

The cartoonist's view of the South African national flag

F.G. Brownell

ABSTRACT: Cartoonists fulfil a role similar to that of the ancient court jester, wrapping the truth in a clothing of humour to make it palatable. Since its adoption, the national flag of South Africa has been the subject of, or incorporated into, cartoons of varying sophistication, dealing with emotions ranging from doubt, through euphoria, to despair. Cartoons are, indeed, a social commentary and when arranged chronologically provide an evolutionary picture of the changing views of society. The cartoons which illustrate this paper cover a three-year period stretching from March 1994 until July 1997.

The illustrations for this paper appear on Plates 7-10.

Life must have its lighter moments but learning to laugh at ourselves is one of the hardest lessons to learn, yet one of the most valuable. In his book on the work of the famous British cartoonist Carl Giles, creator of the "Giles Family," Peter Tory comments that cartoonists fulfil a role similar to that of the ancient court jester, wrapping the truth in a clothing of humour to make it palatable. No one could criticise the monarch outright, but his jester could make a witticism that was both informative and acceptable.¹

Since the acceptance of the design of the present South African national flag by the Transitional Executive Council on the evening of Tuesday 15 March 1994, it has been the subject of or incorporated into cartoons of varying sophistication, dealing with emotions ranging from doubt, through euphoria, to despair. One of the first pictures of the national flag which went out into the world was of Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer, the chief negotiators for the African National

Congress and the then National Party-controlled South African Government, holding up to the media the prototype of the flag which they had, a few minutes earlier, presented to the Transitional Executive Council for adoption.

Six months earlier the Multi-party Negotiating Council, which was drawing up a constitution which would take South Africa to full democracy, had appointed a National Symbols Commission which had invited the public to put forward their proposals for a new national flag. The results of this "creative participation of the people" met with little enthusiasm and the same fate befell the next phase in the search for a new national flag, when the proposals by graphic design studios were also rejected out of hand.

It is not surprising then that one of the first cartoons of the new national flag, which appeared in *The Sowetan* on Thursday 17 March 1994, depicted a somewhat sceptical crowd looking on under a cloud of question marks as Cyril and Roelf walked past carrying the new flag, with Cyril saying: "They'll get used to it Roelf" (Fig. 1).

The *Cape Times* of the same date carried a cartoon depicting a jogger dressed in a flag-inspired running vest passing two bystanders, with the caption "Actually, I prefer it to the protea" (Fig. 2), while the *Daily News* depicted a father, mother and child beneath the flag, with the father commenting "Even the AWB is represented - the big green Y for Terre Blanche's green Y-fronts!" (Fig. 3). This was a reference to Eugene Terre Blanche, leader of the Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement), an organisation to the right of the political spectrum, who some time earlier had been reported as having taken a fancy to an English-speaking *Sunday Times* reporter, despite his opposition to all things English, and having been found wearing green Y-front underpants outside her place of abode.

With its prominent Y-shaped central motif - symbolising convergence and unification - the design of this flag is unlike that of any other national flag. It is not surprising then that initial reaction from the public tended to be guarded, and that the underpant theme found its way into cartoons and comments both locally and overseas.

A cartoon in the *Sunday Times* three days later had a bystander remarking that the flag is "up the pole" (Fig. 4). This clearly alluded to the slang meaning of this phrase, rather than to the physical presence of the flag at the head of the flagpost. In Hogarth's column, which was published above this cartoon he remarks: "The unveiling of the new national flag has elicited a variety of comments but none more bizarre than those from the AWB leader... He said that the flag was confirmation that the Antichrist was about to rule South Africa."

In contrast, in a cartoon from the British *Guardian*, reproduced in the local *Weekly Mail and Guardian* the cartoonist Steven Bell had the then British Prime Minister, John Major, wearing Y-front underpants over his suit trousers while telephoning President Mandela and saying: "Nelson! May I be the first to congratulate you on your brilliant new flag!!" (Fig. 5).²

The underpant theme was revisited in the *Sunday Times Magazine* of 3 April 1994 by Barry Ronge, a critic and commentator on the arts, who wrote :

There's been a nation-wide search for designs, a year's work by a group presumably seasoned in the traditions of heraldry and symbolism, and what do we get? A Y-front flag with more mismatched colours than you'll find in a hooker's make-up kit.

