appointed by the council. It duly developed a wonderful conspiracy theory –

‘the voice was the voice of the SRC but the hand was the hand of NUSAS’ – despite the fact that 1000 out of 1200 students in residence at the time, well over 80 percent, participated in the civil disobedience campaign.

I shall return to the Munnik ‘commission’ later.

In the wake of the controversy after a selected release of the Munnik report, the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, Dr J.M. Hyslop, admitted to the *Sunday Times* that the Security Police obtained information about students from university files. ‘But this information is usually of routine nature which they could get from other sources anyway’.

The *Sunday Times* continued: ‘Dr Hyslop said he was aware that the Security Police sometimes requested information from the administration about certain students, but he told me they never approached him personally. “We are obliged to give the Security Police information about students if they ask, as indeed we are obliged to give the ordinary police information. But to say the university administration ‘works hand-in-glove with the Security Police’ is going too far. I personally do not like the idea of telephone tapping”’.

His reference to telephone tapping arose out of a disclosure in the *Sunday Times* the previous week that the secret Munnik ‘commission’ report had access to information about phone calls to and from the Rhodes University SRC offices. The ‘commission’ unsurprisingly did not disclose how the information was obtained, but in support of its accusation that NUSAS was to blame for the disturbances quoted in its report details of a ‘nine-minute phone call at 9.07 am from the farm at Howick’ (where the NUSAS executive was meeting) to the Rhodes SRC office’. It also said that I had made a phone call after 2 p.m. to ask about agenda for the student body meeting that was to be held that night. (At that stage, I was secretary-general of NUSAS’s educational wing, NUSED, and I was also a vice-president of NUSAS.) The ‘commission’ claimed, without the slightest evidence, that these calls were to give ‘instructions’ to the SRC.

The East London *Daily Dispatch* commented at the time – undoubtedly by its then editor, Donald Woods – that the 9.07 pm phone call was not disclosed by any SRC member but was ‘discovered’ by the commission itself. It continued: ‘Curiouser and curiouser. Now who could have told the commission about this phone call? Surely not the Special Branch. Although they are the only well-equipped phone-tapping agency, what interest would the Special Branch have in an investigation involving students. Obviously there must be some explanation. Maybe a member of the telephone department was co-opted at some stage on to the commission. Or maybe the members of the commission are psychic’.

These telephone calls were crucial to the ‘commission’s’ conspiracy theory, and Dr Hyslop did not like them, but he was happy to let the Security Police examine student files.

The *Sunday Times* also found that the chairman of the Rhodes council, Mr Justice J. Cloete, was not the slightest bit perturbed. Asked about Security

Police activity on the campus, he said: 'As a judge I do not interfere in police activities'. I would have thought that if a chairman of a university council thought he could not comment on secret police activities on his campus, he would have been instantly dismissed, but no such thing happened to Judge Cloete. Instead, he issued an outrageous statement defending the Munnik 'commission' report and then when he was publicly criticised – by me, I should disclose! – he said: 'I am not making any more statements. It would be improper for a judge to join issue on this level'.

What this incident demonstrated was that the university at the highest levels admitted and condoned the administration's collaboration with the security police. They were not even embarrassed by it. When what is known today about the police, and particularly the security police, this collaboration really is astonishing. While the student activists on the Rhodes campus and NUSAS throughout the country were fighting for a democratic South Africa, the Rhodes University authorities were co-operating with the other side, the people using every means possible to perpetuate white minority rule.

Perhaps it wasn't that surprising: on 13 February, 1971, it was reported that the government had made a grant of R100,000 to Rhodes University to help it out of its financial difficulties. This was announced after the Minister of Education, Senator J.P. van der Spuy, had gone to Grahamstown to acquaint himself personally with the university's development. After the Munnik 'commission' report was partly released, what did van der Spuy say at the Orange Free State congress of the National Party? He praised Rhodes as a university trying to 'keep its house in order'. 'The commission found NUSAS to be agitators. The University Council stood firm and fined students who were found guilty. I appreciate the Council's actions and the fact they stood firm. This is what the government wants', Van der Spuy said.

However, it wasn't only this level that the authorities supported the status quo. My father, Frank Streek, was appointed to the Rhodes University Council in the early 1970s. He says today that his position on the council was 'difficult. I had an activist son and an editor who delighted in tearing strips off the Rhodes University pussyfooters'. (He was managing director of the East London *Daily Dispatch* at the time.) He had been involved in studies of poverty levels, particularly in the Eastern Cape, and had helped in an Adam Raphael exposure in *The Guardian* about the appalling salaries paid by the British- and Quaker-owned Wilson Rowntree sweet factory in East London. Various academics, including some from Rhodes, had published studies about the poverty datum line (PDL) and the minimum income families needed to survive.

