

**WITH HER SHOULDER TO THE WHEEL:
THE PUBLIC LIFE OF ERIKA THERON (1907-1990)**

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Summary

This thesis is a biographical study of Erika Theron (1907-1990), an Afrikaner woman who played a significant role in many aspects of public life in South Africa in a critical time in the country's history. The study seeks to give recognition to her achievements, which have received scant attention in a historiography with a masculine bias. At the same time it examines her changing role from collaborator to critic of the apartheid system.

Certain defining features of Theron's life have been highlighted. First, Theron grew up in a staunchly Afrikaner nationalist, service-oriented family which encouraged loyalty to her own people and civic responsibility. Second, she was unusual among Afrikaner women of her generation, in that she was highly educated, independent and ready to assume leadership roles. She became a pioneer in a number of fields, attaining high professional rank and holding important public offices – frequently as the first woman to do so in the country.

The thesis focuses on five areas of Theron's public life. After returning from post-graduate studies abroad, she worked with Hendrik Verwoerd in the campaign to uplift poor whites, particularly the rehabilitation and re-integration of the Afrikaner poor. She thereafter commenced a long career as a social work academic, which included a number of milestones for her new discipline, for the profession of social work and for the advancement of women in academia. From the 1950s she served on the town council of Stellenbosch, including terms as deputy mayor and mayor. She played an important role in historic conservation but was also instrumental in the rigorous institution of apartheid structures in the town during the early days of National Party rule. In the early 1970s she served as chairman of the Commission of Enquiry into Coloured Affairs which influenced her personal views on the country's race policies. She became a public critic of many aspects of the apartheid system and vocal advocate for coloured rights.

Key Terms: Biography; Afrikaner nationalism; Afrikaner dissidents; Afrikaner women (twentieth century); welfare; social work education; poor white rehabilitation; apartheid and local government; policy relating to the coloured population; architectural conservation (Stellenbosch).

Abbreviations

Archives and Manuscript Repositories:

INCH	Institute for Contemporary History (University of the Free State, Bloemfontein)
NA	National Archive of South Africa (Pretoria)
Unisa	University of South Africa Archives, Manuscripts Collection (Pretoria)
UWC	University of the Western Cape Archive (Belville)
US	University of Stellenbosch, University Records (Stellenbosch)
US, Doc. Centre	University of Stellenbosch, J.S. Gericke Library, Document Centre: Special Collections (Stellenbosch)
WCA	Western Cape Archives (Cape Town)

Other:

AB	Afrikaner Broederbond
ACVV	Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging
AHI	Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut
ANC	African National Congress
ANS	Afrikaanse Nasionale Studentebond
ATKV	Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuurvereniging
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement
CCA	Council for Coloured Affairs (formerly UCCA)
CPRC	Coloured Persons' Representative Council
CRC	Coloured Representative Council (formerly CPRC)
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
FAK	Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenings
HNP	Herstigte Nasionale Party
IASSW	International Association of Schools of Social Work
ICSSW	International Committee of Schools of Social Work
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
JUC	Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work
MER	Maria Elizabeth Rothmann
NAD	Native Affairs Department
NP	National Party
NUSAS	National Union of South African Students
OB	Ossewabrandwag

PNP Purified National Party
SABRA Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-aangeleenthede
SAIRR South African Institute of Race Relations
SAR/and H South African Railways/and Harbours
SAP South African Party
SASO South African Students' Organisation
SABSWA

South
African Black
Social Workers'
Association

UCCA Union Council for Coloured Affairs
UDF United Democratic Front
UP United Party



Erika Theron

Source: Unisa Archives

Manuscripts Collection: Marinus Wiechers Papers

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the subject of this thesis, Erika Theron, has its roots in research for my MA dissertation. The dissertation dealt with poor white rehabilitation in South Africa in the 1930s, a project in which Theron was deeply involved. In the course of that research I became acquainted with a young Theron who was a passionate Afrikaner nationalist and a protégé of H.F. Verwoerd.¹

¹ Professor H.F. Verwoerd (1901-1966), later Minister of Native Affairs and Prime Minister of South Africa in the National Party government. Verwoerd is regarded as one of the chief architects of apartheid.

Since Verwoerd was to become a leading figure in the National Party (NP) and has been referred to as the architect of apartheid, Theron's close working relationship with and great admiration for him did not seem to me to be congruent with her later public image. This latter image, dating from the 1970s, relates to her role as chairman of a commission of enquiry into coloured affairs.² The Theron Commission brought out a report that found fault with aspects of the existing social structure in South Africa and made recommendations for reforms that were regarded as progressive for their time. As a result of the commission's findings and Theron's activities in its aftermath she acquired a reputation as an outspoken rebel Afrikaner and critic of the governing NP's race policy. Explaining this apparently radical conversion of a nationalist insider, within its historical context, appealed to me as a potentially fruitful field of study. But I was to find that there was a great deal more to Theron's public career.

² The Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group, 1973-1976, commonly known as the Theron Commission.

When I began to investigate Theron's history, I encountered an individual whose achievements were remarkable, diverse and frequently controversial. She had the distinction of being a pioneer in many fields. She played an important role in the creation of modern welfare structures within the country – from the initial campaign for a dedicated state Department of Welfare, working alongside Verwoerd in the 1930s, through decades of service and leadership in numerous voluntary and statutory welfare and social work bodies. She was among the first three women scholars to be awarded professorships at the University of Stellenbosch. She was the first person (male or female) in South Africa to hold a chair in social work and played a central role in the development of both the discipline and the social work profession. She was the first woman chancellor of a South African university (University of the Western Cape). She was a long-serving town councillor and the first woman to hold the office of mayor of the town of Stellenbosch. She was in the forefront of the struggle to preserve the valuable architectural and cultural heritage of that town, placing it among the leaders in local historical conservation in South Africa. And she was the first woman to head a commission of enquiry into a crucial aspect of the country's social, economic and political order. Among Afrikaner dissidents, she was one of a mere handful of women who publicly applied pressure for revision of the apartheid policy. Theron had three honorary doctorates conferred upon her and among numerous other awards, in 1977 she was voted 'newsmaker of the year' by the Society of Journalists.³

³ 'In Memoriam: Dr. Erika Theron', *Matieland*, 3 (1990), p.32. *Matieland* is the in-house magazine/newsletter of the University of Stellenbosch.

Theron was clearly a public figure of note, who through a lifetime of service and unique achievement, earned a place in the historical record. Hermann Giliomee, a leading historian and political commentator, numbered her among the outstanding Afrikaans-speaking 'leaders' of the twentieth century.⁴ Yet although several sketches have been published about her in the popular media⁵ no substantial biographical study has appeared. She is not even included in the *Dictionary of South African Biography*,⁶ a publication which includes entries on many lesser figures who played relatively modest roles in the affairs of the country. The 'old' *Dictionary*, with a strong bias towards white males and regarded by some as 'apartheid-inspired',⁷ was published between 1967 and 1987 but production ceased before Theron's death. A *New Dictionary of South African Biography*⁸ was launched in 1995 with the object of recording 'the role of many unacclaimed people' including individuals who fell outside of the white establishment, as well as a far greater number of women, but Theron is not yet in that record.⁹

⁴ *Beeld*, 28 September 1999, 'Vyf Grootste Leiers: Afrikaanses Wat Eeu Help Vorm Het' by Hermann Giliomee. Giliomee sets out to select five of the greatest Afrikaans-speaking leaders of the century but first debates the merits of candidates. His final list includes six names since he rates the contributions of M.E. Rothmann and Theron equally. (M.E. Rothmann [1875-1975] who published under the pseudonym 'MER' was a journalist, author and prominent figure in Afrikaner welfare organisation). Giliomee's naming of MER and Theron in this elite group undoubtedly reflects the need for gender representivity, but does illustrate the significance of the achievements of these two women.

⁵ See references to newspaper and magazine articles throughout this thesis. Of note is the article by well-known editor and columnist, Jane Raphaely, *Femina* (March 1990), 'Erika Theron: One of a Kind', pp.76-78.

⁶ *Dictionary of South African Biography*, five volumes (Cape Town, Nasionale Boekhandel for National Council for Social Research, and Tafelberg for the Human Sciences Research Council, 1967-1987).

⁷ Judith Lütge Coullie, Stephan Meyer, Thengani H. Ngwenya and Thomas Olver (eds), *Selves in Question: Interviews in Southern African Auto/biography* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), p.16.

⁸ *New Dictionary of South African Biography*, two volumes, (Cape Town, Tafelberg for Human Sciences Research Council, 1995 and Pretoria, Vista, 1999).

⁹ Coullie, *et al.*, *Selves*, p.16. (I was asked by the then editors to write an entry on Theron in 2000, but various difficulties have disrupted publication of the *Dictionary* since the appearance of the second volume (1999).

The overwhelming predominance of articles about South African men in the old *Dictionary* largely reflects the reality of the social structure of the country during the period in which it was published. Until the last decades of the twentieth century, women in South Africa (and to some extent elsewhere) were offered few opportunities to hold public office or to rise to positions of power or prominence. Afrikaner women, in particular, in this period tended to adopt subordinate and supportive roles in relation to men in society.¹⁰ This does not, however, mean that they are by definition of no interest to historians. Much work still needs to be done by scholars to illuminate the extent and significance of the indirect influence of these women. The emphasis on recovering the history of women has been a growing field since the 1970s (particularly in the United States of America), reflecting both the concerns of the feminist movement and those of social historians whose focus has been on marginalised groups.¹¹ In South Africa the field is less developed although a number of recent publications clearly seek to redress this.¹²

Theron was not, however, a woman whose role in society was merely supportive or hidden. She was among a small group who surmounted the gender barriers. According to Linda Wagner-Martin, women such as Theron clearly invite study – women who led ‘intrinsically interesting’ lives, often ‘different from the expectation of [their] culture’.¹³ In Theron’s case, furthermore, she contributed to social, economic and even political developments in the country in a

¹⁰ Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003), p.376.

¹¹ See for example, Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford, OUP, 1979).

¹² See for example Helen Bradford, ‘Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones, c.1806-70’, *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), pp.351-370. Note also that general works such as Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, increasingly take the roles of women explicitly into account.

¹³ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women’s Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick and New Jersey, Rutgers, 1994), p.31. Wagner-Martin argues for a particular treatment of women subjects in literary biography that recognises the significance of gender both in the shaping and ‘telling’ of women’s lives.

very direct way. Central to this thesis is an attempt to contribute to the closing of the gap in the historiography and to record the history of such a woman and her role within her time.

Not all of Theron's groundbreaking accomplishments are memorable as praiseworthy. She was also in the vanguard of activists who supported projects which have been widely condemned in a later era. For example she was one of only a handful of women to hold a senior rank (that of general) in the radical, right-wing, nationalist Ossewabrandwag (OB)¹⁴ in the 1930s and 1940s. As mayor of Stellenbosch in the 1950s she was an uncompromising leader in the introduction of harsh apartheid regulations at local level. Some such causes which she had supported energetically, she later repudiated (although the OB was not among them). It was Theron's view that everyone retains the right to re-evaluate ideologies and policies as well as their own beliefs and to come to new conclusions in the light of new evidence and understanding. What was important, in her view, was that members of society should apply themselves actively to making a difference in their own environments. It was her credo that there should be no passengers in society; everyone had an obligation to 'put a shoulder to the wheel'.¹⁵ Theron liked to quote from the last lecture delivered by Verwoerd to his students at Stellenbosch, in which he concluded: 'Every one of us must at least try to change *something* in this life for the better.'¹⁶

¹⁴ Edwin S. Munger (ed.), *The Afrikaners* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1979), p.122 . The Ossewabrandwag was formed in the late 1930s, mainly to promote Afrikaner nationalist culture and values. It adopted quasi-military organisation and symbols and was hostile to South Africa's participation in the Second World War as an ally of Britain. See Chapter One.

¹⁵ This was a view that Theron often expressed. See for example University of South Africa (Unisa): Marinus Wiechers collection (Acc.72), 'Erika Theron Papers', file 56,8, letter, Erika Theron to L.C. Pedersen, 15 November 1972. Writing to this student who needed a reference to work in London, she sent an encouraging reply but insisted that she must return to South Africa in due course: 'I am sure you would agree that you owe it to the land of your birth to put your shoulder to the wheel here.'

¹⁶ See for example *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 6, 3 (August 1970), p.118 (transl.). See also Erika Theron, *H.F. Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner, 1932-1936* (Stellenbosch and Grahamstown, University Publishers, 1970), p.65.

Throughout her adult life, Theron attempted to live by this precept and to convey the message to a variety of audiences in speeches and in her writings, although outcomes did not always match intentions. She had no pretensions to being a public intellectual, however this is defined,¹⁷ and rarely engaged in the battle of ideas regarding the country's social and political order in the public arena. In her view, much more would be achieved in life 'if people would just *talk* less and *do* more'.¹⁸ As discussed in this thesis she was often impatient and seemingly uncomfortable with intellectual debate. On more than one occasion she admitted privately that she did not fully grasp the ramifications and implications of various political theories and ideologies. This is perhaps one reason for her impressionability in the face of the intellectual and rhetorical skill of someone like Verwoerd. Theron was at her most assured when devising and advocating practical action to address practical problems. Another of her favourite maxims was a quotation attributed to T.D. Cabot: 'It is easy to forgive mistakes, but hard to forgive inaction'.¹⁹

¹⁷ There is considerable disagreement on what constitutes a public intellectual. See for example Janey Scott, 'Thinking Out Loud: The Public Intellectual is Reborn', <http://nytimes.com/1994/08/09/nyregion/thinking-out-loud-the-public-intellectual-is-reborn.html> (last viewed 9 September 2009); Christopher Hitchens, 'How to be a Public Intellectual. The World's Fifth Best Public Intellectual on the Uses and Abuses of the Term', <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2008/05/howtobeapublicintellectual/> (last viewed 15 September 2009).

¹⁸ Annette Muller, 'Erika Theron: 'n Vrou van Min Woorde en Baie Dade', *Die Huisgenoot*, 4 June 1976, quoting Theron, p.17 (transl.).

¹⁹ Quoted *i.a.* in *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 3 (August 1972), p.217; S.A. National Council for Child Welfare (W.O.79), *The Siegfried Kuschke Memorial Lecture, Number 2*. By Prof. Erika Theron, 22 October 1974 (n.p. S.A. National Council for Child Welfare, n.d.). Original source of the quotation has not been traced.

This thesis, therefore, concentrates on the ‘woman of action’ and her passion for service.²⁰ These were Theron’s ‘special gifts’²¹ and they are the central theme which largely shaped the structure of this study. What made the project particularly worthwhile was the fact that Erika Theron’s life spanned a critical period in South Africa’s history, through the emergence, flourishing and then the decline of Afrikaner hegemony. She was born shortly after the Anglo-Boer War²² and was a witness to the rise of twentieth-century Afrikaner nationalism. As a young woman she saw the political triumph over British domination, the consolidation of the cultural identity and the gradual economic empowerment of Afrikaners. She also saw the institutionalisation of racial division and white supremacy through the imposition of the apartheid system. She was not only a witness to these processes, but an active protagonist. However, in her advanced years she lived to see re-evaluation of the morality and functionality of apartheid and the early phases of its dissolution. Again she was a participant in these events and a contributor to change. To study Theron’s public life is therefore to study significant historical processes as they were experienced and negotiated by an individual, a woman, who was intensely engaged in these processes.

At the beginning of this project, I intended to ‘write the life’ of Erika Theron – a comprehensive biography that would examine in detail the private as well as the public persona. However, I was obliged to refine the nature of the enterprise as my research progressed. According to the prize-winning biographer, Nigel Hamilton, biographical research ‘is impelled by curiosity about

²⁰ Many contemporary commentators identified Theron in this way. See for example, *Die Burger*, 31 October 1972, ‘Waar sy Kan het sy Gedien’; Muller, ‘Erika Theron: ’n Vrou van Min Woorde en Baie Dade’, *Die Huisgenoot*, 4 June 1976; *Die Burger*, 30 August 1990, ‘Dr. Erika Theron was ’n Vrou van die Daad’.

²¹ Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women’s Lives*, pp.31-32. Wagner-Martin writes of the ‘special gifts’ which make an individual worthy of biographical study.

²² The term Anglo-Boer War has been used in this thesis to refer to the war of 1899-1902, which in recent literature is more commonly called the South African War. It is now well-documented that all groups in South Africa participated in, and were affected by the war. However in the contexts in which it is here used, the emphasis is upon relations between Britain and its supporters on the one hand and the Boer Republics and their sympathisers on the other.

individual human nature, not the more impersonal forces of society and politics'.²³ He argues that biographers (whom he contrasts with historians) are essentially concerned with the 'portrait of an individual ... it's the *personal foreground*, not the background, that will ultimately be their *locus vivendi* so to speak'.²⁴ This, however, was not my primary objective, nor did I believe that with the sources available to me I could construct a biography defined in these terms.

²³ Nigel Hamilton, *How to do Biography: A Primer* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2008), p.66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.64-65.

Hermione Lee provides a much more flexible interpretation of what constitutes a biography, although she, too, argues that biography should try to answer the question ‘what was she or he like?’.²⁵ Like Hamilton, Lee distinguishes between the methods and the production of historians and of biographers. She writes that ‘biography rubs up all the time against rival ways of understanding and explaining human beings and the nature of identity’, among which she includes psychoanalysis and history.²⁶ This is a moot distinction, however. Professional historians have for generations written work that they define as biography²⁷ applying prevailing historical methodology. Some historians place emphasis on the individual personality in their writing in the same way that biographers do. Alex Mouton for example, who argues strongly that biography is ‘proper history’, nevertheless describes the genre as ‘whole life – “cradle to grave” – studies investigating the complexity, ambiguity and contradictions of a life’.²⁸

This study does not meet such criteria. Owing to the uneven nature of the sources, it does not provide an unbroken account of Theron’s life. Furthermore, the main focus of this thesis is on the public rather than the private world of Theron. I have discussed and interpreted aspects of her personal life, particularly where these provide insight into her personality and lifestyle. But this does not constitute the ‘foreground’ of the study. Rather, it is the background, intended mainly to throw light on how she conducted herself and what she was able to achieve in the public arena. In her discussion of the genre, Lee does make allowance for such an approach to biography – in cases where ‘a life is all action and narrative, rather than words and ideas’. She recognises that these subjects present particular ‘challenges’:

²⁵ Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, OUP, 2009), p.124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.15.

²⁷ See for example F.A. Mouton, ‘“The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”: Professional Historians and Political Biography of South African Parliamentary Politics, 1910-1990’, Inaugural Lecture, University of South Africa, 27 October 2009. Mouton is author of *Voices in the Dark. Margaret and William Ballinger: A Biography* (Pretoria, Benedic Books, 1997) and *Voorloper: Die Lewe van Schalk Pienaar* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2002).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.3.

Biographies of [such] leaders or activists must set the central performance of their subjects in the context of the political conditions that produce them, the society in and on which they operate, their race, class, nationality, and gender, and the many other figures who surround them.²⁹

²⁹ Lee, *Biography*, p.104.

This is what I have attempted to do. Lee also refutes the view that it is an invariable rule of biography that ‘the story should cover the whole life’.³⁰

Other writers provide even broader scope for what may fall within the ambit of biography. The editors of *Selves in Question* adopt the term ‘auto/biographical account’ to ‘signify a wide assortment of symbolic expressions in which the life or part of the life of a material person or persons is represented’.³¹ Within such a framework, ‘The Public Life of Erika Theron’ may be termed a biographical study.

Throughout the western world, biography is currently a flourishing genre, both in the print and other media such as television and film.³² In South Africa, as elsewhere, popular biographies (as well as autobiographies and collaborative autobiographies) of celebrities such as entertainers and sports personalities, make up a significant proportion of all newly published non-fiction. However, there is also considerable interest in more scholarly biographical production as is evident from the project published as *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/Biography*, which forms part of the *Writing Past Colonialism* series of the Institute of Postcolonial Studies based in Melbourne. This study is concerned primarily with identity creation and is structured around conversations with scholars from a number of fields, who have engaged in biographical and autobiographical production, including for example N. Chabani Manganyi, Es’kia Mphahlele, J.M. Coetzee, Stephen Gray and Gillian Slovo (among many others).³³

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.

³¹ Coullie *et al.*, *Selves*, p.8.

³² Hamilton, *How to do Biography*, p.1.

³³ Coullie *et al.*, *Selves*.

Another recent initiative related to biographical production was the colloquium on biography hosted by WISER³⁴ in Johannesburg in May 2003. According to the WISER newsletter, ‘in recent decades [biography] has become one of the most popular varieties of non-fiction literature and it has also become an increasingly prominent form of historical writing’, as demonstrated by the attendance and participation at this gathering.³⁵ During the colloquium, three of WISER’s members who were (or had been recently) engaged in writing biographical studies – John Matshikiza, Jonathan Hyslop and Mark Gevisser³⁶ – discussed their varied experiences of the process in a group interview with Sarah Nuttal.

These three authors reflect some of the very different current trends in biographical writing in South Africa. Hyslop sees his study as part of ‘the social history tradition of recovering the lives of relatively obscure people’.³⁷ Other examples of this kind of work are Tim Couzens’ *Tramp Royal*³⁸ and Charles van Onselen’s *The Fox and the Flies*.³⁹ These works have in common their relatively exotic subjects with international connections and contribute in some measure to another rising school of historiography, world history.

³⁴ University of the Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research.

³⁵ *WISER in Brief* 2, 1 (June 2003), p.1.

³⁶ These works were published as follows: J. Matshikiza, *With the Lid off South Africa: Insights from Home and Abroad, 1959-2000* (Braamfontein, Mail and Guardian Book Division, 2000); Jonathan Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist: J.T. Bain, a Scottish Rebel in Colonial Africa* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2004); Mark Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2007).

³⁷ *WISER in Brief* 2, 1 (June 2003), p.4.

³⁸ Tim Couzens, *Tramp Royal: The True Story of Trader Horn* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press and Witwatersrand University Press, 1992).

³⁹ Charles van Onselen, *The Fox and the Flies: The World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath* (London, Jonathan Cape, 2007).

Two of Van Onselen's other recent biographical works are more obviously examples of social history in the school of 'history from below', based largely on oral evidence – *The Small Matter of a Horse* and *The Seed is Mine*.⁴⁰ Adam Ashforth's *Maduma* is a similar example.⁴¹ In the introduction to *Selves in Question*, Coullie suggests that in post-apartheid South Africa, this latter school of writing – works based on 'oral testimony of victims of racism, published by white researchers' – is a declining model, possibly because this kind of study may now be interpreted as 'patronising'.⁴²

⁴⁰ Charles van Onselen, *The Small Matter of a Horse: The Life of 'Nongoloza' Mathebula, 1867-1948* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1984); Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1996).

⁴¹ Adam Ashforth, *Maduma: A Man Bewitched* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2000).

⁴² Coullie *et al.*, *Selves*, p.30.

On the other hand, Mark Gevisser's study of Thabo Mbeki reflects a flourishing field of historiography since 1994⁴³ – that of recovering the stories of individuals marginalised and silenced by the South African political system. In the decades of the 1960s to 1980s, writings by or about 'banned' individuals⁴⁴ were prohibited material in this country and thousands of writings by black and other opposition voices were blacklisted, leaving a void in the record.⁴⁵ In recent times a considerable number of studies of prominent figures in the liberation struggle have been released in South Africa. Mandela, as could be expected, has a number of biographers.⁴⁶ Other examples of this field include biographies of Oliver Tambo, of Walter and Eleanor Sisulu and Ronald Suresh Roberts's study of Thabo Mbeki,⁴⁷ as well as lesser-known struggle figures. John Matshikiza's work examines the life and work of his father, Todd Matshikiza, musical composer and writer for the *Drum* magazine, who became a political exile.⁴⁸ A few biographies of white anti-apartheid activists have also appeared, for example Stephen Clingman's book on A.B. (Bram) Fischer.⁴⁹

⁴³ The first non-racial, democratic elections took place in 1994.

⁴⁴ Individuals designated by the state as politically subversive and placed under restrictions. They could not be quoted or published.

⁴⁵ Christopher Saunders and Nicholas Southey, *A Dictionary of South African History* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1998), pp.17-18, cited in Coullie *et al.*, *Selves*, p.21.

⁴⁶ See among others, Tom Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford, OUP, 2006); Kekla Magoon, *Nelson Mandela: A Leader for Freedom* (Edina, Minn., ABDO Publishing, 2008); Peter Limb, *Nelson Mandela: A Biography* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 2008).

⁴⁷ Luli Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Cape Town and London, David Philip and Global, 2004); Elinor Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In our Lifetime* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2002); Ronald Suresh Roberts, *Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki* (Johannesburg, STE, 2007).

⁴⁸ John Matshikiza, *With the Lid Off: South Africa, Insights from Home and Abroad, 1959-2000* (Braamfontein, Mail and Guardian Book Division, 2000).

⁴⁹ Stephen Clingman, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1998).

Literary biography is another burgeoning field in South Africa,⁵⁰ with two writers being particularly prolific in the output of studies of well-known Afrikaner writers – J.C. Kannemeyer and J.C. Steyn.⁵¹ There are signs of interest in lesser-known literary figures as well. For example J.C. Steyn has done some work on Petronella van Heerden, a medical doctor and writer (who incidentally, was well-known in Theron’s circle).⁵² Annemarié van Niekerk has also published on the life and writing of this unusual woman, specifically within the theoretical framework of feminist historiography.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Die Burger*, ‘Die Merkwaardige Opkoms van die Literêre Biografie’ by Hermann Gioliomee, quoted in Mouton, ‘The Good the Bad and the Ugly’, p.12.

⁵¹ To mention a few examples: J.C. Kannemeyer, *Langenhoven: ’n Lewe* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1995); *Leipoldt: ’n Lewensverhaal* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1999); *Die Goue Seun: Die Lewe en Werk van Uys Krige* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2002); *Jan Rabie, Prosapionier en Politieke Padwyser* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2004). J.C. Steyn, *Van Wyk Louw: ’n Lewensverhaal* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1998); *Die 100 Jaar van MER* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2004).

⁵² J.C. Steyn, ‘’n “Gesuiwerde” Nasionalis Word Dissident’, *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 29 (11), February 1991.

⁵³ See Annemarié van Niekerk, ‘A Woman Who Made her Mark in History but Remained Marginalised in the Documents of History: Petronella van Heerden’, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 14, 3 and 43 (December 1998), pp.348-374.

My study of Theron hopefully contributes to the growing body of biographical writing, and in particular to that which examines the lives and roles of women who, as a relatively marginalised group, are under-represented in South Africa's historiography.

Sources

Manuscripts

The bulk of Theron's personal papers disappeared after her death. Despite exhaustive enquiries I have failed to establish with certainty what has become of them. Without exception, members of Theron's family, friends and colleagues with whom I have communicated (including Theron's nephew, godson and executor of her estate, Justice J.J. [Hannes] Fagan), expressed the view that Theron had maintained documents meticulously throughout her life and that a substantial collection should have existed at the time of her death.

The possibility cannot be ruled out, however, that after Theron had published her collection of reminiscences, entitled *Sonder Hoed of Handskoen*.⁵⁴ – a selective record over which she had personal control – she chose to destroy the bulk of her papers. History is replete with examples of public figures who burned diaries, correspondence and other documents for a variety of reasons.⁵⁵ Theron may have wished to frustrate any attempt at the writing of an intrusive or critical biography by an unsympathetic biographer.

⁵⁴ Erika Theron, *Sonder Hoed of Handskoen: Synde a Klompie Informele Herinneringe Waarin die Kind (Meesal) op sy Naam Genoem Word* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1983), p.7.

⁵⁵ Michael Holroyd, *Works on Paper: The Craft of Biography and Autobiography* (London, Abacus, 2003), pp.10-13.

Another possibility is that a collection of documents remains in private hands. Among the many contacts which I made in search of an archive of papers was Irna van Wyk, Theron's personal assistant in the last years of her life. I was able to speak to Van Wyk only briefly, by telephone. According to Van Wyk, Theron made a gift of 'a few' private papers to her. However Van Wyk declined to grant me sight or details of these documents. Nor would she agree to meet or to correspond with me. I therefore have no means of knowing what was preserved. Van Wyk told me that she hoped to write about Theron herself at some time in the future.⁵⁶

A very small number of diverse private papers belonging to Theron, was located within the Marinus Wiechers collection (Accession 72) in the University of South Africa (Unisa) archives. Wiechers was a close friend of Theron in the latter stages of her life.⁵⁷ According to Wiechers he had noticed the documents 'lying around' in Theron's flat and she had said that he might have them.⁵⁸ He appeared unable to offer any further explanation of this event. In the course of my research it became apparent that most, though not all of these documents, related to specific topics discussed by Theron in *Sonder Hoed*. They were evidently extracted from her files for reference purposes during the writing of this book. One of the reasons why these documents were very helpful is that they enabled me to read the narrative in *Sonder Hoed* against original documentary evidence and to make inferences about the ways in which Theron remembered events and portrayed herself and her environment. This provided additional insight, for example, when interpreting other writings and published interviews.

In addition to the archived documents, Wiechers generously handed to me a small collection of personal letters which he had received from Theron during the period 1981 to 1986, on the understanding that these should be added to the University of South Africa archive in due course.

⁵⁶ Refer my letter to I. Van Wyk, 22 September 1999; telephone conversation, 8 October 1999.

⁵⁷ M. Wiechers, former Professor of Constitutional Law and Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa, co-opted adviser to the Theron Commission.

⁵⁸ Interview with Professor M. Wiechers, Pretoria, 7 May 1997.

Although few in number and narrow in the scope of their content, together these two sets of sources were invaluable for the glimpses that they provide into the personality of Theron. As the biographer Janet Malcolm writes:

Letters ... are the fossils of feeling. This is why biographers prize them so: they are biography's only conduit to unmediated experience. Everything else the biographer touches is stale, hashed over, told and retold, dubious, unauthentic, suspect. Only when he reads a subject's letters does the biographer feel he has come fully into his presence ...⁵⁹

This is an idealised view. Undoubtedly Theron's letters, like all correspondence, reflect her particular intentions in writing and her relationship with the intended reader. Nevertheless, in the sparse archive of her personal letters, Theron's blunt, practical approach to issues as well as her humour, her intense loyalty to friends, her warmth and enthusiasm emerge in a way that could not have been discerned from other remaining original sources, such as official documents.

Another important source providing some insight into the personal as well as the public world of Theron is to be found in the Maria Elizabeth Rothmann (MER) collection in the Document Centre, J.S. Gericke Library, University of Stellenbosch. MER was a lifelong family friend and mentor of Theron.⁶⁰ The collection contains only a handful of letters written by Theron but does include substantial correspondence addressed by MER to Theron, to her sisters and close mutual friends, covering a wide range of topics. From these letters, inferences can be made about the *milieu* within which Theron lived and worked and about her interests and attitudes. Care had to be taken, however, not to make false assumptions and to conflate the views of MER with those of Theron.

⁵⁹ Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p.110.

⁶⁰ Theron addressed and often referred to Rothmann as 'TaMiem', an affectionate abbreviation of 'Aunt Miemie'.

Much of the original manuscript research for this thesis necessarily concentrated on the records of institutions and official bodies with which Theron was involved. The Institute for Contemporary History at the University of the Free State (formerly known as the University of the Orange Free State), Bloemfontein (INCH), was an important resource in this regard. In particular, the H.F. Verwoerd private collection (PV93) and the collection of the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings (Federation of Afrikaner Cultural Organisations) (PV202) yielded valuable primary material. Documents dealing with the Volkskongres oor die Armblankevraagstuk (National Conference on the Poor White Problem) (hereafter, 1934 National Conference⁶¹) and its Continuation Committee (central to Chapter Two) are contained in both collections. Neither record is complete in itself and there is considerable duplication. Furthermore, these collections are beginning to show signs of wear and tear. Nevertheless they provide the foundation for the discussion of Theron's association with Verwoerd and her work with him on the poor white rehabilitation project in the 1930s. This was a seminal period in Theron's life which echoed throughout her public career. A number of other smaller collections in this archive were also consulted for information on specific topics. These include the documents of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work (PV605) which is discussed mainly in relation to Theron's academic career (Chapter Three).

A number of collections were consulted in the National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria (NA), including the Department of Labour (ARB/LB), which also had a bearing on the work of the Continuation Committee and its pilot industrial welfare programme. Attempts were made to consult the files of the various statutory bodies on which Theron later served, including the Housing, Welfare and Group Areas boards (which have a bearing on Chapter Four and Five in particular). This was extremely frustrating as the records are in many cases impossible to trace. This is due, among other things, to the merging, splitting and re-naming of the bodies, re-allocation of functions, as well as the closing, re-opening and re-numbering of various filing systems. For example, the Group Areas Board, which had its origins in the Advisory Board for Land Ownership, was later

⁶¹ Although the organisers translated 'Volkskongres' as 'National Conference' this does not capture the important connotations of *Volkskongres* – 'People's Congress'. See Chapter Two.

placed under the Secretary for Community Development and thereafter under the Secretary for Planning.

Staff working in the archives are apparently unable to overcome these complications. What files could be found were incomplete and many documents are simply no longer accessible through the system in its present state. In the absence of sources, it has therefore not been possible to discuss certain aspects of Theron's public career in any depth, important though they were. References will be found, however, to some relevant material from the Department of Planning (BEP), Department of Community Development (GEM), Group Areas Board (GGR) and the Department of Social Welfare and Pensions (VWN).

Theron's career in the town council of Stellenbosch was easier to research. The archive of the Stellenbosch municipality (STB) is housed in the Western Cape Archives (formerly known as the Cape Archives Depot). Comprehensive records of minutes of the council and its various committees provided a useful foundation to study Theron's long service as councillor and mayor (Chapter Four). Some of the correspondence files and other records in this collection are however in disarray. According to the archivists they have been 'weeded' and consolidated in order to reduce volume. The index was not updated during this process and titles appearing on folders and the actual contents of files often do not correspond. This greatly impedes research. It is also the reason for what may appear to be incongruous references in a few instances in this thesis.

The official archive of the Theron Commission was also consulted in the Western Cape Archives,⁶² providing source material in particular for Chapter Five. This is a vast collection and contains an enormous volume of factual data. However, as is the case with the Stellenbosch Council collection, the documents most relevant to this study, in particular minutes of meetings, represent a substantially filtered record. On Theron's instructions, minutes were compiled to reflect only

⁶² Western Cape Archive (WCA): Department of Coloured, Rehoboth and Nama Affairs: Commission of Inquiry into Matters Affecting the Coloured Population Group (1973-1976) (Erica [sic] Theron) (CET).

conclusions and decisions⁶³ and not debate. Nevertheless, the archive provides some useful information regarding this massive project which was one of the defining areas of Theron's public career.

⁶³ WCA:CET, 2/2/2 handwritten note inserted into file initialled by the secretary. Minutes had been rewritten in terms of Theron's instruction to omit discussion and record only decisions.

Newspapers

Newspapers have formed a very important source for this thesis. They have been utilised extensively to indicate the range of public debate around particular issues, and where possible to situate Theron within the debates. I encountered Theron's name appearing occasionally in local, regional and national newspapers from the 1950s, both as a subject of commentary and as a commentator, mainly relating to her academic career, role as councillor and mayor of Stellenbosch and her SABRA⁶⁴ activities. In 1973, however, her appointment as chairman of the Theron Commission thrust her into the limelight and there is considerable reporting and editorial comment on Theron's background as well as expectations concerning the commission in the following years. After the commission had submitted its report in 1976, Theron determined to use the media to keep alive issues arising from the project, and to put pressure on government to improve the position of the coloured population. With her growing reputation as an Afrikaner dissident and her frequently provocative manner, Theron could be counted on by the press to provide good copy.⁶⁵ As a result, she continued to be approached for comment, which was apparently readily forthcoming, virtually until the end of her life in 1990.

⁶⁴ Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-aangeleenthede (South African Bureau for Racial Affairs).

⁶⁵ Interview with the Rykie Van Reenen.

For the purposes of this study, the newspapers most comprehensively surveyed were two of the Western Cape dailies, *Die Burger* and the *The Argus*.⁶⁶ *Die Burger* was founded specifically to represent Afrikaner and NP interests and in the period discussed in this thesis, reflects the changing concerns in these circles. In the early years, the central issues were the upliftment of Afrikaners and their relationship to the English-speaking community as well as national sovereignty. From the late 1940s, increasingly the focus shifted to race relations. The two sets of problems were however never entirely divorced, both being regarded as relevant to Afrikaner survival and independence. According to Giliomee, during the long editorship of Piet Cillié he ‘rarely defended apartheid on its own terms, but superimposed the Afrikaner-English struggle on the white-black or white-coloured struggle’.⁶⁷ Thus, for example, coloured relations were seen in the light of their potential to place Afrikaner survival in jeopardy.