I've read all the expository blah they published along with the flag's unveiling, the converging paths from the past and the broad band leading into the future. And who knows better than I the pressures of political correctness that require so many bits of so many other flags to be represented. But they can talk till they are blue (or perhaps multi-coloured) in the face, they cannot convince me that, with all the options open to them, we had to have a flag that looks like the underpants of a prone harlequin.

Can you imagine our athletes pitching up at the next Olympics waving this thing on high? I can see the slogan already - "You've seen the jockstrap. Now meet the team."

Did they give any thought to how we are going to describe it? The great flags of the world have got lovely snappy titles like Old Glory, the Stars and Stripes, the Union Jack, the Tricolour and even the Maple Leaf. When people talk about the red, white and blue you know what they are talking about.

But how are we going to describe this one? Old Undone Zip? Old Y-Flies?

... they tell us we are stuck with it for the next five years. All I can say is that if this is an example of what negotiated consensus can produce at the level of flag design, heaven help us when they get down to designing a new society.

This scathing comment was accompanied by a cartoon of Pieter Dirk Uys, one of our finest satirists in the guise of his famous drag character Evita Bezuidenhout, carrying the flag (**Fig. 6**). As it happens Evita took to the flag like a duck to water and did much to promote its popularity!

By the time the new national flag was formally taken into use on Wednesday 27 April 1994, the day on which South Africa's new constitution came into force and the first fully democratic elections commenced, initial criticism was being replaced by a more positive sentiment and the Afrikaans language newspaper *Beeld* carried on its front page a full-colour cartoon of the then State President, F.W. de Klerk, and future President, Nelson Mandela, jointly carrying the new national flag and leading the nation over the bridge into the "new" South Africa. The faces of a number of other leading political figures can be identified in the crowd which follows them, while Eugene Terre'Blanche and Ferdie Hartzenberg - proponents of Afrikaner self-determination and an own "Volkstaat" or

"homeland," look down into the chasm into which one of their followers has disappeared (Fig. 7). This side-show subtly casts doubt of the feasibility of the "Volkstaat" ideal. In the same newspaper there appeared on the leader page a hand holding aloft the national flag, breaking out of a gift-wrapped Easter egg (Fig. 8).

On the same day the *Pretoria News* represented the elections by means of a cartoon of a leaking ship with sails as patched as a beggar's coat sailing from the burning shore of the past into the unknown future (Fig. 9). The depiction of the national flag at the masthead would seem to be the first example of its use in a maritime capacity. The caption was: "I know it's leaky, Captain, but it's all we've got" This cartoon, which covered a large part of the leader page, was placed immediately beneath an article which commented that "These elections are going to be strung together with chicken wire and chewing gum, but at least they'll be elections.... The process this week is going to be flawed and it is going to be shot through with anomalies which will seem, to European or North American eyes, as grotesque as a three Rand note."

The nation turned out in its millions to vote and, as predicted, there was electoral chaos in many areas. No one, to this day, knows with certainty how many people voted that week, and for which party, so it must have been with their tongues in their cheeks that the Independent Electoral Commission juggled the figures and certified the elections as having been "substantially free and fair." What is important is that the elections were held in a spirit of general good will and that they ushered in a broadly-based South African democracy - a word which is, itself, open to many interpretations.

In the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* of 29 April - 5 May 1994, which was published over the weekend between the hoisting of the new national flag and the inauguration of President Mandela, we find a cartoon of the previous national flag consigned to the dustbin, the new flag flying and the smiling face of the incoming President in the breaking dawn (Fig. 10);

Tuesday 10 May 1994 saw the inauguration of Nelson Rohihlahla Mandela as President of South Africa and head of a Government of National Unity. A cartoon which appeared in the *Pretoria News* that day (Fig. 11), showed a smiling president holding in his arms the "new" South Africa, represented by a baby wrapped in the national flag. A caption to this cartoon would have been superfluous. The drawing said it all!

After taking power the Government of National Unity - at times referred to by the acronym GNU, which is also the common name for the Black Wildebeest (*Connochaetes gnu*) - embarked on an ambitious Reconstruction and Development Programme, commonly referred to as "the RDP," which was aimed at bringing to previously disadvantaged communities the benefits of social upliftment in the form of housing, running water, modern toilet facilities, improved health and welfare services, widespread electrification, the construction of basic sporting facilities and a host of other services which, in the process of implementation, would also provide much needed employment opportunities.

