

Our African misadventure

I lunched recently at Johannesburg's Zoo Park with the former Most Dangerous Man in Canada. Or at least that's what Glenn Babb, the former South African ambassador to Ottawa, was called. Dangerous because what he said, and how he said it, was making too much sense to too many Canadians.

Babb and his charming wife Brenda still speak warmly of Canada. They are too polite to mention that they were virtually forced to leave under the threat of expulsion by Ottawa. Babb was simply too successful in gently pointing out the arrant hypocrisy and simplemindedness of Ottawa's policy toward southern Africa. A policy whose objective is to buy the Tories the votes of Canadian left wingers and blacks — not to advance Canada's national interests abroad.

That point was made shockingly clear by this week's revelation that Canada may supply "non-lethal" military aid to Zimbabwe. This, we are told, will help that nation fight off the grave threat posed by South Africa.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Can our foreign policy mandarins really be so dimwitted?

As I recently wrote, I met last month with a senior officer of the Zimbabwean Army. He told me that Zimbabwe's general staff considers the border with South Africa to be "the nation's *only safe border*." Zimbabwe has troops deployed on all of its other borders with its black neighbors — but not against South Africa, from where "there is absolutely *no military threat*."

That's the Zimbabwean Army speaking. But never mind the facts, send more cash and goodies to Dr. Robert Mugabe's heroic fighters against apartheid.

Bad enough that Ottawa wastes tens of millions of our tax money to line the pockets of African chiefs, but do we have to look like such chumps while doing it? And advertise our stupidity, for God's sake?

While Ottawa frets over South Africa and stamps its tiny, little feet, Glenn Babb and his colleagues in South Africa's foreign ministry have been hard at work producing what could be a stunning change in the relations between South Africa and its neighbors.

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Last week Babb accompanied South African President P.W. Botha to an historic meeting in Zaire, one of Africa's most important nations, with its leader, President Mobutu. Babb has also lately met with leaders of other black nations, such as Congo, Gabon and the Central African Republic. Botha has recently visited Mozambique and Malawi.

Black Africa is finally admitting on an official level what everyone has known for years: That it cannot live without South Africa and that the best way to get Pretoria to drop apartheid is by bringing it into the mainstream of African life. South Africa trades openly with most of the black African nations, including the "frontline confrontation states" so beloved of Canada's left. While Canada earnestly boycotts Pretoria, South African businessmen, technicians, doctors and trade officials are busy all over southern and central Africa. Sometimes they are called "white Swazis" or "Namibians."

Nigeria, a leader of the anti-apartheid boycott, imports machinery from South Africa, coyly stamped "Made in Czechoslovakia." Somalia denounces Pretoria in the UN and quietly buys South African arms.

And so it goes. Beneath the fog of anti-apartheid rhetoric and the hypocritical posturing over sanctions, for black Africa it's business as usual with South Africa. Now that South Africa may be nearing a deal to grant independence to Namibia in exchange for a Cuban troop pullout from Angola, black Africa's more sensible nations are extending their hands to South Africa and saying, let's talk.

A lot of the credit for this goes to the younger generation of South African officials. Men like Glenn Babb, Neil Van Heerden and Pik Botha who are pushing their stodgy, hidebound colleagues to do something about apartheid and South Africa's painful isolation. African leaders such as Gabon's Omar Bongo and Zaire's Mobutu deserve equal credit for their courageous stance.

Let's hope that Africa may be on the way to solving its own problems in the traditional African way: By long, patient discussion and consensus. A South Africa that feels secure with black Africa will also feel more secure with its own black majority.

Contrast these hopeful signs with the sullen miscomprehension shown by Ottawa and the chicanery of its trio of run-down socialist pals, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania. The "frontline" states don't want an end to confrontation — for how else would they keep soaking Ottawa for cash?

While some black and white Africans are talking sense, gullible Canada continues to beat the tambourine for the good crusade against apartheid while its African dependants pocket the coins.

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