

Renaming of the Students' Union building after Steve Biko

It is most appropriate that Rhodes University's students' union building be named after Bantu Stephen Biko. This is not only to honour and commemorate one of South Africa's finest sons, but also a gesture of penance on the part of the university. Many will know that in July 1967 the annual congress of NUSAS (the National Union of South African Students) was held on this campus. NUSAS represented students from white and black universities. One of the delegates at this congress was Steve Biko, then a student at the University of Natal medical school. A few days before this congress the Rhodes University authorities resolved not to permit black delegates to stay on campus in residence; nor would they be allowed to attend social functions on campus. This meant that the black delegates had to find alternative accommodation in Grahamstown East. Biko and other black delegates were incensed, not only with the Rhodes authorities but also with the white NUSAS leadership who decided to carry on with the congress, rejecting Biko's call for it to be suspended.

Biko walked out of the congress and went straight away to New Brighton where he met up with a close friend, and our guest speaker today, Barney Pityana, who was then a student at Fort Hare. Together they talked through the night. Over the next two years they would work to establish a separate black national student association, SASO (the South African Students' Organisation). This would mark the founding of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. The Rhodes authorities, in their zeal to enforce racial segregation, had unwittingly triggered the emergence of this movement. At the same time they had displayed, not for the first time, a disturbing tendency to acquiesce all too easily in the apartheid system.

On this occasion today Rhodes acknowledges and apologises for some of the more unpalatable aspects of its

past, for some of the regrettable episodes in its history. I, as Vice Chancellor, offer this apology, not to condemn our forebears, nor as an act of self-flagellation, but rather in an effort to bring uncomfortable truths in to the open, to acknowledge the university's role during the apartheid era, and to wipe the slate clean.

This is not to forget that many members of the Rhodes community – staff and students – did over the years, in various ways and to various degrees, engage in protest against apartheid. For this some endured banning, detention and imprisonment. At the same time there is evidence that the university either quietly acquiesced in apartheid, or worse, openly endorsed it through its actions. The acquiescence may at times have emanated from caution – a fear of breaking the law, or an unwillingness to alienate the apartheid government upon which the university depended heavily for subsidy funding.

Much less excusable are those instances when Rhodes either openly endorsed apartheid, or colluded with the state apparatus – and did so on its own volition, when under no pressure to act otherwise. I will offer a few examples.

Before legislation was passed in 1959 enforcing university apartheid, there was no prohibition on universities admitting students of any 'race'. In 1933 the Rhodes Senate and Council passed a resolution not to admit black students. In 1947 there was a slight change of policy when it was decided that black **graduate** students could be admitted, but only "in exceptional circumstances". Between 1947 and 1959 there were fifteen such applications from black graduates; of these three were accepted. Rhodes liked to call itself, along with Wits, UCT and Natal, an "open university". It was hardly that.

Particularly difficult to comprehend was the university's decision to award honorary doctorates to prominent figures in the apartheid government. The first, in 1954 on

the 50th anniversary of the university, was awarded to the Minister of Education, JH Viljoen, an eager proponent of university apartheid – and this at a time when the disastrous Bantu education policy was being introduced. The second honorary doctorate was awarded to the State President, CR Swart, in 1962. As Minister of Justice from 1948 through the 1950s he had been responsible for the harsh repression of opposition organisations and activists. The university's Chancellor, Sir Basil Schonland, actually resigned from his position over this award, albeit without publicly revealing his reasons for doing so at the time.

There were other episodes and actions that should be mentioned. The decision of Council in 1968 and 1969 to overturn twice the recommended appointment of Basil Moore, a Christian anti-apartheid activist, to a temporary lectureship in theology. There was, too, the university's active collusion with the apartheid state apparatus in the 1970s and 1980s, when information on students was handed over to the security police.

Then there has been the treatment of black service staff. In the early 1970s one liberal member of the university council was shocked to discover that Rhodes was paying service staff wages that fell below the poverty datum line. When two such staff members established a Black Workers Union in 1972 the university refused to recognise it. As late as 2001 a member of the catering staff was dismissed for 'stealing' a spoonful of jam.

While we take pride in our university, these are aspects of our past in which we can take no pride. Nowadays it is hard to find anybody who admits to having supported apartheid. There is widespread denial and amnesia. Rhodes University was not responsible for apartheid, but at times it openly endorsed it, and mostly lived with it pretty comfortably. For some time the university has been going through a process of transformation – a process that needs to be taken further. This acknowledgement of past wrongs, and our apology for them, are part of that process.