

Ninety years ago, the Carnegie Corporation of the United States funded a commission of investigation into the growing problem of poor whites in South Africa. DOUGIE OAKES reports.

IN 1927, Frederick Keppel, the president of the Carnegie Corporation, and James Bertram, its secretary, visited South Africa to explore the possibility of handing out grants.

By all accounts they were impressed by the country's natural beauty.

Though less to be impressed over was the rise in the number of destitute white people throughout South Africa's four provinces.

So moved were Keppel and Bertram by the plight of these people that they decided to fund a commission of investigation into the problem of poor whites – even though infinitely more African people were labouring under the yoke of poverty.

The interest of the Americans, and their willingness to help, caused much excitement in South Africa, with the Union government and the Dutch Reformed Church each agreeing to match the Carnegie Corporation grant.

This cash injection made it possible for five commissioners to be appointed.

Before beginning their investigation, there was one question the commissioners needed to find an answer to: What exactly constituted a poor white?

Eventually, they defined such a person as someone “who had become dependent to such an extent, whether from mental, moral, economic or physical causes, that he is unfit, without help from others, to find proper means of livelihood for himself or to procure it directly or indirectly for his children.”

This done, the commissioners were ready to work. In 1929, the five set off in two Ford motor vehicles, in search of poor white South Africa.

Their travels took them to the isolated trek farmers of the Northern and Western Cape, to the bywoners (tenant farmers) of the Karoo, to the woodcutters of the forests of George and Knysna, to the bush farmers of the then Transvaal, to the diamond diggers of the Northern Cape and the reef miners of the Witwatersrand.

At every place they stopped, they were shocked at what they discovered.

Analysing questionnaires, they had sent to almost half the schools in the Union of South Africa, the commissioners found that 17.5% of all the families with children at school were very poor.

Very poor people were regarded as those in the city who needed the help of charities to survive. In the rural areas, very poor people were those living in what most people would consider to be unlivable conditions.

This percentage amounted to 300 000 white people, most of whom were Afri-



Charles “chilos” Douglas smokes inside his shack at Coronation Park in Krugersdorp where about 300 poor white people occupied a park illegally.
PICTURE: PABALLO THEKISO

WHAT EXACTLY constituted a poor white?



Adrie Prinsloo and her husband Tinus outside their small shack at Coronation Park in Krugersdorp where about 300 poor white people occupied a park illegally.
PICTURE: PABALLO THEKISO

kaners, out of a white population in 1931 of 1.8 million.

One of the commissioners, Ernie Malherbe, described 27 000 children in the schools as being “retarded”.

He based this description on the fact they were, on average, two years behind the normal standard for their age group.

He reported that over half the children in poor white families did not go beyond primary education. The result, he pointed out, was that when their families were finally forced off the land and into the cities, they had no prospect of making a decent living.

In their general conclusions, the commissioners stressed that laziness (as suggested by the Transvaal Indigent Commission in 1906) was not to blame for poor white-ism.

“Poverty itself exerts a demoralising influence. It often causes loss of self-respect and a feeling of inferiority. It has a detrimental effect on honesty, trustworthiness and morality.”

If it is long continued the poor white often comes to accept it as inevitable and to bear it with dull and passive resignation.

This attitude is further contributed to by the feeling of inferiority that poor whites have.

The commission noted the high birthrate, especially among poor Afrikaners. Pointing out that the white population had more than doubled between 1904 and 1936.

This had resulted in overcrowding and insanitary conditions, which in return had led to disease and death.

An interesting part of the study was how difficult Afrikaners who had moved from a rural to an urban setting struggled to adjust to life in the cities.

To begin with, they immediately found themselves having to compete for work.

They did not have the skills of uitlanders (foreigners).

Neither could they compete with the cheap African labour, much favoured by English-speaking mine-owners and industrialists.

But they also had another – psychological – problem in the labour market. They refused to do any job traditionally reserved for Africans.

The commissioners found “even the most poverty-stricken bywoner con-

sidered himself a master and would not stoop to do ‘k*ff* work’.”

Much of the Carnegie Foundation's work in the rural areas was done by the Rev Johannes Albertyn, a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in Kimberley.

His stories of the struggles of poor Afrikaners in the Northern Cape Town of Kakamas painted a fascinating picture of a community in crisis.

His meticulously recorded interviews were later described as a “unique account of Afrikaners in crisis – the lowest ebb they had ever reached during two centuries of expansion into Southern Africa”.

This is how one resident described his experiences: “I grew up in Prieska. After I was married, I trekked about with my stock, even as far as German (South) West Africa.

“I got on, bit by bit, until I owned 700 head of small stock, and 90 head of cattle. Then came the drought of 1896 and I was left with 16 head of cattle and 11 goats.

“For the second time, I improved my position, but it took years.

“For a long time I went about dig-

ging wells and making dams. At last I again owned 300 stock and 30 cattle. Then came the drought of 1915, and I lost absolutely everything. So I threw up the sponge and settled here in Kakamas.”