Despite some noteworthy successes and achievements the RDP was rather slow in 'getting off the ground' and has not yet been a resounding success. As a result the press has tended to focus on both perceived and actual lack of delivery, rather than on achievements. Consequently the RDP has been called many things - from jocular remarks such as "Rumours, Delays and Promises" to less savoury political jibes, such as the "Revenge of the Dark People."

A cartoon on the front page of the *RDP News*³ showed Jay Naidoo, then Minister in the Office of the President, responsible for implementing the programme, standing on the national flag and juggling the priorities (Fig. 12), while a festive season cartoon which appeared in the *City Press* on Sunday 18 December 1994, showed President Mandela in the role of "Father Christmas" driving a horse-drawn cart loaded with RDP "goodies" into the new year. The national flag flies proudly from a flag-post attached to the fence dividing 1994 from 1995 (Fig. 13). Horse-drawn carts are widespread in the rural areas, while the *City Press* has a mainly black readership, so it is clear to which section of the population this cartoon was intended to convey a message of hope.

On the same day the *Sunday Times* carried a cartoon depicting a smiling black Father Christmas with his arms outstretched, clothed in the national flag, flying through the air on a sleigh adorned with African beadwork and ethnic designs, drawn by a springbok - our much maligned national animal - and a Gnu, in obvious reference to the Government of National Unity (Fig. 14). This cartoon appeared on a page of Christmas short stories with a transitional theme, each of them precisely 50 words long. Among the themes dealt with in the more than 1500 entries, were the RDP, affirmative action, the gravy train, violence and deprivation. Treatment of these themes ranged from the cynical and brutal to the humorous, compassionate and optimistic. The cartoon itself conveys a happy message but, as has so often happened in ignorance of the correct usage, the chilli red band of the national flag is depicted to the viewer's right, and not to the left as it should be when the flag is draped vertically.

Five days later in the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* of 23 December 1994 - 5 January 1995 there appeared a cartoon giving a rather cynical summary of the politics of the previous year under the caption "Waiting for the gold at the end of the rainbow." The government had, the article stated, "delivered many bold ideas - but nothing concrete yet" (Fig. 16). The cartoon touches on sensitive matters such as the non-payment of municipal services, the problems of the election, crime, the bogged-down RDP, the Volkstaat and differences within the GNU. Despite these difficulties, a happy President is depicted in the upper right-hand corner with the national flag flying proudly from one of the towers of the Union Buildings in Pretoria.

On the sporting front 1995 proved to be a good year for South Africa. Our team won the Rugby World Cup and the national flag was in evidence everywhere. One of the crazes which swept the country was of people painting their faces with the design and colours of the national flag. The flag was painted either spread horizontally or draped vertically and a cartoon poster of a young

African child with painted face, symbolising South Africa, adorned virtually every airport building, rugby stadium and other venue frequented by the thousands of enthusiasts and players who followed the series (Fig. 15).⁴ There were similar commemorative posters depicting the other participating countries.

A cartoon which appeared in the *Pretoria News* of 26 May 1995 shows "Lofty," the Pretoria-based Blue Bull's Rugby Team's cartoon mascot, with cap and jacket adorned with the national flag and loaded with supporters' paraphernalia, obviously having just returned from an "away" match but having led his wife to believe that he had been attending a conference! (Fig. 17).⁵

The same euphoria was experienced as a result of the successes of the South African cricket team and in the run-up to and subsequent winning of the Africa Cup of Nations by South Africa's "Bafana Bafana" soccer team. Here too there were waving flags and painted faces almost everywhere.

However, the euphoria of the post-election honeymoon was beginning to dissipate and foreign investment was not forthcoming to anything like the anticipated extent. The Rand began slipping faster than it had done in the past and cartoons started conveying a more sombre and cynical message. On the front page of the Afrikaans-language newspaper *Beeld* of 27 April 1996, two years to the day after the national elections, we find a cartoon of "John Citizen" being squeezed till his eyes are bloodshot by a hand depicted in the design and colours of the national flag (Fig. 18). The same page reported a rise in the bank rate and petrol price and carried a prominent photograph of Sam Shilowa, Secretary-General of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), with his clenched fist in the air, demonstrating against the proposed Labour Relations Act, outside the Gauteng Provincial Legislature. On the second page of the same newspaper a prominent headline announced that the African National Congress' radical gestures were costing it the trust of the rest of the world.