When he joined the university council he was shocked to find that black workers were paid below PDL wages and did not receive pensions. At one meeting where increases to professors were passed without comment, he and another progressive member of the council, CK Rowling, raised the issue of black salaries. But they were brushed aside, particularly by Kitty Richardson

(incidentally, a member of the Munnik 'commission') and Dickie Ginsburg of King William's Town, on the grounds that if Rhodes increased black wages this would disrupt everything in Grahamstown and the Eastern Cape.

My father says: 'The facts were there and the liberal Rhodes University, instead of setting an example, dodged things until I believe the students forced the issue and embarrassed the council by collecting money for African workers'.

What is clear from this account is that the Rhodes University authorities were far from progressive, and not only in their relationship with the security police and the government. And I don't believe this should be forgotten or deliberately paintbrushed out of the university's history.

I indicated I would return to the Munnik 'commission' report because even today I still find it extraordinary that the whole university council and the senate (which unanimously supported the report) could have fallen for such arrant nonsense. Any fool had to know at the time that the students in the residences, many of whom did not, incidentally, support NUSAS, were getting increasingly frustrated by the extraordinarily antiquated residence and dress regulations. The 1970 SRC had raised the matter regularly and I personally warned Dr Hyslop that there was going to be trouble.

While the youth worldwide were going through the so-called cultural revolution from the Beatles to free love onwards, Rhodes University was stoically trying to maintain obsolete dress codes. The incident that sparked the civil disobedience was after a boy was, horror of horrors, found in bed with a girl in Oliver Schreiner residence. When the authorities increased the penalties imposed by the warden of Oliver Schreiner, the students rebelled, invaded Hobson and then threatened a vote of no-confidence in SRC unless they took action. And that had little if anything to do with NUSAS and its leadership.

The Munnik 'commission', however, ignored the clear mismanagement of the situation by Dr Hyslop and his administration in order to develop the NUSAS conspiracy theory. The report was so weak and poorly argued that I was advised by a senior SC in Cape Town that it was defamatory of me and it had effectively made a finding that I was dishonest, but that I was advised not to sue the council because the publication of the full report was privileged and that in law I was remediless. The same applied to SRC President John Whitehead and other members of the SRC.

So, we had no legal case and we could only fight the report through the media. But how was it possible that the university council at the time could appoint someone like Judge George Munnik to head the committee? When I gave evidence to the 'commission', I insisted that I be given a copy of my evidence. Reading it some 33 years later, I am still astonished that someone with such right-wing and pro-Nationalist views could have been appointed by the council to head the 'commission', and the other members (Kitty

Richardson, the liberal Professor D. Hobart Houghton, and Grahamstown attorney A.P. Cole), the council and the senate could all endorse its report.

In my evidence, for instance, Judge Munnik expressed surprise that there was provision in the prison regulations for the education of prisoners and that NUSAS should have a fund for this purpose, particularly for political prisoners on Robben Island.

‘Have you ever been to Robben Island?’, he asked me.

‘No’, I replied.

Munnik: ‘I have been. It is a fantastic set-up. It is one of the best prisons I have seen from a structural point of view’.

Streek: ‘I don’t know whether they would allow me, as a NUSAS man, to visit’.

Munnik: ‘Each of the leaders has his own cell and desk and books. The only mistake was in allowing them to study through any university. Had it only been UNISA it would have been simpler’.

Remember this was an inquiry into the civil disobedience campaign at Rhodes!

Later he asked whether we didn’t have a joint executive meeting with SASO – a ridiculous assertion – and then he moved onto black students within NUSAS. Munnik asked me about coloureds and Indians and I responded: ‘They prefer to be called black rather than non-white’.

Munnik: ‘Most of them dislike being classed with the Africans’.

Later he explained: ‘Some authentic Africans cannot bear a coloured person’.

Earlier in the evidence I received other some pearls of wisdom from Judge Munnik: NUSAS would like to see a complete change in our society, wouldn’t they? A complete abolition of the present set-up in South Africa, and to see the rules completely changed, and black power come, because this would mean majority rule... If ever there was a society which is an authoritarian one it is the Bantu society, from Chaka onwards’.

Enough. Clearly, a residence revolt at Rhodes had far wider implications that anyone could have thought possible. Yet, this was the sort of person the university council appointed to head the ‘commission’ into the civil disobedience campaign.

Rhodes University has moved into a very different place now, as David Woods said in his letter to me, and we should welcome this. But there are some disturbing skeletons in our cupboard. They can be buried now but they should not be forgotten.