A farmer who lived for 20 years in a wagon said: “My father was a landowner in Vanrhynsdorp, but he lost all his stock, owing to drought. For a time, he took to transport riding.

“When I grew up he and I took out a licence in Bushmanland and after a while we owned 1 000 small cattle and 91 donkeys and cattle.”

He continued: “But once more, we lost nearly everything. I made one more attempt, but the drought of 1913 ruined me completely. So I bought an erf here in Kakamas.

“For 20 years I had no fixed abode. My wagon was my home. My nine children were born while we were on trek.”

The Carnegie Commission concluded its work with a 5-volume report on economic conditions, the psychology of the poor whites, centred on their education, health and socio-economic aspects.

If conditions for whites were difficult for Afrikaners during the early decades of the 20th century, it was more than doubly difficult for black people. In 1930, the historian, WM MacMillan described the lives of rural Africans as “dragging along at the very lowest level of bare ‘subsistence’.”

He added that they lived in “poverty, congestion and chaos” and that they were blighted by ill-health and starvation, endemic typhus and almost chronic scurvy.

He wrote that they suffered “an often appalling mortality rate among infants”, lived in heavily overpopulated; and “grossly neglected” areas where they were “utterly dependent on wage-earning outside to relieve a dead level of poverty” inside. And yet if this was noticed at all by the governments of the day, they did not care enough to take any action.

It was the plight of the poor whites that they were prepared to act on – especially after 1948, when the phenomenon was successfully tackled.

But after 1994 and the advent of democracy, a new story began to emerge....

‘European loafers’ or poor whites?

BY 1876, the number of homeless white people appearing in court for being drunk and disorderly was becoming a growing phenomenon in South Africa.

When an unemployed carpenter named George Gibson was charged in the magistrate's court of the small Eastern Cape town of Alice for “begging while drunk”, his case was covered by the local newspaper.

Pulling no punches, the Alice Times described Gibson as a “European loafer” in its report of his appearance in court.

This, however, was not an original description.

Several other newspapers in different parts of the country were using the same term.

But by the 1890s a much kinder description was gaining traction: poor whites.

In many ways, a large proportion of white society had no control over the cause. The discovery of diamonds and gold had pushed the economies of the southern African region – even before the formation of the Union of South Africa – from agrarian to a rapidly industrialised economy.

This, coupled with regular, devastating drought, pushed ever-increasing numbers of unskilled and uneducated white families to the cities, where they found themselves unable to compete in the jobs market.

Other problems had manifested themselves in this new grouping too – decades earlier.

Because many of their communities lived in close-knit groupings – woodcutters in Knysna and George; farm labour tenants in the Karoo and Bushveld farmers in the then-Transvaal – much inter-breeding with close relatives took place.

Mental incapacity meant that many poor whites had little chance of identifying employment opportunities that would drag them out of poverty.

The growth and struggles of this new urban white poor caused much consternation and soul-searching among, particularly, one section of white society – the Afrikaners.

And the reason for this was simple: the overwhelming majority of poor whites came from the Afrikaans-speaking community.

In 1916, in a letter to the editor of Die Burger, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) lamented the fact that poor whites were living “with, and like, k*ff*rs” on the outskirts of all the major cities.

In the same year, the DRC held a volkskongress in the Cape, to discuss the plight of rural Afrikaners.

Among the speakers was *Dominee* DF Malan, who would later become the first apartheid National Party prime minister of South Africa.

In his address to participants, Malan said: “I have observed instances in which the children of Afrikaner families were running around as naked as k*ff*rs in Congoland.

“We have knowledge today of Afrikaner girls, so poor, they work for coolies and Chinese. We know of white men and women who live married and unmarried with coloureds.

“They are all our flesh and blood. They carry our names. They are Afrikaners, all of them.

“They are the sons and daughters of the Huguenots and the children of Afrikaner martyrs.”

What Malan witnessed and was told played a big part in his thinking when he became prime minister of South Africa in 1948.

The problem of poor whites had convinced him that in addition to having to find ways of dragging them out of poverty, ways also had to be found to put an end to racial “mingling” with coloured people, especially.

A consequence of this was the passing of legislation such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act in 1949, the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act in 1950 and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act in 1953, as well as an amendment to Section 16 of the Immorality Act – all of which criminalised “mixing” between white and black, coloured and Indians.

But by far the biggest “achievement” of the National Party was the way it resolved the poor white problem – through a process of social engineering that guaranteed employment in government departments (but later in the private sector too) for whites, especially white Afrikaners.

The result was devastating for black South Africans.

Dealing with displaced people is a huge challenge

THERE are more refugees and asylum seekers in the world today than there were at the end of World War II. This major crisis came under the spotlight at last week's UN High Commissioner for Refugees conference in Geneva. South Africa was represented by Professor Hlengiwe Mkhize and Fatima Chohan, the Minister and Deputy Minister of Home Affairs. In this piece Fatima Chohan highlights key challenges that pertain to refugees and asylum management in South Africa:

SOUTH Africa's obligations include the duty to share the responsibility of hosting refugees fleeing persecution and insecurity.