The alarming increase in the tempo of emigration of highly-skilled workers from South Africa; was highlighted in the *Pretoria News* "Business Report" of 17 October 1996. In the "Personal Finance" section of the *Pretoria News Weekend* edition of 2 November 1996, under the headline "Heavyweight Currency Stakes" the world's major currencies were depicted flexing their muscles, while a puny figure dressed in the South African national flag vest represented the state of our currency. An article on the same page stated that pressure was mounting on the government to ease exchange controls as the Rand's value evaporated (Fig. 19).

The fall in the value of our currency had been the subject of a cartoon in the *Pretoria News* the previous day, of the Rand not only "going to hell," but breaking right through hell (Fig. 20). Since the beginning of that year the Rand had lost more than a third of its value.

A month later the Business Section of the *Sunday Times* carried an article with the caption "Going overseas? Don't forget your begging bowl," which pointed out that the new daily limit imposed by the Government on persons travelling overseas effectively reduced the overall amount of money they could

take out of the country. This article was accompanied by a cartoon of a young South African, wearing a cap in the design and colours of the national flag, standing on the pavement in London with Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament in the background, holding a begging board with the inscription "10 Rand to the £ Please Help... God bless" (Fig. 21). The Rand had not yet reached that unhappy rate of exchange, but seemed to be heading that way. It has since shown a measure of recovery but is nowhere near the two Rand to the pound sterling that I can remember!

The rising crime rate, which has included a number of thefts from Police Headquarters was depicted in a cartoon which appeared in *The Sowetan* of 5 February 1997, which showed a station commander arriving at work to find the duty officer asleep behind his desk, with the entire police station having been stolen, with the exception of the toilet and the flagpost flying the national flag (Fig. 22).

A tattered national flag flies in the foreground of a heavily barricaded home, in a cartoon which appeared in the *Sunday Times* on 9 February 1997 (Fig. 23). Overhead flies an airliner with an emigrant waving goodbye from the window. This accompanied an article by Stephen Robinson, written after spending seven years overseas as a foreign correspondent, which "tested a frightening theory that Nelson Mandela and the ANC had made it a terrible place." Robinson ends the article, which contained a variety of viewpoints, with the statement: "... having lived in the old South Africa during the riots and repression of P.W. Botha's state of emergency, I know it (South Africa) is a hell of a lot better than we had dared to hope."

Lax security and a theft from Deputy-President Thabo Mbeki's home was the subject of a "Madam and Eve" cartoon in the *Pretoria News* on 31 March 1997, in which an ordinary citizen who is shown as having gained access to the President's office unhindered, asks him for his autograph. The President does not appear personally in this cartoon but the use of the table flag clearly alludes to his embodiment of South Africa (Fig. 24).

The level of crime is a major cause for concern in the country and a unique crime prevention project to take a message of concern from the residents of South Africa to the President used postcards depicting the national flag riddled with bullet holes (Fig. 25).⁶ This is clearly not a cartoon but might well have been!⁷ In the circumstances it seemed appropriate to include it here. The printed message on the back of the card reads:

Dear President Mandela,

All is not well in the state of South Africa. Crime has reached epidemic proportions.

It is raping our optimism. It's murdering our hope. It's tearing at the fabric of our society.

You have sacrificed all to achieve 'one nation, one soul' and now it's being gunned down in cold blood.

Out of desperation, fear and anxiety I am writing to you on behalf of my family, my friends and all the innocent people of South Africa. Please make crime your priority today!

Although postcards only required a signature, many contained short personal messages to the President. Between 150 000 and 160 000 of these cards were deposited on the lawns of the Union Buildings by parachutists and a large truck on Friday 11 July 1997. However, the President, who has his Pretoria office in the Union Buildings was not there to get the message. He was in England receiving the Freedom of the City of Oxford.⁸

The message on these cards is sombre, but perhaps there is light at the end of the tunnel. In an article in the *Sunday Times* magazine "Inside" on 23 February 1997, Barry Ronge speculates that flying in the face of current perception, it might be that the "good old days" are just about to begin. The article is illustrated by means of a cartoon of a "King of Hearts" playing card in which the half white and half black figure is vested in the national flag. The 'K' is, however, replaced by a question mark, which fortuitously links this final illustration to the first one which I showed you (Fig. 26).