Die Burger’s first editor-in-chief, D.F. Malan, was also the leader of the Cape NP from 1915 and apparently made little distinction between the two roles, sometimes to the detriment of journalistic standards.⁶⁸ However in later years *Die Burger* attracted a number of extremely talented, opinion-forming editors whose approach was more professional, including Albertus Geyer, Phil Weber and Cillié.⁶⁹ All were deeply committed to the NP but not subservient to its leaders and were prepared to air critical debate.⁷⁰ According to Ebbe Dommissie, who served on the editorial staff of both *Die Burger* and the *Transvaal Beeld*, it was *Die Burger* which led the way in establishing an ‘independent tradition’ among a group of Afrikaner newspapers.⁷¹

⁶⁶ *The Argus* was founded and initially published as *The Cape Argus*, thereafter from 1 December 1969 as *The Argus* and as *Cape Argus* from 5 September 1996. Except where specific editions are referred to, the popular designation, *The Argus*, will be used.

⁶⁷ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.501.

⁶⁸ Dirk Richard, *Moedswillig die Uwe: Persoonlikhede in die Noorde* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Perkskor, 1985), p.40.

⁶⁹ See for example Giliomee, *Afrikaners*, pp.408, 414-415, 497.

⁷⁰ See for example *ibid.*, p.514. See also Dirk Richard, *Tussen Bid en Droom: 'n Koerantman het Albei Nodig* (Pretoria, Constantia, 1986), p.99.

⁷¹ Ebbe Dommissie, ‘The Changing Role of the Afrikaans Press’ in Munger (ed.), *The*

Die Burger was an important source for this study also because of its Western Cape regional orientation. Theron was born in the Western Cape and based in Stellenbosch virtually throughout her adult life. It was *Die Burger* that spoke most directly to the concerns of Western Cape Afrikaners such as herself, reflecting provincial interests and the particularity of Cape politics. Coloured affairs, for example loomed much larger in the Western Cape where the majority of the coloured population lived, than they did in the northern provinces. *Die Burger* played a central role in the public debate about coloured relations, usually holding the middle ground between the English-language opposition press and liberal Afrikaner opinion on the one hand, and conservative Afrikaner elements on the other.

Die Burger was very much part of Theron's life. The appearance of the first issue, then titled *De Burger*, even warrants mention in her memoirs. As she puts it, *Die Burger* was 'our very own, first, National Party newspaper' and the first edition was greeted with elation in her family.⁷² When her father's eyesight began to fail, she says it was her task to read the newspaper to him, from cover to cover. From that time forward she became a 'chronic newspaper reader'.⁷³ She read at least two newspapers every day and commented regularly to her personal correspondents on articles appearing in the press. She often posted newspaper clippings to friends with comments.⁷⁴ Her relationship with *Die Burger* remained particularly intimate. Like an honest, critical friend, she would from time to time disagree with perspectives it adopted, become exasperated, but later be reconciled. She voiced her opinion in articles and in the correspondence pages of the newspaper and did not hesitate to write directly and privately to its editors to compliment or to remonstrate.⁷⁵

⁷² *Sonder Hoed*, p.6 (transl.).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.7 (transl.).

⁷⁴ Interview with Justice J.J. (Hannes) Fagan, Cape Town, 24 February 1997; interview, Wiechers; correspondence between Theron and Wiechers in possession of author.

⁷⁵ See for example correspondence in University of Stellenbosch, Gericke Library (US Doc Centre): P.J. Cillié Collection, 220.K.57 (2), letter, Erika Theron to the editor, *Die Burger*, 24 January 1957; *ibid.*, 220.K.73 (53), 16 April 1973; *ibid.*, 220.K.73(53), 2 October, 1973; *ibid.*, 220.K.70 (61), 18 May 1976.

The English-language newspaper which was most widely consulted was *The Argus*, in order to provide a less sectional view of events than was provided in the Afrikaans press. *The Argus* catered for the liberal, English-speaking public, and broadly supported the official political opposition. According to Willem de Klerk⁷⁶ while the Afrikaans-language press tended to concentrate on Afrikaner interests and politics, the English-language press generally provided a more balanced discussion of the totality of the country's affairs. By reflecting the 'problems, aspirations and frustrations' of black and coloured communities the English newspapers made white South Africans aware of a broader social and political reality. The English-language press, in his view, was also more vigilant and confrontational about issues such as the rule of law and the freedom of the press.⁷⁷ Also a Western Cape daily newspaper, *The Argus* provided a useful foil to the perspective of *Die Burger*. Theron read *The Argus* regularly and quoted from it extensively in the journal which she edited, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*. In her later years, when she was increasingly at odds with NP policy, her views were often published through this newspaper. In an interview with one of its columnists in 1973, she said that she found it to be 'the best newspaper for news, particularly in social work, not just locally but also overseas'.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ W.J. de Klerk (1928-2009), former Professor of Philosophy at the University of Potchefstroom, newspaper editor and brother of later President F.W. de Klerk.

⁷⁷ Willem De Klerk, *Die Tweede (R)evolusie: Afrikanerdom en die Identiteitskrisis* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1984), pp.71-72 (transl.).

⁷⁸ *The Argus*, 26 April 1973, 'Prof Erika Theron' by Beverley Roos.

For selected periods, when events significant to this thesis were under discussion in the press, a broader range of newspapers was consulted. I was fortunate to have easy access to the extensive micro-film archive of newspapers housed in the well-managed audio-visual section of the University of South Africa library in Pretoria and was able to consult a wide, representative range of publications. These included conservative Afrikaans-language publications such as the Pretoria *Hoofstad* under the editorship of Dr. Andries Treurnicht⁷⁹ and (until the 1970s) the Johannesburg *Die Transvaler*. Established in 1937 under the editorship of Verwoerd, *Die Transvaler* was the instrument of the new political opposition in the northern province at the time, the Purified National Party.⁸⁰ It promoted exclusive Afrikaner nationalism and republicanism and attacked the United Party at every opportunity. Reports and editorials in these newspapers in this period have to be evaluated in the light of this and the bitter breach in the ranks of Afrikaners which had given rise to this publication (see particularly Chapter Two). After a re-united NP assumed power in 1948, *Die Transvaler* continued for '24 bleak years' to serve as a party mouthpiece.⁸¹ Only in 1973, commencing with the editorship of Willem de Klerk, did this publication break the shackles and provide a more independent, questioning voice. Although proudly Afrikaner, 'with a passionate love' for his country, language and culture⁸² De Klerk did not hesitate to criticise the NP government when he thought it was merited.⁸³ In many respects, he and his newspaper stood for the evolving Afrikaner self-examination and revisionism with which Theron was associated.

⁷⁹ Dr. A.P. Treurnicht (1921-1993), theologian, editor of the DRC mouthpiece, *Die Kerkbode* in the 1960s, later editor of the conservative newspaper, *Hoofstad*, cabinet minister in the NP government and first leader of the Conservative Party formed in 1982.

⁸⁰ The Purified National Party was established after an acrimonious split in the former NP. D.F. Malan and a small group of followers declined to follow J.B.M. Hertzog ([1866-1942], revered general in the Boer forces in the Anglo-Boer War, founder of the NP in 1914, Prime Minister, 1924 to 1939) into the merger which was the foundation of the United Party. The intended role of *Die Transvaler* was to 'neutralise' the Afrikaans-language newspaper in the Transvaal which was supportive of the *Smelters* (mergers), *Die Vaderland*.

⁸¹ Richard, *Moedswillig die Uwe*, p.86 (transl.).

⁸² Willem de Klerk, 'I am an Afrikaner' in Munger, *The Afrikaners*, p.94 (transl.).

⁸³ Richard, *Moedswillig die Uwe*, pp.157-167.

The same may be said of the Afrikaans-language Sunday papers *Dagbreek* and *Die Beeld* as well as their successor, *Rapport*, which provided valuable insight for this thesis because of their evidently professional reporting on key issues from a relatively ‘enlightened’ Afrikaner perspective. *Die Beeld* and later *Rapport* were launched under the editorship of Schalk Pienaar. Pienaar, who subscribed to N.P. van Wyk Louw’s vision for Afrikaners of ‘survival in justice’, was an influential figure in the emancipation of the Afrikaans press and the call for ‘enlightened reform’.⁸⁴ Rykie van Reenen, who like Pienaar had worked on *Die Burger*, was also on the staff of *Rapport* (as assistant editor). In the opinion of Giliomee, Van Reenen was ‘undoubtedly the most outstanding Afrikaans journalist of the [twentieth] century (with Pienaar a close second)’.⁸⁵ Van Reenen, who said that she first got to know Theron as a reporter, became a friend and frequently served as a sounding board to Theron.⁸⁶

A slim, local publication which was important for sections of the thesis was the Stellenbosch newspaper, *Eikestadnuus*, archived in the National Library. *Eikestadnuus* was helpful in that it provided an insight into the concerns of Stellenbosch town and its surroundings, including politics, culture and heritage. It published articles on local personalities, among them, Theron, and covered the affairs of the university and municipal council in which she served.

In addition to the above-mentioned sources of newspapers, I had access to several large collections of clippings which were of great value mainly, although not exclusively, for Chapter Five and Chapter Six of the thesis. The S.P. Cilliers papers (collection 289), housed in the Document Centre of the J.S. Gericke Library, University of Stellenbosch, include a number of scrapbooks of press clippings which focus on coloured affairs and Cilliers’ own career. The aforementioned ‘Erika Theron’ files, which form part of the Marinus Wiechers collection in the University of South Africa

⁸⁴ Alex Mouton, *Voorloper*, pp.7,163. Pienaar (1916-1978) also became founding-editor of the ‘enlightened’ Afrikaans-language daily, *Beeld* in 1974. See also Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.548-550.

⁸⁵ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.564.

⁸⁶ Interview, Van Reenen.

archives, also contain clippings on a variety of subjects. Although they include items covering a 30 year period, what has been said of the fragmented nature of the files generally, is equally applicable to this newspaper clipping collection.

The Marinus Wiechers collection does, however, also include a separate collection of clippings which appears to have been compiled by a professional news-gathering service. This provides extremely comprehensive and systematic coverage of coloured affairs for the period 1973-1976, the duration of the Theron Commission. The articles are drawn from a very wide range of newspapers and other publications in both languages and from all major regions in the country. These were an important resource.

I also have in my personal possession, clippings which accompanied the private correspondence between Theron to Wiechers, referred to above. Dating mainly from the first half of the 1980s, these do not form any systematic or coherent record. However they do include items about Theron and about matters in which she took an interest, especially political affairs.

After careful consideration it was concluded that no academic purpose would be served by identifying specific repositories when referring to newspaper and magazine articles in the thesis. It would merely result in unnecessarily cumbersome annotation. It was therefore decided that citations would record only the title of the article and title and date of the publication. In the few instances where the source is an archived newspaper clipping and the relevant data is missing from the document, full details of the source are provided.

Books, Journals, Reports, Unpublished Literature

Extensive use has been made of books, journals, and reports as well as unpublished literature such as dissertations and theses. These include writings produced over a period of almost a century by a wide spectrum of authors, writing in English and in Afrikaans. Works reflecting all the main trends in South African historiography are therefore included. This study has drawn critically on the insights provided by various recent schools of thought without privileging any single paradigm. This eclectic approach is evident to a greater or lesser degree in much recently published history,

including the general histories which I most frequently consulted: the respected Davenport and Saunders, *South Africa*, Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* and Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Rodney Davenport and Christopher Saunders, *South Africa: A Modern History*, 5th ed. (Basingstoke, Macmillan Press Limited, 2000); Robert Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Although *The Afrikaners* focuses on the ‘biography’ of one ethnic group it is based on a vast range of sources and provides wide and insightful coverage of the general history of the country post-1652. Giliomee has been characterised as a ‘liberal’ historian,⁸⁸ but his writing has clearly also taken account of the revisionist-materialist perspective which gained considerable ground through the 1970s and early 1980s. He has in recent times claimed that both liberals and radicals failed to recognise fully the importance of group identity and of ideology in their analysis of the country’s history.⁸⁹ He also says that although he does not see himself as an Afrikaner historian, he does write as a historian who is an Afrikaner. Questioned on this in an interview, he says that he is first and foremost a professional historian, ‘striving to be objective and refusing to cook the books’. But at the same time he recognises that he identifies culturally with Afrikaners and the larger Afrikaans-speaking community. He comes from ‘that corner’.⁹⁰ Writing about the world of a Western Cape Afrikaner, a world which he shared with Theron, I found the balance of insider perspective with the commitment to writing empirically ‘good history’, which *The Afrikaners* displays, extremely helpful. It does not, for example, gloss over the pernicious nature of apartheid, but neither does it summarily dismiss the intentions of those who conceptualised apartheid in an idealised way.⁹¹ *The Afrikaners* has been a particularly valuable reference work for this thesis.

⁸⁸ Historians of the liberal school in South Africa emphasise the individual but also the influence of race in the shaping of the racially stratified social structure. Liberal historians assumed that capitalism and the free market system were benign forces that would in time undermine this structure.

⁸⁹ See J.P. Brits, ‘An Afrikaner History for All Times? Hermann Giliomee’s *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*’, *Kleio*, 36 (2004), pp.48-52 for a discussion of Giliomee’s approach to writing history.

⁹⁰ Heribert Adam, ‘An Historian of Afrikaner Origin, but not an Afrikaner Historian: Hermann Giliomee at 70’, *South African Historical Journal* 60, 4 (December 2008), p.537.

⁹¹ See *ibid.*, pp.548-549 in which Giliomee responds to the observation that his critics accuse him of sounding like an ‘apartheid apologist’.

The insights of post-modern theorists whose main impact has been on literary studies, have also brought some influence to bear on approaches to historical writing, particularly since the 1990s. This is true even of broadly empirical work. Among other things, greater attention is being paid to recognising gaps, interrogating theoretical assumptions and acknowledging the contingent nature of evidence.⁹² I have only occasionally engaged overtly with these issues in the text of the thesis, where I have considered it appropriate, but my methodology has been influenced by these trends.

Theron's autobiographical work, *Sonder Hoed of Handskoen* has been a key resource for this study. Although it has been loosely referred to in this thesis as Theron's 'memoirs', it is in fact a short, highly selective and informal collection of anecdotes and recollections. Rykie van Reenen, author, newspaper reporter and friend of Theron, played a significant role in the compiling and editing of this book but refused acknowledgement for her contribution, according to Theron.⁹³ Much of the basic material for *Sonder Hoed* was gathered during conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, recorded at Theron's holiday home in Hermanus in 1981. The two cassettes were donated to the writer by Van Reenen and provide an invaluable lens through which *Sonder Hoed* has been read. There are discrepancies between the two sources, which have been noted and interpreted wherever possible in this thesis.

Mention must also be made of the importance of the academic journal *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* as a source for this study. Theron founded the journal, edited it and published in it for over two decades, until shortly before her death (see Chapter Three). Possibly more than any other source, it provides relatively direct access to her public voice and opinions over an extended period of time.

Interviews

⁹² Few texts used in this thesis could be regarded as representative of post-modernist writing in the sense that deconstruction and textual analysis are central features. However many historians are reflecting more overtly about how they have arrived at interpretations.

⁹³ See document in possession of author: letter Erika Theron to Marinus Wiechers, 22 May 1982.

I had the privilege of meeting and conversing with a number of Theron's colleagues and friends as well as members of her extended family. Given that Theron was born in 1907, my informants (with the exception of Brunhilda Helm⁹⁴) belong to later generations who were not yet born or were very young when Theron's early public career began. Their observations relating to the early part of her life, therefore, were invariably based on hearsay or on published sources with which I was already familiar. Often, the manner in which informants selected and related these fragments of Theron's history conveyed more about the informant than about the subject. Nevertheless, as Hamilton points out, 'today the *subjectivity* of individual perspectives is seen as rich, valuable, and illuminating in many disciplines of the humanities'.⁹⁵ Oral testimonies, including those of 'competing witnesses', provide a 'collage',⁹⁶ a diversity of perspectives from which much may be gleaned quite apart from the limited and sometimes suspect factual detail which is recounted in interviews. Through inference, insight could be gained concerning the environment in which Theron moved, the ways in which she related to others and the identity which she projected.

Personal communications provided more valuable insight about the later period of Theron's career, from the 1960s, although the element of subjectivity is a constant factor. I was able to interview a number of Theron's academic acquaintances from the social science fraternity, both from Stellenbosch University and other institutions. Since these included both admirers and detractors of Theron and of her department's approach to the disciplines of sociology and social work, due care has been taken in corroborating, assessing and interpreting this oral testimony.

⁹⁴ Interview with Professor B. Helm, former Head of the Department of Social Work, University of Cape Town, Knysna, 19 October 2001.

⁹⁵ Hamilton, *How to do Biography*, p.76.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.74.

I had discussions with several participants in the Theron Commission including a high-profile leader in the coloured community, Richard van der Ross.⁹⁷ These interviewees provided helpful observations and insight into the workings of this commission and the personality of Theron. Unfortunately, I was not able to make contact with any of the conservative block of members of this commission, who had opposed what they regarded as the ‘liberal’ tendencies of the majority. These individuals were either untraceable or in several cases, known to be deceased.

Family members and a number of friends of Theron, including her long-serving housekeeper, Linie Leith, whom she refers to in her will as her ‘friend’, shared their recollections of Theron. Some informants, in particular Marinus Wiechers and Rykie van Reenen, also offered astute opinions and analysis of Theron as private and public personality and of her *milieu*. These contributed greatly to my understanding of my subject and the direction of my research.

Structure

Since a number of Theron’s important public roles overlapped in time, a chronologically organised discussion was inherently problematic. In the interests of coherence, therefore, I have organised the thesis thematically, concentrating separately on five significant areas of Theron’s public career, within their relevant social and political contexts. The consequence of this approach is that some sections are necessarily much longer than conventional chapter length. It is hoped, however, that clearly designated sub-sections fulfil a similar purpose to that of chapter partition, providing logically and stylistically appropriate units of text and facilitating readability.

In Chapter One, Theron’s family background and education are discussed to explain her confident, independent personality and her strong Afrikaner nationalist inclination. The importance of her post-graduate student years in Germany is discussed and it is argued that this experience had a seminal influence on her attitudes. Among other things her confidence in the abilities of women,

⁹⁷ Professor R.E. van der Ross, educator, author and activist for the rights of coloured people in South Africa, also Vice Chancellor of the University of the Western Cape. Van der Ross served on the Theron Commission.

her orientation towards service and her desire to work for the upliftment of the Afrikaner people were reinforced, contributing to the shaping of her career. Her relationships with her two mentors, MER and Verwoerd, are also considered.

Chapter Two deals with the campaign in service of the poor whites during the 1930s, and its links to the resurgence of Afrikaner nationalism. It is argued that this experience made an indelible impression on Theron. It fed her crusading inclinations and ignited in her an activist spirit which would be expressed in many other areas of her public career. In particular, the association with Verwoerd, with whom she worked closely at this time, is discussed.

Theron's career as an academic leader is examined in Chapter Three. It is argued that Theron served the social work discipline and profession with dedication for over half a century (taking account of her long editorship of the social work journal) and that she had a long-term influence on their development. To do so she overcame obstacles to the advancement of women in academia, particularly prevalent in Afrikaans-medium universities at the time. However, it is also argued that her service as social work academic took place within the framework of NP race policy, until disenchantment and new perceptions began to emerge during the 1970s.

In Chapter Four Theron's career as town councillor and first woman mayor of Stellenbosch are discussed. This coincided with the early years of NP rule. It is shown that she was instrumental in the implementation of apartheid in local government in a particularly inflexible way and that her service to the white community and to NP ideology resulted in significant inhumanity and injustice – particularly as it affected the black population. At the same time, it is argued that Theron served future generations through her role in the struggle to preserve aspects of the architectural character and cultural heritage of Stellenbosch, albeit mainly the colonial features of that heritage.

Chapter Five deals with Theron's role as chairman of the Theron Commission. In this chapter it is argued that through her experience in the commission Theron's eyes were opened to the harm inflicted on the coloured population through the apartheid system. This is discussed within the context of an emerging trend among 'enlightened' Afrikaners, toward questioning NP race policy.

In Chapter Six Theron's role as Afrikaner dissident and campaigner for reform are discussed. It is argued that her Western Cape socialisation inclined her to greater sympathy for coloured aspirations but that in the late years of her life she had begun to consider the circumstances of the black population as well and to acknowledge flaws in Verwoerdian apartheid. Ironically, the character traits which she had developed and strategies which she had learned in the poor white crusade, as disciple of Verwoerd, she applied in her campaign for greater social justice for people of colour.

Language and Terminology

Many of the sources for this thesis are written in Afrikaans. Translations of quotations are my own and the Afrikaans version of the text is not routinely supplied. However, where it was felt that there are dimensions in the original that cannot be fully captured in English, the Afrikaans is provided as well, in parentheses. This is particularly true of quotations from MER whose idiosyncratic use of the Afrikaans language infuses her writing with historical, emotional and humorous connotations which are partially lost in literal translation. In such instances, the original Afrikaans word or phrase (which is the direct quotation) is placed in quotation marks whereas the translation or the paraphrased English is not.

Afrikaans titles of published items, such as newspaper, magazine and journal articles, and of dissertations, have not been translated. However, where the headings on documents are purely descriptive in nature, referring for example to reports or minutes of meetings, these are given only in English. Words and phrases in languages other than English are italicised in the text (for example, *volk*). Recognised Afrikaans titles of organisations are, however, not italicised (for example, Afrikaner Broederbond).

Choosing a form of nomenclature to refer to the different racial communities in South Africa is difficult. It is recognised that all of the four main groups as officially defined under the NP

government⁹⁸ included large numbers of individuals who by many criteria might have been otherwise classified. Anomalies, appeals against classifications and re-assignments were a constant feature of the apartheid era.⁹⁹ Nevertheless the most viable way of discussing race relations and policy in South Africa in the twentieth century is through reference to these categories, flawed as they are. I have chosen to use the terms 'black', 'white' and 'coloured' in the adjectival sense (hence in lower case),¹⁰⁰ with the intention of avoiding the reification of categories possibly implied in the terms 'Blacks', 'Whites' and 'Coloureds'. It is an imperfect solution for ideological and practical reasons and has created difficulties in sentence construction from time to time. It has nevertheless been maintained as a preferred compromise.

The word 'nationalist' in this thesis refers to principles and policies of nationalism, and individuals who espoused them. I have not used the word to mean attachment to the NP, as it is sometimes applied in popular writing. To avoid confusion, I have used the term 'Afrikaner' in a narrow sense to refer only to white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans.

⁹⁸ The Population Registration Act (Act 30 of 1950) classified individuals as White persons, Bantu persons and Coloured persons (the latter consisting of several sub-groups). For census and various other official purposes, four groups were identified, 'Whites', 'Bantu', 'Coloureds' and 'Asians'.

⁹⁹ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.503-504.

¹⁰⁰ The term 'Asian' is necessarily an exception to this style.

CHAPTER ONE

CHILD, STUDENT AND YOUNG NATIONALIST: LEARNING TO SERVE

Among the many advantages which Erika Theron enjoyed in her long life, was the solid foundation of a happy childhood. Hers was by all accounts a nurturing, affluent family in which she occupied a special place. It was also a family that valued learning both for its own sake and as an instrument to achieve civic ideals.¹ As a result she received abundant encouragement and material support which enabled her to pursue her interests freely. With the backing of the family, with her own intelligence and hard work, she was able to attain a level of education that was unusual for a woman in South Africa at that time. She was not channelled into one of the traditional female professions such as teaching or nursing, but was allowed to enter the newly-emerging field of social science. This shaped her future public career. Her education and professional training, her family's tradition of social responsibility and the influence of inspirational mentors directed her into a lifetime of service and activism. In this chapter, Theron's family, social and educational background and her two great mentors will be discussed in order to illuminate those aspects of her character and formative influences which shaped her career.

Childhood and Family

¹ Interview, Hannes Fagan; interview with Professor J. de Villiers, former Head of Department of Social Work, University of Stellenbosch, and personal friend of Theron (later estranged), Stellenbosch, 16 July 1999; interview with Ina Rens, chairman of the ACVV in Paarl, former student and personal friend of Theron, Paarl, 30 July 1997.

Erika Theron was born on 17 May 1907 in the village of Tulbagh in the rural Western Cape. Her recollections of the district and of her early childhood, recorded in her memoirs some 75 years later, are idyllic.² She remembers Tulbagh as a ‘cosy’ little town where everyone knew everyone. There was some racial segregation, she recalls, but all the residents, coloured and white, ‘shared in the ups and downs of life’.³ According to Theron, ‘people were judged by different social criteria in those days’. ‘You were not “rich” or “poor”. You were decent [*ordentlik*] or you were not decent.’⁴ She writes that there was virtually no crime in the town in her youth. There were no serious social problems, and if there were ‘scandals’ (‘as there no doubt were’), the children of the village knew nothing about them.⁵ Theron writes sentimentally of her memories of hand-rearing lambs, of seeing milk cows amble through the town, of swimming in mountain pools and returning home with arms full of wild flowers.⁶ Her depiction is that of an exceptionally tranquil and secure environment.

² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.7.

³ *Ibid.*, p.1 (transl.).

⁴ Tape-recorded conversations between Erika Theron and Rykie van Reenen, Hermanus, July 1981, cassette no.1 (transl.).

⁵ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.2 (transl.).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.1.

Her sense of stability must have been strengthened by the knowledge that she belonged to one of Tulbagh's 'good families'.⁷ There had been Therons in the Tulbagh area (formerly the Land of Waveren) since the first white settlement at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The freeburgher Jacob Thèron (also recorded as Jacques Therod) was a recipient of one of the first eight freehold farms granted in Waveren.⁸ When the administrative district of Tulbagh was established a century later, there was a Theron among the first appointed *heemrade*.⁹ From the time that the first Dutch Reformed Church was founded in the district, registers of early church councils invariably include one or more Therons.¹⁰ In a later era, there was a Theron hero of the Anglo-Boer War – Danie Theron – who had lived in Tulbagh as a boy.¹¹ The formerly whites-only sections of the cemeteries contain numerous gravestones memorialising past Therons. The cradle of Erika Theron's childhood was thus a town in which her family name had deep roots and was associated with a history of service and leadership.

Theron's parents were to continue this tradition. Her father Gabriël (Gawie) Theron was a well-respected figure in the town, serving as an elder in the church, and as a councillor and mayor.¹² As a young man Gawie Theron had left Tulbagh for the diamond fields of Kimberley where he succeeded in establishing himself as a successful businessman. His main interest was in meat supplies, which included a lucrative contract with De Beers Consolidated (mining company). He also, at one stage, co-managed a small diamond mine.¹³ While in Kimberley he married Jessie

⁷ Interview, De Villiers.

⁸ Gawie and Gwen Fagan, *Church Street in the Land of Waveren* (Cape Town, Tulbagh Restoration Committee, 1975), p.21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.44. *Heemrade* were officials in district courts.

¹⁰ See for example *ibid.*, pp.29, 31, 33.

¹¹ A plaque memorialises his childhood home in the town.

¹² *The Argus*, 26 April 1973, 'Prof. Erika Theron', by Beverley Roos.

¹³ Interview, Hannes Fagan; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.2.

Bennett, daughter of a Scots-Afrikaner couple, and Erika's six older siblings were born¹⁴ – Pieter, James (called Jimmy), Maria (Daisy), Alida (Ida), Jessie (Queenie) and Gabriël (Gawie).¹⁵

¹⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.3.

¹⁵ Interview, Hannes Fagan.

When the Anglo-Boer War ended, the Therons moved back to Tulbagh and Erika, the ‘*natrossie*’, was born. Her mother was at the time 45 years of age and her father 52.¹⁶ The family was settled and well-off.¹⁷ As the youngest member of the family by ten years, Erika was surrounded by supportive siblings and spoiled by her father – she was the perennial ‘centre of attraction’.¹⁸ It was an ideal environment for Erika’s development as a self-confident child, able to form strong opinions and speak her mind. Her representation of this earliest period of her life, is revealing. Foremost among her recollections are moments of being made to ‘feel important’, of ‘taking a stand’ on matters of principle, and of being known as a ‘rebel’.¹⁹

As an adult Theron enjoyed having the reputation of being independent-minded, spirited and resolute and she projected these character traits back into her childhood. Among her favoured anecdotes is one which must have been treasured in family memory and repeated to Erika as she grew up, for she would have been too young to remember the detail herself. Seemingly in junior school she accepted the challenge of older children to approach an out-of-bounds area where school staff took morning tea. When she was caught and reprimanded by the school principal, she is reported to have stood her ground and said, ‘I pays my monies and walks where I likes’.²⁰ She tells the tale on the first page of her memoirs and although she does not articulate this, it seems to have symbolic significance. Erika Theron almost certainly thought of herself as someone who stood up for her rights and those of others and walked where she liked throughout her life.

Theron regarded herself as privileged to have been allowed to receive all her schooling at the local rural school (‘*doodgewone boereskool*’) in Tulbagh. Two of her sisters had been educated at the

¹⁶ Theron uses the expression ‘*natrossie*’ in *Sonder Hoed*, p.4. Literally, it means a bunch of grapes borne late on the vine.

¹⁷ Interview, Hannes Fagan. See also interview, De Villiers.

¹⁸ Jane Raphaely, ‘Erika Theron: One of a Kind’, *Femina* (March 1990), p.78. See also Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.4-5.

¹⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.5-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

prestigious Rustenburg Girls' School in Cape Town. Seemingly at one stage there was discussion about boarding school for the youngest Theron as well – her mother thought she was in need of some discipline and polish.²¹ Fortunately, in her view, her father came to her rescue,²² and she was able to enjoy her school years in the familiar village surroundings and in the bosom of her family.

²¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.7. See also pp. 4-6 on her headstrong character and unmannerly behaviour.

²² *Ibid.*, p.7.

As a result of remaining in Tulbagh throughout her schooling, she was not exposed to the English-language education which her mother had favoured, and unlike her sisters was never entirely confident in her use of the language. In her memoirs she relates incidents to illustrate her resistance to learning her mother's home tongue and tells of the agony of trying to summon up a few words of conversational English as a student in Stellenbosch.²³ Both English and Afrikaans were spoken in the Theron home, the older siblings conversing in English with their mother and in Afrikaans with their father. But Erika claims that she 'refused' to use English and that her mother learned to write in Afrikaans in order to correspond with her during her student years.²⁴ Here again she draws the portrait of the stubborn rebel, but is perhaps saying more. Her relationship with the English language seems to parallel her relationship with English-speakers which, according to her, was rarely comfortable.²⁵ Since she became fluent in German during her student years, her professed problem with English probably says more about deep-seated anti-British sentiment than her incapacity to learn languages.²⁶

Student Years

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.1, 5-7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.88.

²⁶ *Ibid.* See below for discussion of Theron's staunch Afrikaner nationalist roots and the associated, deeply entrenched antipathy towards the British.

In 1925 Theron left Tulbagh to study at the University of Stellenbosch. According to Theron, she had developed a passion for history from her early school days and had decided to major in history and Afrikaans at university. Her interest in popular history was to endure, but her enthusiasm for pursuing formal study of the subject was blighted by some uninspiring lecturers. She is particularly scathing about ‘prof. Gie’ (S.F.N. Gie) whom she describes as untidy in his dress and habits and whose classes she considered boring and ill-prepared. His lecture notes ‘were nothing more than the manuscript of his own book’ she writes in her memoirs.²⁷ That these are the particular traits that she remembers and records is significant. They represent the antithesis of what she admired and what came to be personal trade marks: fastidious attention to grooming and diligent performance of duties.²⁸ These are the first characteristics that many of her acquaintances called to mind when discussing Theron.²⁹ Elize Botha, for example, says that throughout her student days at Stellenbosch she admired ‘Dr. Erika’ whom she saw regularly, walking in Victoria Street. Theron lived in a flat in this street in the heart of academic Stellenbosch – 6 *Soete Inval* – for approximately 50 years. Botha describes her as ‘immaculately dressed, elegant in bearing, refined in features’. Meeting her again in later years, Botha was struck by her ‘penetrating gaze’ and ‘direct, businesslike manner’.³⁰

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.9 (transl.).

²⁸ See contrast with Verwoerd below.

²⁹ See for example interview with Professor K.J. Collins, Professor of Social Work, University of the Western Cape, former student of Theron, Pretoria, 20 September 1999; interview with Professor A. Steyn, former Head of the Department of Sociology, Rand Afrikaans University, former student and personal friend of Theron, Pretoria, 20 April 1999; interview with Professor D.D. Joubert, former Head of the Department of Sociology, University of Stellenbosch and personal friend of Theron, Stellenbosch, 16 July 1999.

³⁰ Elize Botha, ‘Ontmoetings – Kanttekeninge oor Vormende Kragte in die Lewe en Werk van Erika Theron’, Erika Theron Memorial Lecture delivered at the ACVV Congress, 19 August 1998 (transl.). Professor Botha (1930-2007) lectured in Afrikaans *i.a.* at the University of South Africa and the University of Pretoria and was active in Afrikaans language and culture movements. She became the first woman chancellor of the University of Stellenbosch.

Theron completed her BA in 1927³¹ and an MA in economics under the guidance of J.F.W. Grosskopf in 1929.³² Of some interest is the fact that she obtained her degree in the same year as Geoffrey Cronjé,³³ who completed an MA in Greek, *cum laude*.³⁴ Despite their very different fields of study at this level, the subsequent studies and careers of Theron and Cronjé were to intersect frequently in their lifetimes.³⁵

³¹ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.VI, Minutes of a Special Meeting of Senate, 5 December 1927, p.165.

³² *Ibid.*, 2 December 1929, p.178.

³³ Professor G. Cronjé, (1907-1993), who became Head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Pretoria, was an influential, right-wing race theorist.

³⁴ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.VI, Minutes of a Special Meeting of Senate, 5 December 1927, p.165.

³⁵ See later chapters. See also J.M. Coetzee, 'The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-)', *Social Dynamics* 17 (1), 1991. Like Theron, Cronjé studied in Germany and later attained a doctorate in criminology and sociology at the University of Amsterdam. He was influential in the OB and active in the campaign to uplift poor whites.

Theron writes of Grosskopf in glowing terms, using an expression which crops up frequently in her descriptions of people whom she holds in high esteem. ‘Hy was ’n fyn beskaafde man’.³⁶ To describe someone as refined, genteel, cultured, ‘civilised’, was for her a compliment of the highest order and he was clearly an important figure in her academic as well as her personal development. Of particular significance in relation to the development of Theron’s interests and career was the fact that Johannes Grosskopf was a member of the multi-disciplinary Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Problem in South Africa (hereafter Carnegie Commission) convened in 1928. Funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, this study was a landmark in the efforts to address acute structural poverty among white South Africans. It was aimed primarily at gathering data about ‘poor whites’³⁷ for ‘diagnostic’ purposes, and is generally regarded as the first of its kind in South Africa. The sociologist, C.J. Groenewald, refers to it as ‘a unique research experience in the social scientific history of South Africa [which] set a precedent for later undertakings’.³⁸

According to Theron, her own MA studies, recommended and supervised by Grosskopf, formed part of the background to the Carnegie Commission.³⁹ It has not been possible, however, to trace her specific contribution. The theoretical model and methodology of the Carnegie study clearly had a profound influence on Theron’s approach to research in the social sciences (as well as that of other social scientists of the era). It included a focus on factual, particularly statistical, information and a conceptual underpinning of the notion of ‘progress’ (or retrogression) in response to the social and geo-physical environment. This influence would be discernible in the many, diverse projects

³⁶ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.9-10.

³⁷ Definitions of ‘poor whites’ vary considerably but generally include the idea of social regression as well as material destitution (see Chapter Two). The Carnegie Commission makes a distinction between ‘extremely poor’ white people and ‘poor whites’. See *Report of the Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Problem in South Africa*. 5 vols. (Stellenbosch, Pro Ecclesia, 1932).

³⁸ C.J. Groenewald, ‘The Methodology of Poverty Research in South Africa: The Case of the First Carnegie Investigation, 1929-1932’, *Social Dynamics* 13, 2 (1987), pp.60-74. Also see Chapter Two for further discussion of the poor white problem and its significance in the social and political dynamics in South Africa.

³⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.10.

in which she was to be involved in her lifetime, including what she regarded as a high-point, the Theron Commission on coloured affairs.