From 2006 to 2015 South Africa received about 1.08 million asylum seekers compared with 3.7 million for the 28-member EU, an average of 132 000 persons for each European country for that period.

Without doubt, South Africa carries a fair share of the burden of displaced persons.

Since 2010, we have afforded work and study permits through sequential special permit regimes to no fewer than 280 000 Zimbabweans seeking jobs in

South Africa, in the wake of that country's economic crisis.

International law does not require refugees to seek asylum in any particular country.

There is, however, the principle of “first country of asylum” which directs countries to welcome refugees fleeing from persecution in a neighbouring state.

This principle has developed so that, in practice, an asylum seeker who has had the opportunity to claim asylum in another country is liable to be returned to the neighbouring country to have his or her claim determined there.

The UK unsuccessfully tried to invoke this principle during the exodus of Syrian refugees, returning them to safe countries like Greece while shutting their borders to the newcomers who resorted to camping in the French city of Calais.

Despite resource and capacity challenges related to managing migration, South Africa has not closed its ports of entry to asylum seekers.

Consequently, many of our resources have been diverted to dealing with challenges arising from so-called “mixed migration”.

This refers to migration motivated by a variety of reasons

‘Protecting refugees and ensuring security are compatible goals’

including insecurity, persecution and better economic prospects. It also includes irregular (or illegal) migration as well as the heinous practice of trafficking. Irregular migration is not benign to a mixed economy such as ours and already the strain on the Health Department's resources is becoming evident in Gauteng, where most undocumented migrants are concentrated.

South Africa's post-apartheid human rights orientation does not sit comfortably with the notion that poor people merely looking for a better life should be dealt with as criminals who stand to be arrested and deported.

Instinctively, South Africans

understand and can relate to the plight of poverty and the human aspiration of seeking out new pastures.

However, our constitution itself is a law, and an essential principle of any constitutional state is respect for the law. Our Bill of Rights reserves the right to enter and reside in the country only to citizens.

Everyone else is required to enter the country in accordance with immigration laws. If you enter illegally, you should surely not have an automatic right to remain and have equal access to state resources.

As a country we must strike a balance between our humanitarian values and our responsibility to ensure safety and security for all citizens as well as those migrants and refugees who take the trouble to comply with our laws.

This emphasis is increasingly being overlooked in subsequent court-made policy decisions. Notwithstanding the fact that a correct interpretation of the Bill of Rights would be to ensure no room for contradictions of its provisions, the state is increasingly being directed by the courts to afford rights to persons who have entered and remain in the country illegally.

In this regard, it has previously

been understood that the separation of powers doctrine retains the executive's remit in relation to the deployment of state resources.

Increasingly, the executive is made to give effect to court-made policy that has serious implications for the deployment of the scarce resources and entails the reprioritisation of budgets determined by the cabinet.

In some instances, these court determinations result in the direct displacement of government policy determined through democratic processes and commitments to the electorate.

Placing the refugee reception centres at the land borders in the north is one such policy. The UNHCR Report on Protection, delivered in Geneva on October 5, states:

“The UNHCR recognises the legitimate security concerns of states in managing their borders. Protecting refugees and ensuring security are compatible and even complementary goals.

“Protecting sensitive border management systems and effective screening and referral mechanisms allow for those persons in mixed flows who need international protection to be detected and referred to the appropriate services

while simultaneously advancing national security.

“The orderly processing of asylum claims, either in an individualised procedure or through group procedures, enables states to be confident about who is on their territory and at the same time safeguards the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. This includes prompt registration of new arrivals and appropriate status determination mechanisms.”

Similar considerations prompted the governing party's policy conferences since 2012 to affirm the government's intention to relocate the refugee reception centres to our northern-most land borders.

Our statistics and strategic analysis indicate that a new refugee centre at the border with Mozambique, together with the existing Musina refugee reception centre, will be able to process most newcomers upon their arrival at our borders.

Given the blatant corruption experienced at the Port Elizabeth refugee reception centre in 2011, the director-general announced the closure of that reception centre to all newcomers. Likewise, a later decision was taken to close the Cape Town refugee reception

centre to new asylum seekers. Resident refugees in both those cities would continue to be serviced by those centres operating leaner bureaucracies.

It was intended to deploy the residual resources from the scaled-down operations toward the new borderline reception centre. Due to subsequent court challenges by NGOs based in PE and Cape Town, our courts have ordered the Department of Home Affairs to reopen both those reception centres to first-time applicants. Meanwhile, the department's resources have come under significant strain, due to subsequent budgets cuts.

This effectively means that any further resources acquired by Home Affairs in the future will have to be prioritised towards the reopening of these two centres, in cities situated far from where most new arrivals enter the country.

This, among other things, deals a blow to the protection of vulnerable asylum seekers who arrive at our borders, and constrains the state's attempts to contain illegal movement through the hinterland of the country, undermining our collective security. This state of affairs benefits neither our humanitarian values nor our aspiration for greater safety.