



## Affirmative action is **class-based and exclusive**

Affirmative action is neither a rejection of non-racialism, nor a sudden affirmation of Africanism within the ANC. Rather, it epitomises an ideological tension between nativity – meaning ways of thinking that are innate rather than acquired – and non-racialism that has plagued the discourse from its very inception in the nineteenth century. MCEBISI NDLETYANA analyses the history around these opposing forces and the effect it has on the redress policy.

WHEN THE ANC WAS FORMED in 1912, it was racially exclusive and only opened up to all races as recently as 1985. Yet, this did not make the pre-1985 ANC racist. ANC founders were wholly Euro-centric, and maintained good relations with the white folk. The exclusiveness simply reflected a loss of faith in the liberal agenda and a shift towards a new belief in self-reliance and action rather than the reliance on white politicians to agitate on behalf of black Africans.

Throughout its existence, the ANC was neither purely non-racial, nor exclusivist. Rather, the two ideological strands fused into a hybrid, especially after 1950. African nationalism was re-defined. Euro-centricity made way for Afro-centricity. The ANC retained cross-racial alliances and embraced non-racial citizenship but still excluded non-Africans from its membership. The exiled ANC actually sought to look even more African in order to please the African leadership on the continent and to give the ANC an undoubtedly African identity.

Frankly, the nationalist discourse remained largely distrustful of non-Africans. This repeatedly surfaced when non-racial membership was discussed in the ANC, both in 1969 and 1985. After all, ANC thinking defined apartheid primarily as oppression of Africans while the other races enjoyed apartheid privileges, albeit in different ways. The commitment of these other groups to

the liberation of Africans was questioned. But the ANC could not remain exclusive in the light of non-Africans joining its non-racial military-wing, Umkhonto We-Sizwe, an indication of their willingness to die for the cause of African freedom.

Yet, even this self-sacrifice proved insufficient a reason to grant non-Africans full membership. The 1969 conference resolved to allow them to serve in organisational committees, but would not elect non-Africans into decision-making structures, especially not onto the National Executive Committee (NEC). But the increasing non-racial character of the resistance movement back home would force the exiled ANC to make a full concession at the 1985 conference – not without limitations though. The top three positions of the organisation – president, general secretary and treasurer – were to be reserved for Africans only.

Affirmative action, therefore, is a reflection of ideological contestation within the nationalist discourse. To argue that this policy shows a sudden Africanisation of the ANC, as Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert does, shows a gross misreading of the history of African nationalism in South Africa.

In the same vein, the nationalist discourse has always made a connection between citizenship and the possession of material resources. This was particularly pronounced in the 1950s, but highly contested. This

eventually led to a split and the formation of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). The latter wanted ownership of resources to be restored wholly to Africans, whilst the ANC preferred common ownership. But the issue of redress for Africans, in particular, would increasingly gain urgency within the ANC.

The ANC's 1970s resistance to the adoption of the term 'black' was motivated by concerns for post-apartheid redress. This term homogenised the political experience of the three groups – African, coloured and Indian – which underplayed their varying experience under apartheid. It also insinuated equal claims to post-apartheid redress, without taking into account the severity of racial oppression on Africans. This question assumed even greater urgency from the mid-1980s as the negotiations on the post-apartheid dispensation gained ground.

The problem with affirmative action and the redress regime in general, is its class bias towards the middle and upper classes. The indigent and working class are excluded from redress, as they are shunted aside towards social grants, which barely help them survive. Redress, although focusing on race, should cut across classes. Broad-based empowerment, for one, provides a remarkable base to build upon further redress mechanisms. ●

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