

Under The Skin



Peter Honey

## A PRIZE BEYOND RACE

I had the pleasure recently of dining beside the exuberant and irrepressible Cheryl Carolus, outgoing CEO of SA Tourism, former ambassador to the Court of St James and one-time acting secretary-general of the ANC.

There were about 10 of us and the conversation drifted far and wide, touching at one point on the truth commission. I found myself saying impulsively and with some heat that I resented the commission's amnesty provision because it undermined legal process and let apartheid-era criminals off the hook. "We should have tried the bastards," I grumbled.

Carolus was unfazed and defended the commission with practical simplicity: "But we had to do it that way to get people to come forward."

It's an old debate, of course, which has run a circular course from the day the commission was mooted. But, later, thinking about what she said, and the calm way in which she said it, I saw the irony: here was I, scarcely scathed by apartheid, the angry one, while she, who had been detained, restricted and generally brutalised by the system, was happy to put it behind her and plunge positively forward.

How often are actual victims – of crime, racism, war, genocide or whatever – more prepared to forgive, or at least better understand, their oppressors than outsiders, be they relatives or total strangers? Vengeance, the proverb goes, is a dish best served cold, which could mean several things but which I interpret as saying that if you want revenge, leave it to those not directly harmed because they will go about it with cooler determination.

Is this why one so often finds great warmth and tolerance among the poorest of our country who were, and continue to be, most battered by apartheid, while the most strident and

angry people tend to be the educated elite, often youngsters who never took part in the struggle and perhaps feel guilty because of it?

I don't know if that is true. But interesting observations about the relationship between education and political tolerance come from US- and Stellenbosch-based political scientist James L Gibson, who spent several years researching reconciliation and the truth commission. He details his findings in a book, *Overcoming Apartheid*, released recently by the Human Sciences Research Council.

Comparing research he conducted in 25 countries, Gibson found that political tolerance increases with education – except in SA, where the reverse is true among black people.

Noting the disparity, Patrick Laurence, editor of the Helen Suzman Foundation's journal, *Focus*, speculates perceptively that it is because educated black people are more aware of the injustices of their social condition, and can see more clearly the subjugating purpose of "bantú education".

Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that race continues to be an alienating obsession with many South Africans, and thus a hobble on our national confidence, which in turn undermines the confidence of foreigners to invest here. Hopefully the anger will subside as more people realise that we cannot create social capital by shaking sticks at each other.

Meanwhile, we should treasure people like Carolus, a sparkling exception to the archetypal elite. Her buoyant, can-do approach to life and business exemplifies those rare struggle-era leaders who understand that true liberation depends on expanding the economic pool to the benefit of all, instead of sniping over the racial ownership of shrinking resources. ■