By the time that Theron had completed her MA, her interests evidently were already directed away from pure economics towards the as-yet-undeveloped sub-field of applied social economics. In her later life, during an interview for *Matieland*, she was to say that the direction she took could not have been otherwise – that her career in social work education, an outgrowth of applied social economics, was pre-ordained.⁴⁰ She suggests that, coming from a philanthropic, community-minded family in which both her parents and sisters were deeply involved in a range of welfare endeavours, it was natural, indeed inevitable, that she should ultimately follow a similar path.

⁴⁰ Heloïse Davis, 'Erika Theron – Enig in Haar Soort', *Matieland*, 2 (1979), p.47.

Theron's mother was a founding member of the women's service organisation, the Zuid-Afrikaansche Christelike Vrouwe Vereniging (later known as the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging or ACVV). This organisation had its roots in the committees of Afrikaner women which were formed to alleviate the plight of Boer prisoners-of-war awaiting deportation during the Anglo-Boer War.⁴¹ From an early stage its activities included more than feeding and nursing the sick. Groups of these women protested against the internment of women and children in the concentration camps during the war and the organisation founded in 1904 included in its objectives, the promotion of the Afrikaans language and Afrikaner religious traditions. In other words its welfare functions were framed within a nationalist-cultural context,⁴² which may well have coloured Theron's own perspectives.⁴³ Two of her sisters were also very active in the ACVV. Ida taught at the ACVV domestic science school in Tulbagh for a time. Later she became editor of the ACVV publication, *Eendrag*, and secretary of the organisation, a position which she held until her early death in 1944.⁴⁴ The oldest sister Daisy (often called 'Misdys', a parody on the form of address used by a coloured worker in the Theron home) ran an ACVV hostel for young women with low incomes, in Salt River, Cape Town. The objective of this project was to provide shelter for the impoverished white women streaming into the city in search of work, and to protect them from being forced into racially-mixed slum areas with all their perceived evils.⁴⁵

⁴¹ H.C. Lambrechts and E. Theron, *Vrouevolksdiens: Die Werk van die Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging* (Cape Town and Pretoria, HAUM, 1959), pp.5-6. See also Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging, *Ons Saamreis: Feesuitgawe van die ACVV Vyf-en-Twintig Jaar na Haar Eerste Kongres* (Cape Town, Stellenbosch and Bloemfontein, Nasionale Pers, 1930), pp.1-4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.7-20.

⁴³ See below.

⁴⁴ Ida Theron died of diabetes in October 1944. See J.C. Steyn, *Die 100 Jaar van MER* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2004), pp.243, 387-390.

⁴⁵ M. J. Burger, 'Die Bydrae van Daisy Theron op die Gebied van Maatskaplike Sorg' (MA dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 1989), pp.149, 151-153; M.E. Rothmann, 'Haar Huis en Haar Mense', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (Oct. 1972), pp.230-232.

It was not only the female members of the family who were caught up in welfare projects. In the *Matieland* interview, Theron made a point of mentioning that her father was also concerned with assisting the less fortunate and that he had taken a great interest in coloured education.⁴⁶ In *Sonder Hoed* she also very specifically refers to her father's work on behalf of the local *sendingskerk* – the mission church which served coloured people.⁴⁷ This stress on her father's involvement with coloured upliftment should perhaps be seen in the context of the timing of both the interview and the compiling of *Sonder Hoed*. By the late 1970s, in the wake of the Theron Commission, Theron had acquired celebrity status in some quarters (notoriety in others) for her public campaign for the advancement of coloured people. It is very likely that this tended to focus her memory in that direction. Gawie Theron may well have taken an interest in the welfare of the local coloured community but he was certainly also very much concerned with the upliftment of Afrikaners. Among other things, he donated a large plot of land on the outskirts of Tulbagh to the ACVV for the establishment of the domestic science school for Afrikaner girls from dysfunctional families (the school at which Ida taught).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Davis, 'Erika Theron - Enig in Haar Soort', *Matieland 2* (1979), p.47.

⁴⁷ *Sonder Hoed*, p.7.

⁴⁸ Burger, 'Daisy Theron', p.146; Rothmann, 'Haar Huis en Haar Mense', pp.230-232.

As important as the family tradition of civic-mindedness and humanitarian service was, undoubtedly other factors played a role in Theron's study and career choices. Grosskopf's mentorship and the Carnegie study have already been mentioned. These linked in to broader social and political currents. Two important developments in the 1920s and 1930s were particularly significant. One was the burgeoning of the social sciences in the country's universities, with the Cape institutions in the vanguard; the second was the renewed mobilisation of Afrikaner nationalists.⁴⁹ These two forces were to feed off of one another and to foster a sense of mission among many educated Afrikaners. Dedication to serving the people – specifically their own people – became a driving force among prominent individuals in these circles. By a coincidence of background, time and place Erika Theron was drawn into this circle, which included two of the most influential figures in her life, Hendrik Verwoerd and Miemie Rothmann – her '*Twee Grotes*' (two great ones).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See further discussion in Chapter Two.

⁵⁰ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, Chapter Three.

The rising interest in social-science studies as a tool in the co-ordinated ‘scientific’ assault on white poverty in South Africa was part cause, part effect of the creation of the Carnegie Commission. The origins of the Carnegie project seemingly lie in a lobby by E.G. Malherbe,⁵¹ backed by the Dutch Reformed Church. Malherbe had identified the need for scientific study of the poor white problem in an article in the *Cape Times* as far back as 1921. During his studies in the United States of America, he had formed personal and professional connections with Frederick Keppel,⁵² President of the Carnegie Corporation and when Keppel visited South Africa in 1927, according to Malherbe he was persuaded of the value of funding a scientific study.⁵³ It is a moot point whether the Carnegie foundation intended that this commission should merely gather data, or whether it should make recommendations about ways to address the poor white problem. Roberta Balstad (Miller) claims that in proposing support of the project to the Carnegie Board of Trustees, Keppel envisaged a purely fact-finding survey.⁵⁴ *Die Burger* at the time also emphasised that the commission was committed to determining the causes of the problem, the historical origins and current conditions among poor whites, but not to suggesting solutions.⁵⁵ Probably, the Carnegie Corporation’s direct involvement was intended to be limited to the survey, but it was regarded as ‘appropriate’ that conclusions would be drawn that would lead to remedial action. As Morag Bell points out, the enquiry linked ‘scientific investigation with reformist goals’ which would influence public policy, in keeping with the ‘crusading ideals’ of the founder of the corporation. The first

⁵¹ Ernest Gideon Malherbe (1896-1983), later Head of the National Bureau for Educational and Social Research, and Vice Chancellor of the University of Natal. Malherbe may have exaggerated his role in the initiation of the Carnegie Commission. Other interpretations emphasise other agencies.

⁵² E.G Malherbe, *Never a Dull Moment* (Cape Town, Timmins, 1981), p.119. Keppel was formerly a dean at Columbia University, Malherbe’s *Alma Mater*.

⁵³ *Ibid.*; E.G. Malherbe, ‘The Carnegie Poor White Investigation: Its Origin and Sequels’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 9, 2 (1973), p.85.

⁵⁴ Roberta Balstad (formerly Miller), ‘Social Science, Philanthropy, and Politics: The Carnegie Corporation in South Africa’, paper delivered to the American Historical Association, December 1993 (cited with permission of the author).

⁵⁵ *Die Burger*, 11 January 1929 and 15 January 1929, cited in Steyn, *MER*, p.251.

formal letter on file from South African promoters, appealed directly to this vision of the late Andrew Carnegie.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Morag Bell, 'American Philanthropy, the Carnegie Corporation and Poverty in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26, 3 (September 2000), pp.481-504. The letter dated 10 January 1928 was addressed to Keppel by Rev. F.X. Roome, F.S. Malan and Charles Murray. See also Brahm Fleisch, 'Social Scientists as Policy Makers: E.G. Malherbe and the National Bureau for Educational and Social Research, 1929-1943', African Studies Institute Seminar Paper presented at the University of the Witwatersrand, 8 March 1993 (pages unnumbered).

In the event the Carnegie Commission certainly provided ‘a data base for further research and welfare programmes’ and led to important policy developments in the long term.⁵⁷ Its report included some general recommendations in the form of 124 paragraphs published under the heading of Joint Findings and Recommendations of the Commission (bound into each of the five reports) and the suggestion of a follow-up conference. The National Conference on the Poor White Problem held in 1934 extrapolated from these to formulate specific policy and goals.⁵⁸ What is important for this discussion is that a precedent was set for a new paradigm in which social science and policy-making were linked. In terms of this approach social change could be effected through the use of ‘facts’ provided by scientific research. As Fleisch points out in relation to Malherbe (who was a member of the Carnegie Commission) ‘his conception of science [was] unapologetically empiricist and positivist’. ‘In this version of science, observation and prediction were directly tied to control’.⁵⁹ Groenewald makes a similar point in his thesis: with the institutionalisation of sociology as independent discipline (in the 1930s), theoretical and methodological approaches of sociologists became focused on empirical-descriptive studies with a view to ‘solving’ what were identified as social problems and bringing about social change – a pattern which persisted for decades.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Groenewald, ‘The Methodology of Poverty Research in South Africa’, p.63.

⁵⁸ See Chapter Two.

⁵⁹ Fleisch, ‘Social Scientists’, no page number.

⁶⁰ C. J. Groenewald, ‘Die Institutionaliserings van die Sosiologie in Suid Afrika’ (DPhil, University of Stellenbosch, 1984), p.433.

Theron's early links with the Carnegie Commission were not limited to her own research and connections with the Stellenbosch University-based members of the team. She also had close links with MER, who took part in the 'sociological' part of the study. MER was a family friend whom she had known since girlhood, and was warmly interested and involved in the lives of the Theron sisters with whom she maintained a close, lifelong bond.⁶¹ MER showed great fondness for the young Theron and took an interest in all aspects of her life. This association with the work of the Carnegie Commission would have given Theron insight into the future of the social sciences in South Africa, and potential for her own career development. She says that Grosskopf had hinted at the possibility of sociology becoming a university subject in the near future.⁶² Courses with a sociological component had already been introduced at various universities in, for example, philosophy, anthropology and economics departments. But no dedicated sociology course or university department existed. The intellectual and social climate was favourable for this to change.⁶³ As Miller states, '[b]y the end of the 1920s, the idea that social science could be used to solve the full range of national social problems ... was generally accepted'.⁶⁴ 'Social science' in this context refers to a number of disciplines including sociology and anthropology. Social work was only much later recognised as an independent discipline.

⁶¹ Rothmann, 'Haar Huis en Haar Mense'; Steyn, *MER*, pp.151-156. See also MER's letter of encouragement to Theron on her departure for Germany, discussed below. US, Doc. Centre: MER Collection (MER), 55.M.1.K.18(1), letter, MER to Erika Theron, 7 April 1930.

⁶² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.10. From 1929 steps were taken by Stellenbosch University to investigate the development of a course which would train workers who could apply themselves to the poverty question. Arising from this, a chair in sociology was established and a curriculum for a degree in social work drawn up in 1931. In 1932 Verwoerd became first Head of this new Department of Sociology and Social Work: G.D. Scholtz, *Dr. Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, 1901-1966* (Johannesburg, Perskor, 1974), p.29.

⁶³ The development of scientific social welfare in South Africa will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

⁶⁴ Roberta Balstad (formerly Miller), 'Science, Sociology, and Social Engineering: South Africa in the 1930s', paper delivered at a conference commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, York University, [c. September 1994, cited with permission of the author].

A lack of trained local sociologists became evident in the setting up of the Carnegie Commission. South African specialists were available for four of the five areas of investigation: Grosskopf for the economic study, R.W. Wilcocks (also from the University of Stellenbosch) for the psychological survey, Malherbe (at the time attached to the University of Cape Town) for the educational study and W.A. Murray (from the Department of Public Health) for the health study. However the two-part sociological study was carried out by Rev. J.R. Albertyn, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church clergy, and MER. Both were known for their work in the welfare field but were without formal training in the social sciences and lacking in theoretical background. In the absence of local sociologists, two Americans were engaged to assist with their expertise⁶⁵ and presumably to attempt to ensure that this aspect of the investigation was in keeping with the intended 'scientific' approach of the study as a whole.

⁶⁵ Dr. Kenyon L. Butterfield, who specialised in rural social conditions and Dr. Charles W. Coulter, who specialised in urban conditions: Steyn, *MER*, pp.254-255. See also Malherbe, *Never a Dull Moment*, p.121; Fleish, 'Social Scientists as Policy Makers', no page number.

It was in this climate that Theron decided to further her studies in the field of social science. Grosskopf does not seem to have regarded her as an outstanding scholar. Her MA was not awarded with distinction and an ‘exchange of opinion’ between Grosskopf and MER recorded by MER, supports the view that her academic ability was not particularly remarkable. MER writes that on an occasion she had said to Grosskopf that of his two post-graduate economics students, Theron was the star and Frikkie Tomlinson⁶⁶ the average student. He had replied that in his view the reverse was true – ‘Erika was good, but an unexceptional student; Frikkie was something out of the ordinary’.⁶⁷ Fellow academics have endorsed this view of Theron with reference to her own research output in later years. She seems to have been a competent, rather than a groundbreaking or brilliant scholar.⁶⁸ Although she did not attain a distinction grading for her MA degree, she had evidently shown the necessary diligence, interest and ability for Grosskopf to recommend that she continue with her studies.

Berlin Experience and the Ossewabrandwag

The decision to study abroad rather than within South Africa may have been prompted by the fact that no appropriate course was available in South Africa. However, it was not uncommon at the time for academically gifted students and those with the necessary financial means, to round off their studies in other countries.⁶⁹ Since the Germans, who had been pioneers in establishing an

⁶⁶ Later Professor F.R. Tomlinson, MER’s nephew. He headed the Commission for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bantu Areas within the Union of South Africa, appointed in 1949.

⁶⁷ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55 K.T.(34), letter, MER to Daisy Theron, 30 July 1956 (transl.).

⁶⁸ Interview with Professor B. McKendrick, former Head of Department of Social Work, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 17 January 2000; interview, Collins; interview, Helm.

⁶⁹ Moodie names a number of the ‘foremost’, ‘young Afrikaner intellectuals’ who completed doctoral studies abroad in the period, including H.F. Verwoerd. See T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1975), p.154.

extensive and efficient welfare system,⁷⁰ were leaders in the development of social work and social work education, Germany would have been a practical choice.

⁷⁰ David Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon* (London, Pelican, 1966), pp.358, 658.

Theron, however, ascribes the decision to study in Germany to other factors. Her recollection provides insight into the pro-German ethos of her home life and the circles in which she moved in the university. She says that she had always been an admirer of the Germans, an admiration which she had acquired from her father.⁷¹ She says also that the ‘German professor’ at Stellenbosch, Ernst Friedländer, ‘had a hand in the matter’. Seemingly she spoke German reasonably well so there was no language barrier to her studying in a German institution. She had learned the language in school under a stern taskmaster. Also, she says in her memoirs, her sister had taken German lessons at the German mission in Tulbagh and together they had read the Bible and children’s books written in German. At university she had attended German church services with a roommate who had majored in German.⁷²

This fascination with Germany and its culture cannot be interpreted in isolation from the history of anti-British sentiment among many Afrikaners. Theron suggests as much in a somewhat puzzling statement in *Sonder Hoed*. She says that the ‘rebellion of 1918’ had probably played a role in her father’s admiration for the Germans.⁷³ If one accepts that the reference is in fact to the Afrikaner rebellion (1914-1915) at the outbreak of the First World War, it says something about her political background.

⁷¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.13; recorded conversation between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1.

⁷² *Sonder Hoed*, p.13 (transl.).

⁷³ *Ibid.* (transl.).

The 1914 revolt was an expression of long-standing resentment harboured by a section of the Afrikaner population against Britain and the compromised national status of South Africa. When the Union of South Africa parliament affirmed its support of Britain in the war with Germany (as it was constitutionally bound to do) but more contentiously agreed to invade neighbouring German South West Africa, a small group of Afrikaners went into rebellion, at some stage being promised support by German authorities. Germany had strong credentials in some Afrikaner circles. It had provided moral support in the build up to the Anglo-Boer War, and was undoubtedly regarded favourably by former republicans still embittered by the loss of independence and unreconciled to British overlordship.⁷⁴ If nothing else, in 1914 Germany had the status of being the enemy of the enemy. The series of revolts were easily put down but had long-term symbolic ramifications. They had involved revered veterans of the Anglo-Boer War and had elicited significant Afrikaner sympathy; they had created an Afrikaner martyr, Jopie Fourie, who was executed by firing squad. Refusing a blindfold, he was to be portrayed as 'longing ... that his blood might awaken the Afrikaner people'.⁷⁵ As Robert Ross puts it, it 'added to the mythology on which Afrikaner nationalism would feed'.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.380-381.

⁷⁵ Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.83, quoting Wellington NP branch minutes, 2 October 1915.

⁷⁶ Ross, *A Concise History*, p.84. See also Davenport and Saunders, *South Africa*, pp.283-285; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.380-384.

Theron's family were evidently sympathisers. Her eldest brother, Pieter, was imprisoned for refusing to take up arms against the rebels in the Northern Cape where he farmed⁷⁷ and Theron remembers proudly wearing a Jopie Fourie commemorative pin ('*speldjie*') as a schoolgirl.⁷⁸ She knew others who had been directly affected, such as Grosskopf, her deeply-respected supervisor at Stellenbosch, who had participated and had been imprisoned for nine months as a result.⁷⁹ MER's brother Frederik (Frits), who had assumed Turkish citizenship and was a known German supporter, was interred on the grounds that Turkey was an ally of Germany.⁸⁰ It is in this context, perhaps, that Theron's apparently strange reasoning should be interpreted and her link between the rebellion and her inclination towards furthering her studies in Germany understood.

Theron left for Germany in 1930. This is a phase of her studies about which not a great deal of information has come to light, and no record of any resulting formal qualification has been traced.⁸¹ Her reasons for not following the traditional pattern of completing a doctorate before leaving, or while abroad, are not on record. Even the recollections of close colleagues about her academic programme in this three-year period, are somewhat vague and inconsistent. In two separate articles (one based on a personal interview) published in the University of Stellenbosch newsletter, *Matieland*, it is stated only that she 'studied at the University of Berlin', but there is no mention of the courses completed.⁸² In *Sonder Hoed* Theron says that she 'registered' at the University [of

⁷⁷ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.6. The decision was taken by the Union government to use predominantly rural (Afrikaner) citizen force units to put down the rebellion. The use of English-speaking units would have been politically risky. See Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.382.

⁷⁸ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.6.

⁷⁹ Steyn, *MER*, p.108.

⁸⁰ Frits Rothmann was a *bittereinder* – an unreconciled member of the Boer forces at the end of the Anglo-Boer War – and had sought Turkish citizenship rather than accept British citizenship. See Steyn, *MER*, pp.75, 108.

⁸¹ Theron's personnel file at the University of Stellenbosch contains no copy of a *curriculum vitae* and indeed very little information.

⁸² Davis, 'Enig in haar soort', *Matieland*; 'In Memoriam (Erika Theron)', *Matieland*.

Berlin] and also at the Akademie für Soziale Frauenarbeit.⁸³ In a memorial article written after her death by a fellow academic and friend, it is stated that she studied ‘social economy and sociology’ at the university as well as social work at the academy over a three-year period.⁸⁴

⁸³ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.13 (transl.).

⁸⁴ J.B. du Toit, ‘Prof. Erika Theron (17 Mei 1907 - 30 Aug.1990)’, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 31, 1 (Maart 1991), p.66 (transl.). Koos du Toit was a former colleague of Theron at the University of Stellenbosch, later Head of the Department of Sociology, University of the Western Cape. He served as secretary of the Theron Commission.

Whatever the exact nature of her studies, her admission to doctoral studies in sociology at Stellenbosch upon her return to South Africa, were made conditional upon her fulfilling certain additional requirements in the areas of psychology and sociology.⁸⁵ This suggests that Theron had focused on practical training rather than post-graduate academic study. Theron's experience of practical social welfare delivery was undoubtedly a valuable addition to her *curriculum vitae*. At the time in South Africa, there was no comparable source of professional practical training such as that provided by social work schools in Europe.⁸⁶ One of her students from her early years as a lecturer (later a well-known social work academic in her own right) recalls that Theron's presence at Stellenbosch was important for the prestige of the department. She was 'the only tutor that we knew of at the time who had studied in the field overseas'.⁸⁷

There is no evidence as to whether Theron intended to pursue an academic career or to practice as a social worker when she returned from abroad. It was certainly the expectation of MER that her '*lieuwe kind*', would use her training in the service of her people. In a letter to Theron dated April 1930 – 'to be read at sea' on her voyage to Germany – MER wrote:

The field of study that you have chosen is for me the most interesting in the world. And I think that it suits you particularly well because you are someone who loves order, and it will be your creative calling in life [*skeppingswerk*] to bring order in this confused old world.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.IX, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 10 March 1933.

⁸⁶ H.F. Verwoerd, 'Maatskaplike Werkers in Suid-Afrika en Hulle Opleiding' in *Report of the National Conference on Social Work, 1936* (Pretoria, Government Printers, 1937), p.93.

⁸⁷ Interview with A. de Vos, formerly (*i.a.*) lecturer in the Department of Social Work, Rand Afrikaans University and University of the Witwatersrand, former student and personal friend of Theron, Pretoria, 19 January 2000.

⁸⁸ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.M.1.K.18(1), letter, MER to Erika Theron, 7 April 1930 (transl.). This letter is quoted in Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.20-21.

In her view, social science really ‘[came] to grips with the essential human being’; as the doctor worked with the body, so the social scientist worked with man’s innermost being, his very nature.⁸⁹ By inference, social scientists had the potential to heal the social ills in society. That MER foresaw Theron’s future career as directed at uplifting her own people – the Afrikaner poor – seems very evident. In this letter she implicitly links Theron’s training with the needs of this community and shares thoughts about the impoverishment and decline of the poor whites. She comes to the conclusion that this process was ‘completely natural and unavoidable’ given their circumstances:

[W]e as a mere handful of white people tried to tackle the whole, vast South Africa. Our ignorance was also our strength, and as result we did in fact get the whole farming enterprise started in this country [*sodat ons werklik die hele boerdery nogal aan die gang gesit het*]. But we did not take account of the impact on our people of the veld, the vastness, the loneliness, the isolation, ... Can you imagine it, none of the formative influences of communication, reading, interaction with people, knowledge of developments in the world; very little of the church; the ONLY source of education among those Afrikaner farming people [*daardie boerevolk*] was from within the family, that is to say the mother.⁹⁰

The letter goes on in emotive prose to contemplate the hardships of these women, endless pregnancies without medical assistance, the demands of having to make virtually everything they needed themselves from the raw materials of the countryside: ‘It was too much to ask!’ she says.⁹¹

MER was deeply engrossed in issues surrounding the poor white question at this time and in particular the plight of the women. She had very recently completed her part of the investigation for the Carnegie study and had still to write up her report on ‘mothers and daughters’. Also, as organising secretary of the ACVV she was engaged in an intense drive to expand welfare work among Afrikaner poor whites. Throughout 1930 and 1931 she had travelled about the country to visit branches of the organisation.⁹² As she says in her letter, she saw her work as her vocation, her

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* (transl.).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* (transl.).

⁹¹ *Ibid.* (transl.).

⁹² Steyn, *MER*, pp.266-267, 272.

own personal act of creation, bringing order from chaos – her ‘*skeppingswerk*’ – and admitted to being so passionate about it that people mocked her for her obsession.⁹³

⁹³ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.M.1.K.18(1), letter, MER to Erika Theron, 7 April 1930.

It should be noted that the intensity of MER's motivational letter reveals more than her personal 'obsession'; it reflects trends within a constellation of mobilisers and reformers in Afrikaner communities.⁹⁴ Although MER and other like-minded Afrikaners were enthusiastic about the potential of scientific social welfare, their interest was essentially quite narrow and very focused: the primary purpose of social work training was its application to poor white rehabilitation. As Lowe puts it, 'early development in South African social work assumed a strong Afrikaner ethos ... rather than an activity to aid the larger society, social work's roots in South Africa were ethnically based and group specific'.⁹⁵

The powerful expression of dedication to a cause encapsulated in MER's letter undoubtedly served as a strong incentive to the young Theron, as it was intended to. The image of a courageous pioneering people – her people – suffering depredation and degeneration was a stirring one. At an impressionable age, the notion that she, personally, might play a role in uplifting them was surely flattering and inspirational. Whatever crusading spirit Theron already possessed was certainly strengthened.

⁹⁴ Steyn, MER, p.234. See Chapter Two.

⁹⁵ Gary R. Lowe, 'South African Social Work and the Norm of Injustice', *Social Service Review*, 62, 1 (March 1988), p.32. See also C. Marks, 'A Contextual Historical Commentary on Social Work Education in South Africa' (MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1988).

Although we have few details of Theron's studies at the University of Berlin, some interesting inferences can be made concerning her time at the Academy for Women's Social Work. The academy had been founded by Dr. Alice Salomon, an important figure in the development of social work, both as an independent academic discipline and as a recognised profession.⁹⁶ Theron describes Salomon as an 'exceptional woman' and in her memoirs mentions that she was a founding member of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW).⁹⁷ (The organisation was initially known as the International Committee of Schools of Social Work [ICSSW] and Salomon served as its first secretary.) Theron also mentions with evident pride that she, herself, later served on the executive of this body for many years.

Theron says little else about the academy, however. She does not acknowledge Salomon as having been an important influence in her life as she does, for example, when writing about Verwoerd and MER. Yet it seems unlikely that Salomon did not contribute in some way to the formation of some of Theron's own attitudes and aspirations. According to Kuhlmann, Salomon was known for her 'attractive' lectures and is said to have had a 'charismatic influence on young girls'.⁹⁸ She was a prominent member of the women's movement both in Germany and internationally and her approach to social welfare reflected her feminist views.⁹⁹ She envisaged social work as a field in which women could play a significant role in the struggle against poverty and the dislocating effects of industrialisation. Central to her perspective was the notion that rehabilitation, empowerment and the encouragement of self-help must replace simple charity.¹⁰⁰ This was to become an essential principle of the evolving 'scientific welfare'. In terms of her personal achievements, she

⁹⁶ Carola Kuhlmann, 'Alice Salomon (Germany), President 1928/29-1946', <http://www.socwork.net/2008/1/supplement/kuhlmann>, last viewed 20 January 2009 (first published as 'Historical Portraits of Important European Leaders in Social Work: Alice Salomon [1872-1948] – Germany', *European Journal of Social Work*, 4, 1 (2001), pp.65-75).

⁹⁷ *Sonder Hoed*, p.13 (transl.).

⁹⁸ Kuhlmann, 'Alice Salomon', citing K. Jüngling and B. Roßbeck, *Elly Heuss-Knapp (1881-1952); Die Erste First-Lady – Ein Portrait* (Heilbronn, Salzer, 1994), p.60.

⁹⁹ Kuhlmann, 'Alice Salomon'.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

was unusual for her time. She had broken a number of gender barriers in the German society of the time, and represented a role model as a female 'leader' in a male-dominated culture.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* See also *Alice Salomon Hochschule*, Berlin, 'Alice in the Field', <http://www.alice-in-the-field.org/alice-history.html>, last viewed 20 January 2009.

Salomon's feminism would not have presented Theron with entirely new ideas. Theron was one of 'a family of strong minded women'¹⁰² and had a number of self-consciously independent female role models – most notably her sister Ida and MER. Even her mother had been dubbed 'the suffragette' by her daughters.¹⁰³ MER and Ida were close friends and colleagues at *Die Burger*¹⁰⁴ and regarded themselves as 'emancipated'. They supported the enfranchisement of women and rejected the view that women must necessarily accept subordination to male judgement and male leadership.¹⁰⁵ In her column in *Die Burger*, MER provided encouragement and recognition of women's initiatives outside of their domestic roles, and frequently challenged male chauvinism. As a result she gained the reputation of being a 'feminist'¹⁰⁶ although compared with members of some radical women's movements abroad, she was relatively moderate in her views.

With the example of these strong-willed women, and her own mutinous streak, Theron had shown herself to be sensitive to gender discrimination even before she left South Africa. For example while still at university in Stellenbosch she had become assistant secretary in the student council, in defiance of the convention that only men should hold office. She was also part of a campaign against the more restrictive house rules which were applied in the women's residences compared with those of the men's residences.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless studying in the overtly feminist environment of

¹⁰² Marijke Du Toit, 'Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism: A Social History of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging, c.1870-1939' (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1996), p.201.

¹⁰³ Raphaely, 'Erika Theron', *Femina* (March 1990), p.76.

¹⁰⁴ Both later became office bearers in the ACVV.

¹⁰⁵ MER was an executive member of the Cape Branch of the National Women's Party (Nasionale Vroueparty) which promoted the extension of the vote to women. Steyn, *MER*, p.177-180.

¹⁰⁶ See Steyn, *MER*, Chapter 6, 'In die Vrouepolitiek'.

¹⁰⁷ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.11-12. In later life Theron would continue to resist gender-based discrimination, particularly when her own interests were at stake. See for example Theron's reaction to being by-passed for promotion and her campaign for equal salaries for male and female academics discussed in Chapter Three.

Salomon's academy undoubtedly strengthened Theron's convictions and her confidence in the ability of women to play a role in public life and to contribute to social change.

In spite of what was positive for Theron in her experience at the academy, there were aspects of Salomon's identity and ideology which she possibly found alienating. Salomon was of Jewish ancestry. As discussed below, Theron may have harboured some prejudice on this account. Salomon was also a well-known pacifist and internationalist¹⁰⁸ and opposed to the growing nationalism in Germany. It was as a result of the conservative, nationalist trends in the German women's movement (Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine) between the wars, that Salomon resigned from, or was forced out of the executive of this body.¹⁰⁹ Theron, on the other hand, admired the German nationalism of this period and was not unsympathetic to the rising militarism. Theron may also have had misgivings about Salomon's views on what she called 'social justice'. Salomon taught that for justice to prevail there must be equal rights not only for men and women, but for different classes as well as for ethnic minorities. In her view, social workers had a particular ethical responsibility towards all disadvantaged groups.¹¹⁰ Although in the 1930s, particularly in the Cape, race was not yet the all-consuming issue that it was to become, notions of white racial superiority, segregation and discriminatory practices were already prevalent in the South African, particularly the Afrikaner way of life.¹¹¹ On the evidence of her later actions, Theron was probably not receptive to Salomon's egalitarian ideas. It is perhaps for these reasons that Theron was reserved in her comments about Salomon and was relatively reticent about her experience at the academy.

¹⁰⁸ Kuhlmann, 'Alice Salomon'; Lynne M. Healy, 'Introduction: A Brief Journey Through the 80 year History of the International Association of Social Work Schools', <http://www.socwork.net/2008/1/supplement/healy>, last viewed 20 January 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Richard J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894-1933* (London and Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1976), pp.235-236.

¹¹⁰ Kuhlmann, 'Alice Salomon'.

¹¹¹ J.P. Brits, *Op die Vooraand van Apartheid. Die Rassevraagstuk en die Blanke Politiek in Suid Afrika, 1939-1948* (Pretoria, University of South Africa, 1994), p.7.

Theron says of her time in Europe that she made a point of getting to know Germany and the German people really well, unlike the many other young Afrikaners whom she knew, who were studying abroad but mixing almost exclusively with their compatriots. She also travelled extensively in other parts of Europe during holidays and clearly revelled in her widened horizons.¹¹² Coming from a rural background and student years spent in the small university town of Stellenbosch, subject to the rigidly regulated environment of the women's residence with its dress codes, curfews and compulsory church attendance, it is understandable that the freedom of movement and abundant opportunities for new experiences created a deep impression and left her with an abiding love of continental Europe and a passion for travel.¹¹³

¹¹² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.14.

¹¹³ Interview, Hannes Fagan. According to Fagan she travelled abroad as often as she was able to – almost annually once her career was established. Europe, particularly Germany, was her first love.

Theron says that she felt like a ‘cultural barbarian’ when she arrived in Germany.¹¹⁴ This was however a perception of a relative nature. She had been exposed to the arts and to artists from her early years. Theron’s sisters were trained in arts and literature, and according to her, had attempted to instruct her in the basics. Daisy had studied art at the University of Cape Town and Ida, seemingly a most versatile member of the family, wrote, produced and performed in plays. Theron also had the benefit of her association with the Fagan family. Her sister Queenie, who had a great interest in the arts¹¹⁵ and brother-in-law, Henry Fagan,¹¹⁶ who was a poet and dramatist, moved in theatrical and artistic circles in the Western Cape.¹¹⁷ Theron was introduced into their world and as a young student met eminent writers and performers. For example she recalls being overawed and tongue-tied in the presence of C.J. Langehoven who was a frequent visitor to the Fagan home.¹¹⁸ A former Stellenbosch student who was taken under Theron’s wing remembers this association with the Fagans as important to the Theron sisters as it provided a certain social cachet – an ‘in-group’ status.¹¹⁹ Theron herself took an interest in amateur dramatics at the University of Stellenbosch, although she admits to having been less than a star on stage.¹²⁰

However the capitals of Europe undoubtedly opened a new world to the enthusiastic young person. With her admiration for Germany and its people, she was predisposed to be impressed by German high culture. According to her, she plunged into the reading of German literature, especially ‘the classics’. Berlin was a cultural hothouse in the 1930s and she had the privilege of being able to

¹¹⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.13 (transl.).

¹¹⁵ Steyn, *MER*, p.151.

¹¹⁶ H.A. Fagan, Afrikaans playwright, cabinet minister in the United Party government and Chief Justice of South Africa. See Q. Fagan (compiler), *H.A. Fagan, 1889-1963* (Cape Town, Private Publication, 1975).

¹¹⁷ *MER, My Beskeie Deel: 'n Outobiografiese Vertelling*, (Cape Town and Johannesburg, Tafelberg, 1972), p.277.

¹¹⁸ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2.

¹¹⁹ Interview, De Vos.

¹²⁰ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.12.

attend performances by outstanding musicians and actors in Berlin – she says, among the best in the world. She developed a great love of classical music, particularly the German *kunslied*. This was an interest which she pursued on her return to Stellenbosch, with the guidance of Dr. Con de Villiers.¹²¹ Theron’s great interest in the arts, stimulated during her student years in Germany, was to influence her public life in later years. As mayor of Stellenbosch, Theron was very active in promoting aspects of the town’s cultural life – protecting its architecture, encouraging art exhibitions and musical performances by leading national and international performers.¹²²

¹²¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.14. C.G.S. (Con) de Villiers (1894-1978) was Professor of Zoology at the University of Stellenbosch from 1923-1959. Among other things he was renowned as an author and linguist and for his extensive knowledge and love of music.

¹²² See Chapter Four. ‘Cultural life’ here refers to western ‘high culture’.

Berlin of the 1930s was marked not only by a cultural flowering but by political ferment and this aspect of her experiences in Germany also influenced Theron in important ways. In her mind there were many parallels between the German and Afrikaner experience. The Germans, like the Republican Afrikaners, were a recently-defeated nation; Britain was regarded as the chief agent in this defeat and both Germany and South Africa had been ravaged by the conflict. As a self-conscious nationalist, brought up in a community of people who were embittered by their military defeat in the Anglo-Boer War and chafing against the restrictions and impositions of the conquering nation, for Theron the resonance was profound.

In the Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, the legacy of the First World War was evident in all areas of social and political life. Like other European nations, Germany had suffered appalling loss of life and property, damage to infrastructure, and disruption of economic and social development. In the post-war period, as a defeated nation, she carried the additional burdens of a humiliating occupation by foreign troops and a war-reparations claim with incalculable economic implications. She also smarted under the stigma of the 'war-guilt clause'¹²³ which cited Germany and her allies as the aggressors who bore responsibility for the war. Low national morale and economic dislocation led to a financial crisis in the 1920s which critically undermined confidence in the unstable Weimar republican government. This, aggravated by the effects of the Great Depression, rendered Germany receptive to the totalitarian national socialism of Adolf Hitler, which gained growing support over the following ten years.¹²⁴

¹²³ Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles signed at the conclusion of the First World War.

¹²⁴ See for example Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London, Allen Lane, 2003) with particular reference to chapters 1-4.

