

## AN OPEN LETTER

**By Esau du Plessis (formerly Co-ordinator of the Boycott Outspan Action), to Sietse Bosgra, author of the report on the Netherlands *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 3, International Solidarity, Part 1*, published by South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET). My open letter is therefore directed both to Sietse Bosgra and SADET.**

The reason for writing is that I would like to see substantial rectifications of the report insofar as it refers to the Boycott Outspan Action (BOA) and to me personally. Sietse Bosgra has hugely distorted facts by means of omissions and wrong information. Some points can even be referred to as a gross falsification of history. Of course, I accept readily that this period of the history of the international solidarity should be preserved for future generations. However, needless to say it is only worth preserving if a factually true record is preserved.

At the outset I am greatly surprised that S. Bosgra was asked in the first place to write such an important document. After all, he represented only one of the solidarity movements in the Netherlands and he was the very last of these to concern himself with the anti-apartheid struggle. He is therefore to say the least an interested party and he unashamedly did not even attempt to show any degree of impartiality or objectivity. In my considered opinion it would have been far better if SADET had asked a representative of every Dutch anti-apartheid movement to deliver a document. These documents could then have been either combined by an objective outside observer or they could have been published as separate chapters or contributions in the report. In my talks to journalists and other persons in the Netherlands who were involved in the struggle, I found general agreement that Sietse Bosgra was the last person who should have been asked to write this report. It is therefore inevitable that he wrote the report to the advantage of his own organization, KZA, and to the disadvantage of the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement (AABN) and the Boycott Outspan Action (BOA). However, it is only with the latter that I will concern myself in this writing.

Before embarking on a point by point demolition of Bosgra's report, I would like to make some comments on his general introduction entitled Chapter 1 – The early years 1652-1973. In it he ignorantly states that the word apartheid “arose in Afrikaner intellectual circles in the 1930’s”. However, on May 22, 1917 General J.C. Smuts held a mayor speech in the Savoy Hotel, London, under the chairmanship of Lord Selborne entitled “The white man’s task”. Smuts referred, amongst other things, to the experiment of “native self-government” by Cecil Rhodes in the old Cape Colony. He continued “in framing the Act of Union an Appendix was added by Lord Selborne. This Appendix laid down that the native territories in South Africa should be governed apart from the parliamentary institutions of the Union and on different lines which would achieve the principle of native self-government.” Compare this with Malan and Verwoerd’s apartheid and Bantustans.

General Smuts continued: “Instead of mixing black and white in the old haphazard way, which instead of lifting up the black degraded the white, we are now trying to lay down a

policy of keeping them apart as much as possible in our institutions. In land ownership, settlement and forms of government we are trying to keep them apart, and in that way laying down in outline a general policy it may take a hundred years to work out, but which in the end may be the solution of our native problem.” (These quotations are taken from Plans For a Better World containing seventeen mayor speeches by J.C. Smuts and published by Hodder and Stoughton, London 1942.)

Bosgra says rather feebly: “Yes apartheid is a Dutch word, but it only has meaning in connection with South Africa.” Instead of the Netherlands being the cradle of apartheid, he states: “German National Socialism had far greater influence on Afrikaner ideology”.

Germany was a democracy before 1933. It is rather naïve to attribute apartheid to Germany in those horrible years of 1933-1945. It is abundantly clear from Smuts that the seeds of apartheid were laid long before Hitler was even born [1889]. The racism of the Old Testament was a much more potent force in the development of Afrikaner apartheid. The idea of a chosen race appealed and fascinated them much more than any other ideology. But in essence, it is in my considered opinion that apartheid bears a label Made in Europe. Britain and the Netherlands were equally responsible for apartheid. The Peace Agreement of Vereeniging [1902] was meant to effect reconciliation between Boer and Brit. But it is mistaken of Bosgra to state that “apartheid is a Dutch-sounding word”. Apartheid is by definition a Dutch word. Moreover, it is the only Dutch word that soils all dictionaries in the world. There are obvious similarities (but also differences) between the Dutch culture and the Afrikaner one. The examples are the use of the same bible, similar Dutch Reformed Churches, basically the same language, but there is also a deeper connection. Also in Holland there is growing discrimination of people of a different colour and culture. Also in Holland people are set apart. Drug users, the aged, the mentally handicapped, the Islam-phobia and hysteria that currently sweep through the country. Apartheid is a mirror for Holland. It shows where it leads to when a society is built not on solidarity with the socially weak, but on hierarchy, feelings of supposed superiority and apartheid. Racism and intolerance are undoubtedly increasing by leaps and bounds in Holland. On my repeated visits to that country, people tend to be surprised by the virulence and rapidity of the growth of apartheid. Having lived in Holland for thirty years, from 1965 to 1995, I am not in the least surprised. I have seen and experienced how superficial the so-called Dutch tolerance is. But I have also seen and experienced the tolerance, sacrifice and solidarity of Dutch people.

