

South Africa debate at Aitken

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South Africa is moving towards a one-man, one-vote government with equal rights for all. That was the premise debated Tuesday among a group of Canadian and African students and the South African Consul.

Walter Baker, the South African consul based in Montreal, was paying a courtesy visit to Fredericton this week. In addition to discussing trade matters with public officials, he spent a considerable amount of time on campus.

The discussion-session Tuesday took place in Aitken House. The unplanned forum developed when more students than expected turned up for a private function.

Baker first stated his premise that South Africa is moving away from its Apartheid policy by implementing major reforms, and has the eventual goal of giving all racial groups the vote. He complained that the country has not been given enough credit for changes already made such as the new tricameral parliament which allows so-called Coloureds (of mixed race) and Indians a say in their own affairs.

When asked why protests and violence are now erupting, Baker said that part of the reason was that Blacks (who form the great majority) still have no political rights under the new constitution. "...but," said Baker, "things must be done in a measured way."

When asked why political rights could not be immediately given to the Blacks, Baker said the situation was very complex and change must be worked out at the discussion table.

Baker outlined his view of the country's complexity by explaining some of its history. The Whites and Blacks both arrived in a nearly empty country centuries ago. He said that the Blacks were composed of many tribes (the Zulus being the largest) who settled in their own areas. Many Whites took to farming and bought land from the Blacks; many Blacks worked as migrant labourers on this land and were thus considered, "temporary residents" in the White areas, continued Baker.

Earlier this century, said Baker, it was decided that harmony could be best maintained by creating separate areas for racial groups where each could look after itself. This policy

called "Separateness" or "Apartheid," conceded Baker, has not worked. He said the government recognises the problems with Apartheid and is committed to creating a new system where races will be integrated.

Many participants in the discussion challenged Baker and cited the cases of Nelson Mandela, imprisoned leader of the outlawed African National Congress (ANC), and the Black "homelands" as proof that the government is not as committed as Baker stated.

Mandela was imprisoned for crimes including the possession of a large volume of arms, "48 000 hand grenades and many machine guns," said Baker. "He has been twice offered amnesty," but has refused to eschew violence continued Baker. The amnesty was offered so that Mandela could sit at the table discussing South Africa's future, said Baker, but it would be reasonable for a man to denounce violence, even if he did not mean it, before being freed.

One of the African participants said, "Mandela should not be considered in isolation," and said that there may be no alternative left but violence. Another student pointed out that the Afrikaans Whites themselves had taken up arms against their British colonial rulers near the turn of the century. One student said that Mandela was only joking when he said he would, "Wipe out the Afrikaans," and compared this to Ronald Reagan's television slip when he said he was going to bomb Russia.

Several students criticized the so-called "Black

"things must be done in a measured way"

Homelands" saying they were desert areas and were put together in a piecemeal way. Baker responded that these areas were the ancestral areas of the tribes, and that the South African government had bought pieces of land to give to the homelands when this was requested by the homeland leaders. Baker also said one homeland in particular was not a desert.

Baker said that of the ten homelands, four were considered completely independent nations by South Africa (other countries do not

recognize them, however). The other six are self governing. In the recently-announced reforms, said Baker, residents of the independent homelands would be given dual citizenship and South African citizenship would be restored to residents of the self-governing homelands.

Much of the discussion centred around economic issues. Baker said that when Blacks were kept separated in defined areas, the standard of living could be propped up by housing subsidies and other public support. Now, continued Baker, Blacks are more free to move and this has resulted in accelerating urbanization and a resulting reduction in the standard of living. Baker cited this as one of the causes of violence.

"there may be no alternative left but violence"

Baker said that regardless of the public political statements condemning South Africa made by other African nations at the U.N., most of them benefit substantially from South Africa by way of trade. Baker described the customs union among neighbouring countries in southern Africa which, among other things, includes an electrical and transportation network. Baker said that 48 of the 51 nations in Africa trade with South Africa, although many do not want this publicly known.

Baker said that wages for Blacks are rising faster than those of Whites; he said they are catching up but admitted there is still a substantial disparity. He said a minimum wage law is being, "worked on." In at least one company, Baker continued, which has a fourteen-level wage scale, a Black is at level eleven.

Baker started to compare South African Black wages with those in other African countries, but several participants objected to these comparisons as, "unfair."

The issue of Namibia (South West Africa) which South Africa has administered since the Second World War, came up for discussion. Baker said the government was, "committed to their independence." He said though that it was concern about communist connections ("the Cuban connection") that was preventing the immediate



start of negotiations. Upon the mention of communism, several participants said that this was always used as an excuse: "just because you get arms from a country does not mean you support their political views." Baker retorted that there were at least one case in Africa where a Marxist regime was established, and the revolutionaries had previously used communist-supplied arms. Strong opposition was expressed by some of the participants to the use of examples from other parts of Africa.

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One of the central questions asked, given Baker's assurances that the South African government was committed to ending Apartheid, was: Why can political rights not be given to the Blacks right now?

Baker gave two basic reasons why, in his eyes, this could not be done. Firstly he said that the nation contained many minorities (the Zulus are the largest, the Whites are the second largest and many smaller

Black tribes follow), so any political structure must make sure all the minorities are protected. The "Westminster system" (i.e. the British-style parliamentary system) would also not work because loyalty to tribal chiefs is still ingrained in the African way of life. In addition, he said there was still a minority of whites who were conservative and thus opposed change; this posed potential political problems for President Botha's government if change were to go too fast.

At the end of the session, many of the African students expressed skepticism. "Maybe if I didn't have experience (in Africa) it would not be so easy to be skeptical," said one.

In addition to the discussion in Aitken house, Baker spoke in political science classes and was interviewed for CHSR-FM. That interview will be heard on the Focus program to be heard Saturday supper-time within the next couple of weeks.

Walter Baker has been South African Consul in Montreal since the spring. He held previous posts in Iran (during the revolution) and at The Hague; in addition he has worked in the diplomatic service dealing with the South African homelands.