In 1930, when Theron arrived in Berlin, this process was still unfolding. Some of the economic disabilities carried over from the war were beginning to be alleviated – the withdrawal of Allied troops was under debate and the Young plan to ease reparation repayments was in place. However Germany, together with many other countries around the world, was in the grip of the depression which created severe economic, social and political upheaval. Theron says that during her three years in Germany she personally witnessed the decline in the economy and the suffering that this caused. She was acutely aware of the crisis because in order to gain practical experience, she was working for a large (unnamed) welfare organisation. Germans had been reduced to a level of hopelessness, she says.¹²⁵

Theron was daily confronted with the bitterness that the economic hardship engendered. She tells of making a small purchase at a store in Berlin and tendering what would be, at the time of her recording (1981), the equivalent of a R10-00 note since she had no small change. A bystander was clearly offended by this apparent display of affluence and made a sarcastic comment about people who ‘had too much money’.¹²⁶ It is a petty incident and that she recalled it at all is indicative of its impact and her impressions of the conditions of the time. The same applies to her story about the dishevelled and hungry man who asked whether he might eat the remains of a meal that she was about to leave at the counter in a department store.¹²⁷ Reminiscing in a conversation with Rykie van Reenen, she recalls a letter that she wrote to her family while on a visit to Italy, in which she says how relieved she was to be away, even for a short time, from the depressing atmosphere of poverty and despair which prevailed in Germany.¹²⁸ It is perhaps within this context that her measured, potentially controversial, comments about the rise of Nazism in *Sonder Hoed* have to be viewed.

¹²⁵ *Sonder Hoed*, p.14-15.

¹²⁶ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1 (transl.).

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, *Sonder Hoed*, p.14.

¹²⁸ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1.

Although she says that she did not ever personally hear Hitler speak she did listen to the emotional outpourings of Goebbels on more than one occasion, and witnessed a group of Nazi supporters singing and marching in the streets of Berlin, within a week of her arrival. In Theron's words in *Sonder Hoed*, she had been 'disturbed' to see German friends who had been scornful of Hitler initially, being won over by Nazi doctrine, including highly 'developed' academics. This is the closest she comes in the memoirs, to suggesting that she had any misgivings about Nazism. Of interest is her observation that as these friends were gradually converted, they 'lifted their shoulders' – they stood tall again; they said that Hitler and his lieutenants had restored their pride and given them hope for the future. She adds that having witnessed the deteriorating situation in Germany first-hand, she could 'understand' the appeal of Nazism.¹²⁹

But at least in this published work she does, obliquely, suggest reservations about the Nazis. The circumspection is absent in the original discussion with Van Reenen, which formed the basis of *Sonder Hoed*. This raises the question as to whether the reservations were a calculated insertion in the memoirs, intended to soften her position in the interests of public relations. In the recorded conversation she states categorically that she 'had sympathy with the Nazis'. She says that she told 'the English' whom she met at the time, 'you are to blame – it was *your* behaviour at Versailles'. She regarded the Treaty of Versailles as a 'terrible thing'. It had caused great humiliation. She says that the Germans had printed and distributed copies of the text of this treaty (presumably while she was in Germany) and that she still kept a copy of it in her bookshelf. In her opinion, Hitler offered the Germans a great deal, including work opportunities, discipline and the ability to conduct international negotiations without having to 'crawl'. He enabled Germans to 'state their demands', she says.¹³⁰ In *Sonder Hoed* she mentions in passing Hitler's promise to the German people to create 'a new empire'.¹³¹ It seems that she did not clearly distinguish between the economic distress caused by the depression which she had observed first-hand and which had elicited her compassion, but which was a world-wide phenomenon, and the residual frustrations of a German

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* See also Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.14-15 (transl.).

¹³⁰ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1 (transl.).

¹³¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed.*, p.15 (transl.).

nation defeated in war and subjected to a punitive peace. It is difficult to judge from the limited comments to be found in the sources whether she recognised the Third *Reich* as an aggressively-militarised and expansionist power, or whether she regarded the forging of a ‘new empire’ as a legitimate goal to restore Germany to its rightful place in world politics.

Theron’s positive perceptions concerning the rise of Hitler and the Nazis was not uncommon amongst Afrikaner nationalists in the 1930s and 1940s. Anti-British sentiment remained a potent force in their ranks and many, like Theron, saw Germans as fellow victims of British imperialism. There were Afrikaner scholars who were contemporaries, or near-contemporaries of Theron, who studied in Europe in this period and returned to South Africa deeply influenced by national socialism. Among those who were to play a prominent role in Afrikaner intellectual and political life were Geoff Cronjé, Nico Diederichs, Albert Hertzog (son of Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog), Piet Meyer and J. de W. Keyter.¹³² Numerous other students visited Nazi Germany on various exchange systems, scholarships and student tours.¹³³ After the Afrikaner National Students Union (ANS) was formed in 1933, groups of students visited Germany on ANS-sponsored tours.¹³⁴ Evidence of the ANS leanings toward national socialist ideology can be deduced from the fact that it approached the radical nationalist OB movement to establish closer co-operation and requested the

¹³² See Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.154. Professor N.F. Diederichs became professor at the University of the Orange Free State, NP cabinet minister and later State President. Dr. A. Hertzog, became an NP cabinet minister and later founder of the right-wing *Herstigte Nasionale Party*. Dr. P.J. Meyer became an NP organiser and played an important role in the Afrikaner cultural organisations and trade unions. J. de W. Keyter became Professor of Sociology at the University of the Orange Free State. All, including Cronjé (see p.37), became active in Afrikaner nationalist mobilisation through various cultural and political organs.

¹³³ Patrick J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1987), p.78.

¹³⁴ Meyer and Diederichs were founders of the ANS after a break with the National Unions of South African Students (NUSAS) which nationalist students regarded as English-dominated and too liberal. See Patrick J. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika*, pp.78-81.

OB leader, J.F.J. (Hans) van Rensburg¹³⁵ to become its president.¹³⁶ Van Rensburg had visited Germany in 1936 and was a self-proclaimed Germanophile who admired Hitler.¹³⁷ Apart from Cronjé, the visits of these scholars did not overlap with Theron's student years in Europe. But most became known to one another over time through their activities in the network of organisations which emerged during the 1930s, dedicated to mobilisation and upliftment of Afrikaners.

Someone whose admiration for Nazi Germany would have been particularly significant to Theron was MER who travelled to Europe in the company of Ida Theron in 1934 (after Theron's student days). It was MER's first ever visit abroad and her acute observations were recorded extensively in her correspondence and in *Die Burger*. MER had not shared the unreserved pro-German sentiments of some Afrikaner nationalists before this journey. She had warned Erika in 1930 not to be over-impressed by the Germans who were 'also snobs and imperialists'.¹³⁸ But she was substantially converted by what she experienced during her stay in the country. She disliked Nazi fanaticism but said that she understood why Germans were 'bewitched by Hitler'. He was 'the personification of the will of the people'. MER saw in the national-socialist movement much with which she strongly identified. In terms of her interpretation, the Nazis understood 'that every nation must develop its own genius, free, as far as possible from the dominance of others'. She saw in their policies the embodiment of her own ideal: 'cultivate in your own people that which is good within in them, according to their own unique nature'.¹³⁹ The fact that the English press was

¹³⁵ Dr. J.F.J. van Rensburg was the Secretary for Justice in the United Party government, then Administrator of the Orange Free State until he resigned from his post to take up the leadership of the OB.

¹³⁶ Speech delivered by Dr. J.F.J. van Rensburg at Stellenbosch on 24 February 1941, 'Weg met die Kapitalistiese Imperialisme Wat Onder die Vaandel van Demokrasie Ons Volk Verkneeg', quoted in Ossewabrandwag, *Dr. J.F.J. van Rensburg: Lewensbeskrywing en Drie Toesprake* (Johannesburg, Voortrekkerpers, n.d.), p.13.

¹³⁷ Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, pp.212-213.

¹³⁸ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.M.1.K.18 (1), letter, MER to Erika Theron, 7 April 1930 (transl.).

¹³⁹ Letter, MER to Anna Rothmann, 11 July 1934, quoted in Steyn, *MER*, p.323 (transl.).

critical of developments in Germany only heightened her sympathy. She and Ida were so incensed by what they regarded as the ‘pathetic meanness’ of the *London Times* and other British papers in relation to Germany, that she says that she was tempted to give the ‘*Heil Hitler*’ salute herself.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Letter, MER to Anna Geyer, 17 [July?] 1934, quoted in Steyn, *MER*, p.322 (transl.).

MER's conviction that Hitler and the Nazis would be the saviours of the German nation was such that she even attempted to rationalise the manifestations of anti-Semitism ('*Jodehaat*'). She did, however, express some concerns on the matter.¹⁴¹ Theron scarcely does even this. In neither the recorded reminiscences, nor in *Sonder Hoed*, is she unambiguous in her judgement of Nazi excesses. When asked by Van Reenen what she had thought at the time about their behaviour towards the Jews, she conceded that 'of course this could not be condoned'. But, she says, she had not believed the claims at the time. 'I did know that lots of them had to leave – writers and so forth. And the woman who taught me, Salomon',¹⁴² she concedes. This scarcely captures the scale of the mass emigration occasioned by officially sanctioned anti-Semitic activity.¹⁴³ Her comments about Salomon in *Sonder Hoed*, are noticeably dispassionate:

Dr. Salomon descended from a very well-known German-Jewish family. While I was in Berlin, she celebrated her sixtieth birthday. The newspapers made much of it. Her seminars and discussion classes meant a great deal to me. Because of her half-Jewish background, she later moved to America, where she apparently died in relative poverty.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Steyn, *MER*, p.325.

¹⁴² Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1 (transl.).

¹⁴³ According to Evans, 37 000 Jews left Germany in 1933 alone. See Evans, *Coming of the Third Reich*, p.439.

¹⁴⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.13 (transl.).

Although Salomon was an assimilated German and her family were Christian converts she had been subjected to the hostility and dispossession directed at all ‘non-Aryans’ by the Nazis. In 1933 the Academy for Women’s Social Work was forced to ‘dissolve itself’ (it only re-opened in 1945) and over time Salomon was stripped of various public offices. She remained in Germany for a while attempting to aid other Jews and continued to serve as secretary of the ICSSW despite the demands of the German schools of social work that she be dismissed. As a result the German contingent withdrew from the international committee. Finally in 1937 she was forced to leave the country.¹⁴⁵ Theron must have been aware of much of this and to say that Salomon had ‘moved to America’ is simply prevarication. It is not possible to tell from the sources whether the Academy was shut down while Theron was still a student, or shortly afterwards. It could be expected that the closure of an institution at which she had studied would provoke some reaction or criticism of the sinister side of Nazism, and particularly of anti-Semitism, in her memoirs. But it is conspicuously absent.

There is a telling passage in the conversation with Van Reenen in which Theron indicates that she regarded Salomon’s expulsion as somewhat ‘surprising’ since the Salomons were an early immigrant family and ‘not one of those who had arrived since the [First World] War’. Referring to the more recent influx of Jewish immigrants, she remarks that the Jews had arrived ‘in their hoards’ from Eastern Europe. They had poured into Berlin and to Frankfurt. Berlin was a veritable nest of Jews (‘*n Jode-nes*’).¹⁴⁶ Prejudice is evident in the tone of these comments, made many years after the event. Significantly, they do not appear in *Sonder Hoed*, which highlights the fact that the published memoirs often present a much more tolerant picture of Theron than do the uncensored conversations.

¹⁴⁵ www.alice-salomon-archiv.de/angebote/iassw/editorial.html (Last viewed 15 February 2005).

¹⁴⁶ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1 (transl.).

Theron had left Germany by the time that Hitler came to power. According to her she was aboard ship on her homeward voyage.¹⁴⁷ Thus she did not witness personally the rising brutality in his regime. The people of whom she says simply that they had ‘had to leave’, went into exile voluntarily and not into the concentration camps. Still her account is silent about the abuses that followed – bland and devoid of criticism of the Nazis and their policy. No evidence has come to light to suggest that she may have subscribed to one of the reactionary theories which assert that the holocaust was an exaggeration, or invention, to elicit sympathy for Jewish claims in the post-war period. In 1953 she gave MER a copy of a book which MER refers to as *2de Kans*,¹⁴⁸ dealing with atrocities committed by the Germans during the war, but the significance of this is difficult to interpret. MER returned the book with apologies saying that she was unable to finish reading it: it ‘upset [her] too much’.¹⁴⁹ MER was clearly wrestling with the revelations and questioning their veracity. She writes further ‘... you know the Germans, Erika, can the murder of Jews in German camps really be true, and the gas ovens and all the deliberate cruelty ... ?’ MER could not entirely believe this of the ‘civilised Germans’. ‘Sometimes I think, no. Sometimes I don’t know.’¹⁵⁰ Unfortunately, Theron’s reply does not survive. The fact that she chose the book for MER could be interpreted as implying either acknowledgement of Nazi war crimes, or scepticism – or the same ambivalence that MER had expressed. What may be inferred from Theron’s reluctance to criticise Nazi actions is that loyalty was one of her most outstanding characteristics and she felt a great loyalty to Germany.

The heightened respect for *volkskultuur* and for aspects of the Nazi socio-political system which emerged from Theron’s time in Germany no doubt contributed to her ready support of the OB in South Africa. She and MER were early recruits to the movement and Theron rose rapidly through

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ This probably refers to C.V. Gheorghiu, *De Tweede Kans* (The Hague, Pax, 1953) which is a novel dealing *i.a.* with atrocities suffered by Jews at the hands of Germans.

¹⁴⁹ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.K.T. (21), letter, MER to Erika Theron, 15 November 1953 (transl.).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, (20), letter, MER to Erika Theron, 26 October 1953 (transl.).

the ranks of the organisation.¹⁵¹ Their mutual interest in OB affairs was an added bond in their growing attachment and a large amount of the surviving correspondence addressed by MER to Theron includes discussion of the affairs of the OB and its members.

¹⁵¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.41-42.

According to an OB publication, the organisation was born out of the ‘mystic fervour and brotherliness’ resulting from the 1938 centenary celebration of the Great Trek.¹⁵² It was, initially, a cultural movement with its main focus being that of creating Afrikaner unity and mobilisation around Afrikaner history and symbols.¹⁵³ With the approach of the Second World War, rejection of South African participation in the war and the desire for South Africa to become a republic also became central concerns¹⁵⁴ and as Moodie says, ‘accusation of National Socialism became self-fulfilling’.¹⁵⁵ Taken together, these ideals reflected an Afrikaner vision of independence and realisation of identity which correlated strongly with ideas expressed by MER on the nature of nationalism.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Ossewa-Brandwag, *Some Facts About the Ossewa-Brandwag* (Stellenbosch, Pro Ecclesia, 1944), p.8.

¹⁵³ Christoph Marx, ‘The Ossewabrandwag as a Mass Movement, 1939-1941’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, p.195; Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.190.

¹⁵⁴ Marx, ‘The Ossewabrandwag’, p.195.

¹⁵⁵ Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.222.

¹⁵⁶ Steyn, *MER*, p.30. Steyn quotes from an article by MER published in *Die Burger*, 23 October 1934, in which she defines and discusses nationalism. See also her comments on German nationalism quoted above.

From the early stages the OB adopted a para-military *kommando* structure and uniforms for members. Theron says that this was intended to instil ‘more discipline among our people, which was a good thing’. According to her, however, as a typical ‘rebel’ she balked at wearing the prescribed hat.¹⁵⁷ In a 1944 publication the OB expressed its ‘clear and unambiguous objective’ as the establishment of a ‘National and Social Authoritarian Republic’¹⁵⁸ in which only ‘Afrikaners or potential Afrikaners’ defined as ‘assimilable white elements’ with ‘undivided loyalty to [the] Fatherland’ could become national citizens.¹⁵⁹ The republic would not be sought through the ballot box or through parliament but through the ‘force of will of the people’. As Elsa Joubert writes, it was unclear just how this process was supposed to take place.¹⁶⁰ Joubert’s depiction of OB activities at Stellenbosch during her student years is gently ironic. They were ‘exciting’ times. On the one hand there were secret assignations, coded messages, conspiratorial insider status. On the other hand there were spectacles of uniformed mass gatherings, marching, singing, impassioned speeches. Together these created a fevered nationalism that for a time engulfed vast numbers of Afrikaners across class and age groups¹⁶¹ Initially this was bolstered by the conviction that Britain and the Allies would be defeated in the war. According to Furlong, OB leadership did not merely hope for a German victory that would hasten the end of British overlordship in South Africa, but was prepared to become actively involved in assisting the Nazi war effort.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1 (transl.).

¹⁵⁸ Ossewa-Brandwag, *Some Facts About the Ossewa-Brandwag*, p.27.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98, quoting ‘Statement by the Council on the Policy of the Ossewa-Brandwag’, issued in 1943.

¹⁶⁰ Elsa Joubert, *’n Wonderlike Geweld: Jeugherinneringe* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2005), p.243.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* See for example pp. 241-243, 263.

¹⁶² Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika*, p.143.

In her memoirs Theron explains her membership of the OB as a result of both anti-British and pro-German feelings. She does not express herself in the Romantic-sentimental way that MER does about her *volk* – about nationhood and self-realisation. This was not Theron’s style. But she was fiercely loyal and narrowly patriotic. She says that the OB was a body through which Afrikaners could show the rest of the world how they felt about being dragged into the war, ‘chained to England’, just as the rebellion had done in the First World War. But she says, too, that she was pro-German, particularly after her student years in Germany.¹⁶³ In discussion with Rykie van Reenen, she distinguished between being anti-‘English’ and being pro-German. She saw them as two separate issues but identified with both.¹⁶⁴

According to Theron, the OB members in the Cape were ‘a tame lot’ compared with the northern branches. She also claims that it was the *stormjaers*, the militant wing of the OB, and not the rank-and-file members who were involved in anti-war subversion. ‘There was no cutting wires’ in the Cape, she says, although she claims that she would love to have ‘cut wires’.¹⁶⁵ It is clear from the laughter in the recording that she is joking, but there is no mistaking the strength of her bitterness against the imperial connection or her sympathy for the German cause. Her leadership in the OB allowed her to act on these sentiments and to serve fellow Afrikaners in so doing. Like MER, Theron remained loyal to the OB and its principles long after it ceased to be a coherent movement.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.41.

¹⁶⁴ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1 (transl.).

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* This presumably refers to sabotage such as cutting telegraph wires.

¹⁶⁶ See for example US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.K.T. (15), letter, MER to Erika Theron, 10 August 1952. MER refers to herself as a *bittereinder* and clearly this also applied to Theron. Only late in 1953 did MER mention that she and Erika had become doubtful about the direction that the OB was taking. See *ibid.*, 55.I.M.1.KL(14), letter, MER to H.C. Lambrechts, 22 October 1953. The movement was disbanded in 1954.

It must be concluded that Theron's Berlin years were a seminal period in her life with long-term ramifications. She developed a deep and enduring attachment to Germany. Uncharacteristically, she seems to have suspended her judgement, not only on anti-Semitism but also on Nazi discrimination against women¹⁶⁷ – which was also a feature of the OB.¹⁶⁸ Even as a general she says she did little more than 'deliver speeches'. According to Christof Marx, when high-ranking women in the OB attempted to 'play a more active role in the organization ... they were quickly reduced to more decorative functions'.¹⁶⁹ MER explains the Nazi attitude towards women and to 'women's work' as born of necessity. Discrimination was the outcome of an emergency in the life of the nation. As a priority (and by inference only in the short term) all forces had to be concentrated on the upliftment of the people and deployed with that objective in mind.¹⁷⁰ Whatever it took to achieve this, had to be tolerated. This, she presumably also applied to the position of the OB. It is difficult to imagine Theron accepting such a point of view, but seemingly as a young woman, probably influenced by MER, she was persuaded.

As evidence of the strength of Theron's convictions is the fact that she maintained her loyalty to Germany and to the OB despite the fact that Verwoerd, her hero and mentor, held opposing views. Verwoerd was also a product of post-graduate study in Germany (as well as the United States and Great Britain), although in a somewhat earlier period than the pro-Nazi scholars discussed above. Verwoerd, however, rejected Nazism in the strongest terms. According to him 'the Afrikaner wanted to have as little to do with German National-Socialism as he did with British Imperialism

¹⁶⁷ Women were relegated to certain 'female' roles and tasks and were excluded from others – for example women could no longer hold office as town councillors. See Steyn, *MER*, p.324.

¹⁶⁸ This is not to argue that anti-semitism and gender chauvinism in the OB were identical with or drawn directly from German national socialist ideologies. See for example Tilman Dederling, review of Christoph Marx, *Im Zeichen des Ochsenwagens. Der Radikale Afrikaaner-Nationalismus in Südafrika und die Geschichte der Ossewabrandwag* (Münster, LIT, 1998), *South African Historical Journal*, 42 (2000), pp.380-384.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, citing Marx, pp.310-314.

¹⁷⁰ See MER's rationalisation in Steyn, *MER*, pp.324-325.

and that he was no more a minion of Hitler than he was of Chamberlain'.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ O. Geyser (compiler), *Dr. H.F. Verwoerd die Republikein: Hoofartikels uit Die Transvaler, 1937-1948* ([Cape Town], Tafelberg, c.1972), pp.13-14. See also Davenport and Saunders, *South Africa*, pp.335, 351; Giliomee, *Afrikaners*, p.444. Patrick Furlong says that 'Verwoerd's public militancy in opposing co-operating with the Radical Right' was at odds with his 'private relationships' but does not provide any evidence of sympathy with the Ossewabrandwag. See Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika*, pp.209-210.

Verwoerd was also antagonistic towards the OB, particularly as it opposed parliamentary government to which he was committed, and threatened to divide the NP.¹⁷² As editor of *Die Transvaler*, he ‘climbed in with boots and bare fists’ to try to destroy the organisation and its leader.¹⁷³ Throughout her association with Verwoerd, Theron supported him, apparently unconditionally and in virtually all his opinions and policies. She seemed incapable of expressing a contradictory view, at least in public – arguably placing her own integrity at risk at times. Her views on Nazi Germany and the OB, however, were striking exceptions.

Doctorate and the Verwoerd Connection

Theron’s personal association with Verwoerd began when she returned to South Africa and on the advice of her MA supervisor, Grosskopf, registered for a doctorate in sociology at the University of Stellenbosch under Verwoerd’s supervision.¹⁷⁴ Verwoerd who had been Professor of Applied Psychology and Psychotechnics since 1928, had recently been appointed head of the newly-created Department of Sociology and Social Work. The growth of the social sciences in South Africa had moved rapidly in Theron’s absence, as Grosskopf and others had anticipated, and Theron returned to exciting possibilities. For Theron her association with Verwoerd would prove to be of enormous significance in the long term. He became a towering figure in her world, casting a long shadow and substantially shaping her values, her decisions and her future.

¹⁷² Davenport and Saunders, *South Africa*, p.351.

¹⁷³ Richard, *Moedswilig die Uwe*, p.58.

¹⁷⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.22.

This raises some questions about Theron's relationship with Verwoerd. For Theron to identify MER as holding a special place in her life, as one of her 'grotes' is understandable. MER was a very close friend of the family and during their later work together on welfare projects, they established an enduring connection, traceable in sustained, warm correspondence which records regular visits, thoughtful advice and assistance, exchanges of gifts, mutual concern for health and changes in life circumstances, observations on a wide range of principles and public affairs but also personal and religious reflections. They clearly used one another as sounding boards and had mutual respect for one another's opinions. Theirs was a relationship of great significance, stretching over five or six decades; it was 'great' by any standards.¹⁷⁵

It is perhaps less obvious why Theron would, in 1983, still choose to name Verwoerd as the other 'great' figure in her life and why she was 'widely considered to be [his] disciple'.¹⁷⁶ She began her doctorate under his supervision, but she did not complete it until much later and under another promoter. She did work closely with him in the Cape in the committee dealing with the poor-white project, but for a relatively short time – somewhat less than three years.¹⁷⁷ Their paths then diverged. Verwoerd left the committee and moved to Johannesburg in 1937 to launch the northern 'propaganda organ' of the NP, *Die Transvaler*. This ended his academic career and set him on the path which led to his future in politics. He remained in the Transvaal for the next 11 years until the triumph of the NP in 1948 in which *Die Transvaler* played a significant role. He then left journalism for good, becoming first a senator, then a cabinet minister and finally Prime Minister,¹⁷⁸ dividing his time between Cape Town and Pretoria. Theron also resigned from the committee in 1937, and returned to the academic world in Stellenbosch. She evidently maintained contact with the Verwoerd family. She refers to various communications and visits, in *Sonder Hoed*. Several

¹⁷⁵ See US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.KT and 55.M.1.K.18.

¹⁷⁶ Raphaely, 'Erika Theron', *Femina* (March 1990), p.76.

¹⁷⁷ See Chapter Two.

¹⁷⁸ Henry Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid: H.F. Verwoerd – An Appraisal* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1980), pp.65-75, 86, 148; Scholtz, *Verwoerd*, p.52.

interviewees speak of a continuing family friendship, and there are references in MER's correspondence which confirm this.

Betsie Verwoerd, Hendrik Verwoerd's widow, was asked to contribute to a collection of tributes dedicated to Theron on her retirement from the University of Stellenbosch in 1972 and published in a special issue of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*. In her short tribute, entitled 'Terugblik' (looking back), she emphasises the family connections, not only with Erika but with all the Theron sisters and their parents, through their mutual interest in the work of the ACVV. Of Erika, she says that she was always a welcome guest in the Verwoerd home. She also mentions 'close ties between the student and her professor' during their work for the 1934 National Conference. This was reflected, she says, in Theron's 'brilliant' book, *H.F. Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*.¹⁷⁹ The focus of the Betsie Verwoerd piece – and this may have been the brief of the compilers – seems to be on Verwoerd, rather than Theron. Theron is discussed as the acolyte, privileged to have been instructed by a man of Verwoerd's qualities, and as torch-bearer – the former student who had continued where the late professor had left off in the pioneering field of scientific social studies and the training of social workers.¹⁸⁰

With the Verwoerd document collection at the Institute for Contemporary History purged of private correspondence and Theron's own papers missing, there is little to indicate how close the relationship between Verwoerd and Theron, personally, remained. The sole exchange of significance after 1937, which turned up during research for this thesis consists of a brief telegram to the Union Buildings from Theron congratulating Verwoerd on his public clarification of 'Coloured policy' and a cordial but formal reply from the Prime Minister in which Theron is addressed as 'Geagte dr. Theron'.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ The reference is to Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, a slim chronicle of events surrounding Verwoerd's role in the petition for a state Department of Welfare by the 1934 National Conference and its Continuation Committee. See below and Chapter Two.

¹⁸⁰ Betsie Verwoerd, 'Erika Theron – 'n Terugblik', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), p.273 (transl.).

¹⁸¹ INCH: H.F. Verwoerd Collection (PV93), 1/30/1/10, telegram, Erika Thehen (*sic*) to

H.F. Verwoerd, 25 November 1960; *ibid.*, telegram, H.F. Verwoerd to Erika Theron, 29 November 1960.

Yet there can be no question of the manifest personal power Verwoerd had in shaping Erika Theron's life. A number of interviewees hinted broadly that there had been speculation surrounding Theron's relationship with Verwoerd. These informants have requested anonymity. If there were any truth in the rumours that any romantic attachment had formed or was threatening to develop, it would add an additional, if mundane dimension to Verwoerd's decision to quit academia for politics and to leave Stellenbosch in 1937. Theron's nephew, Gawie, is adamant that Theron was never romantically linked with a man; that she was 'not interested in that'.¹⁸² There is no concrete evidence on the nature of the relationship with Verwoerd, and it is moreover not material to this discussion.

All interviewees did confirm that Theron was attached to Verwoerd to an extraordinary degree, beyond the bounds of what might be regarded as normal in the given circumstances.¹⁸³ This can be attributed to hero-worship of a particularly intense kind as much as to any deeper affective sentiment. A former student and good friend says that Theron was so deeply attached to Verwoerd that 'she was *beside herself* when Dr. Verwoerd was [killed]. She said that people would never know the quality of the man now dead'.¹⁸⁴ Another close associate who regarded Theron as 'obsessed' with Verwoerd, also remembers her devastation at his death – she 'went crazy'.¹⁸⁵ She was not exceptional; many Afrikaners shared similar sentiments. But in Theron's case the loss was clearly, profoundly personal.

¹⁸² Interview, Gabriël (Gawie) Fagan, prominent architect and nephew of Theron, and his wife, Dr. Gwen Fagan, architectural historian, Cape Town, 12 July 2006.

¹⁸³ Interview, De Villiers; interview, Joubert; interview, Steyn; recorded conversation between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2.

¹⁸⁴ Interview, Steyn (transl.).

¹⁸⁵ Interview, De Villiers (transl.).

Other voices are scarcely needed to attest to Theron's admiration and regard. It radiates from her own words,¹⁸⁶ in articles that she wrote, in *Sonder Hoed*, in *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner* and in her contribution to the *South African Dictionary of Biography*.¹⁸⁷ Verwoerd was 'vivacious', 'energetic', 'exceptionally amicable', 'charming'. He was an impressive lecturer, who 'prepared his lectures carefully', wrote neat and comprehensive notes. Over 40 years later she still retained his notes, which she said were a 'pleasure to page through'. He had the 'vision to devise grand schemes', he had 'knowledge, competence and an unrelenting capacity for work'. He could employ a disarming 'boyish smile', had a 'phenomenal memory', and when not engaged in public oratory, had a 'pleasant manner of speaking and soothing voice', 'implacable logic' and great 'powers of persuasion'. He could 'make a point strongly, but always with patience and in a friendly manner'.¹⁸⁸ There is no hint of the man who, according to Richard van der Ross had subjected a senior official of Van der Ross's acquaintance to hours of bullying, or who 'would go into a meeting and would talk from beginning to end and you wouldn't dare to question or interrupt him'.¹⁸⁹ Nor is there any reflection of the man who had such overweening self-confidence that by his own testimony his sleep was completely untroubled – he was never in doubt that he could be mistaken in his judgement.¹⁹⁰ Theron's praise is extravagant; criticism is conspicuously absent. She says she never knew the Verwoerd who was depicted by others as the harsh 'man of granite'.

¹⁸⁶ She speaks of his role in the early development of welfare in glowing terms in numerous interviews. See recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2. Theron tells Van Reenen in a colloquial mixture of Afrikaans and English that she has always had a 'sneaking admiration' for Verwoerd.

¹⁸⁷ F. du T. Spies, E. Theron and J.J.J. Scholtz, 'Verwoerd, Hendrik Frensch', in C.J. Beyers (ed.), *South African Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. IV (Durban and Pretoria, Butterworth, for HSRC, 1981), pp.731-740. See esp. Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.22-27 (transl.).

¹⁸⁸ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.22-27.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Professor R.E. van der Ross, Cape Town, 27 January 2005.

¹⁹⁰ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.520. Giliomee refers to an interview of Verwoerd by Rykie van Reenen published in *Die Burger*, 14 June 1957.

Whether from conviction or deference, while Verwoerd was alive Theron seldom deviated from the course he set for Afrikaners. She was, of course, not alone in this. Verwoerd's intellectual brilliance and powers of persuasion have been widely recognised.¹⁹¹ Henry Kenney says of him:

When Verwoerd was bestriding South Africa like a colossus he did not brook dissent from fellow Nationalists (the Opposition he simply ignored). He imposed an intellectual straitjacket on the Afrikaners which most accepted with extreme docility ... there were few in the land prepared to say him nay.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ See for example, Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.520-521.

¹⁹² Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid*, p.9.

Kenney's book has its detractors, but of interest here is that Theron herself recommended it. According to Marinus Wiechers, she gave him a copy of the book as a birthday gift, and said to him that of all that had been written about Verwoerd this book was the 'most significant, the most objective'. She accepted Kenney's devastating criticism and said that she could now understand that Verwoerd 'was wrong', but that 'it was the way that he felt for the Afrikaners that prevented him from seeing the total picture'.¹⁹³ In other words his intentions were altruistic (if nationalistic). The awful consequences of apartheid were not foreseen. So it was not only to the public media that she declined to condemn Verwoerd. Even in private discourse, as late as 1980, she was making excuses. As Raphaely commented in one of the last interviews with Theron to be published:

She doesn't speculate about what Verwoerd's reaction might have been had he lived to see her conversion, and her revulsion for apartheid and its cruelty to the coloured people does not extend towards its inventor [*sic*] ... She rejects apartheid, and yet loyalty and civility preclude open criticism of its creator.¹⁹⁴

One should perhaps not see her susceptibility to Verwoerdian political ideology entirely in the light of personal enthrallment. Verwoerd was a convincing man, probably because for better or worse he was a man of conviction. Rykie van Reenen suggested that criticism of Verwoerd based on hindsight is misconceived.

He had an absolute certainty, and logically saw ... eventual equality between equal peoples ... It is easy to judge now, but things have to be seen how people at the time [saw them]. If you don't understand the kind of *idealism* that there was, then you don't understand a whole lot. He thought – we thought – we were here to uplift ... of course then greed and privilege came in ... but in Verwoerd, I am absolutely convinced that [idealism] was his point of departure.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Interview, Wiechers.

¹⁹⁴ Raphaely, 'Erika Theron' (March 1990), *Femina*, p.76.

¹⁹⁵ Interview, Van Reenen.

Theron evidently shared and retained her respect for the idealism, but as the practical reality of apartheid unfolded from the 1950s, and particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, Verwoerd and his policies became increasingly contentious in some of the circles in which she moved. These included international sociology and social work academics and professionals, and closer to home, Afrikaner intellectuals in Stellenbosch and elsewhere. It is perhaps in this light that Theron's nostalgia for the 1933-1936 period before Verwoerd became immersed in politics, may be seen. It was a period of intense endeavour, directed at the upliftment of the poor whites for the sake of Afrikaner 'survival', in which she saw the idealistic vision as uncorrupted, unlike the vision of apartheid.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ See Chapter Two. It will be argued that the poor white issue was used as a political instrument.

At the beginning of this period she commenced research for her doctoral thesis, a sociological study of female factory workers in Cape Town,¹⁹⁷ which, she says, linked in with her work on female labour in industry, carried out in Berlin.¹⁹⁸ It was a topic with considerable currency in Afrikaner circles in South Africa at the time. Increasing numbers of young white women seeking employment in the shops and factories of the cities – the majority Afrikaners – had been a growing source of concern in Afrikaner church and welfare organisations from the 1920s.¹⁹⁹ It was believed that these daughters of Afrikaners²⁰⁰ were subject to economic exploitation by English-speaking capitalists, to health hazards, sexual harassment and moral temptation. The lack of racial distinction or segregation in places of work and lodging were regarded as particularly undesirable.²⁰¹ As Marijke du Toit shows, the ethnic-national dimensions of the ‘problem’ made this a ‘volksaak’ as well as a ‘vrouesaak’. If these working class women were not protected they ‘would be lost to the *volk*’.²⁰² Through her ACVV connections and *Die Burger*, MER was very much engaged in the issue, as were the other Theron sisters. Daisy was superintendent of the first ACVV hostel for these ‘working girls’, opened in 1930.²⁰³ For Erika, it must have been an obvious choice as a research topic.

Theron’s doctoral project would stretch over many years, interrupted by her work for the 1934 National Conference and its Continuation Committee.²⁰⁴ The thesis was completed and accepted

¹⁹⁷ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.IX, p.135, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 26 June 1933.

¹⁹⁸ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.5.

¹⁹⁹ Impoverishment and urbanisation of Afrikaners is discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

²⁰⁰ See headline in *Die Burger*, 15 September 1925, ‘Kongres: Ons Dogters’, quoted in Du Toit, ‘Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism’, p.251.

²⁰¹ Du Toit, ‘Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism’, pp.251-255.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p.250.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 59 (illustration and caption), 67, 69.

²⁰⁴ The 1934 National Conference and its Continuation Committee are the subject of Chapter Two.

only at the end of 1942, with Verwoerd's successor, O.J.M. Wagner, acting as promoter.²⁰⁵ As she was later to comment, it was a typical 'old-fashioned' study. The justification for the research, and the stated objectives are modest: industry was growing at an increasing rate in the Union of South Africa offering more employment opportunities for female workers; more information was needed about these workers which could be of use, for example, in 'determining their wages, the improvement of working conditions, provision of better housing for married and unmarried workers, the provision of a constructive entertainment and recreation programme'.²⁰⁶ Typical of much of Theron's work, it was very practical in its conception and presentation.

²⁰⁵ Scholtz states incorrectly that Theron was one of two students who obtained doctorates under the guidance of Verwoerd in the five-year period in which he headed the Department of Sociology and Social Work, 1932-1937. See Scholtz, *Verwoerd*, p.30. Wagner's appointment as Theron's promoter to replace Verwoerd is noted in US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.XII, p.5, Report of the Faculty Board, Appendix to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 16 April 1937.

²⁰⁶ Erika Theron, *Fabriekwerksters in Kaapstad ('n Sosiologiese Studie van 540 Blanke en Kleurling-Fabriekwerksters)* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1944), published version of DPhil thesis, pp.1-2 (transl.).