I recall when my friend and former colleague Klaas de Jonge was detained by the apartheid regime, a picket-line of protest was organised in front of the South African Embassy in The Hague. The spokesperson of the organisation declared to the assembled journalists and public: “He is one of us!” I wonder if it ever dawned on her how small a step separates “He is one of us” from “he is not one of us!” For example, some years later a girl student of Turkish origin was overrun by a truck. The student attended the then Rembrandt Gymnasium in Leiden. The Dutch truck driver did not stop at a zebra crossing and killed the girl. The driver jumped out and exclaimed: “Fortunately, she is not one of us!” This is apartheid in its ugliest form. It represents the “we and they”, the “us and them” mentality. This reveals an exclusive way of thinking rather than an inclusive one. This is apartheid and it is this thinking that led to slavery, colonialism and the divide that perpetuates the gulf between the rich and the poor nations to this very day.

It is also nonsense, as Bosgra claims that “Hendrik Verwoerd was born in Amsterdam in 1901, but left the Netherlands for South Africa at the age of two”. He was however raised by

Dutch-speaking parents. Until Verwoerd's death he was considered a rather arrogant and conceited "Dutch man" by Afrikaners and never accepted as a real Boer.

It should be noted that many of the provisions of apartheid regarding labour, land segregation, social and educational separation, and a virtually exclusive white franchise were in place before the Nationalists victory in 1948, but after that date it was erected into a complete political, social, and economic system. The whole system was then backed by extensive repression.

Now I wish to turn to the inaccuracies and distortions attributed to the BOA and to me personally as recorded in chapter 2 – The Dutch anti-apartheid organisations.

On page 19, he claims that I came to the Netherlands in 1968. I actually came to Holland from the UK in 1965 and left that country for Sweden in 1995. He describes me as a "coloured South African". I wonder what went through his brain when he wrote this. I do not wish to disown my ancestry or my people, but this is a term used in the racist classification of the apartheid regime. Besides, Bosgra is not consistent. Thus he mentions James Phillips, Reg September and Allan Boesak elsewhere in the report without referring to them as 'coloured'. The last person as far as I know who described me as a 'coloured' was Dr. Koot Vorster, the brother of the then S.A. Prime Minister, in the Dutch village Lunteren at a conference of the ultra-conservative Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) in August 1968. For his information Barack Obama, Tiger Woods and Lewis Hamilton would also have been classified as 'coloured' by the apartheid regime, so would, for example, half the population of Brazil.

He falsely continues: "When he arrived in the Netherlands in 1968 he offered his support to the Comité Zuid-Africa (CZA), but it annoyed him that this organization refused to recognise that change in South Africa was impossible without the use of violence." This matter is far more complex than the simplistic assertion by Bosgra. The truth is that I soon became so bitterly disappointed and frustrated by the CZA that I never joined it and did not become a member. I contributed one or two articles to the bulletin. My position has always been that if the West did nothing against apartheid then violence would become inevitable. However, this does not mean that I rejected the work of the militant wing of the ANC, The Spear of the Nation. I make a clear distinction between the violence of oppression and the violence of liberation. I believe that any occupied and oppressed people have the right to free themselves by means of violence, if necessary.

What I have done in practice ever since I came to the Netherlands was to inform people at meetings and discussion groups about the crimes and evil of apartheid. In 1968 I joined a series of meetings with Jan and Karina Wolkers and Annemarie Prins, together with her theatre group "Theater terzijde" (off the beaten track) consisting of about ten actors. We came together every Sunday at the home of Jan and Karina Wolkers out of disappointment with the CZA. Not much came out of these meetings, but it served to channel my frustration into something creative and positive. However, in August 1968 I was approached by Ben van Kaam with the request to support some critical Reformed Christians who were protesting in Lunteren against the pro-apartheid synod of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES). A pro-apartheid delegation led by Koot Vorster and Gericke was to be present.

