

## The changing face of Afrikaner history as told by Afrikaners

By Max Du Preez

There has been a shift in the way Afrikaners remember history. Two important figures in Afrikanerdom died in the last two weeks. The way their deaths were reported and their lives remembered by the Afrikaans media tells an interesting story of the shifts in Afrikaner thinking and gives a good glimpse of their state of mind today.

Anton Rupert was the most successful Afrikaner entrepreneur ever and became one of the richest men in the world. He started a backyard business with a small loan and built it into a multi-billion international conglomerate.

Chris Heunis was a giant in the National Party for more than a decade and played a critical role in the early reform efforts of the PW Botha government. He was a powerful cabinet minister, key ideologue and a prominent figure in Afrikaner nationalism in the Cape.

When Rupert died, it dominated the front page of Die Burger for several days. His life was remembered by many guest writers, page after page. His funeral took up the front and several inside pages. The paper even published a special weekend supplement.

It is hard to imagine that any other South African would get this kind of treatment from Die Burger at the end of his/her life. Not even FW de Klerk would, I think, but perhaps Nelson Mandela would.

(I am not in any way trying to diminish the stature of Anton Rupert. But it is certainly true that the Afrikaners treated his death as they would that of a great statesman or a king.)

When Heunis died a few days after Rupert, his death was reported in a small piece at the bottom of page two of Die Burger. No great analysis, no stirring tributes, no friends writing their memories of him, no special supplement.

And yet Heunis played a much stronger role in Afrikaner affairs and had much more influence on Afrikaner thinking than Rupert.

Rupert's main business activities were in Europe, and he was never a political animal. Most of Die Burger's readers only took notice of the few times Rupert made political statements when they read it in his obituary. Locally he was only occasionally in the news because of his role in the conservation of nature and architecture.

Heunis, on the other hand, was extremely close to Die Burger. He was the strongman of the Cape NP, and Die Burger was, until the end of the 1980s, the party's official mouthpiece in the province.

What does this tell us? I think what is immediately obvious, is the very normal and human reaction to want to over-emphasise what was good in one's past and to under-emphasise the negative.

It shows, I think, a strong need among Afrikaners to claim elements of their past that are not tainted with apartheid or the excesses of Afrikaner nationalism. Die Burger, which is a different and far more progressive paper today than a decade ago, clearly didn't believe Heunis represented anything that could be celebrated.

In contrast, Rupert's long life offered a lot to celebrate. He was a symbol of the Afrikaner's successful economic self-rehabilitation after the devastation of the Anglo-Boer War and the Great Depression. Along with very few others he was an inspiration to Afrikaners suffering from a post-colonialist inferiority complex that they could be successful in the big world if they worked hard.

While Afrikaners were viewed as an evil tribe during the apartheid years, Rupert retained his status as a respectable world citizen.

Rupert wasn't exactly famous for his opposition to apartheid. I can't recall him ever standing up publicly against the regimes of John Vorster and PW Botha in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet most pieces written about him after his death recalled his clash with Dr Hendrik Verwoerd about investing in the Bantustans. His aid to the people of Lesotho, which I do remember, was also stressed.

In this sense Rupert was the ideal Afrikaner hero. He was never seen to support or directly benefit from apartheid and when he did make political pronouncements, they had a humanitarian feel to them. Yet he never alienated the mainstream of Afrikaner nationalism, like Beyers Naudé did, for instance.

Several commentators called it "loyal resistance" (lojale verset) - the only criticism Afrikaner

nationalism has ever tolerated. Any other form of resistance, at least from the Left, was labelled treasonous and hostile.

It is going to be interesting to see how Afrikaners treat their own history from now on. Trying to sanitise it will serve no purpose. Loudly protesting, as historians again did last week at a conference of the Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, that English and black history writers were demonising and marginalising the Afrikaner, seems to me at this point to be crying wolf or a form of pre-emptive strike.

We should all keep each other honest when we record the stories of our past.

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