The information gathered and presented in the thesis is essentially unproblematised, statistical and descriptive raw data, with little analysis or theoretical context. No real ‘conclusion’ is offered. According to Annemarie de Vos in a review of 30 years of Theron’s research output, it would not have passed muster as social work research in a later era, but it was the type of work which was a necessary forerunner to future developments in the field.²⁰⁷ Although the doctorate was not awarded *cum laude* (as the Stellenbosch degree could be), publication of the thesis was funded jointly by the South African Board of Educational and Social Research and the Department of Sociology and Social Work of the University of Stellenbosch. This is presumably evidence of its quality and relevance in its time.

It was an exercise which had consequences for Theron and for the Department of Social Work at Stellenbosch that she was to head in the future. The research phase involved gathering information from the management of factories employing women and from 540 female factory workers, 302 of whom were ‘coloured workers’.²⁰⁸ There is nothing in the thesis to tell whether Theron approached the survey with any underlying notion that race was a primary indicator or that any policy or action which might be informed by the study would be race-centred. It does not seem so. Although the data is all recorded by race category, both the title and structure of the study suggest that the focus is essentially on the lifestyle of a particular class of worker.

²⁰⁷ A.S. de Vos, ‘Maatskaplikewerk-Navorsing in Suid-Afrika – ’n Beknopte Oorsig’, *Maatskaplike Werk/Social Work*, 8, 4 (October 1972), p.257.

²⁰⁸ Theron, *Fabriekwerksters*, p.3.

Theron carried out this fieldwork in person, visiting all but three of the women herself. It was a formidable task. Most subjects were interviewed in their homes where she frequently met friends and family.²⁰⁹ In these private settings, observations and discussions took place covering a wide range of issues, including the composition of and relationships within households, childcare, education, income and spending habits and recreation. For a white person of the privileged classes to enter the domestic worlds of coloured people in South Africa was rare, even in pre-apartheid Cape Town where there was as yet little formal social segregation. Such social racial mixing as did occur, was largely confined to the working-classes who shared the poorer neighbourhoods. In the course of the study Theron encountered a number of racially-mixed households – ‘bastards’ – and recorded this data, intending to include it in her study. However, according to her, she was dissuaded from doing so by her promoter, because it would raise ‘problems’.²¹⁰

It is probable that this work awakened her interest in the coloured community, an interest which helped to shape course content and provide inspiration for research projects among her students during her later career in the Department of Social Work at Stellenbosch.²¹¹ This in turn no doubt contributed to her reputation as an academic with special insight into ‘coloured affairs’, although she herself was wary of the notion of being an authority on the coloured people (‘*n kenner*’). ‘People are too ready to represent themselves as authorities’ she told an interviewer in later years. ‘Even in the most favourable of circumstances it is difficult to fully “know” a people ... it is still less possible in a society where white and brown people have been so alienated’.²¹²

Nevertheless, Theron’s reputation and willingness to participate in public affairs led to a lifetime of involvement in bodies which devised and implemented policy affecting the lives of coloured people. After the Theron Commission, she would be referred to by Richard van der Ross as an ‘honorary

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

²¹⁰ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1.

²¹¹ See Chapter Three.

²¹² *Die Burger*, 18 June 1976, “‘Ons gaan kyk!’ het Erika Theron oor en oor gesê”, by J.J. Scholtz. See also Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.88-89.

coloured',²¹³ in recognition of her struggle for coloured peoples' rights. But that refers to a very late stage of her career. In the interim years, important influences from her formative years would lead her in a different direction. She would apply her drive and learned skills to try to make a difference in life. She would serve many civic, social, cultural and professional communities in a variety of ways, but wearing the blinkers of Verwoerdian Afrikaner nationalism and essentially committed to an ideology of apartheid which in practice translated into white supremacy.

²¹³ Interview, Van der Ross.

CHAPTER TWO

DISCIPLE OF VERWOERD: SERVING POOR WHITES

Whatever negative feelings Erika Theron may have developed later relating to Verwoerd's political career, she had no ambivalence about his role in the development of welfare in South Africa. It may be speculated that because in a much later era she was to find herself unable to defend what was increasingly indefensible with regard to race policy, and yet was unwilling to be openly critical of the man for whom she had such high regard and affection, she placed an almost excessive emphasis on this area of his life – the crusade for the redemption of the poor whites and the creation of modern welfare structures. It encompassed a period of less than three years, and as will be argued below, at least as far as Verwoerd himself was concerned, the philanthropic, personal and political were never entirely disentangled. For Theron, it was essentially an opportunity to give expression through action, to her will to be of service to her people.

There is no evidence that Theron fully recognised the politicisation of the poor-white problem, or the element of professional self-interest in the lobby to enhance the status of the social sciences, both of which may be discerned in Verwoerd's work in the field of welfare. From 1934 she was absorbed in the altruistic and nationalistic fervour of the struggle against poor-whitism leading up to and following on from the 1934 National Conference, which was conducted under the slogan of '*Nou of Nooit* - Now or Never'.¹ That this provided an opportunity to criticise the new government's supposedly indifferent response to the poor white problem, was probably a bonus rather than a central concern for her. As she says in *Sonder Hoed*, having Verwoerd as her 'boss' during these few years, was a 'wonderful experience' for her. It was life-shaping.² By concentrating on this period whenever she commented publicly on Verwoerd in later years, she was

¹ *National Conference on the Poor White Problem, Kimberley 1934*. (Information brochure) (Kimberley, Diamond Fields Advertiser, 1934). This conference was organised to give practical effect to the findings of the Carnegie Commission.

² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.27.

able to express her great admiration for him in extravagant terms and take pride in her own role, serving alongside her hero.

The Poor White Problem and the Carnegie Commission

The campaign to rescue poor whites from degradation was Theron's first great mission and in many ways it seems to have prepared her for future missionary battles. She learned a great deal from the experience. The attitudes, approach and methods which marked the campaign are reflected in later projects. For the researcher, however, reconstructing this part of Theron's career is frustrating. Her own role was supportive and largely hidden – overshadowed by the rising star of Verwoerd. Devoted disciple that she was, Theron's public reflections on the period all focus on him. Other contemporary sources, such as the press, do much the same. In the account below, therefore, she often seems to be no more than an extra in the drama in which Verwoerd plays the leading role. It must be recognised, however, that she was very much present and engaged in what she regarded as a seminal moment in the development of the welfare structures which would serve South Africa for decades to come. Her personal energy and dedicated support of Verwoerd contributed to this and in the process, to a systematic approach to the fight against white poverty.

The poor-white project was the source of inspiration for Theron's book, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, written after his death. In it she focuses on what she thought to be his uncontroversial achievements. She says of this work:

The purpose of this publication is to inform, especially the younger generation of welfare workers of the events in the 1930s when the first trained social workers were just beginning to emerge from the training institutions. [Among other things] ... they must know about the pioneering work done by the men and women who received the mandate from five hundred delegates of the National Conference to see to it that its decisions were carried out. The task could not have been placed in better hands and the men and women could not have been under better leadership than that of Dr. H.F. Verwoerd.³

³ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.64 (transl.).

Theron was one of these ‘pioneering’ men and women entrusted with the mandate of the 1934 National Conference. In the social work journal which she founded and edited from 1965, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, her nostalgia for this period is conspicuous; in fact she claims that the seeds of the journal were sown in that time.⁴ Forty years later she was still referring repeatedly in editorials to the ‘groundbreaking’ work of Verwoerd and seminal influence of the National Conference and its Continuation Committee, promoting the legend that this was the defining moment in the history of social work in South Africa. It was a legend which was imparted to generations of students who later passed through her hands as a lecturer at the University of Stellenbosch. A prescribed text for first-year students (of which Theron was co-author), used over a very long period, includes the claim that the resolutions taken at the 1934 National Conference and the follow-up of the Continuation Committee were ‘more than any other factor, responsible for the ultimate employment of trained social workers in South African welfare services’ and for the creation of an independent state Department of Welfare.⁵ Not surprising, it is a view that surfaces frequently in literature about the development of social work in South Africa.⁶

⁴ See Chapter Three.

⁵ Erika Theron and A.A. Stulting, *Maatskaplike Dienste in Suid-Afrika. 'n Kort Inleiding* (Stellenbosch and Grahamstown, University Publishers and Book Sellers, 1961), pp.18-21, 24-27.

⁶ Examples are numerous, but the following is typical: De Vos, ‘Maatskaplikewerk-Navorsing’, p.255: ‘It can be stated without the slightest doubt that the origins of social work research in South Africa can be found in the Carnegie Enquiry ... and from this flowed the National Conference held in Kimberley in 1934. From this in turn, due to the efforts of Prof. H.F. Verwoerd ... university training of social workers took shape and the Department of Welfare came into being.’ (transl.).

The few years spent in close association with Verwoerd, initially as his doctoral student and thereafter working for the National Conference, remained fixed in Theron's mind as a crucial, formative period in her own life as well – her apprenticeship. Verwoerd's diligence and enthusiasm, his work methods and planning skills, she says in *Sonder Hoed*, were an inspiring example upon which she was able to build her own professional competencies. In the third chapter of her memoirs she acknowledges indebtedness and pays tribute to others for the many lessons she learned from them in her lifetime, including her family and MER, but she concludes that it was to Verwoerd that she owed the essential moulding that prepared her for her career ('*die vorming vir my werk*').⁷

Steeped in the notion of the Afrikaner 'struggle'– against the harsh environment, against the 'heathen' peoples with whom they competed for resources, and against the forces of imperialism – as well as in a family tradition of charitable support of needy Afrikaners, the poor-white cause was one which Theron naturally embraced personally. But she was also caught up in a movement with much wider dimensions and implications.

⁷ *Sonder Hoed*, p.27.

Poverty in sections of the white population had existed from an early period in the history of European settlement in South Africa and been defined as a social problem from at least the late nineteenth century.⁸ As Christopher Saunders puts it, whereas ‘most whites assumed that blacks were somehow naturally poor ... poverty among whites was something anomalous and required special attention’.⁹ The point is similarly made in the report of the Carnegie Commission, but with added value-laden content which throws light on the sensitivities and prejudices encapsulated in the concept of the poor-white question. According to the joint findings and recommendations, ‘[t]he term “poor white” could hardly have come into common usage except in a country inhabited by an inferior non-European population as well as by Europeans’.¹⁰ In other words, different minimum living standards were regarded as appropriate to different racial communities. It followed that when members of the dominant white community sank below these standards, it raised concern within their ranks about the political and social status quo. Malherbe recognised this concern as ‘tinged with the fear that in open competition the lower 10% of whites will become subordinate to say, the upper 10% of blacks.’¹¹ Equally a source of concern for employers of labour, was the potential emergence of class identification between white and black workers. Against the international backdrop of revolution and amid growing industrialisation and urbanisation in South Africa in the early part of the twentieth century, concerns about the forces of ‘Socialism, Communism and Bolshevism’ were prevalent.¹²

⁸ The following summary of the nature of the poor-white problem and its significance among Afrikaner nationalists is based largely on J.A. Tayler, ‘Aspects of Social Welfare and Poor White Rehabilitation in South African Railways and Harbours, 1934-1952’ (MA dissertation, University of South Africa, 1994), pp.11, 13-25, which also deals with the causes of the poor-white problem, not regarded as germane to this thesis.

⁹ C. Saunders, ‘Putting the History of White Poverty in South Africa on the Agenda’, *South African Historical Journal*, 28 (1993), p.242.

¹⁰ *Report of the Carnegie Commission: Joint findings and recommendations*, pp.xviii-xix.

¹¹ Malherbe, ‘The Carnegie Poor White Investigation’, p.87. Giliomee points out that similar fears were prevalent in many European colonies, related to notions of racial exclusivity and the fear of losing caste. See Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.315-316.

¹² *Gesamenlike Kongres oor die Arme Blanke Vraagstuk in die Raadsaal te Bloemfontein op 4 en 5 Julie 1923* (n.p., n.p., n.d.), p.4.

From the point of view of Afrikaner nationalists, the poor-white problem had not only racial but also ethnic dimensions since by far the majority of poor whites were Afrikaans-speaking. This was commonly accepted long before it was confirmed in the Carnegie study,¹³ and was reflected in the fact the Dutch churches and Afrikaner women's service organisations were in the forefront of attempts to address the problem. The fact that poor whites were mainly Afrikaners and that a large proportion of the Afrikaner population was affected¹⁴ fed into insecurities and tensions among Afrikaners and their relations with other groups. Anti-British sentiment was aggravated by the chauvinist attitude of a section of the English-speaking community towards poor whites. Maurice Broughton, for many years editor of *The Cape Argus*, wrote that 'in English consciousness' the poor white 'stood forth as the typical Afrikaner' – their 'peculiar product and responsibility'.¹⁵ Like many nationalists, MER was incensed by this attitude. In her autobiography she refers caustically to the principal of the University of Cape Town who suggested that poor whites were generally of weak intellect and that something inherent in Afrikaners had caused the incidence to reach such alarming proportions.¹⁶ Seen against the nationalist passion expressed in MER's letter to Theron in 1930,¹⁷ the indignation that such attitudes elicited can be understood. Both were extremely sensitive to any denigration of Afrikaners.

Prejudice was not confined to certain English-speakers, however. In his study for the Carnegie Commission, Grosskopf found evidence that among many higher-income Afrikaners, poor whites

¹³ *Report of the Carnegie Commission*, Part III, p.viii. The report refers to the 'white population of the older settlement', being mainly Dutch-speaking farmers of 'Dutch-French-German extraction'. Common terminology for this group would later be 'Afrikaners'.

¹⁴ H.F. Verwoerd, 'Die Bestryding van Armoede en die Herorganisasie van Welvaartswerk' in P. du Toit (compiler), *Verslag van die Volkskongres oor die Armblankevraagstuk Gehou te Kimberley, 2 tot 5 Okt. 1934* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, c.1935), p.30.

¹⁵ M. Broughton, *Press and Politics of South Africa* (Cape Town, Purnell, 1961), p.110.

¹⁶ MER, *My Beskeie Deel*, p.236.

¹⁷ See Chapter One.

were a source of embarrassment: ‘You feel that, in a way, they have let you down’.¹⁸ This sense of stigma-by-association possibly contributed to the tendency among a section of the Afrikaans-speaking community, particularly in the urban population, to distance themselves from their ethnic roots and to become gradually anglicised.¹⁹ To Afrikaners who nurtured a strong sense of ethnic solidarity and awareness of a threatened identity, this was a cause of grave concern.

¹⁸ *Report of the Carnegie Commission*, Part I, pp.17-18. See also Die Federale Armesorgraad, *Kerk en Stad: Verslag van Kommissie van Ondersoek oor Stadstoestande* (Stellenbosch, Pro Ecclesiastica, 1948), p.178 in which the term ‘*armblanke*’ (poor white) is referred to as obsolete and undesirable because of the stigma attached to it; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.324.

¹⁹ See for example Abel Coetzee, *Die Opkoms van die Afrikaanse Kultuurgedagte aan die Rand, 1886-1936* (Johannesburg, Afrikaanse Pers, 1937), p.344; E.P. Stals (ed.), *Afrikaners in die Goudstad* (Pretoria, HAUM, 1978), p.173. Stals regards this as a rare phenomenon whereas Coetzee’s polemical work depicts it as a real threat to Afrikaner survival.

Thus it was not only the economic, but also the racial, social and, by extension, the political facets of the poor-white issue that created the emotional response to the Carnegie reports. The shocking revelation that ‘more than 300,000 (as a conservative estimate) of the white population were “very poor”’ lent an additional urgency to the call to action.²⁰ Estimates which had been tabled at various conferences since 1916 (the Cradock Conference), had suggested that the numbers of poor whites were increasing.²¹ Unlike the Carnegie statistics, these earlier estimates had not been arrived at by scientific sampling procedures. However as David Berger points out, in understanding emotional reactions to the poor-white problem, absolute numbers are less important than public perceptions and the perception had taken root that the numbers were growing.²² In terms of the prevailing social science paradigms which informed the Carnegie study, social problems were regarded as ‘social pathologies’, analogous with physical pathologies. In fact they were often referred to as social diseases. Following this model, the ‘disease’ of poor-whitism was conceived as a malignancy which had a tendency to ‘spread’ and had the capacity to invade previously healthy organs.²³ When this analogy was applied to the poor-white problem in South Africa, the prognosis was ‘degeneration’ of the ‘entire nation’.²⁴

²⁰ *Report of the Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa*, Part I, p.vii.

²¹ An estimate of 80 000, revised to 10 518 emerged at a conference in Cradock in 1916. See W.M. Macmillan, *Complex South Africa: An Economic Foot-note to History* (London, Faber and Faber, 1930), p.49; thereafter estimates were raised in 1921, 1923 and 1924. See Tayler, ‘Aspects of Social Welfare’, pp.19-20.

²² D.L. Berger, ‘White Poverty and Government Policy in South Africa: 1892-1934’ (PhD Thesis, Queens University, Kingston, 1990), p.22. See also ‘Welcoming Address’ by Rev. William Nicol in Du Toit (compiler), *Ver slag* p.11 (transl.).

²³ Groenewald, ‘The Methodology of Poverty Research in South Africa’ pp.60-74.

²⁴ Nicol, ‘Welcoming Address’, in Du Toit, *Ver slag*, p.11 (transl.).

The timing of the publication of the Carnegie reports between late 1932 and the beginning of 1933 is significant. Their release came in the wake of a deepening poverty crisis in South Africa, as a result of the world-wide economic depression, aggravated by severe drought locally. In reality, December 1932 marked a turning point for the better in the economy of the country.²⁵ However, this turnabout (which was to herald the commencement of a prolonged period of economic growth) was not apparent early in 1933. It was assumed, certainly with justification, that the numbers of white poor had risen sharply since the Carnegie field survey which began in 1929, and publication of the findings.

The years of hardship had indeed taken their toll. Increasing numbers of vulnerable, rural families had been forced to abandon marginal livelihoods, swelling the stream of poverty-stricken white and black people flowing into towns. Low levels of education, little command of English (the language of commerce and of the civil service), and no formal occupational training meant that unskilled labour was often all that was open to poor whites. For this, they competed with black job-seekers. Despite a state policy of preferential employment of white labour,²⁶ employers frequently favoured black workers who were prepared to accept lower wages – wages at a level that would not permit white labourers to sustain ‘what has come to be regarded as the traditional European ... standard of life’.²⁷ Many poor whites lived in squalid conditions in racially-mixed slum areas. Thus racial sensitivities were added to the political, ethnic-nationalist and humanitarian concerns surrounding the ‘poor-white problem’.²⁸

²⁵ See J.P. Brits, ‘Political Developments and the Depression of 1929-1934’ in B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds), *South Africa in the 20th Century* (Pretoria, J.L. van Schaik Academic, 1993), pp.246-249.

²⁶ The so-called ‘civilised labour’ policy was instituted by the Pact government in 1924, requiring that ‘when-ever practicable, civilized labour [so defined as in practice to mean white labour] shall be substituted by the Government for that which may be classified as uncivilized’: National Archives, Pretoria (NA): Department of Labour (ARB) 211, LB601: Circular no.5, 31 October 1924. The private sector was encouraged to do likewise.

²⁷ *Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa, no.10, 1927-1928*, p.196; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.318, 324.

²⁸ Tayler, ‘Aspects of Welfare’, pp.15-19; Judith Tayler, ‘Building Railways and

“Building Character”: The Model Villages in Northern Natal, c.1935-1939’, *Contree. Journal for South African Urban and Regional History*, 35 (June 1994), pp.32-38.

In these circumstances, the rescue of the poor white was a cause that gripped a wide spectrum of white South Africans, but in particular nationalist, welfare-minded Afrikaners. Writing decades later but still captive to a simplistic perspective of the campaign to eradicate the poor-white problem, Scholtz heads this chapter of his biography of Verwoerd, 'In Service of the Nation'. Whether Verwoerd was moved primarily by this high-minded motive will be questioned. But that the young Theron believed that she was serving her nation seems certain.

Theron had been involved as a student in research related to the Carnegie poor-white study. She had continued to communicate with members of the Carnegie team, such as Grosskopf and MER, and had both a personal and academic interest in the project. At the time of her return from Germany in January or February 1933,²⁹ four of the five volumes of the report had been published recently, and public interest was running high.³⁰ Verwoerd, now Professor of Sociology and Social Work, was already becoming involved in poverty alleviation and welfare initiatives in the Cape. According to Theron, this reflected his views on the responsibilities of his new department, namely that the specialised knowledge in the department must not merely circulate in the halls of academe, but must be applied to the real problems of the country.³¹ Theron identified with this activist approach and later made it a cornerstone of her own professional career.

²⁹ She says that she was on her return voyage when Hitler came to power on 30 January 1933.

³⁰ Volume III: E.G. Malherbe, *Education and the Poor White* was released later.

³¹ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.11. See also below.

In April of 1932, while the Carnegie reports were still in preparation, Verwoerd appealed to the senate of the University of Stellenbosch to establish a central institute for sociological research, based in Cape Town, but under the management of the chair of the Department of Sociology. This was approved in principle on condition that outside funding could be found.³² Later in the year he appeared before a commission on the organisation of charities in Cape Town, at which he delivered a memorandum again promoting this proposed research institute, to be run by his Stellenbosch department.³³ Verwoerd's proposal found its way into *Die Burger*.³⁴ As Balstad states:

[Verwoerd] was ... clearly ambitious, energetic, pragmatic and opportunistic. Because his characteristic mode of operating in community activities ensured that he and his ideas dominated the discussion, Verwoerd became a central figure in the early South African social welfare movement.³⁵

She says also:

... ultimately his national reputation in the battle against white poverty were due in large part to his skill at defining problems in ways that emphasised the need for his own participation.³⁶

Scholtz portrays this initiative as a manifestation of Verwoerd's 'typical urge for action' motivated by his recognition of the need for sociology students to gain practical experience in the urban situation.³⁷ However, the promotion of an extramural institute of which he would be head probably also reflected personal ambition.

³² Scholtz, *Verwoerd*, p.30.

³³ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, pp.16-20. See also Scholtz, *Verwoerd*, p.34.

³⁴ *Die Burger*, 21 September 1932.

³⁵ Balstad (Miller), 'Science and Society', p.637.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.658.

³⁷ Scholtz, *Verwoerd*, pp.30, 34. See also Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, pp.16-17.

In 1933 Verwoerd submitted a report on a more ambitious scheme, entitled 'Plan for the Organisation of Social Work throughout the Union', on this occasion to the Provincial Finance Commission. Verwoerd's increasingly newsworthy profile in the public arena was followed with interest and admiration by his student, Theron. In her hagiography on Verwoerd's early career she mentions this plan for the state-sponsored, Union-wide organisation as a further development of the ideas of 'this original thinker'. She observes, without any attempt at explanation, that it was interesting that Verwoerd 'did not yet at this stage consider the establishment of a Union Department of National Welfare as practicable'.³⁸ It is strange, because by October 1934 this was to be the *sine qua non* of his demands of the state,³⁹ with the proposal for the countrywide network of social workers a close second. These were the first two recommendations in his address to the 1934 National Conference and were adopted as Resolution One and Resolution Two. They were the primary objectives which Verwoerd and Theron pursued relentlessly when the Continuation Committee of the National Conference was formed.

It may be speculated that by 1934 Verwoerd had exhausted all possible avenues for funding and setting up his proposed institute and had been forced to relinquish this particular ambition. His own situation had also changed in the political climate of late 1934, diminishing the possibility of his heading such a project. He was not a supporter of the new amalgamated governing party (the United South African National Party, [UP]), but rather of the opposition splinter 'Purified' National Party (PNP),⁴⁰ and this would have been public knowledge. As Scholtz says, Verwoerd was never one to hide his opinions.⁴¹ But as one door closed, he may have foreseen the potential to exploit the

³⁸ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, pp.20-21 (transl.).

³⁹ Verwoerd in Du Toit, *Ver slag*, p.36.

⁴⁰ The party was formed under the leadership of Dr. D.F. Malan. It consisted of a small group of unequivocally republican nationalists, hostile to fusion with the South African Party. It retained the name of Nasionale Party (National Party) but became commonly referred to as the Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party (Purified National Party). See Lindie Korf, 'D.F. Malan: A Political Biography' (DPhil, Stellenbosch University, 2010), p.350, fn.2. The party will be referred to as the NP hereafter in this thesis.

⁴¹ Scholtz, *Verwoerd*, p.52.

poor-white issue in other ways. Using the plight of impoverished Afrikaners to confront the UP government had political potential, for the new party and for Verwoerd.⁴² Demanding a dedicated Department of Welfare was one way of doing this.

⁴² Scholtz claims that it was Verwoerd's energetic approach to the poor-white problem that persuaded them to approach him to launch *Die Transvaler* in 1936, which in turn acted as a springboard to his political career. See Scholtz, *Verwoerd*, p.52.

Holding a doctorate in psychology and having developed a course in advertising, Verwoerd was always aware of the value of media coverage. He did not miss opportunities to promote his particular interests through the press. One such opportunity was the publication of the Carnegie Report. Being in the vanguard of the field of sociological studies, and not having been a member of the original Carnegie poor-white study team, Verwoerd was an obvious candidate to review the five volumes as they appeared. He used these extended reviews to raise awareness of the white-poverty crisis among the general public and to begin to agitate for state action. At the same time he insinuated his arguments for co-ordination of welfare and the use of trained professionals.

The reviews were published in *Die Burger* between 28 December 1932 and 11 January 1933. Generous in his praise of the Grosskopf and Wilcox reports which dealt respectively with economic and psychological issues, he still used the reviews to showcase his own discipline. Both articles are laced with his own observations about ‘scientific investigation’ and the role of the social worker in the rehabilitation process.⁴³ As one of only two university departments offering training for ‘scientific social work’ at the time,⁴⁴ Verwoerd was defining the territory and highlighting the need for the graduates which his department would provide. It must be borne in mind that offering these new courses had been a leap of faith. It placed a significant burden on the pioneering staff who manned the early departments, such as Verwoerd, and later Theron. It was they who had to promote the social work profession, to explain it to an uncomprehending public and bureaucracy, to prove its value, and to create a demand for its services. A conference speaker noted in 1951 that it was to the credit of the universities in South Africa that they had instituted training courses in social work ‘before there was a definite demand on the part of the government authorities and voluntary agencies for scientifically trained personnel to operate in the social welfare field’.⁴⁵

⁴³ *Die Burger*, 21 September 1932, ‘Armblanke-Vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika. (Deel I) *Plattelandsverarming en Plaasverlating* (Deur J.F.W. Grosskopf)’, by H.F. Verwoerd; *Die Burger*, 30 Desember 1932, ‘Armblanke-Vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika. (Deel II) *Die Armblanke* (Deur R.W. Wilcocks), by H.F. Verwoerd’ (transl.).

⁴⁴ The Transvaal University College (later University of Pretoria) offered diploma and degree courses with first enrolments in 1930.

⁴⁵ R. Knobel, ‘The Professionalisation of Social Work’ in ‘Nasionale Konferensie Insaake Maatskaplike Werk, Kaapstad 1951’ (n.d.), p.59. quoting from the Van Schalkwyk Committee’s

The reports on the two-part sociological study of the Carnegie investigation fared badly in Verwoerd's reviews. They provided him with precisely the evidence that he was looking for to demonstrate the need for professional sociologists and to train a spotlight on the deficiencies in the welfare system in the country. He was particularly harsh on the Rev. J.R. Albertyn's contribution which he slated as being unscientific, subjective and impressionistic.⁴⁶

Report on the Training and Employment of Social Workers (n.d.).

⁴⁶ *Die Burger*, 11 January 1933, 'Armblanke-Vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika. (Deel V.a) *Die Armblanke en die Maatskappy* (Deur J.R. Albertyn)', by H.F. Verwoerd (transl.).

MER he let off lightly but not unscathed. She was already personally acquainted and on good terms with the Verwoerd family by this time, which may have had a bearing on his approach.⁴⁷ Verwoerd also criticised her report for its lack of ‘rigorous methodology’ and for not being ‘strictly scientific’. But, he says, the objective of this addendum to the sociological study was to paint a vivid picture of the intimate family life of the poor whites and especially that of the women. Within this framework he seems to suggest that MER’s work succeeds and points the way for future, more detailed, investigations. In this respect he refers specifically to her brief overview on female factory workers and women in institutions, which he says ‘makes one wish for an extensive research project’ to be carried out.⁴⁸ It is not clear whether Theron was already in communication with Verwoerd about doctoral studies at this stage. He may have been trying to attract a post-graduate student by advertising the topic, or merely endorsing the relevance of Theron’s planned research. There is an article, significantly on file in the Verwoerd document collection, written by Theron in 1932 while she was still in Germany, which indicates that she already had an interest in the field.⁴⁹

Verwoerd’s mild criticism of MER’s *Moeders en Dogters* may have played a part in her decision to ask Theron to accompany her on a field study of forestry workers in the Knysna district in March 1933. Possibly influenced by the Carnegie project, the Director of Forestry had approached the ACVV in 1932 to see whether anything could be done about the ‘very poor social conditions’ under which forestry workers lived. MER had visited the area briefly during the Carnegie investigation, but decided that more thorough research was needed. Theron says merely that MER was ‘kind enough to take [her] along’.⁵⁰ Steyn says of this trip that for Theron it was ‘an illuminating

⁴⁷ Steyn, *MER*, p.291.

⁴⁸ *Die Burger*, 7 January 1933, ‘Armblanke-Vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika. (Deel V.b) *Die Moeder en Dogter van die Armblanke Huisgesin* (Deur M.E. Rothmann)’, by H.F. Verwoerd (transl.).

⁴⁹ INCH: PV93, 1/29/3. The article was published in MER’s women’s page in *Die Burger*. See *Die Burger*, 19 January 1932, ‘Die Vrou en Nagarbeid: Ontstaan van Fabriekswette wat die Vrou Beskerm’, by Erika Theron.

⁵⁰ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.17.

experience to carry out fieldwork with such a seasoned researcher'.⁵¹ However, the learning experience was mutual. Theron had academic training in social science methods which MER lacked. Since the report appears under both their names, MER clearly (or kindly) recognised the value of her input.⁵²

⁵¹ Steyn, *MER*, p.294 (transl.). Steyn uses the expression 'n belewenis'.

⁵² US, Doc. Centre: *MER*, 55 M.1.A(5), document titled: M.E. Rothmann en Erika Theron: *Ondersoek in Maatskaplike Toestande in die Distrik Knysna met die Doel om Maatskaplike Werk daar aan die Gang te sit*. Maart en April 1933; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.17-18.

The report is of the survey type, often repeated in projects in which Theron was later involved. It provides considerable insight into attitudes evidently shared by MER and Theron. It describes the ‘history’ of the forestry settlements and the economic position and the living circumstances of the subjects. Despite its neutral, ‘objective’ language, the trappings and lay-out of a scientific study, it is fraught with unexamined value judgements. One of the concerns raised in the report is the ‘colour question’. White and coloured forestry workers frequently lived together on ‘an equal footing’; they did the same work, earned the same wages, and their families shared similar living conditions. They intermarried – in some instances to the advantage of white girls from poor homes. The report mentions that there are cases where certain coloured families have ‘progressed’ and live better than some of the white families, particularly those which have ‘seriously regressed’. Some white families worked for, or received charity from, coloured neighbours.⁵³ The study presents such circumstances as inherently problematic, undesirable and in need of ‘solution’.

According to MER, she was impressed by Theron’s ‘balanced outlook’ which, she said, had been enhanced by her time in Germany.

I think what pleases me is to know that [one day] when I stand aside or drop out, there will be those with stronger powers than I have, with all the advantages of training, devoted to this work. I consult [Erika] in everything. Along with her decisive judgement, she has a lovely [*mooi en lieue*] attitude towards me. She has a soft heart towards the suffering of the poor and a deep drive to set these chaotic conditions right.⁵⁴

One outcome of the project was the close bond which formed between Theron and MER. They spent five weeks together, working under difficult circumstances and sharing a room. Writing about this experience, each refers to the other with affection and respect. Theron in her memoirs also refers to another trip with MER, to Namaqualand, where MER had been called to provide

⁵³ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55 M.1.A(5), Ondersoek in Maatskaplike Toestande in die Distrik Knysna (transl.). See also Albert Grundlingh, ‘“God het Ons Arm Mense die Houtjies Gegee”’: Poor White Woodcutters in the Southern Cape Forest Area c.1900-1939’ in Robert Morrell (ed.), *White but Poor, Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa, 1880-1940* (Pretoria, University of South Africa, 1992), p.47.

⁵⁴ Steyn, *MER*, p.294 (transl.).

advice on ‘poverty problems’.⁵⁵ She says that simply by listening to MER she had learned a great deal.

⁵⁵ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.18 (transl.). Theron does not provide a date.

As the informal apprentice of MER and student of Verwoerd, Theron was drawn increasingly into the poor-white debate which was gathering momentum through 1933. In that year the federation of the provincial Afrikaner women's organisations (including the ACVV) met to discuss the issue. By the second half of the year the idea was being mooted for a national conference to carry forward the work of the Carnegie Commission. At the instigation of the Federal Poor Relief Commissions of the DRC, committees were set up to pave the way. It was intended that researchers from the original Carnegie Commission would lead these committees, but since Grosskopf was overseas, Verwoerd was asked to take his place as chairman of the 'Economical and Sociological Committee'.⁵⁶

The National Conference, 1934 (The Volkskongres)

⁵⁶ INCH: PV93, 1/67/3, newspaper clipping from *The Cape Times*, c. December 1933.

The groundbreaking gathering took place in Cape Town on 24-25 January 1934. *Die Burger* reported that some 70 representatives of various organisations including churches, state departments, academic institutions, women's service organisations and trades unions, had assembled for the preliminary discussions. The article is permeated with the sense of purpose that gripped the organisers of the 1934 National Conference from the outset. As a mobilising exercise it was full of promise. 'A spirit of optimism ruled' and it was clear that 'every single member of the large gathering had come with a firm objective of getting to the very root of this evil in the South African national life'.⁵⁷ Following upon this founding meeting, sub-committees were established (40 in all) to investigate specific topics in advance of the conference. All three Theron sisters were involved in the project from the outset. Verwoerd wrote that he thought it important that Ida Theron should be fully involved, being acting secretary of the ACVV at the time, and he arranged that she serve as a full member of his general committee.⁵⁸ Both Daisy and Erika were members of special sub-committees.⁵⁹ The fact that Verwoerd informs MER of this by letter and the manner in which he does so suggests that the recommendation had been discussed with her.⁶⁰

The sub-committees were small and had very clearly defined areas of research to be carried out over a period of six months. Although the Carnegie Commission had offered some 46 recommendations in its final reports, these were broadly sketched suggestions. Since the stated purpose of the 1934 National Conference was to translate the Carnegie study into a programme of action, sub-committees were expected to come up with concrete proposals. Erika was assigned with 'Mevr. Dr. Geyer' (probably Anna Geyer, wife of Albertus Geyer, editor of *Die Burger*) to

⁵⁷ *Die Burger*, 25 January 1934, 'Voorbereiding vir die Volkskongres' (transl.).

⁵⁸ Ida Theron was deputy to MER who was indisposed when the committees were set up, but Verwoerd wanted her to serve as a full member. He had been criticised for loading his committee with members from the 'south' (Cape) so he says he 'smuggled' her onto the committee. See INCH: PV93, 1/67/2, letter, Organising Committee of the National Conference on the Poor White Problem (transl.) (signed by Verwoerd) to M.E. Rothmann, 3 February 1934.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, letter, Organising Committee of the National Conference on the Poor White Problem (transl.) to D. and E. Theron, 3 February 1934.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, letter, Organising Committee of the National Conference on the Poor White Problem (signed by Verwoerd) to M.E. Rothmann, 3 February 1934.

study the expansion of work opportunities for white women in domestic service and as factory workers.⁶¹ She was a natural choice for this particular sub-committee, having had some experience in the field through her studies and practical work abroad. It was also potentially beneficial for her as it tied in with her recently commenced doctoral project.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1/67/3, memorandum, National Conference on the Poor White Problem. Socio-Economic Division (undated).

By August of 1934 the 40 sub-committees had handed their reports to the conveners who, in co-operation with the Poor Relief Board of the Federated Dutch Reformed Churches, evaluated, correlated and consolidated the vast number of proposals to arrive at 99 which were to be tabled at the conference.⁶² Theron claims that Verwoerd played a very important role in this preparatory work, in particular by ensuring that the final proposals were ‘logically’, ‘scientifically’ formulated and were practically workable.⁶³ One encounters this reverence for the logical and scientific throughout Theron’s career. It was for her, as for many social scientists in the 1930s-1960s, the essential hallmark of scholarship, regarded in itself as evidence of ‘the truth’. In her terms Verwoerd epitomised the new social scientist. Her discussion of his careful appraisal and co-ordination of proposals suggests that she assisted him in this phase of preparation and was already an admiring disciple.