Commenting on the difference between two official functions which he had attended at the presidential guest house in Pretoria, one under the previous dispensation and the second hosted by Deputy President Mbeki, Ronge remarks that what had once been a celebration of privilege, now seemed to him to be a celebration of diversity.

The latter function was the launch of Business Arts South Africa, a combined project between "big business" and the arts fraternity, which has a widely representative board. He reports that the Deputy President spoke about the role of the arts with a fervour and conviction he has never heard from any of this country's leaders - past or present - and that as he made his way home, despite the inevitable gunshots in the night, he really did have the feeling that the "good old days" are not gone, but just beginning. These remarks were in rather shrill contrast to what Ronge had written two years earlier.

This country, with its rich cultural diversity and latent potential in so many fields can, and hopefully will, overcome the difficulties which beset it. There is a broadly-based spirit of good will and a national flag which has become an icon synonymous with the country.

It can make us proud, it can make us laugh and it can make us cry, but that is life. The cartoonists seem to have captured it embodying most of these emotions.

Acknowledgements

Although most of the illustrations are from the author's own collection, he is obliged to Theo Stylianides for providing material which appeared in newspapers published in the Cape.

Notes

1. Tory, P., *The Giles Family : the illustrated history of Britain's best-loved family*, p. 36.
2. "Year in Review," *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, 23 December 1994 - 5 January 1995.
3. *The Reconstruction and Development Programme Newsletter*, No. 13, March/April 1996.
4. This poster was by Cliffie Brown of Audio Images and this example is taken from the cover of *A.P.T. Comment*, June 1995, the official journal of the Association of Professional Teachers.
5. The national flags have been highlighted in colour.
6. *Record*, Central Pretoria, 2 May 1997.
7. A cartoon of draft flag designs which appeared in the Sunday Times of 7 November 1993, when the Multi-Party negotiations were in progress, indeed depicted one of the flags riddled with bullet holes.
8. *Pretoria News* and *Saturday Star*, 12 July 1997.

Frederick Gordon Brownell

Fred Brownell was born at Bethlehem in the Free State and has an MA degree in History. After service in the Department of Immigration, he joined the Bureau of Heraldry in 1977 and became State Herald of South Africa on 1 May 1982. The national flag of South Africa is derived from a sketch which he prepared while attending the XV ICV in Switzerland during August 1993.

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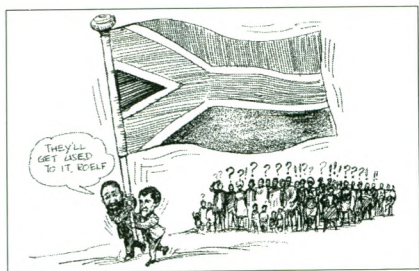


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

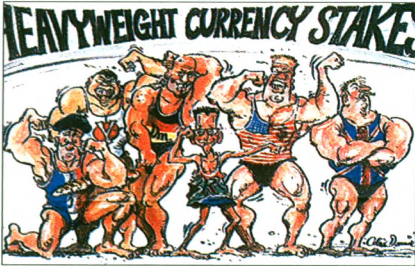


Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

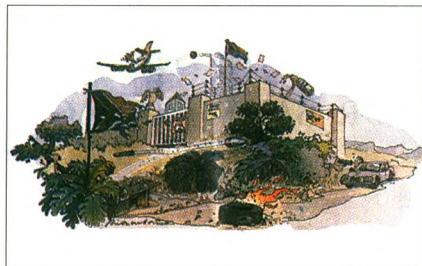


Figure 23

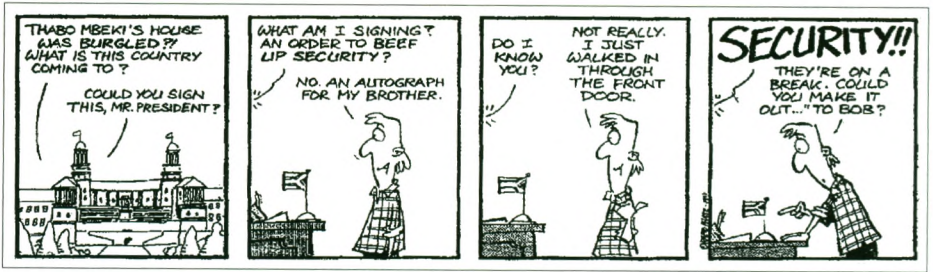


Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26