There people like Ad Zeillemaker, James Ravell and Faith de Haas and I, amongst others, installed an anti-apartheid exhibition in a building close to the conference of the RES. Professor J. Verkuyl and the Rev.. R.J. van der Veen were the only people who presented an

anti-apartheid view. This campaign organisation led to the tentative formation of the working group Cottesloe, the forerunner of the working group Kairos. I remained a member of Kairos until the mid-seventies, but continued to serve on the editorial committee of the bulletin of Kairos, until it later joined the monthly *Amandla*. Also I assisted the PPR (Political Party Radicals), especially Bas de Gaay Fortman, the leader of this party in the Dutch Parliament. For example, I helped Bas the Gaay Fortman to render his speech in parliament into Afrikaans which he delivered to a S.A. parliamentary delegation. We organized on behalf of the local group, WZA-Leiden, picket-lines, whenever a S.A. parliamentary delegation visited and we gave Bakker, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Transport, a critical send-off to S.A. at Schiphol in 1970. This aroused interest of the media and they followed his visit critically whilst in South Africa.

Furthermore, in 1970, together with Karel Roskam, I drew the attention of the media to the plight of black people in the Resettlement Areas during a severe drought in S.A. It was on this occasion that I had the opportunity to expose the false propaganda disseminated to the Dutch media by Eschel Rhodie of the S.A. Embassy. In the meantime, the Boycott Outspan Action (BOA) was formed. These and other activities illustrate convincingly that far from advocating "violence", all my activities in the Netherlands from 1965 until 1995 were simply meant to make Dutch people aware of the crimes and evil of apartheid. To this end no other organisation in that country published more books, brochures, leaflets and posters against apartheid. The Outspan boycott campaign itself served as an exemplary action that will stand model for future consumer boycotts. Sietse Bosgra only briefly mentions Outspan, but the word 'Outspan' became a symbol of apartheid. It served as a hall-stand on which other targets of apartheid could be hanged. For example, we organized the successful anti-emigration campaign of 1975; the national bus tours through the Dutch cities, the international trades' union conference in Leiden at which worker organisations from Belgium, Holland, Italy, France, SACTU and ICFTU, etc. participated.

Most significantly, the urban campaigns (referred to as 'city campaigns' by Bosgra) were in fact the culmination and climax of the BOA work. We continued to mobilise the grassroots of Dutch society as we believed that real change can only come from the bottom and rarely from the top. Each city was divided into different target groups, for example, schools, universities, trade unions, libraries, youth groups, women groups, political parties, churches, artists and writers, etc. In this model it is clear that each target group has specific possibilities which are at times very different from others. Thus a workers' organisation can by definition manifest itself differently from political parties. We strongly felt that the grassroots, the base, are largely ignored by the more populist and opportunistic campaigns generally conducted. The Outspan Campaign was, for example, a campaign that required a personal decision by each and every consumer to decide whether to buy an Outspan orange or to leave it. In a nutshell, this was the strength of the campaign. It was not important for the Angola Comité of Sietse Bosgra or the anti-apartheid movement (AABN) of Connie Braam to support it or to refuse to support it. The public decided whether to support it or not.

S. Bosgra refers further to my criticism of the Dutch government's policy towards apartheid. He then adds "And yet the same government had subsidised the BOA's boycott campaign." This is an extremely colonial and paternalistic view. Does he think that Dutch people should not have criticised the USA for the war crimes committed in Vietnam because Holland had received massive Marshall Aid after the Second World War? For his information, we were very disappointed in the policies to apartheid by various Dutch governments. Of course, the Den Uyl left of Centre government was the most progressive ever. Joop Den Uyl himself

remained a personal periodic donor of the BOA right until his death. The same applies to his wife Liesbeth Den Uyl, who continued to be a BOA donor until she died. We never had problems in our personal relations with the Dutch government at the time. But evidently Sietse Bosgra had problems with the BOA.

Bosgra's remarks about the BOA's position on apartheid in S.A. and racism in the Netherlands is laughable. He writes "BOA virtually became an anti-racist organisation ... as a consequence the government terminated its subsidy in 1992." What arrant nonsense! The BOA consistently maintained that the struggle against racism is indivisible. We believed that a person cannot compartmentalise racism, i.e. divide it into segments or compartments. To fight apartheid far away at a remote distance, while allowing and promoting racism at home, is very easy. However, charity begins at home. It is easy to see the splinter in another person's eye, but not the beam in one's own. Admittedly, it is painful and it requires courage to look into one's own bosom. Racism is racism, no matter under which name it parades. In South Africa, it was known as apartheid, in the USA as segregation, in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) as partnership, etc., but in essence racism is fundamentally the same. The more people in Holland who show such confused and woolly thinking as S. Bosgra the more racism will continue to flourish luxuriantly.