Theron seems to have had an idealised recollection of the conference. In her tribute to Verwoerd she states that as far as she is able to determine this was the first such gathering to call itself a ‘*Volkskongres*’ and that it was essentially different from later conferences where she feels that the term ‘*Volkskongres*’ was ‘misused’.⁶⁴ She presumably had in mind such self-consciously Afrikaner nationalist projects as the *Ekonomiese Volkskongres* of 1939 (National Economic Conference). She clearly regarded the 1934 National Conference as the first genuine ‘conference of the people’ called to solve a national problem.

Theron either did not question or did not object to the fact that the conference might be simultaneously serving interests other than the purely philanthropic and she was not alone in this. Most of the individuals and organisations who threw their weight behind it did not consciously recognise the political undercurrents at the time. Nevertheless there may have been influences at work of which they were not aware. A.N. Pelzer, author of the official history of the *Afrikaner Broederbond* (AB), claims that it was this cultural-nationalist brotherhood that took the lead in

⁶² J.R. Albertyn, ‘Introduction’, in Du Toit, *Verslag*, pp.3-4.

⁶³ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.33.

organising the Kimberley conference.⁶⁵ He suggests that the common perception that it was a church-led scheme, in response to public demand, was at best only part of the truth.

⁶⁵ A.N. Pelzer, *DieAfrikaner-Broederbond: Eerste 50 Jaar* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1979), p.96. Giliomee is very critical of Peltzer's book: see Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners*, p.421. However the clustering of AB nationalist entrepreneurs around the 'people's initiatives' of this era, indicates that even if the power of the AB has been overstated, they did exercise influence behind the scenes. The argument that the AB, and later the NP, were involved in the National Conference and its Continuation Committee is advanced in J. Tayler, "'Our poor': The Politicisation of the Poor White Problem, 1932-1942', *Kleio*, 14 (1992), pp.40-65.

Pelzer's claim is very plausible. From 1922 the AB had for undisclosed reasons become an underground organisation, committed to secrecy concerning its membership and activities.⁶⁶ Whatever role it played in public affairs was covert. Nevertheless, its 'front' organisations, such as the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (FAK)⁶⁷ certainly played a large role in the 1934 National Conference. Furthermore, many of the individuals who were prominent in the organisation of the conference or who delivered papers, are identifiable as AB members and office bearers – Verwoerd among them. The chairman of the conference for example, the Rev. William Nicol, was a former AB chairman. Such behind-scenes activity was typical of AB policy and methods of the time. Moodie argues that the 'volkskongres' concept (not only as related to the 1934 National Conference) was a well-developed strategic tool. According to him, ideas for furthering the organisation's objectives which emanated from within the AB structure, were disseminated, debated and finally submitted for consideration at general meetings. If accepted by the brotherhood, they were introduced to 'the people'. As the AB was a secret organisation, this would be done through some other agency, usually led by 'experts'. From these interested parties arose a call for action, culminating in a conference.

Moodie explains the procedure in this way:

Such Volkskongresse, often billed as arising spontaneously from the bosom of the People, typically led to the formulation of an independent association specifically dedicated to furthering the proposals which had originated in the secrecy of Broederbond discussion and sealed by the "Peoples" approval at the Volkskongres.⁶⁸

This description fits very neatly with the known history of the 1934 National Conference and its successor, the Continuation Committee, to which Theron dedicated her idealistic energy.

⁶⁶ Brits in *Liebenberg* and Spies, (eds), *South Africa*, p.199.

⁶⁷ Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations formed in 1929 which during the 1930s had almost 300 affiliated societies and was extremely active and influential. See Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.61.

⁶⁸ Moodie, *Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.105.

However, even if it is accepted that the AB did orchestrate the conference, this would not necessarily imply anything more than that it was not a totally spontaneous, popular initiative. There is nothing necessarily sinister in the AB promoting upliftment of poor whites, which was a declared interest of the organisation – whether it did so openly or through other channels and agencies. What is open to conjecture, however, is whether or not this was the sole issue on the agenda or whether the conference had a dual purpose and was intended also to be used in nationalist, political manipulation. The evidence suggests both. It is doubtful that Theron would have objected, if she were aware of it. She was apparently cynical about the AB in later years and disliked its exclusive male character.⁶⁹ But her nationalist sympathies are unquestionable. So if an assault on the poor-white problem simultaneously advanced the cause of Afrikaner nationalism, she would have thought of this as a bonus.

The context and timing of the National Conference is significant. It was planned and took place amid discord and political positioning, as Malan's supporters split from the main body of the NP. By the time that the Continuation Committee was formed in October 1934, the breakaway party was manoeuvring to adopt the poor-white cause as peculiarly its own.⁷⁰ The new fusion party – the UP – left the gap for the Malanite NP to appropriate this valuable plank for its electoral platform, by making no specific policy provision in its constitution to address the poor-white issue. This allowed the NP to contrast its benevolent-activist attitude to poor whites with the supposed capitalist heart and indifference of the UP, and to portray itself as the true 'friend to the poor man and worker'.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Interview, Van Reenen.

⁷⁰ See Korf, 'Malan', p.355.

⁷¹ *Die Burger*, 2 July 1935, quoting D.F. Malan (transl.).

The NP and AB cannot be regarded as identical in membership or policy. In terms of its own principles the AB stood aloof from party politics, but its commitment to ‘aggressive’ safeguarding of Afrikaner identity, to the advancement of Afrikaners in all spheres of life and to the promotion of Christian nationalism, inevitably resulted in considerable areas of overlapping interests and complementary activity.⁷² Seen in this light, the 1934 National Conference, and more particularly its heir, the Continuation Committee, cannot be divorced from the groundswell of Afrikaner nationalist influence.

The conference was a great success judging from its reception in the media. Ultimately 109 concrete resolutions were agreed upon in the three-and-a half days of deliberations by some 500 delegates. Indicative of the tone of the event is the preamble to the list of resolutions:

Under the deep realisation that the workmen labour in vain unless the Lord builds the house, and the sentries are on guard in vain unless the Lord guards the city, this Conference, prayerfully looking to God, places the following resolutions before the nation.⁷³

It is understandable therefore, that for many delegates, the resolutions of the 1934 National Conference took on the character of a divine injunction to act on behalf of ‘the people’. In terms of the final resolution of the conference, a Continuation Committee and Executive were to be nominated to ‘take the necessary steps to ensure that the resolutions of [the] Conference be carried out’.⁷⁴ In this highly-charged atmosphere it would have been surprising had the youthful Theron not been deeply impressed and fired with a sense of calling.

The Campaign for Scientific Welfare

⁷² See Moodie, *Rise of Afrikanerdom*, pp.99-115; O’Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, pp.61-72. Although Moodie and O’Meara approach the rise and role of the AB from different perspectives, on the essential issues material to this discussion they largely agree.

⁷³ Du Toit, *Verslag*, p.292.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.317.

The momentum of the 1934 National Conference was maintained by a dedicated Continuation Committee. The first general meeting of the committee took place on the day after the conference. According to the annual report, at the meeting the full committee took the decision to assume a supervisory role only, and to delegate ‘ full power’ to the six-member Executive Committee. The Rev. P. du Toit, secretary of the 1934 National Conference, and compiler of its official (bi-lingual) report, was the first chairman of this committee.⁷⁵

When the Executive met in January of the following year it was agreed that two secretariats would be established, one in the Transvaal (where Du Toit was based) and the other in the Cape. At least for the first year, the head office was to be based in Cape Town.⁷⁶ Verwoerd, who was elected vice-chairman of the committee, was asked to ‘undertake the direction of the office and the continuation work’ assisted by a ‘trained and salaried secretary’.⁷⁷ This was the role that Theron was to fill. On 9 January 1935 MER, also a member of the Executive, wrote to Theron to express her delight that Verwoerd and Theron would be working on the committee together. Her letter reflects the sense of mission which was also to infect Theron. She clearly regarded Theron as more than a mere secretary, but rather as a welfare specialist who in partnership with Verwoerd could make a difference in the struggle against white poverty:

I heard from Ida and also Verwoerd today, and they both told me that you had accepted the secretaryship of our new Board; I am so pleased ... You and V. will make something of this that pieceworkers like us can never do; besides, you both have everything in you that should make for success. For me, your best characteristic, both of you, is that you judge ministers and prime ministers and whoever, on the basis of whether or not they deliver the goods. That’s how one has to deal with them ...⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *National Conference, 1934: First Annual Report*, p.3.

⁷⁶ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the National Conference, 1934], 16 and 18 January 1935. This seems to have been the first meeting of after the post-conference meeting.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ US, Doc. Centre, MER, 55.M.1.K.18(2): letter, MER to Erika Theron, 9 January [1935] (transl.).

The date of the letter is noteworthy since the task of appointing a 'suitable person' was only assigned to Verwoerd and to M.J. Adams (chairman of the Finance Committee) at a meeting held a week later.⁷⁹ Nor was Theron a trained secretary. Assuming that the dates are correct, Verwoerd had jumped the gun and he and Theron had already formed the team that would be the driving force of the project. As in so many of the affairs of the Executive Committee, he had already made up his mind and did not have any doubts that he would have his way. Verwoerd claimed that 'the principle of centralisation [of the work of the Continuation Committee] was adopted in order to avoid confusion' and that for this reason 'the head office had to assume full responsibility'.⁸⁰ However it is evident that he personally favoured this concentration of organisation and authority and was more than willing to take on untrammelled leadership. It was he, according to Theron, who tabled a draft constitution and a detailed plan of how the committee would function, at its first meeting. Theron reproduces the plan in her book on the grounds that it serves as an excellent example of welfare planning.⁸¹ She is, as could be expected, full of praise. She gives no suggestion of considering any ulterior motive in Verwoerd's practice of preparing detailed memoranda in advance of meetings. What looks like a device for imposing his own ideas by pre-empting alternatives, she presents as merely well-organised.

The one dissenting voice at the first meeting was that of the Rev. Albertyn who had envisaged no more than a co-ordinating role for the committee. Albertyn had expected that existing bodies already active in the relevant welfare fields, such as the churches and women's groups, would take the necessary action to see that conference resolutions were carried out. This was, however, rejected and the reasons, apparently put forward by 'the meeting' as a whole, minuted in painstaking detail.⁸²

⁷⁹ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the National Conference, 1934], 16 and 18 January 1935.

⁸⁰ *National Conference 1934, First Annual Report*, p.3.

⁸¹ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.8; INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the 1934 National Conference], 16 and 18 January 1935.

⁸² INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the 1934 National Conference,] 16 and 18 January 1935.

Albertyn was to cross swords with Theron and Verwoerd on other occasions, suggesting that he was unhappy about the high-handed and autocratic way in which the affairs of the committee were being run. In a letter to Theron he accuses the Cape Town office of a lack of consultation. He complains that no meetings were held for long periods while critical negotiations were under way, and that when meetings were called, notifications were issued too late. Essentially, he was implying that some members were being sidelined. His objections were answered speedily with the detailed justification characteristic of correspondence from the Executive office.⁸³ Albertyn's attitude on this occasion could possibly be explained as having a personal basis. As already indicated, Verwoerd had reviewed his contribution to the Carnegie Commission quite harshly. But it is perhaps also symptomatic of the growing distance between an older order of welfare dispensation which the church had long dominated and the new order of young intellectuals represented by Verwoerd and Theron, who laid claim to a 'scientific', and by inference, superior understanding of this work. These were tensions that were to surface in a variety of situations as the first generation of South African sociologists and social workers began to assert claims of professionalism.

At the initial meeting of the Continuation Committee, Verwoerd proposed that as a matter of urgency a schedule of the 1934 National Conference proposals be drawn up in order of priority, and that only a few items be raised with the authorities at any one time.⁸⁴ There is no record of how this ranking was arrived at in the event, but given the organisation of the secretariat it was probably a foregone conclusion as to which proposals would take precedence. Verwoerd's own paper delivered at the conference, '*Die Bestryding van Armoede en die Herorganisasie van Welvaartswerk*' ('Combating Poverty and the Re-organisation of Welfare Work'),⁸⁵ although not scheduled as such, seems to have been a keynote address. It was first on the programme and covered the first eight proposals. According to Theron, it was 'masterly' and way ahead of its time.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, letter, J.R. Albertyn to The Secretary, Continuation Committee [of the 1934 National Conference], 10 June 1935; *ibid.*, Secretary to Albertyn, 19 June 1935.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference], 16 and 18 January 1935.

⁸⁵ Verwoerd, 'Bestryding van Armoede' in Du Toit, *Verslag*, pp.30-40.

Theron says that this paper was to a large extent the blueprint from which the Continuation Committee would work.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, pp.33-36, 38.

In practice this meant that Verwoerd and Theron concentrated on only two of the 99 resolutions of the conference. Theron says that the struggle to achieve a dedicated Department of Welfare (Resolution One) ‘had the lion’s share in this campaign’.⁸⁷ The committee raised other matters with the relevant authorities, particularly in the early period, but these were not as persistently pursued. Other individual members of the Executive and sub-committees in the different provinces also published articles, addressed public meetings and attempted to have various measures, for example relating to health care and education, carried through – particularly those of more local concern.⁸⁸ But at the Cape head office, the focus fell overwhelming on the expansion and professionalisation of welfare.

⁸⁷ Spies, Theron and Scholtz, ‘Verwoerd’, in Beyers, *South African Dictionary of Biography*, Vol IV, p.731.

⁸⁸ *National Conference 1934, First Annual Report*, pp.9-21.

It is not clear what role was envisaged for the chairman, the Rev. J.B. du Toit, when the committee was originally constituted. He was based in the Transvaal and it may be that it was a gesture in the interests of north-south representivity. Also, the 1934 National Conference was officially the initiative of the Dutch churches. They still regarded the welfare of the Afrikaner poor as their domain. It would be expected that the follow-up committee would be led by an official of the church. Whatever the intention, in practice Verwoerd was always in control. On more than one occasion when there were differences of opinion, he used his powers of persuasion to get his own way but was not above over-riding decisions taken by Du Toit.⁸⁹ Of this, Theron says nothing in her writings. She was not a religious person and not submissive to the authority of the church.⁹⁰ Her own conviction was that social scientists held the key to solving social problems; clerics should defer to sociologists in this field. Besides, she would not have questioned that Verwoerd knew best. In October 1935 Du Toit resigned to take up the newly-created post of Commissioner of Welfare, in the Union Department of Labour and Welfare, with the support of the Continuation Committee,⁹¹ and Verwoerd took over as chairman. There was no longer any need even for the formality of consultation. Other members of the committee, barring Albertyn and the Rev. A.D. Lückhoff, seem to have been content to allow Verwoerd and Theron a free hand.

Theron attributes Verwoerd's dominance to his original, progressive thinking. He was simply way ahead of the rest of the committee, she says.⁹² Even Verwoerd's detractors recognise his intelligence and energy and it is easy to see how he and his dedicated assistant could have appropriated the running of the project. In *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner* Theron claims that he did appeal for input and complained about the fact that he had been 'obliged to come up with all the

⁸⁹ See Tayler, 'Aspects of Social Welfare', pp.63-64.

⁹⁰ Interview, Terreblanche; interview, Van Reenen. Terreblanche says that Theron was not hostile to the church, but 'rather agnostic' and 'outspoken about it'.

⁹¹ INCH: PV93, 1/67/7, Minutes of a Meeting of the Continuation Committee of the National Conference, 20-21 December 1935.

⁹² Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.38.

ideas'.⁹³ When she repeats the story in *Sonder Hoed* it is subtly different and probably nearer the truth. Although she again says that he asked for contributions from other members, she concludes that 'he had already made all the plans himself'.⁹⁴ She does not seem to see this as dictatorial or stifling initiative from others. When she says that he 'carried' the committee, she is expressing sympathy and admiration. And she was proud to have supported him throughout. 'There was no thought of relaxation', she says. Without realising it, over a period of two years she did not take a single holiday.⁹⁵ So great was her immersion in the campaign, that her life outside of the committee was virtually suspended.

⁹³ *Ibid.* See also Tayler, 'Aspects of Social Welfare', pp.63-64.

⁹⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.23 (transl.).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, (transl.).

Theron was the only person engaged full-time on the business of the Continuation Committee. She seems to have done a great deal more than merely manage the administrative work in the office, which in itself must have been demanding, judging by the surviving records. As discussed below, she played a key role in setting up the Railway Welfare pilot scheme, her only field experience as a social worker. She is also listed in the annual report as having attended meetings with state officials together with Verwoerd and other members of the Executive Committee, but while other members of delegations are named, she is always referred to only as ‘the secretary’.⁹⁶ This may be a matter of protocol. She was not an elected member of the committee and had no official standing. However, it is also noticeable in her book on Verwoerd that she always refers to herself, unnamed, in the third person, minimising her visibility. It is possible that she was aware of talk surrounding her relationship with Verwoerd and that she wished to avoid fuelling gossip. On the other hand, she may simply have wished to keep the spotlight on Verwoerd and his achievements.

She also seems to have been prepared to play the role of buffer. It is conspicuous in the Executive Committee files that while Verwoerd and Theron ran the office, all external correspondence is addressed to or from ‘the secretary’ or Erika Theron by name.⁹⁷ This includes communication with senior members of government, dealing with matters of considerable import. In her book she makes a point of stressing (in italics) that although letters carried her name, they were in fact composed by Verwoerd and dictated to her.⁹⁸ This is evidently accurate, as the style of writing is not hers. It made Verwoerd and Theron something like co-conspirators, evidently to Theron’s delight.

⁹⁶ *National Conference 1934, First Annual Report*, pp.11-12.

⁹⁷ See files in INCH: PV93 and *ibid.*, PV202, ‘Aanhangsel II: Instituut vir Volkswelstand’.

⁹⁸ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.50. Theron says this in the context of exchanges with the Minister of Labour, but it seems to apply to all the correspondence.

One can only guess at Verwoerd's reasons for this strategy. For someone not given to seeking anonymity, there must have been a pragmatic objective. It may have had something to do with avoiding embarrassment to the University of Stellenbosch (and censure) if communication with government became acrimonious – as it did. He had needed the permission of the university to serve on the Continuation Committee and had given an undertaking that it would not be to the detriment of the institution. It may have had even more to do with meticulously maintained legend that the Continuation Committee represented the voice of 'the people'. By extension, when the requests or demands of the Continuation Committee were not carried out by whatever state agency had been approached, it could be argued that it was the will of the people that was being thwarted. This was an important concept that Verwoerd consistently exploited. In this scenario, it could be argued that a secretary of such a body was a relatively neutral agent. It was more difficult to attribute ulterior motives to her, than to a high-profile individual with known political interests, such as Verwoerd himself. If this was the ploy, it does not seem to have been entirely successful. Despite the fact that Verwoerd's name does not appear on the correspondence in the two years of hostile exchanges between the committee and state departments, and in particular the Department of Labour, he was evidently identified as the prime mover and a thorn in their side. MER's assessment when the Verwoerd-Theron team was formed was correct; both enjoyed a challenge and neither was intimidated by authority.

The pair were extremely diligent and efficient. As soon as they had established their office in Cape Town, letters requesting consideration of various conference resolutions were sent to the relevant government departments and arrangements were made for the Prime Minister and Minister of Labour to receive separate deputations from the Continuation Committee. At these meetings key issues were to be discussed – Resolution One, requesting the establishment of an independent Department of Welfare and Resolution Two, the creation of a state-run national social-work service. It was also decided that an appeal would be made to the Minister of Labour to contribute to the funding of the work of the Continuation Committee.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, letter, Erika Theron, Secretary [Cape Town Secretariat of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference] to Prime Minister, General J.B.M. Hertzog, 5 February 1935; letter, Erika Theron, Secretary [Cape Town Secretariat of the

Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference] to the Minister of Labour, 5 February 1935.

Theron was later to claim that the methods used by the Continuation Committee to ensure that Resolution One was carried out ‘remain[ed] one of the best examples of social activism in the history of welfare in the country’. It began with the gathering of information, then the dissemination of this information through speeches, articles and appeals to national bodies to put pressure on the government to establish a Department of Welfare. This was followed by the explanatory letter and delegation to the Prime Minister. Although the minutes do not reflect this, Theron claims that ‘the secretary’ was present. It was clearly important to her.¹⁰⁰ The meeting with Hertzog was apparently cordial, although not as fruitful as Verwoerd and Theron chose to portray it. Various options were discussed and in closing Hertzog said that the Minister of Labour was looking into the matter and that he would report back to the Continuation Committee in due course. But it is recorded at one point that Verwoerd ‘accepted with thanks’ the ‘proposal of the Prime Minister’ to re-organise the Department of Labour as the Department of Labour and Welfare with two sub-departments each under its own under-secretary.¹⁰¹ A reading of the minutes, presumably compiled by Theron, reveals no such firm promise. It seems that, intent on coming away with some victory, Theron and Verwoerd put words in the Prime Minister’s mouth after the fact. By going public with the ‘promise’ the following day,¹⁰² they placed the negotiations in the public arena. When the government offered less,¹⁰³ the Continuation Committee implied that this was a retraction. It appears manipulative, yet Theron consistently represents the negotiations in this period as firm but scrupulously proper and just.

¹⁰⁰ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.46 (transl.).

¹⁰¹ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, document titled: Delegation to the Prime Minister on 25 February 1935 (transl.).

¹⁰² *Die Burger*, 26 February 1935.

¹⁰³ A sub-department was created within the Department of Labour, under a Commissioner of Labour.

In its dealings with the relations with the Department of Labour, the Continuation Committee encountered a less than sympathetic reception. It is understandable to some extent that the Minister, A.P.J. Fourie, and the Secretary for Labour were uneasy about the activities of the committee. Since the majority of the welfare-related functions of the government fell under the Department of Labour, attempts to have these moved to an independent Department of Welfare could have seemed threatening. Theron suggests as much in her book, but also criticises them for having an outdated view that the poor-white problem was essentially employment-related (and hence the concern of the Department of Labour).¹⁰⁴ Minister Fourie was also suspicious of the Continuation Committee's intentions and methods. The committee's repeated claim to be acting on behalf of 'the people' was problematic, since Fourie was a member of the cabinet answerable to 'the people' through parliament. It was particularly provocative at a time when the legitimacy of the fusion government was in question and party-political animosity was running high.

Furthermore, from the outset the Continuation Committee defined itself as a propaganda agency. Its objective was to promote the resolutions of the 1934 National Conference by direct approach to the relevant agencies (including government departments). It warned that where these agencies failed to comply, it would raise public awareness and bring pressure to bear through the media or by other means. Minister Fourie seems to have interpreted this as a threat to embarrass his department and was unwilling to subsidise a watchdog over the government's performance.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.48.

¹⁰⁵ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, Report on Deputation to the Minister of Labour, 26 February [1935].

It is not possible to determine beyond question whether or not Minister Fourie had valid reasons for suspecting the motives of the Continuation Committee. Notwithstanding Theron's view to the contrary, the approach to his office in February had a high-handed tone, considering that the Continuation Committee came as supplicants. Fourie's own department was in little doubt as is evident in internal correspondence. The committee's first letter, requesting the February interview, was subject to a critical advance report from the Under-Secretary for Labour, endorsed by the Secretary for Labour, which was forwarded to the Minister. In their view, the tone of the letter from the committee was distinctly threatening.¹⁰⁶ This was to set the tone of relations. On a later occasion, the Secretary for Labour is reported as stating categorically that no financial help would be forthcoming from the government until it was 'absolutely certain that the Continuation Committee did not have a strong political colour'.¹⁰⁷

Verwoerd denied any ulterior motives and insisted that his office had been reasonable and courteous; but in terms of its mandate it could not be weak.¹⁰⁸ However, not everyone in the Continuation Committee was convinced. Du Toit, who still held the position of chairman at that stage, wrote to Verwoerd in June 1935, implying that there may be better ways to achieve the ends of the 1934 National Conference. Without levelling any accusations directly, Du Toit states that every effort should be made to ensure the sympathetic co-operation of the government and to avoid conflict.¹⁰⁹ Verwoerd responded by having the correspondence with the Ministry 'literally translated' and vetted by 'unbiased individuals'. One of these arbiters, presumably through Theron's arrangement, was her brother-in-law, Henry Fagan (who was a member of the UP).

¹⁰⁶ National Archives, Pretoria (NA): Department of Labour (AR/LB), vol.638, file LB644/1, memorandum, Under-Secretary to Secretary [of Labour], 13 February 1935; refer INCH:PV93, 1/67/6, letter, Erika Theron, Secretary [Cape Town Secretariat of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference] to the Minister of Labour, 5 February 1935 (transl.).

¹⁰⁷ INCH:PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Finance Committee of the National Conference, 1934, 2 May 1935: M.J. Adams reporting on a meeting with the Secretary for Labour (transl.).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, PV202, II/2/1/1/1, circular, H.F. Verwoerd to 'Geagte Vriende' [members of the Continuation Committee], 23 May 1935.

¹⁰⁹ INCH:PV93, 1/67/6, letter, P. du Toit to H.F. Verwoerd, 6 June 1935.

According to Verwoerd the correspondence was pronounced polite and businesslike.¹¹⁰ And for the most part it is – with the exception of the initial approach which could be read as arrogant, particularly as it was signed by a young, female secretary. Verwoerd intended from the outset to release the correspondence to the press if necessary to achieve results¹¹¹ and was far too shrewd to use anything but the most measured tone on paper. Besides, there were other ways of exerting pressure on the government. The NP and its mouthpiece, *Die Burger*, took up each issue between the Continuation Committee and the government with vehemence, allowing the committee to assume a position of injured innocence.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, letter, H.F. Verwoerd to P. du Toit, 14 June 1935.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

There are numerous examples of this strategy.¹¹² In April 1935, for instance, when it became known that the welfare function was to remain within the Department of Labour and fall under a commissioner with only advisory status, the leader of the NP, Malan, attacked the government in parliament. While the government had an independent Department of Forestry, he said, it refused to create a comparable department to deal with welfare. Seemingly ‘the degeneration that threatened to bring down the *Afrikanervolk* ...was less important than the development of the country’s forests’.¹¹³ *Die Burger* immediately took up the story and accused the fusion government of doing nothing for the people unless it was forced to (*‘hy moet eers daarin “geskop” word’*) – and even then, of doing a halfhearted job.¹¹⁴ The combination of the overtly party-political editorials of *Die Burger* and the a-political profession of the Continuation Committee was a source of great frustration to government.

There is no clear evidence of collusion between the committee (or more specifically the Executive office) and the nationalist press. Theron makes no reference to it in her writing. But since in both her memoirs and her tribute to Verwoerd, she is concerned to highlight his non-political achievements, she would not be expected to do so. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that she and Verwoerd were strong NP supporters, and that Verwoerd was skilled in the use of the media, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there was orchestration from their office. If not, then at very least the political fall-out was a welcome by-product of their campaign to give effect to the National Conference resolutions. What seems certain is that Theron enjoyed the test of wills which she reports at length in *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*. She evidently learned from the strategy employed in these years, and would herself turn to the press to influence public opinion and try to force the hand of officials, in her campaigns in later years.

¹¹² See for example, *Die Burger*, 12 August 1935, leading article, ‘Koud Onverskillig’; *ibid.*, 17 August 1935, leading article, ‘Dwangkolonies’; *ibid.*, 1 June 1936, leading article, ‘Skaamkwaad’; *ibid.*, 3 June 1936, cartoon by ‘Boonzaaier’; *ibid.*, 6 June 1936, leading article, ‘Die Voortsettingskomitee Antwoord’.

¹¹³ *Die Burger*, 10 April 1935, leading article, ‘Alweer Lapwerk’, (transl.).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The issue of obtaining government assistance in funding the Continuation Committee was of material concern to the committee, and to Theron in particular, since the costs of her office and salary needed to be met. The committee had access to only ‘a few hundred pounds’ from donations. It had hoped to raise money through the sale of the published report of the 1934 National Conference, but was able to dispose of only a fraction of the copies printed.¹¹⁵ It seems to have counted on receiving government support. Initially the committee requested that the government bear half of the anticipated cost of £2000 per year for five years, but this was not forthcoming. The Department of Labour debated the issue over many months, neither refusing nor committing itself. A price was being paid for the strained relations.

Meanwhile the committee’s start-up resources were dwindling. Verwoerd claimed that he had delayed appealing to the public for donations pending a decision from the Department of Labour. He argued that when an appeal was made, it would draw interest from a ‘wider base’ – ‘a different section of the public’ – if the project were subsidised by the government.¹¹⁶

When the Department of Labour finally agreed to contribute to the work of the committee, it was based on a proportion of funds collected from the public (5 shillings in the £1 to a maximum of £400 per year).¹¹⁷ As a result, income for the first year was negligible and the future looked uncertain. Given Theron’s circumstances, she was probably not concerned about the material consequences of potentially losing her job. But the mission of the Continuation Committee had still to be accomplished. More specifically, Verwoerd’s grand welfare scheme, which she wholly embraced, had still to be fought for.

¹¹⁵ *National Conference 1934. First Annual Report*, pp.5, 21-22; See also INCH:PV93, 1/67/7 for correspondence with distributors of the report, for example, letters from Erika Theron to *Burger Boekhandel*, 7, 18, 21 November 1935.

¹¹⁶ INCH:PV202, II/2/1/1/1, circular letter, H.F. Verwoerd to ‘*Geagte Vriende*’ (members of the Continuation Committee), 23 May 1935 (transl.).

¹¹⁷ *Die Burger*, 12 August 1935, leading article, ‘Koud Onverskillig’.

The Railways Welfare Project

By May 1935, the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference was facing a cash crisis and a source of funding was needed urgently to keep the office afloat and the crusade alive. Reprieve was offered by way of the pilot Railways Welfare Scheme. From June 1935 the committee embarked on a venture which assisted with immediate administration expenses and took care of Theron's employment in the short-term. At the same time it gave Verwoerd and Theron an opportunity to demonstrate scientific welfare in practice. The Railways Welfare Scheme may have been the brainchild of Verwoerd but Theron was fully involved from the outset. Her studies in Germany and experience in practical social work were extremely useful, since Verwoerd had little background in the discipline of social work, let alone field work. In this phase of their collaboration Theron steps out of Verwoerd's shadow and her input is more clearly discernable. Acting independently in her own sphere of relative expertise, the highly-motivated, determined individual emerges. Never a theorist or public intellectual like Verwoerd, Theron preferred the task of turning ideas into concrete action. The Railways Welfare Scheme allowed her to apply her talent for the organisation and practical application of a project.

The offer of a donation from the South African Railways and Harbours (SAR) apparently had its origins in discussions held in Cape Town between Verwoerd and the Minister of Railways, Oswald Pirow,¹¹⁸ as well as separate discussions between Du Toit and the General Manager of the SAR, held in Johannesburg. In May 1935 the office of the Minister wrote to the Continuation Committee inviting it to assist in the establishment of a 'welfare service' at certain SAR institutions such as its hostels and model villages which housed low-paid, white railway workers. In his letter, the Minister proposed that a subsidy of £1000 per annum and other facilities, including travel privileges, be made available to the Continuation Committee in return for its input. The nature of the arrangement was only broadly outlined: the Minister sought 'practical advice on the execution

¹¹⁸ Oswald Pirow was a staunch supporter and later biographer of J.B.M. Hertzog. After fusion in 1934 he remained in Herzog's cabinet until it split in 1939. In 1940 he formed a pro-German, national-socialist party, the New Order.

and extension of the welfare work which the Department of Railways has already begun to institute, and which [could] serve as a point of departure for a general welfare [service]'.¹¹⁹

Initially the Cape Town and Johannesburg offices seem to have envisaged very different ways of utilising this opportunity. On the grounds that the Minister of Railways was concerned with the spiritual as well as material upliftment of its workers, Du Toit proposed that half the amount be allocated to the Poor Relief Commission of the DRC, and that the local women's service organisations be approached to carry out the necessary welfare work.¹²⁰ Without dismissing this out of hand, Verwoerd with systematic, manipulative rationalisation, set out his reservations: the Continuation Committee should not appear partisan by favouring one church or one women's group over another; neutrality was important and they must avoid antagonising other charitable organisations; whatever scheme was devised should be handed over to the Sub-Department of Welfare when this was established. He made it clear that he believed that Du Toit's proposal was fraught with problems and proposed an early meeting of the full Executive Committee to discuss the matter.

¹¹⁹ INCH: PV202, II/2/1/1/1, summary of correspondence: copy letter, Office of the Minister of Railways to The Secretary, [Continuation Committee] National Conference 1934, 27 May 1935.

¹²⁰ The communication from Du Toit has not been traced in the files. However Verwoerd refers to Du Toit's recommendations in his reply: INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, letter, H.F. Verwoerd to P. du Toit, 8 June 1935.

However, much more was at stake than the potential sensitivities between different denominations and women's groups. As had been mentioned, latent divisions over the essential nature of welfare and who was to take the lead in defining and implementing this, had existed from at least as far back as the foundation meeting of the Continuation Committee, if not to the 1934 National Conference itself. Verwoerd and Theron represented the advocates of a secular 'scientific' approach with its authority situated in the universities. Both had a stake in this 'modern' welfare. In their personal capacities they stood to become leaders in an exciting, expanding field, given the opportunity. They were also convinced of the potential of science to solve the problems of society and to ensure human progress. So from both self-interest, and as members of the team designated to work for the upliftment of poor whites, they had vested interests. They would have been determined to find ways of applying the precepts of social science, administered by qualified practitioners, to achieve these ends.

By contrast, several members of the Continuation Committee, including Du Toit, Albertyn and Lückhoff, were ministers in the DRC, office bearers in its Poor Relief structures and committed to a different tradition of welfare. There is no evidence in the files that they took a consistently reactionary position on the committee and in most cases appear to have supported the Cape Town office. But the Poor Relief Commission had been instrumental in setting up the 1934 National Conference and they naturally had a proprietary interest in seeing its promise fulfilled as they perceived it.

At times their vision diverged markedly from that of Verwoerd and Theron. A typology reflecting the 'history of the development of welfare' in South Africa, illustrates the social scientists' perspective. It appears in the *Report of the Department of Welfare, 1937-1939*, and is reproduced in the introductory text written by Theron for her first-year students in the 1960s. (It often appears in early social work dissertations thereafter.) The phases of this 'history' are depicted as follows: the 'family period'; the 'church period'; the emergence of private welfare organisations (for example the women's service organisations); the Carnegie Investigation and the 1934 National Conference; the commencement of training of sociologists and social workers at South African universities; the creation of the Department of Welfare in 1937. This outline does not necessarily imply that one set

of institutions is supplanted by another in each phase but it does suggest an underlying assumption of progress from one period to another: welfare had ‘developed’. It had broadened and evolved and ultimately its moderation had been transferred into the hands of the professionals. Theron and Verwoerd clearly believed that the churches must play only a supporting role in the era of professionalism.

Despite signs that a power struggle was brewing, when the scheduled meeting took place in Pretoria, Verwoerd succeeded in having a counter-proposal accepted. This proposal was essentially a scaled-down version of Resolution Two of the 1934 National Conference.¹²¹ Resolution Two had its origins in the paper delivered by Verwoerd at the conference, but had an even longer history. It was essentially a revised version of the scheme that he had submitted to the Cape commission in 1933,¹²² proposing the organisation and development of scientific social work on a national scale. The underlying principle was to prevent wasteful overlapping of services and to identify gaps through co-ordination at central and local level by state-employed, university-qualified social workers. Local, voluntary initiatives were to be encouraged and their resources harnessed, but guided by the new professional custodians of welfare policy. Efforts would be directed at preventive and rehabilitative endeavour, rather than the dispensing of aid. These were the principles of modern welfare in which Theron had been schooled and which she and Verwoerd were determined to see in practice.

¹²¹ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the Continuation Committee, 1934 National Conference], 17-18 July 1935.

¹²² Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.58.

Verwoerd's scheme did not have the undivided enthusiasm of the larger Continuation Committee. Unfortunately, it competed directly with a similar scheme which was being promoted by the Poor Relief Commission, the Church-State Scheme.¹²³ The two programmes shared many features with the crucial exception that the Church-sponsored scheme was not predicated on the employment of qualified sociologists or social workers.¹²⁴ This led to an embarrassing conflict of interests as the rival schemes were both seeking state endorsement and funding at the same time.¹²⁵ After some acrimonious correspondence between Verwoerd and Lückhoff,¹²⁶ an uneasy compromise was reached and it was agreed that the two groups would seek parallel trials.¹²⁷

The discord between the Church's vision of serving the welfare needs of its flock, and that of the social-science promoters is very evident in this exchange, which, although papered over was not resolved. At a conference held a few months later – the first South African National Conference of Social Work – both Verwoerd and Theron delivered papers emphasising the new trends in welfare organisation. In their terms, the onslaught on social problems could no longer be a haphazard business. Theron's paper was characteristically practical, providing guidelines for professionally

¹²³ This was a revised and expanded version of an earlier welfare-delivery partnership between the state and the DRC. See UG4/1937, *Report of the Department of Labour and Social Welfare for the Year Ended December 1935*, p.35. See also UG44/1937, *Report of the Department of Labour and Social Welfare for the Year Ended December 1936*, p.31.

¹²⁴ NA: AR/LB 644/1, memorandum [by the Commissioner of Welfare, Department of Labour and Welfare], 'Maatskaplike Welvaartdiens. Vergelyking tussen Kerk-Staat Skema en die Volkskongres Voorstel', undated.

¹²⁵ See *ibid.*, memorandum, Under-Secretary to Secretary [for Labour], 13 February 1935, in which the Under-Secretary points out that members of the clergy who were also members of the Continuation Committee seemed to be promoting two rival programmes. The memorandum suggests that this weakens the Continuation Committee's credentials.

¹²⁶ INCH: PV202, II/2/1/1/2, letter, A.D. Lückhoff to The Secretary, Continuation Committee, National Conference 1934, 21 November 1935 (transl.); *ibid.*, letter, H.F. Verwoerd to A.D. Lückhoff, 28 November 1935.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the Continuation Committee, 1934 National Conference], 17-18 July 1935; *ibid.*, 1/67/7, Minutes of a Meeting of the Continuation Committee of the [1934] National Conference, 20-21 December 1935.

organised welfare systems. Verwoerd was more direct. In his paper he stated clearly that leadership in social welfare could not remain the province of well-meaning volunteers. It had to be professionalised. Although he gave recognition to the churches' desire for a 'Christian' orientation in welfare endeavours, he insisted that they should not attempt to train their own 'social workers' in their own institutions. According to him this would give rise to an 'inferior class' of workers.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ H.F. Verwoerd, 'Maatskaplike Werkers in Suid- Afrika en Hulle Opleiding' in *Report of the National Conference on Social Work, 1936*, pp.88-99 (transl.); Erika Theron, 'Organisasie van Maatskaplike Werk', *ibid.*, pp.30-37 (transl.).

The SAR offer in 1935 presented Verwoerd with the funds and facilities he needed to carry out a trial of his plan for co-ordinated scientific welfare. The scheme which he drafted involved the creation of a central welfare committee made up of representatives of the SAR administration, existing SAR service organisations such as the Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuur Vereniging (ATKV) and welfare specialists, including a minister of religion and a ‘sociological expert’. At local level similar committees should be established, including representatives of voluntary charitable organisations, the churches and district health officials. These local committees would be led by qualified social workers ‘appointed to provide advice and leadership and to personally supervise the more difficult cases of family welfare’. The Continuation Committee would offer to assist in the appointment and supervision of the social workers.¹²⁹ Throughout the various levels of the scheme, trained professionals were at the apex of the hierarchy.

In terms of Verwoerd’s proposal, Theron would be seconded to the project initially to provide a sound basis for the pilot scheme. She would carry out a study of the Railways’ needs and make concrete recommendations. In the longer-term it was envisaged that the whole scheme would be transferred to the Sub-Department of Welfare and be incorporated into the country-wide social work network for which the Continuation Committee (or part of it) was lobbying.

¹²⁹ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the Continuation Committee, 1934 National Conference], 17-18 July 1935 (transl.); See also *ibid.*, letter Secretariate [of the Continuation Committee], National Conference 1934 to General Manager of Railways, 30 July 1935.

The General Manager of SAR was slow to respond to the offer and the tone of this and subsequent correspondence over a period of two years, suggests that Railways administration office was less than enthusiastic about the welfare scheme. It is not clear whether in offering his generous subsidy, Pirow had envisaged anything like the complex structure that was being proposed. To the SAR administrative personnel who would have to put it into practice, it clearly was regarded as inherently problematic. After almost two months the General Manager finally agreed to the scheme on a trial basis only, providing that the Continuation Committee was fully responsible for its implementation and running. A free rail pass was provided for Theron and the committee was advised that the subsidy would be paid over immediately.¹³⁰

The tone of the letter from the General Manager suggests that acceptance of the conditions by the Continuation Committee was considered to be a *fait accompli* and evidently other communication had taken place, which is not on record. A likely interpretation is that the Railway administration had refused to undertake the scheme, that discussion had taken place and that rather than relinquish access to the donation and the opportunity to demonstrate the value of Resolution Two, Verwoerd had accepted the SAR conditions, verbally. The Cape Town office of the Continuation Committee, after hastily canvassing three local members of the Executive, responded to the letter from the General Manager agreeing to his conditions. They confirmed that Theron would depart within a week to begin her evaluation. This speedy reaction reinforces the impression that the letter from the SAR had not been unexpected.¹³¹ It also suggests that Verwoerd and Theron were very eager to grasp the opportunity before other members of the Continuation Committee could place obstacles in the way. All that had been agreed at the original meeting of members was that the broad organisational format of Resolution Two be recommended to the SAR and that limited advice and assistance be offered. What Verwoerd and Theron had undertaken was a very different task.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, summary of correspondence: copy of letter, General Manager [SAR] to The Secretary [Continuation Committee of 1934 National Conference], 13 September 1935.

¹³¹ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, summary of correspondence: copy letter, Secretary [Cape Town Secretariat of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference] to General Manager of Railways, 20 September 1935.

By the end of September 1935 Theron was detached from the committee to commence with the preliminary survey in the capacity of 'Organiser and Head Social Worker' in the Railway Welfare Scheme. Verwoerd was then left to explain this sudden new responsibility of the Continuation Committee to his Executive. In a circular written during October, he claimed that the SAR had insisted upon the Continuation Committee carrying out the welfare project. He then contended that the redeployment of Theron had come at an opportune moment, since the work of the Continuation Committee would remain viable only if it cut its budget severely. With Theron's salary covered by the SAR donation, and operations moved from the Cape Town office to a 'rent-free room in Stellenbosch', significant savings could be effected. A typist was to be hired to carry out the routine office administration and bookkeeping. According to Verwoerd, in order to secure the SAR donation it was necessary to commence work at once. He assured the committee that all arrangements were only temporary and open to review when the Executive Committee met at the end of the year. Any member of the Executive Committee who had objections to the re-organisation was asked to submit them in writing.¹³²

¹³² INCH: PV202, II/2/1/1/3, circular, H.F. Verwoerd to members of the Executive Committee [of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference], undated, c.25 October 1935.

Despite Verwoerd's arguments, the sudden and substantial changes in the administrative structure and functions of the Continuation Committee are not satisfactorily explained in this circular, and it is not surprising that Albertyn responded negatively.¹³³ Although copies of correspondence with the SAR were circulated to members of the Executive, there were clearly gaps. Nothing on record seems to explain or support the SAR's supposed 'insistence' that the Continuation Committee take charge of the welfare programme. It seems more than likely that the Minister and General Manager would have been content to have had established welfare bodies tending to the material and spiritual needs of its labourers as Du Toit had suggested, especially since they had emphasised religious ministrations. What they had not wished to do was to attempt to implement and manage the particular complex social work service that Verwoerd had presented to them. Albertyn regarded the acceptance of this responsibility to be ill-advised and contrary to the constitution of the Continuation Committee; instead of acting purely as a pressure-group, it was becoming directly involved in welfare work. He also questioned the 'purported urgency' of the decision, which was used to excuse the lack of consultation.¹³⁴ In the archived records, attached to Albertyn's memorandum is a document headed 'Information in respect of the letter of the Rev. J.R. Albertyn', undated and with the signature missing, but bearing all the hallmarks of a justification by Verwoerd.¹³⁵ In this document it is stated that the urgency was not 'purported' but 'genuine' and that 'the financial situation of the committee had been such that a choice had to be made between accumulating more debt, retrenchment of the secretary or her temporary redeployment'. The document then adds that subsequently finances had been restored to a healthy situation as a result of funds collected.¹³⁶ The explanation is not a strong one. It seems apparent that the major savings

¹³³ *Ibid.*, II/2/1/1/2, memorandum, J.R. Albertyn to members of the Executive Committee of the Continuation Committee [of the 1934 National Conference], 4 November 1935.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, incomplete document attached (n.d.).

¹³⁵ The document makes reference to an article by Verwoerd in *Die Burger*, 18 February 1935, as written by the 'undersigned' (transl.).

¹³⁶ INCH: PV202, II/2/1/1/2, incomplete document attached to memorandum from J.R. Albertyn to members of the Executive Committee of the Continuation Committee [of the 1934 National Conference], 4 November 1935.

were effected by closing the Cape Town office and not by the secondment of Theron, since she was in any case replaced by a typist in Stellenbosch.

There is also a counter-argument to the allegation that the pilot scheme was a breach of the principles under which the Continuation Committee had agreed to operate. This, too, is unconvincing. Verwoerd agrees that the intention had been for the committee to focus on advocacy and propaganda. However, he claims that provision had been made for experimental projects for purposes of demonstration, if funds were available. This provision is mentioned in an article by Verwoerd written in February 1935, but whether this was sanctioned by the committee is uncertain. It is not referred to in the minutes of the foundation meetings which discuss the committee's plan of action. No copy of a constitution has been traced in the files.¹³⁷ Allowance for a pilot project is referred to conspicuously in the annual report of the Continuation Committee, but this was compiled by Verwoerd after the event.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* See also *Die Burger*, 18 February 1935.

¹³⁸ See 'Experiments aimed at Convincing Responsible Authorities of the Practical Value of the Conference Resolutions' in *National Conference 1934, First Annual Report*, pp.25-26.

What is evident is that Verwoerd and Theron were determined to introduce ‘scientific welfare’ to the Railways. It was an ideal way to get a foot in the door of an employer of large numbers of impoverished Afrikaner workers. In the annual report they explain this as follows:

[The Executive Committee] hoped that the Executive could merely direct the work and leave all administrative and financial arrangements in the hands of the Railways. The Department insisted however, that the Executive Committee should be entrusted with the £1,000 and should organise the scheme financially as well as otherwise. This decision was accepted and the Executive hopes to develop as soon as possible a useful organisation with which the Minister will not readily dispense. The time will be ripe for its transfer to the Division for Welfare, in accordance with Resolution No. 2 of the Poor White Conference.¹³⁹

What they do not mention is that the Continuation Committee did not unanimously endorse the project and ratify Verwoerd and Theron’s actions.¹⁴⁰ That it was allowed to continue was probably due to the fact that by late December when the committee met, matters were already far advanced and it was too late to pull back, just as Albertyn had predicted. The strategy of Verwoerd and Theron – if that is what it was – had been successful.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26 (transl.).

¹⁴⁰ INCH: PV93, 1/6/67, Minutes of a Meeting of the Continuation Committee of the [1934] National Conference, 20-21 December 1935 (transl.).

By this time Theron had already spent two months in the field, preparing the ground for the initiation of ‘family welfare work among Railway labourers’.¹⁴¹ This pilot scheme was to evolve into what is believed to be the first example of scientific industrial welfare in South Africa.¹⁴² Given that Theron was not yet 30 years of age and had limited practical experience, it was a considerable responsibility. She does say that her work was carried out under the leadership of Verwoerd,¹⁴³ but for him, too, it was a pioneering exercise. Nothing encountered in Verwoerd’s writing about the poor whites suggests that he had any personal experience with the realities of their lifestyle. Theron at least had some exposure. She had met some of the indigent young women under the care of her sisters. As a researcher she had visited the lice-infected lodgings of factory workers in Woodstock, Salt River, Sea Point and District Six. She could relate to the experience of sitting on a mat, alive with fleas, because ‘there was not a stick of furniture’ in the room.¹⁴⁴ She had travelled into remote areas with MER and interacted with the materially and socially impoverished forestry workers. She even had some basis for comparison, having worked among impoverished Germans as part of her practical training at the Academy in Berlin. In this respect, she almost certainly had more insight than Verwoerd.

To gain a general impression of the SAR’s existing welfare benefits and assess where social work services could best be instituted, Theron began by travelling extensively in Natal. She visited all the significant centres of operation and spent a week in the Railway ‘model villages’ – the construction-site settlements in the north of the province. She meanwhile gathered data from the other regions telephonically and through correspondence. She then followed up with visits to the major centres of Johannesburg, Germiston, Pretoria, East London and King Williamstown, Port

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, PV202, II/2/4/1/1/1, Summary for the Minister of Railways of a Report by the Head Social Worker of the Continuation Committee of the [1934] National Conference, signed Erika Theron (c.December 1935) (transl.).

¹⁴² Interview, McKendrick.

¹⁴³ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.57.

¹⁴⁴ Recorded conversation between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1.

Elizabeth and Uitenhage, Cape Town, Worcester and Touws River.¹⁴⁵ Taking into consideration the vast distances covered and the conditions of travel at the time, it was an arduous undertaking. The free train ticket became well worn. On the basis of this orientation tour, she recommended that three areas be serviced initially: the model village at Ingogo in Natal (this area of operation was later to be extended to serve Ladysmith and surrounds), Johannesburg and the Cape Peninsular (also with extensions envisaged in the longer term).

¹⁴⁵ INCH: PV202, II/2/4/1/1/1, Summary for the Minister of Railways of a Report by the Head Social Worker, c. December 1935.

Theron was involved in the recruiting of suitable candidates to run the programme in the various centres and found this far from easy. As local degree courses had been available for only a few years, the pool of qualified social workers on which they could draw was still small. Nevertheless, the requirement that university trained staff be utilised was not negotiable – it was at the core of the scheme. Most graduates in the field were young and inexperienced and the conditions being offered were very demanding. Within the first months, a number of candidates resigned or withdrew their applications for a variety of reasons. One lasted only 12 hours.¹⁴⁶ The task of these social workers (with the co-operation of their local welfare committees) was to ‘rehabilitate’ the families of the lowest ranks of white Railway workers. Most were beneficiaries of the ‘civilised labour’ policy in terms of which indigent, uneducated, unskilled white labourers were provided with work. Many of these families had only recently migrated from depressed rural areas, and lacked even the most basic of social skills.¹⁴⁷ According to William Nicol, who advised Theron on the setting up of the Johannesburg operation, the social worker in Johannesburg would need to be very tough indeed (*‘hare op haar tande sal moet hê’*) to deal with the ‘type of person’ that she would encounter in the course of her duties.¹⁴⁸

It was not only in the cities that the maladjustment of poor white migrants was problematic. Conditions in the other centres were little better as can be seen from the reports of the social workers. At Ingogo Model Village, for example, the social worker reported on finding numerous ‘weak’ families needing special attention: ‘where children are abused; where the house is dirty and virtually unfurnished; the mother not quite normal and the family consequently neglected; the man sickly and lazy; the couple living in sin’.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II/6/3/2/1/1, report titled: Railway Welfare Work, January-August 1936, signed H.F. Verwoerd, Chairman of the Continuation Committee and Erika Theron, Head Social Worker (transl.).

¹⁴⁷ See Tayler, ‘Aspects of Social Welfare’, Chapter One; *ibid.*, pp.98-99.

¹⁴⁸ INCH: PV202, II/2/4/1/1/1, letter, Erika Theron to H.F. Verwoerd, 2 March 1936 (transl.).

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II/6/3/2/1/1, report, ‘Railway Welfare Work, January-August 1936’.

When the two social workers engaged for Ingogo and Johannesburg took up their posts in the northern centres in March and April 1936, Theron accompanied them and remained to see them suitably accommodated, to establish the welfare committees and assist them in getting the service off the ground in terms of the Resolution Two principles. She thereafter continued to supervise and visit the centres periodically, while running the Western Cape operation herself.¹⁵⁰ According to her preliminary report, to begin with the social workers were expected to focus on 'general family welfare' providing advice and assistance with 'family problems' – household management, food preparation, furnishing, savings, hygiene, education and career guidance for the children. In order to do this, contact had to be made with the families, information gathered and assessments recorded.¹⁵¹ The survey tradition remained strong and data collection was a priority, even when this cut into valuable time needed for direct remedial intervention. Theron reported on visits to 160 families in her region carried out with the assistance of a trainee (destined for Johannesburg) from January to March 1936.¹⁵² This was an extraordinary workload considering her other duties which included counselling and referrals, administration, and detailed reporting to the Continuation Committee. At the same time she planned expansion into other areas. In October 1936 it was decided that a second social worker would be employed in Johannesburg and a new service opened in the Orange Free State.¹⁵³ The organisational skills and capacity for sustained hard work, which she says that she had learned from Verwoerd, were certainly put to use at this time.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, II/2/4/1/1/1, Summary for the Minister of Railways of a Report by the Head Social Worker, c.December 1935 (transl.).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, II/6/3/2/1/1, 'Report on Railway Welfare Work, January-March 1936', signed E. Theron, Head Social Worker (n.d.) (transl.).

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, PV93, 1/67/7, summary of correspondence: copy letter, Acting Secretary [of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference] to General Manager [SAR], 14 November 1936; *ibid.*, 10 December 1936.

There is no record of what Theron's personal impressions were of being a practising social worker. Some inferences can be drawn, however. Theron was never greatly interested in domestic affairs, and seemingly wasted no time in handing over such duties as running the childcare classes and the knitting and sewing clubs. This was justified in terms of the general principle of encouraging co-operation between professional and voluntary welfare agents, which became a trademark of her approach to social work practice.¹⁵⁴ Writing about welfare work in rural centres (some years later), she set out practical guidelines for this kind of partnership. For example, she recommended that trained social workers should carry out the necessary research as to the needs in particular communities and that they should take the lead in initiating the establishment of suitable 'clubs'. They should then find interested local parties to take over the running of these activities. Social workers should not be directly involved as this would impinge on the time needed for their more specialised duties.¹⁵⁵ While Theron was based in Cape Town as a Railways social worker, her strong connections with the ACVV made it easy for her to call on volunteers to take charge of group activities while she concentrated on issues in which she had a greater interest.

¹⁵⁴ After Theron entered her academic career she gave generously of her time, energy and material support to organisations such as the ACVV, emphasising the interdependence of professional and voluntary welfare workers. See H.C. Lambrechts, 'Vrywillige Welsyndienste in Suid-Afrika', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972).

¹⁵⁵ O.J.M. Wagner and Erika Theron, *Maatskaplike Werk by 'n Plattelandse Vereniging* (Cape Town, Bloemfontein and Port Elizabeth, Nasionale Pers, 1944), p.100.

Theron was also never very comfortable with interpersonal social work. According to one of her students 'she felt helpless when faced with personal problems. She found the emphasis on listening and accepting non-judgementally alien to her nature'.¹⁵⁶ This is evident when comparing her reports from Cape Town with those of the other social workers – for example the resident at Ingogo, whose reports are replete with detail about clubs, domestic relationships and housekeeping minutia. Theron's central concerns are different. Like the American social reformer Jane Addams, whom she greatly admired, she was more interested in broader issues of social reform, in material issues and social policy.¹⁵⁷ This is reflected in her efforts to expand the services of the Railway social workers into new areas. Within the first months of work she was recommending that they be more closely involved in decisions about housing. This was to become one of her chief interests and was to earn her a reputation for expertise in the subject. She would later play a major role in the machinery of housing policy at national level.

The issue of housing in relation to the poor-white problem had been examined by the Carnegie Commission and received the attention of the 1934 National Conference. Several resolutions were passed relating to housing and were followed up by the Continuation Committee. For example, Resolution Nine (c) taken at the conference stated categorically 'that mixed housing of Europeans and Non-Europeans [should] be combated'.¹⁵⁸ Even before the conference, Theron had regarded racially-mixed households and residential areas as 'social problems' by definition, as was reflected in the report on the forestry settlements compiled with MER. It was therefore among the issues which she took note of in her preliminary survey of the housing conditions of the Railway workers.

¹⁵⁶ K.J. Collins, 'Erika Theron, George Bernard Shaw and Social Action', Erika Theron memorial lecture delivered in Cape Town, 31 May 2007.

¹⁵⁷ INCH: PV93, 1/29/3, newspaper clipping, *Die Burger*, n.d., Erika Theron, 'Jane Adams [sic] se Edele Werk. "Hull House" in Chicago.' Theron writes with admiration of Addams's social activism and says that 'there was not an important city or state commission dealing with social problems in those years on which she did not serve' (transl.). The same could be said of Theron in later years.

¹⁵⁸ See Du Toit, *Verslag*, pp.293. See also INCH: PV202, II/2/1/1/1, letter, Continuation Committee [of the 1934 National Conference] to Minister of Health, 16 August 1935 and related correspondence.

For example, she observed with concern that a number of the wives of labourers living in the 'Breakwater Cottages' in Cape Town were 'non-whites' and suggested that the social workers who would be engaged in the Railways scheme (in the case of Cape Town, Theron herself) could assist local Housing Committees by visiting applicants for housing before allocations were made.¹⁵⁹ The idea was presumably that during these visits social workers would identify families with coloured members and that these families would then be excluded.

¹⁵⁹ INCH: PV202, II/2/4/1/1/1, Summary for the Minister of Railways of a Report by the Head Social Worker, c. December 1935.

She continued to pursue the matter after the welfare programme was instituted, and clashed with officials in the process. The matter of segregation was discussed extensively in her later report, under the heading 'Matters Affecting Railway Administration which Impede Welfare Work'. Seemingly she had approached the secretary of the Railway Housing Committee with objections to the fact that houses were being allocated to men with coloured wives. The secretary claimed that since it was the men who were the SAR employees, and they were white, they were eligible for SAR housing if it were available. Theron did not accept this and in her report argued that white labourers who had non-white families had no such entitlement.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II/6/3/2/1/1, report, 'Railway Welfare Work, January-August 1936'.

There is no indication in the sparse records that Theron had qualms about the implications of her standpoint. Other voices in the expanding welfare arena were beginning to call for a wider view of the country's social problems as was evident at the National Conference on Social Work held in 1936. For example, in the session devoted to 'Non-European Problems' and in the 'wrap-up', warnings were sounded against a tunnel-vision approach to welfare. In particular, it was suggested that attempts to open doors of opportunity for the white poor were resulting in the closing of doors on other communities, and exacerbation of their problems.¹⁶¹ However, these were the views of liberal thinkers such as J.D. Rheinallt Jones. In Afrikaner intellectual circles of the time a tradition held currency that sociologists (and indeed other social scientists) were 'expected to serve their [own] group'.¹⁶² Furthermore, Theron undoubtedly shared Verwoerd's views which reflected the prevailing social pathology paradigm, as well as his implacable pragmatism. In his address to the 1934 National Conference – so often quoted and praised by Theron – he argued that upliftment of the white poor must take precedence, even at cost to other communities if this were 'unavoidable'. This was in the 'interest of the country' since the white population constituted the 'vital organ' in the national body.¹⁶³ In terms of the social pathology perspective, unless the disease of poor-whitism were first eradicated, the health of other organs could not be restored. This process included preferential access to employment and other facilities for white labour, as well as rehabilitation through a modern welfare system.¹⁶⁴

Apart from promoting a general policy of residential segregation, the National Conference had directed a specific 'request' to the SAR to 'pay serious attention to the necessity for more and better housing for railway employees'.¹⁶⁵ Railways had responded promptly and established a

¹⁶¹ *Report on the National Conference on Social Work, 1936*. See for example 'Introductory Note' and J.D. Rheinallt Jones, 'Social Work and the Non-European', pp.386-390.

¹⁶² Heribert Adam, 'The Vocation of a Sociologist in South Africa', in John Rex (ed.), *Apartheid and Social Research* (Paris, Unesco, 1981), p.17.

¹⁶³ Verwoerd, *Bestryding van Armoede* in Du Toit, *Verslag*, pp.31-32.

¹⁶⁴ See Groenewald, 'The Methodology of Poverty Research', pp.60-64.

¹⁶⁵ Du Toit, *Verslag*, p.294.

commission of enquiry to look into the accommodation and living conditions of their personnel.¹⁶⁶ The commission produced a bulky report, and some attempts were made to encourage local authorities to provide low-cost housing. However, this does not seem to have translated into much improvement as can be seen by the flow of adverse comment from the social workers attached to the Continuation Committee.¹⁶⁷ Theron herself, for example, was highly critical of a group of Railway houses in the Maitland/ Woltemade area, which she claimed were in poor condition and ill-located as well as overcrowded. In her report she admitted that the occupants had moved into the houses willingly to take advantage of low rentals, but nevertheless suggested that it was reprehensible for the Railways to own and let properties of these standards. She recommended that they be demolished.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ UG 41/1935, *SAR & H, Report of the General Manager for the Year Ended 31 March 1935*.

¹⁶⁷ As evidence of the unsatisfactory outcome of the 1935 housing commission, a second commission was set up in 1937. See UG 40/1938, *SAR & H, Report of the General Manager for the Year Ended 31 March 1938*.

¹⁶⁸ INCH: PV202, II/6/3/2/1/1, Monthly Report of the Head Social Worker, September-October 1936.

Ultimately the housing issue became the focus of deteriorating relations between Theron's welfare network and the Railways. In December 1936 she led a deputation to the Minister of Railways, ostensibly to report on what had been accomplished through the social work programme. The Minister may have agreed to receive the deputation as a public relations gesture and in the expectation of commendation for the SAR welfare initiative. In the event, the meeting did not turn out to be an exercise in mutual congratulations. Theron was determined to raise 'certain difficulties' with the Minister.¹⁶⁹ As MER had predicted earlier, Theron did not hesitate to confront highly-placed individuals, including members of the cabinet, in pursuit of her objectives. At the meeting a number of requests were submitted relating to improvements to existing accommodation, as well as the question of racial mixing. Not content to condemn unsatisfactory older houses, Theron also proposed that her social workers should have a say in the planning of future housing. She argued that current designs were flawed and did not provide for appropriate standards of living for the 'civilised' labour. The Minister's immediate response showed little sympathy for the poor-white labourers, whom he said 'should not be spoiled' and should have to work towards improving their circumstances.¹⁷⁰ His tone suggests that he regarded the discussion of details such as taps, bathtubs and interior doors as outside his province (and beneath the dignity of his office). The whole episode clearly raised hackles in the ministry and the SAR head office. In later correspondence the social workers and welfare committees were curtly advised to take up matters of housing with the Railway Board and not with the Minister.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, PV93, 1/67/7, summary of correspondence: copy letter Acting Secretary [of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference] to Minister of Railways, 14 November 1936.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, summarised report, 'Delegation to Minister of Railways and Harbours , 7 December 1936' (transl.).

¹⁷¹ INCH:PV93, 1/67/8, letter, Secretary of the Railways Board to Honorary Secretary [Geoff Cronjé] of the Continuation Committee [of the 1934 National Conference], 24 July 1937.

Perhaps more pertinent than the question of whether or not the Minister should be approached directly was the fact that housing remained a sensitive issue in Railways and was potentially embarrassing for the UP government as a whole. There had been critical comment about SAR housing from the then NP in parliament in the pre-Fusion days,¹⁷² and it continued to be an easy target as serious shortcomings persisted. In 1936 the Minister and his administration would not have welcomed discussion of the housing of Railway labourers, as well as wages and service conditions¹⁷³ – in particular not by social workers attached to the politicised Continuation Committee, and by welfare committees with strong representation from nationalist-oriented service organisations. Well-disposed towards the committee initially, the Minister may not have understood the nature of the social work service which he had invited into his organisation. He almost certainly did not anticipate having personnel affairs under critical scrutiny by outsiders with the ever-present threat of *Die Burger* taking an interest. Nor would he have expected to have to deal with an opinionated and forthright young woman such as Theron, on a crusade for ‘the people’.

¹⁷² See for example W.H. Rood (NP), *Debates of the House of Assembly*, 14 March 1934, column 1405.

¹⁷³ See monthly reports of social workers from various centres in INCH:PV202, II/6/3/2/1/1 and II/6/3/2/1/2; also ‘Continuation Committee of the National Conference 1934. Report on the Railway Welfare Work, May 1935 to March 1938’ (unpublished report, Samuel Pauw Library, University of South Africa, Pretoria).

By the time that the controversial meeting with the Minister took place, Verwoerd had left the Continuation Committee to begin preparing for his new career with *Die Transvaler* in Johannesburg. According to Verwoerd this post was ‘indirectly connected with party-politics’ and it was for this reason that he felt it necessary to resign. He argued that although he was not obliged to do so in terms of the draft constitution, it had been a guiding principle in the selection of the original members of the committee that they should not be connected with party-political activities. In his opinion it remained an unwritten rule and was vital to preserve the neutral and broadly representative character of the Continuation Committee.¹⁷⁴ These protestations have a rather hollow ring given the substantial numbers of radical Afrikaner nationalists and AB members in the committee by this time.¹⁷⁵

Following Verwoerd’s resignation, the office of the Continuation Committee moved to the Transvaal and Nicol became the new chairman. Theron was called on at very short notice to spend two months in Johannesburg, assisting in the establishment of the Continuation Committee office in the north and handing over the committee’s work. Since she was, at the time, still fully involved as Head Social Worker of the Railway welfare project and was standing in for the Johannesburg social worker who was ill, a great deal was being demanded of her.¹⁷⁶ As the *de facto* leader of the Railways project, without Verwoerd in the background, Theron’s own efficiency and self-confidence become increasingly evident in this period. She launched a number of new initiatives and kept up a considerable flow of correspondence, now clearly written by her personally.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ INCH: PV93, 1/67/7, Report of the Chairman [of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference], 5 October 1936.

¹⁷⁵ By late 1936, these included Verwoerd, Nicol, Geoff Cronjé, J.C. van Rooy, Albert Herzog and Nico Diederichs, all prominent members of the AB. See *i.a.* Moodie, *Rise of Afrikanerdom*, pp.99, 154-155, 188; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.416.

¹⁷⁶ INCH:PV93, 1/67/7, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the Continuation Committee of the 1934] National Conference, 5 October 1936.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, see extensive correspondence during October and November 1936.

By this time, however, relations between the Continuation Committee and Railway structures had deteriorated significantly, and it was evident that the existing arrangement could not continue indefinitely.¹⁷⁸ On the one hand, the Minister and SAR officers were anxious to eliminate the ‘outside management of the lives of railway people’¹⁷⁹ and the negative publicity that this was generating. On the other hand, the Continuation Committee was ready to withdraw its participation. When Verwoerd had persuaded his reluctant Executive to ratify the Railway pilot project, it had been on condition that the scheme would be transferred to the Sub-Department of Welfare at the earliest opportunity. Once the Department of Labour had agreed in principle to conduct trials of Verwoerd’s national social work service (Resolution Two) he seems to have been eager to make good this undertaking to the committee. In any case, his political future was opening up, offering larger scope for his ambition and talent. He was ready to disengage from his direct and intense involvement in the Continuation Committee. From 1936, numerous attempts were made to persuade the Railways on the one hand and the Department of Labour and Welfare on the other to agree to having the Railway welfare centres together with personnel and external structures, incorporated into the larger project.¹⁸⁰ However the question of funding had to be resolved and both departments appeared to have other reservations with the result that negotiations dragged on.

¹⁷⁸ Tayler, ‘Aspects of Social Welfare’, pp.103-109, 121.

¹⁷⁹ NA: Private Secretary, Minister of Transport (MVE), 1197, 538/157/1, memorandum, Railway Health Officer to Assistant General Manager, 6 November 1939.

¹⁸⁰ See for example INCH: PV93, 1/67/7, letter, H.F. Verwoerd to Acting General Manager, SAR, 11 August 1936; *ibid.*, Report of the Chairman [of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference], 5 October 1936.

What neither Verwoerd nor Theron wished, was for the structure which they had carefully built up to be dismantled. This, however, was to be its fate. In March 1938 the SAR terminated the programme. It instituted its own 'Health and Welfare Service' under the Railway Health Officer,¹⁸¹ which proved to be very successful. The system was run entirely by SAR personnel and the external welfare committees set up by Theron were dispensed with. Over time the SAR developed an internal training scheme to produce its own 'welfare officers'. The Diploma in Social and Health Work which was designed by the Railways Health Officer was accredited by the Department of Education and recognised by the Department of Social Welfare.¹⁸² It included an academic component but was very practical in orientation, which for the advocates of university training, rendered it inferior by definition. Theron's ambition to give life to Verwoerd's grand welfare scheme through the Railways pilot programme, died in its infancy. In her tribute to Verwoerd's pioneering role in welfare organisation, she expresses regret that this 'modern', 'promising' idea – Resolution Two of the National Conference – was never realised.¹⁸³

Meanwhile Theron had also tendered her resignation from the Continuation Committee, and ended her employment with them on 23 December 1936.¹⁸⁴ She had stated from the outset that she would be available in Johannesburg only until the end of the year.¹⁸⁵ There is no mention in the records of her reasons, and it may well be that her decision had been taken at the same time that Verwoerd prepared to resign. Verwoerd had not only left the project but vacated his professorship at the University of Stellenbosch. According to Theron, 'although there was probably a brilliant

¹⁸¹ 'Continuation Committee of the National Conference 1934. Report on the Railway Welfare Work, May 1935 to March 1938'; Tayler, 'Aspects of Social Welfare', p.121.

¹⁸² UG13/1950, *Department of Social Welfare: Report of the Departmental Committee of Enquiry into the Training and Employment of Social Workers* (Pretoria, 1950), p.35.

¹⁸³ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.62.

¹⁸⁴ INCH: PV93, 1/67/7, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee of the [Continuation Committee of the 1934] National Conference, 6 November 1936 and 8 December 1936.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Report of the Chairman [of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference], 5 October 1936.

future for him as an academic', his experience on the Continuation Committee 'had persuaded him that he needed political power to put his ideas on social welfare into practice'.¹⁸⁶ Theron undoubtedly discussed her plans with him. Perhaps they decided that it was inappropriate for her to follow him to the Transvaal. Perhaps she was simply encouraged to seek a post at Stellenbosch, following in the footsteps of her mentor in another way. There is no record of her motivation.

¹⁸⁶ Spies, Theron and Scholtz, 'Verwoerd, Hendrik Frensch', in Beyers (ed.), *South African Dictionary of Biography*, pp.731-732. Verwoerd's subsequent record does not indicate that the promotion of scientific welfare was the priority in his political career.

The Verwoerd-Theron Executive team was replaced in the Continuation Committee by Geoff Cronjé who assumed the newly-created post of honorary secretary and took over the day-to-day running of a Management Committee. Theron is subtly dismissive of this new era in the life of the Continuation Committee. In *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, she argues that he had done the ‘lion’s share’ of the work which resulted in the creation of the Department of Welfare¹⁸⁷ – this despite the fact that the decision was taken fully a year after he had left the committee and facilitated by a change in the Labour ministry.¹⁸⁸ He was, however, consulted in Johannesburg about the contents of a memorandum submitted to government concerning the structure and function of the proposed department, a point which Theron does not miss.¹⁸⁹ According to her:

His clear and logical argument for the necessity of having such a department [of welfare], his relentless persistence in repeatedly putting forward the case of the National Conference with patience and courtesy, in circumstances that were not always pleasant, his infectious diligence and the inspiration that radiated from him as a leader, can never be emphasised too strongly.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, pp.55-56.

¹⁸⁸ J.H. Hofmeyr had by that time replaced Fourie as Minister of Labour and Social Welfare and was amenable to the idea of a separate Department of Welfare from the outset.

¹⁸⁹ INCH:PV93, 1/67/7, summary of correspondence, copy memorandum William Nicol to Geoff Cronjé, 10 March 1937; Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.55.

¹⁹⁰ Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, p.56 (transl.).

In neither the book on Verwoerd nor in *Sonder Hoed* does she have much more to say about the work of the committee which continued for several more years, maintaining pressure on the various state departments to further other aims of the 1934 National Conference. In 1939, at the end of the five-year lifespan which had been envisaged for the committee, it reconstituted itself as the Suid-Afrikaanse Instituut vir Maatskaplike Navorsing en Volkswelstand¹⁹¹ of which Theron says briefly and sarcastically that it had a grandiose memorandum of association (*'n windmaker akte van oprigting'*). According to her, that was the end of the organisation.¹⁹² In fact it stuttered on into the 1950s but Theron, writing in the 1980s, would not have wanted to be identified with it. Its latter leadership included Ivan Lombard and Piet Meyer¹⁹³ (whom she distrusted as an 'opportunist'). Its orientation was conservative, Christian Nationalist and it propagated 'scientific' racism through its mouthpiece, *Volkswelstand*.¹⁹⁴ The Institute was ultimately absorbed by the FAK.