On page 32, Bosgra makes another fantastic claim, without any basis whatsoever. He writes: "When BOA organised an action week in Rotterdam, it had to accept co-operation with the Azania Komitee, but in other cities BOA excluded them." This is also absolutely not true. BOA never excluded the Azania Komitee. It is true that the BOA supported the ANC and SACTU. But in Rotterdam it was possible to find common ground with that organisation, but not in the city of Breda. We have in fact encountered the Azania Komitee only in these two cities and our experience was that they existed only in these cities and definitely not in "in other cities", as Bosgra claims.

I could continue pointing out the inaccuracies, pertinent untruths and distortions in Bosgra's report. This is in my view unnecessary. However, this only reinforces my request for a rectification. After all, I myself was involved in the struggle against apartheid abroad ever since September 1959 when I arrived in London. It is therefore completely unacceptable for Sietse Bosgra to try do diminish my work by stepping on it with his wooden clogs. Far from diminishing my work, Bosgra has only managed to reveal his own mentality. Besides, by concentrating solely on me by name, when referring to the BOA, is an offence to the many devoted and sincere Dutch persons who worked extremely hard and completely free of any pay. To mention only a few: Rob van der Aa, Felix Luitwieler, Theo Veerman, Wil v.d. Giesen-Scherpenzeel, Gerard van Dijk, Ad Zeillemaker, Ben van Kaam, Karel Roskam and many others scattered all over the country.

Besides the BOA was a Foundation (stichting) with a chairman, secretary, treasurer and other members. The first chairman was the MP of the PPR (Political Party Radicals) Dolf Coppes. Considering my earlier co-operation with Bas the Gaay Fortman, the leader of this party, it was almost obvious that somebody from this quarter should be BOA's first chairman. Dolf Coppes was followed as chairman by a progressive catholic pastor Jan Ruijter who later became director of the cultural- social Moses and Aaron Church in Amsterdam. Tjitte de Vries, journalist and a co-founder of the BOA succeeded Jan Ruijter. The BOA held weekly meetings, every Monday evening, at which all the volunteers also attended. In fact, everybody who did some work for the BOA attended these meetings. It is therefore highly incorrect of Sietse Bosgra to create the impression that I was the only person in the

organisation. Other than an attempt on his part to create a rift between me and the Dutch participants, I cannot think of any other reason.

This reminds me of a nasty event soon after the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the ANC. Sietse Bosgra went to South Africa on his first visit ever. And, in South Africa, surprise, surprise. He told a Dutch journalist confidentially(!) that Conny Braam, the Executive Secretary of the Dutch Anti –Apartheid Movement (AABN) had bodily contact ('lijfelijk contact') with the ANC. Instead of keeping this news a secret, the journalist concerned reported it to his newspaper. Consequently, it appeared in the rest of the Dutch media. Just imagine, going to South Africa at such a momentous time for the first time. This incident discredited Sietse Bosgra for ever in my eyes. I mention this incident not only because it is true, but because he knocked me below the belt in the SADET report.

It is also painful to note that Bosgra does not pay any tribute to the two giants of the anti-apartheid struggle, namely Dr. B.B. Buskes and Dr. Karel Roskam. These two men, more than anyone else, paved the way for anti-apartheid work at an extremely difficult time in Holland, when almost every person was still pro-apartheid.

In this regard, he even fails to mention the significant role played by South Africans in exile in the struggle against apartheid. To mention only a few: Darius Dhlomo, Vernie February, Mpo Ntoane, Camu and Joe Kajee, Thelma and James Ravell, Rita Isaacs-Jonathan and Faith de Haas, etc. Without their work no serious anti-apartheid activities of any importance would have occurred in Holland. I know that Sietse Bosgra preferred to work with exclusively Dutch people in his organisation. This tells me that he never really felt and understood what was happening in South Africa.

I therefore urgently request SADET to withdraw this report by Sietse Bosgra from distribution, while the possibilities of a rectification are being considered and discussed. Clearly, in its present form it cannot be allowed to stand.

I am anxiously awaiting your reply.

Yours sincerely,

**Esau du Plessis**