Theron preferred to remember an imagined a-political Continuation Committee that she had worked for under what she regarded as the inspired, progressive leadership of Verwoerd during the period 1934 to 1936. She firmly believed, with justification, that much had been achieved, not only for the rehabilitation of the white poor, but in laying the foundations of modern welfare structures in the country. Although she gave all credit to Verwoerd, her own commitment, enthusiasm and sheer hard work cannot be discounted. It seems evident that she also learned a great deal in this time. Having worked, however briefly, with the indigent in rural hovels and urban slums around the country, she could bring to her academic and public career a measure of practical experience. Having also interacted with individuals of considerable intellect as well as men in high office she

¹⁹¹ G. Cronjé (compiler), *Instituut vir Volkswelstand (Volkskongres 1934)* (Pretoria, Tvl. Pers Bpk., n.d.).

¹⁹² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.24.

¹⁹³ I.M. Lombard, and P.J. Meyer, prominent members of the AB. See for example Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.416, 436.

¹⁹⁴ See example quoted in Groenewald, 'Die Institutionaliserings van die Sosiologie in Suid Afrika', pp.35-36. See also INCH:PV93, 1/67/8, 'Report on a discussion which the undersigned [G. Cronjé] held with Mrs. M.E. Rothmann on 4 December 1937 in connection with the founding of a South African institute for social research and national welfare'.

had matured and grown in self-assurance. Both through her association with Verwoerd and in her own right, she had made useful contacts and a reputation in her field, that would stand her in good stead in her future public career.

CHAPTER THREE

ACADEMIC: SERVING HER PROFESSION

Barring three years of study abroad and approximately two years with the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference, Erika Theron was associated with the University of Stellenbosch from 1925 to 1972 as student and member of the academic staff – ultimately Head of the Department of Social Work. She then continued to edit the journal which she founded, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, until her death in 1990,¹ for several years working from a small office attached to the department.² This represents an active academic career spanning more than 50 years. When questioned in later life about her varied interests and achievements, Theron identified herself first and foremost as an academic. This was the key to the ‘essential’ Erika Theron according to one interviewer.³

For Theron the term ‘academic’ encompassed a great deal. In keeping with Verwoerd’s dictum that academics must reach out to serve their communities, Theron applied her knowledge, skills and energy in a wide field of endeavours. She conducted research, she published and she edited the journal, she was a dedicated teacher, she developed and defended her discipline, she promoted the profession for which she trained her students and gave the benefit of her experience to numerous local, national and international bodies and causes. Her influence in the welfare and social work fields for over half a century was profound and pervasive.

¹ Theron retained the title of Editor-in-Chief of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* until her death. Until 1980 she almost invariably wrote the main editorial herself but thereafter her contributions became more slight and it is evident that from the middle of the 1980s she played a diminishing role.

² Interview, De Villiers. See also interview, Rens, who indicated that Theron’s ‘character’ and ‘strong opinions’ made it difficult for her to cut herself off from the department.

³ *Die Burger*, 26 April 1977, column ‘Van Alle Kante: Dr. Theron Gee Haar Credo’, by Maureen Joubert.

The Lecturer and Her Department

While still busy with the first phase of her doctoral research, and before she took time off to serve on the Continuation Committee, Theron had some brief exposure to work in the academic environment, presumably on the recommendation of Verwoerd who was Head of Department of Sociology and Social Work and her supervisor at the time. Her official designation was that of 'student-assistant ... with the right to give classes'.⁴ When Verwoerd resigned from the department at the end of 1936, the university decided not to fill the vacant chair but to promote the only other lecturer in the department, Dr. O.M. Wagner, to senior lecturer and head of department. Theron was appointed to the post of lecturer with effect from 1 February 1937 and a new student assistant, A.A. Stulting, was engaged.⁵ It was a small department with relatively young staff, but it was a front-runner in a very new field with much optimism and idealism surrounding it. By 1939 Theron had evidently shown sufficient competence to be appointed acting head of department for a semester while Wagner was away on leave of absence.⁶ With her doctorate complete in 1942, her post was upgraded to that of senior lecturer with effect from the following year.⁷ At this rank she seems to have encountered the gender ceiling and ten years would pass before she was again promoted, despite growth in the numbers of students and academic personnel in the department.

⁴ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.IX, p.280: Further Report of the Appointments Committee appended to Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 23 March 1934.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol.XI, p.10: Further Report of the Appointments Committee appended to Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 11 September 1936.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol.XII, p.286, Meeting of 1 April 1938.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol.XVI, p.132, Meeting of 15 March 1943. Confirmation of the re-grading from the Department of Education, Vol. XVI, p.161.

When Wagner resigned from the department to take up a post at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1949, the Appointments Committee took a decision not to advertise the chair but simply to appoint Dr. Samuel Pauw who became the new head of department.⁸ This was clearly not uncontentious. One of her former students states (without offering evidence) that ‘the senate was male-dominated and didn’t want to give [Theron] the professorship’.⁹ In 1951 the Appointments Committee decided (supported by a memorandum from Pauw) to apply to the state Department of Education to replace the post of senior lectureship in the Department of Sociology and Social Work with a professorship, and if agreed, to promote Theron with effect from the beginning of 1952.¹⁰ The Department of Education must have turned down the request because in October 1952 Theron tendered her resignation. The letter does not make mention of the reason for this resignation. However in conversation with Rykie van Reenen many years later, she refers to having resigned ‘because they didn’t make me professor’.¹¹ At the time she was extremely bitter. In her letter of resignation she writes that she has taken the step with deep regret since it has been her ‘pleasure and privilege’ to devote her energies to serving the university and ‘the department which I helped to build up’.¹² This was the department which she may have felt she had a special right to inherit. She, who had been trained by its founder, Verwoerd, and who had applied herself with enthusiasm to realising his ambitions for it, would have resented the lack of recognition or progress through promotion.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol.XXIII, p.227, Meeting of 10 September 1948.

⁹ Interview, De Vos.

¹⁰ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.XXVII, p. 35, Meeting of 3 August 1951.

¹¹ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2 (transl.).

¹² US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.XXIX, p.116, Meeting of 7 November 1952, letter of resignation appended dated 7 October 1952 (transl.).

Nevertheless, she subsequently retracted the resignation, seemingly after discussion with Pauw. What promises were made to persuade her to do so, are not on record, but if there were any they were forgotten.¹³ When Pauw left in 1955, the Appointments Committee prepared to overlook her yet again. It recommended to senate that the vacant chair be offered to J. de W. Keyter from the Department of Sociology at the University of the Orange Free State.¹⁴ However, quite extraordinarily according to Sampie Terreblanche,¹⁵ on this occasion senate did not rubber-stamp the recommendation of the committee as was customary. Instead, one of its members, A.C. Cilliers, proposed that the appointment of Theron as Professor of Social Work – a new chair – be recommended to council. Some years later she was to write a letter to Cilliers, wishing him well in his retirement and saying that she would always be grateful for what he had done for her during the ‘struggle’ over her promotion.¹⁶ She was clearly aware of the circumstances. At the time, the motion by Cilliers was accepted by a majority vote (not unanimously) and after a ‘secret ballot’ in what seems to have been a resumption of an adjourned meeting.¹⁷ All the signs suggest that Theron’s appointment to a professorship, was the result of a hard-fought struggle. Theron was at the time only the third woman to be granted a chair at Stellenbosch and in her words, she felt ‘like the camel that had passed through the eye of the needle’. It was regarded as a breakthrough by fellow female academics at Stellenbosch. They organised a celebration among themselves, which was attended by virtually all the women lecturers in the university.¹⁸ But Theron’s appointment was a landmark for reasons other than the fact that it widened the breach in gender barriers at Stellenbosch. Like many of her accomplishments, it was a ‘first’. She was the first person, man or

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.144-145, Report of the Appointments Committee, 2 December 1952, appended to Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 13 March 1953.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol.XXXII, p.92, Report of the Appointments Committee, 7 March 1955, appended to Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 11 March 1955.

¹⁵ Interview, Terreblanche.

¹⁶ US Doc. Centre: A.C. de Villiers Collection, 166.K.U.60: letter, Erika Theron to Professor A.C. de Villiers, 19 September 1963.

¹⁷ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.XXXII, p.94, Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Senate, adjourned meeting, 11 March 1955.

¹⁸ ‘Dr. Erika Theron Word Professor’, *Eikestadnuus*, 29 April 1955 (transl.).

woman, to hold a chair in social work in South Africa.¹⁹ It was a triumph not only for her but for the discipline which she had nurtured. Social work had been recognised as a fully-fledged university subject.

¹⁹ J.N. de Villiers (Rector of the University of Stellenbosch), 'Haar Jongste Onderskeiding, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972) , pp.281, 272.

Theron continued to resist gender discrimination at the university in many ways and seems to have spearheaded the campaign to improve the salaries of female academic staff over a number of years. The fragmentary 'Erika Theron papers' within the Wiechers collection include records of extensive research and correspondence carried out from at least 1964 to within a year of Theron's retirement. Theron gathered information from all South African universities, from which it appears that Stellenbosch salaries for virtually all categories of academic staff were extremely low. Furthermore, unlike the English-language universities, there were significant differences between the salaries of male and female lecturers. Theron prepared detailed, reasoned memoranda in the style of Verwoerd when he was determined to persuade by argument, requesting a review of the situation. However it was not until 1970 that council conceded parity and then only at the top end of salary scales.²⁰

²⁰ Unisa: Acc.72, file 56/6; see also US Doc. Centre: A.C. de Villiers Collection, 166.K.U.60, letter Erika Theron to Professor A.C. de Villiers, 19 September 1963.

At the time that Theron joined the staff, the study curriculum in force at Stellenbosch for the degree in social work was a demanding one. It included two three-year majors – in sociology and either psychology or economics – as well as four other designated subjects. Requirements were somewhat different for male and female students in the early years. Whereas men had to include one or two years of special commercial science, women had to make up their curricula with courses in domestic science, bookkeeping, typing as well as special physiology which encompassed first aid, home nursing and hygiene.²¹ The option of specialisation in economics was open to men but not to women. It is perhaps noteworthy that the compulsory domestic science component occurred only in the curricula of Stellenbosch and Pretoria, among universities offering social work degrees in the 1930s.²² These were the first two universities to introduce training courses for social workers (initially at diploma level) and both universities had strong links with the respective regional Afrikaner women's service groups. These course designs seem both to reflect and perpetuate the tendency for male graduates to enter policy-making, administrative and managerial posts after qualifying, whereas women were expected to enter the practice of social work in the field.²³

Since the curriculum at Stellenbosch was originally drawn up by Verwoerd, no critical comment on this aspect has been noted in any of Theron's writings. She had not been subjected to the feminised course herself, as she had completed her undergraduate studies before the introduction of the social work degree. Perhaps her acceptance of the curriculum is best seen in its historic context. The medical profession had a similar bias: overwhelmingly it was men who became the doctors, educators in medicine and policy makers in public health, whereas women undertook the traditionally maternal, nurturing role of nursing. Theron's training in Germany had been based on a similar ideology. While the writings of Salomon (and many other first-generation social work

²¹ Verwoerd, 'Maatskaplike Werkers in Suid- Afrika en Hulle Opleiding' in *Report of the National Conference on Social Work, 1936*, p.91.

²² Annette Muller, 'Opleiding vir Maatskaplike Werk met Spesiale Verwysing na Suid-Afrika' (Doctor of Social Work thesis, Universiteit of Stellenbosch, 1965), p.54.

²³ This gender division was a longstanding feature of social work. See for example R.C.W. van Biljon, 'Enkele Aspekte van die Beroeps- en Persoonlikheidsfunksionering van Maatskaplike Werkers in Suid-Afrika' (DPhil. thesis, Unisa, 1970), Chapter 3.

educators) emphasised equality of value between the genders, they assumed ‘separate spheres’. Practical social work was regarded as a distinctly feminine calling in which women could make a unique contribution to society²⁴ – it was *frauenarbeit*. Arguably, MER held a similar view. As Theron’s own career progressed she would demonstrate that she no longer accepted this kind of distinction, particularly when it limited the full participation of women in the development of social welfare policy.²⁵

²⁴ Sonya Michel and Seth Koven, ‘Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origin of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States, 1880-1920’, *American Historical Review*, 95, 4 (October 1990), p.1079.

²⁵ See citation for Theron’s honorary doctorate from the University of Stellenbosch: *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 21, 1 (March 1985), pp.6-8.

A number of commentators have stressed the American orientation in sociology-social work studies at Stellenbosch.²⁶ This was true of the majority of universities in South Africa but it was of particular significance that Stellenbosch followed this route, because it was in the vanguard of the development of the field and to a certain extent, set a precedent.²⁷ Several reasons have been advanced for Stellenbosch's adoption of the American approach, including the influence of the Carnegie Commission which provided the context from which most of the new sociology and social work departments emerged, but which was particularly strong at Stellenbosch. Two members of the Carnegie team were Stellenbosch academics, Wilcocks and Grosskopf. Furthermore Charles Coulter, Professor of Sociology at Ohio Wesleyan University, who also assisted in the Carnegie study, was visiting professor at Stellenbosch in 1929 and evidently had contact with key figures in the drive to apply a new, scientific approach to the white poverty problem. Coulter discussed the American system in a paper addressed to a research committee at Stellenbosch, which was undoubtedly influential because it entered uncharted territory at the university.²⁸ Roberta Balstad also suggests that Verwoerd's study tour of the United States may have played a role. He was apparently greatly impressed by developments in the field of social work and welfare in the USA.²⁹ As the founder of the Stellenbosch department, his bias would have been important. There were probably other pragmatic factors such as the fact that pioneering work had been done in America in devising practical techniques for 'applied sociology' which would form the basis of social work. The US was also ahead of Britain in producing a body of literature on social work training (as opposed to training in social administration), which could serve as the basis for most South African

²⁶ See for example interview, Helm; Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners*, p.350.

²⁷ Balstad, 'Science, Sociology and Social Engineering', pp.1-20.

²⁸ See for example Charles W. Coulter, 'The Need of a School of Sociology: Address by an American Collaborator in the Carnegie Committee of Inquiry on Poverty in the Union', *The Social and Industrial Review*, 5 February 1930, pp.58-65. This article includes discussion of the creation of a school of social work.

²⁹ Balstad, 'Science, Sociology and Social Engineering', p.5; Groenewald, 'Institusionalisering van die Sosiologie', p.337.

training centres. This attachment to American sources (or South African texts based on adapted forms of the American model) was to persist throughout Theron's long career at Stellenbosch.³⁰

³⁰ Muller, 'Opleiding vir Maatskaplike Werk', p.69.

Even within this general framework, however, there were differences in the approaches to the teaching of sociology as instituted at the various universities in South Africa. In the 1930s Stellenbosch, in particular, because of its very close links to the Carnegie study, initially adopted a practical, reform orientation in which a significant component comprised themes that would later find a home in the discipline of social work.³¹ Differentiation between the two disciplines was evolving gradually both at Stellenbosch and elsewhere at the time that Theron joined the academic staff. Social work would be recognised as a discipline during the next few years and is identified as such for the first time at Stellenbosch, in the curriculum in 1941. This pattern differed from one university to another. Social work became compulsory to second-year level for the degree in social work at Stellenbosch from 1942 and to third-year in 1946.³² Theron was therefore very much involved in the early phases of development of the subject – almost certainly more so than the heads of department who preceded her and who had no background in social work, including Verwoerd.

³¹ Groenewald, 'Institusionalisering van die Sosiologie', pp.315-317; 337.

³² Muller, 'Opleiding vir Maatskaplike Werk', Schedule facing p.49, p.55.

The university which was most closely situated to Stellenbosch geographically, the University of Cape Town, possibly differed most radically from other South African universities in its approach to teaching what it termed 'social science' for decades.³³ These differences created a measure of tension between the respective departments of the two institutions which throw light on Theron's commitment to nurturing the young discipline of social work and the aspiring profession of social workers. She valued and identified with the legacy which Verwoerd had left and was prepared to defend it. Edward Batson, who had created the University of Cape Town degree course, was a product of the London School of Economics and had imported the British tradition, concentrating on the administration of social services.³⁴ The differences in approaches were quite marked. Batson's department did not adopt the typically American approach to training in social work, which emphasises three areas of theory and practice – case work, group work and community work. In fact in discussing the differences between the two departments in 2001, Brunhilda Helm who had worked closely with him, said that she still thought of 'those old three divisions' as 'nonsense'.³⁵

Theron on the other hand, remained committed to this traditional model for teaching social work although she personally had less aptitude and interest in case work, and was recognising the limits of its applicability in developing countries towards the end of her tenure at the university. She also remained committed to the theoretical foundation of sociology, psychology and (to a lesser extent) economics in the social work degree, along with the subject of social work as it evolved, although the configuration of curricula altered over time. At a conference on social work held in 1954, at a time when the profession was still in its infancy and training in no way standardised, Batson controversially suggested that sociology alone should be the cornerstone of a degree in social work. According to him, only an elementary understanding of economics and psychology was called for, and social work was essentially applied sociology.³⁶ In subsequent discussion of the paper, Theron

³³ *Ibid.*; Groenewald, 'Die Institutionaliserings van die Sosiologie', pp.324-328.

³⁴ Interview, Helm.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ E. Batson, 'Theoretical Training for the Social Work Profession' in Inter-University

responded strongly to Batson. Batson argued that the central concern of the social worker was society and social structures and that logically, the science of society should be sociology. 'Before we can aspire to be taken seriously as a profession, we must be able to show that there is one science that we can apply more skilfully than anybody else. And if our client is society, that science is sociology,' he proposed.³⁷

Committee for Social Studies, Report of Conference on Social Work Profession, 14-15 May 1954, pp.5-8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7.

Theron disputed Batson's 'logic'. She argued that social work practitioners were not concerned only with impersonal structures, but equally with individuals and that case work, for example, required a thorough grounding in psychology. Furthermore, she said, she regarded herself as a social work educator, not a sociologist. She added that she was not even very well qualified in sociology. This was of course equally true of Verwoerd whose knowledge of sociology was largely self-taught. Her main argument was for the recognition and development of social work as academic discipline in its own right. In fact she suggested that lecturers should not be required to teach in both areas, as though they were simply branches of the same subject. She said that she personally found it difficult to keep up to date with the developments and literature in her own subject (which she clearly considered to be social work) let alone the two subjects.³⁸ It was at the level of individual diagnosis and clinical counselling that the activities of social workers could be most obviously identified as specialised and professional and at this stage of her career, Batson's suggestion that social workers become 'applied sociologists' and 'abandon pretensions' to being 'applied psychologists',³⁹ was anathema to her.

This disagreement in principle with Batson is quite revealing. Theron couched her objections in polite but adversarial terms. This probably had to do with more than simply the issue of social work as subject, although this was not insignificant given Theron's fierce commitment to defending the discipline. Batson was British and this was strongly reflected in his speech and manner.⁴⁰ The distinctive approach to social science and the training in 'social assistance' at the University of Cape Town seems to have been regarded as superior by its own staff,⁴¹ which would not have sat well with Theron who was hostile to anything that could be interpreted as British chauvinism.

³⁸ 'Discussion [of the paper by Batson]', *ibid.*, pp.13-14. Social work was being offered as a major at a number of universities but in some cases still as a sub-discipline of sociology or social science. See Muller, 'Opleiding vir Maatskaplike Werk', pp.54-55.

³⁹ Batson's response, 'Discussion', Inter-University Committee for Social Studies, Report of Conference on Social Work Profession, 1954, p.21.

⁴⁰ Interview, Helm.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

This exchange needs to be seen within the context of a struggle to establish a new scientific discipline, and specifically to the strong links between the genesis of social work studies and the poor white problem, which were so pronounced at Stellenbosch. Case work and group work were regarded as particularly appropriate to the task of socialisation and re-integration of the Afrikaner poor into the white community. Community work, or community organisation, was regarded as more difficult to define and to teach to students in the early years. It was, therefore, the least emphasised component of the curriculum until a later era⁴² when its importance in developing countries became recognised.

As an applied science, social work necessarily included a practical component and providing for this practical training and experience was a perennial problem. For many years, the University of the Witwatersrand was the only university in South Africa with a four-year degree in social work. In the other universities, including Stellenbosch throughout Theron's time there, a three-year undergraduate degree was offered. With the heavy theoretical workload, time was an important limiting factor and practical work had to be fitted into vacations. Discussion about extending the period of training was ongoing among social work educators. It seems to have been universally agreed that this was desirable, but it had to be balanced against the interrelated problems of costs and the need to attract students. Salaries paid to social workers were notoriously low – lower than those of teachers and nurses in Theron's time. If four years of training were demanded, this could dry up registrations.⁴³ On the other hand the basic three-year course compromised the professional status of social workers and in turn depressed salaries; it was a predicament which seemed to defy solution. Qualification for other, higher-status professionals, such as medicine and law, involved longer periods of university tuition as well as supervised practical experience. This had the added advantage that by the time that the qualified professionals began to practise independently they had

⁴² Muller, 'Opleiding vir Maatskaplike Werk', p.98.

⁴³ Over time all the South African universities adopted a four-year social work degree. In April 2009, discussing the critical shortage of social workers, the Minister of Social Development stated that 'government needed to recognise the social work profession, which draws lower salaries than teachers and nurses' and he 'appealed to SA social workers to stay in the country instead of opting for better salaries overseas'. See *Saturday Star*, 2 May 2009, 'Child Society Hopes New Training Will Close Gap'.

been out of school for five to seven years. Social workers, by contrast, were generally entering the field at around the age of 21.

These were issues that were debated within welfare and social work circles throughout Theron's long career⁴⁴ and which she personally wrestled with continuously. Given the kinds of situations and individuals that social workers would confront in practice it was a matter of great concern that their personal maturity and practical experience were inadequate when they entered their field of employment. Organisation skills took time to develop and there was also the question of whether young social workers could command the necessary respect from officials and from hardened, socially derelict clients, in order to carry out their duties with authority. Theron's brief experience in Berlin and later with the SAR project, gave her first-hand insight into these problems that most other first-generation social work educators in South Africa did not share. Subsequent study tours in the United States, one in the 1940s⁴⁵ and one in 1958 which was supported by a Carnegie Foundation research grant⁴⁶ made her even more conscious that the local profession faced peculiar difficulties. After the first of these visits she pointed out at a conference that in this regard South Africa needed to find its own solutions as other countries had found theirs. The social work

⁴⁴ See for example, Verwoerd, 'Maatskaplike Werkers in Suid- Afrika en Hulle Opleiding' in *Report of the National Conference on Social Work, 1936*, pp.90, 93; Edward Batson, 'Education and Training for Social Work' in *Report of the National Conference on Social Work, 1936*, p.83; Panel Discussion on 'The Future of the Qualified Social Worker', *Report of the South African National Conference on Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work* (Pretoria, Government Printers, 1944), p.121; Erika Theron, 'Die Maatskaplike Werk Professie', Inter-University Committee for Social Studies, *Report of Conference on Social Work Profession, 1954*, pp.114-118; Annette Muller, 'Social Work Education in the Republic of South Africa', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), pp.264-265.

⁴⁵ Interview with Professor Katherine Kendall, *i.a.* former President of the Council on Social Work Education (USA) and former President of the IASSW, Paris, 8 July 2002. According to Kendall, Theron's visit was part of an exchange programme and she had been responsible for the planning of Theron's schedule in the USA.

⁴⁶ Villiers, 'Haar Jongste Onderskeiding' *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972).

qualification in the United States, for example, included two years of post-graduate study and training; in the Netherlands there was a minimum age at which practical training could even begin.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Theron, 'Die Maatskaplike Werk Professie' in Inter-University Committee for Social Studies: Report of Conference on Social Work Profession, 1954.

Despite the difficulties, Theron seems to have applied herself to ensuring that students were given as much exposure as possible to practical work. In fact Stellenbosch seems to have had a reputation dating from Verwoerd's days of 'lay[ing] emphasis on guided practical work as the central point of training' following the 'American school of thought'. This was in contrast to the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town in the early days.⁴⁸ Certain kinds of practical experience, such as data gathering and interviewing were easier to arrange than others. Theron, with her very active involvement in the civic life in the Western Cape, was well placed to provide opportunities for her students in this regard. As one example, her department carried out a study of sub-economic and economic housing needs in Stellenbosch for the Department of Community Development.⁴⁹ The minutes of meetings of the Stellenbosch council, of which she was a long-serving member, reflect numerous instances where she offered the services of her students to carry out surveys or to process information.⁵⁰ For many years her second-year students routinely carried out surveys in District Six⁵¹ as part of their practical studies. One former student recalls that District Six residents became so familiar with the visits of Stellenbosch social work students that they became 'well-trained clients', amused by the awkwardness and inexperience of the young people, they 'would tell us what to ask them and then what to write down'. 'They gave us tea ... they enjoyed us as much as we enjoyed them'.⁵² It has not been possible to trace whether the outcomes of all these projects were destined for use by official bodies, but they possibly were. As Theron became increasingly

⁴⁸ Quoted from a letter from Dr. F. Brummer, Research Officer of the Department of Social Welfare to the Dean of the School of Social Service Administration of the University of Chicago, 8 October 1937 in Isadora R. Hare and Wilma Hoffman, *Social Work Education at Wits 1937-1987* (Johannesburg, School of Social Work: University of the Witwatersrand, 1987), p.5. The shortcomings in practical training were addressed in time. Both universities, for example, later ran community centres where students were exposed to practical work.

⁴⁹ Unisa: Acc.72, 56/3, letter, Secretary for Community Development to Erika Theron, 12 March 1969; *ibid.*, letter, Theron to Secretary for Community Development, 14 March 1969.

⁵⁰ See examples in Chapter Four.

⁵¹ District Six was a run-down, inner-city area housing a racially mixed but dominantly coloured population.

⁵² Interview, De Vos.

involved in welfare and housing planning at local, regional and even national level, these surveys, based on models devised by Theron and her staff, must have played a role in policy-formation.

Other types of training were more difficult to arrange. However, Theron's close contacts with local welfare bodies would probably have been helpful and Theron was always innovative and well-connected. According to interviewees she was a thoughtful associate and placed a high priority on nurturing relationships. With both friends and professional associates, she maintained regular contact, communicating concern when there were misfortunes, remembering special occasions, and scrupulous about such courtesies as letters of thanks. She also had the advantage of her extensive family connections. As a result she built up many networks which provided mutual assistance.⁵³ For example, the minutes of the senate of the University of Stellenbosch in 1937 reflect an arrangement whereby the ACVV provided rent-free accommodation in Salt River for five female students and a supervisory lecturer to enable students to complete practical work with the organisation, for a post-graduate diploma in social work.⁵⁴ As Theron was the only female lecturer in the department at the time it seems certain that she would have been the 'supervisory lecturer', which would have been extremely convenient as she was conducting research for her doctorate in the area at the time. This was the type of co-operation that she seems to have been able to call on even early in her career and as her networks widened she was irresistible. According to a former student, 'she could drop *names*, even international names'.⁵⁵ This, together with her determined spirit, enabled her to overcome obstacles that would have been insurmountable with a lesser armoury.

Theron's past students speak very highly of her abilities as a lecturer – she tolerated 'no nonsense', but was enthusiastic and interesting.⁵⁶ 'She had a very strong personality and set high standards but

⁵³ Interview, Steyn; interview, Van Reenen; interview, Wiechers.

⁵⁴ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol. XII, pp.39-40. Report of the Executive Committee appended to Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 14 April 1937.

⁵⁵ Interview, De Vos.

⁵⁶ Interview, Du Toit; interview, Collins; interview, De Vos; interview, De Villiers.

could somehow get people to work to achieve these standards.’⁵⁷ One such student, Frieda Francisco-la Grange, who later held chairs in social work at Rand Afrikaans University and the University of the Western Cape, dedicated her inaugural lecture to Theron, her special ‘mentor’.⁵⁸ Undergraduates held her in awe, as illustrated in an anecdote by Kathy Collins:

[T]he whole class knew that there was no chance of being absent. When I was subpoenaed to court in third year as a witness ... I told the sheriff that I would not be allowed to miss class. The court session would have to wait until university vac. He instructed me that Prof. Erika Theron was not the ultimate authority in the Western Cape. It was difficult to believe that.⁵⁹

But although she inspired such awe (and fear), according to Collins, she made students ‘feel that [they] could be wonderful too ... in their own way’.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Interview, Steyn (transl.).

⁵⁸ F.H. Francisco-la Grange, *Vanuit 'n Leerstoel in die Maatskaplike Werk* (Johannesburg, Rand Afrikaans University, 1981), p.3.

⁵⁹ Collins, ‘Erika Theron, George Bernard Shaw and Social Action’.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Perhaps one of Theron's greatest gifts to her students and contributions to her discipline lay in her encouragement of scholarship. According to McKendrick, Theron gathered around her in the sociology and social work departments some very bright young people in the profession. She recognised potential and cultivated it in her students.⁶¹ During her career, she supervised approximately 50 post-graduate dissertations and theses dealing with a wide range of topics, including five MA studies of mission stations for coloured people in different regions in the Western Cape, completed in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁶² Many of her students would go on to lecture in universities across the country, several to become professors and heads of departments.⁶³ This naturally enhanced the reputation and spread the influence of her Stellenbosch department.

⁶¹ Interview, McKendrick. See also interview, De Vos; interview with Dr. F. G. Kotze, Chairman of the Department of Social Work, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, 27 February 1997.

⁶² De Vos, 'Maatskaplikewerk-Navorsing in Suid-Afrika', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), pp.256-258.

⁶³ Among many former students who became Professors of Sociology or Social Work are the following: Professor K.J. Collins (*i.a.* Western Cape), Professor Annemarie de Vos (*i.a.* Witwatersrand), Professor J.B. du Toit (Western Cape), Professor Dian Joubert (Stellenbosch), Professor F.H. Francisco-la Grange (*i.a.* Rand Afrikaans University), Professor C. Muller (Witwatersrand), Professor Anna Steyn (Rand Afrikaans University), Professor Jan de Villiers (Stellenbosch).

It was not only among her own students that Theron insisted on high standards. As a referee, she could be scathing about the quality of manuscripts submitted to her for comment. Even at the end of her lecturing career, she showed herself to have an excellent knowledge of the most current literature in her field and a keen eye for faulty detail. Of one manuscript she says that ‘publishing writing of this nature would be a poor advertisement for the social work profession in South Africa’.⁶⁴ In another report she says that it would be a waste of money to publish: the author was clearly unequal to the task he had undertaken.⁶⁵ Theron also used the journal, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* to monitor and encourage sound research – even after her retirement from her department. For some years she published details of all advanced degrees in social work awarded in South Africa, and from the 1980s increasingly expressed concern about the low numbers of students producing original research. She was also critical about quality and what she regarded as a trend towards the choice of narrow topics.⁶⁶ Congresses and symposia had their place, she said, but they could not replace research. As she put it, ‘a Congress Hobo can become intellectually lazy’.⁶⁷

One of Theron’s most consistent pleas was for scholars to undertake empirical research that was applicable in the real world. Research output ‘must be drafted with the scientific knowledge and objective approach of the trained researcher who should then indicate fearlessly what steps are to be taken in future to improve the situation’.⁶⁸ According to her, the value of an academic should be measured by ‘the results of his [*sic*] research and his practical delivery’.⁶⁹ This was particularly

⁶⁴ Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter, Erika Theron to the president, HSRC, 8 December 1972.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Report on MA Manuscript, 22 December 1972.

⁶⁶ Annemarie de Vos, ‘Maar Het ons ’n Paradigma?’, editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 20, 1 (March 1984), p.2.

⁶⁷ Erika Theron, ‘Baie Kongres – Genoeg Oorspronklike Navorsers?’, editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 19, 4 (October 1983), p.194.

⁶⁸ Erika Theron, ‘Research and Developing Communities’, editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 15, 1 (March 1979), p.2.

⁶⁹ Erika Theron, ‘Akademiese Betrokkenheid’ editorial, ‘*Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 13,1(March 1977), pp.2-4 (transl.).

necessary in a developing country where it took ‘integrity and courage’ to examine ‘sensitive’ problems.⁷⁰ This last observation was written in the wake of the Theron Commission and she clearly had an axe to grind concerning underdevelopment in the coloured population. But there are also echoes of the 1934 National Conference. The heady days of working with Verwoerd to force the state to act on the Carnegie research were never far from her consciousness.

⁷⁰ Theron, ‘Research and Developing Communities’, editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 15, 1 (March 1979) pp.2-3.

Despite Theron's considerable reputation and influence on the development of social work scholarship, her own research and writing, although substantial in terms of output, does not seem to have been seminal. It is not for her publications that she is remembered – indeed most interviewees could not say much about what she wrote. They recall that she almost invariably contributed papers at social work conferences and wrote numerous articles. A study of such published papers and articles as have been traced – all very brief – reflect the down-to-earth approach of 'a practical person', as she defined herself.⁷¹ They cover a wide range of topics – probably dictated by the themes of the conferences. However, from the perspective of an historian, whose discipline has very different conventions, there is not a great deal of evidence of the original research that she demanded of others. Theron wrote from observation, opinion and experience, on the day-to-day practicalities of different areas of social work, of welfare organisation and the education of social workers.⁷² Her informal writing in newspapers and magazines and the editorials in her journal, are much more potent than her academic articles. In the informal pieces her sheer persistence (she had no compunction about repeating herself endlessly), passion and direct, colloquial style are not easy to ignore. However, in this writing it is the practised propagandist and activist, rather than the scholar, that stands out.

⁷¹ Erika Theron, 'Opleiding van Studente in die Maatskaplike Werk, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8,1 (March 1972), p.30 (transl.). (Published lecture delivered at the Conference on Practical Training for Social Work Students, Pretoria, 7-9 June 1971).

⁷² To cite only a few examples: Erika Theron, 'Die Kleurling en die Houding van die Blanke', *Tydskrif vir Rasseaangeleenthede*, 1, 4 (1950), pp.21-24; Erika Theron, 'Die Vraagstuk van Veroudering: "Die Probleem"', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 3, 2 (June 1967), pp.79-82; 'The Changing Welfare Scene in Southern Africa and the Contribution of Social Workers', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 3 (August 1972), pp.184-188.

Theron was involved in the production of some 11 books during her lifetime,⁷³ most of which were directly related to social work. The majority of these texts she edited, or co-authored with colleagues from Stellenbosch (several based on theses which she had supervised). In an overview of Theron's research, Annemarie de Vos says that Theron's very practical approach to the discipline of social work and her emphasis on 'useful' research which related to existing problems in South Africa, is reflected in her writing. As a loyal former student of Theron, De Vos's comments are carefully weighed. Criticism, although discernible, is muted. For example she says that some of the older publications could 'not be compared with modern social work research', but rather represented basic 'practice wisdom'. However, according to De Vos, these books were useful publications for the profession in their day. Of particular significance was the fact that while social work was in its infancy, Theron had ensured that literature in the discipline was appearing in Afrikaans.⁷⁴

⁷³ If there were other books, these have not been traced.

⁷⁴ De Vos, 'Maatskaplikewerk-Navorsing in Suid-Afrika', p.257.

A strong characteristic of Theron's academic career was her capacity to stay abreast of new developments in her profession and to be prepared to embrace new ideas. This was to prove true of her attitudes in spheres other than her profession as well. One example is Theron's willingness to recognise the potential in the modern 'community development' approach to welfare, and particularly its significance for training and practice for social workers in South Africa. In an address on the practical training of students (delivered at a conference in Pretoria in June 1971), she berated social workers for allowing other disciplines to take the lead in this new direction.⁷⁵ Since professionals working in community development came from a number of disciplines, and drew on the participation of community-based organisations, with very limited training, some social workers were hostile to the trend. One interviewee was clearly disdainful of the new 'short courses' being offered by university departments as well as other institutions. She totally rejected the notion that volunteers with a six-to-twelve month certificate course in counselling could be effective in the field.⁷⁶ Many social workers believed that standards would be compromised and that the status of the profession would be threatened by these 'auxilliarities'. In the early days of establishing university-trained social workers as the experts and leaders of welfare in the country, Theron would have taken the same position. But in a paper delivered in December 1971 she discussed the limitations of traditional approaches in the face of wide-spread poverty and under-development. The international community had begun to re-examine the applicability of First World approaches in developing regions⁷⁷ and Theron was following the debate with her usual keenness. In the paper, she repeats the quote: 'you cannot casework people out of poverty' and argues that 'social workers should be trained to take an active part in community development and must be taught to work with other professions in the field'.⁷⁸ This was a relatively radical perspective in the 1970s. It is still

⁷⁵ Theron, 'Opleiding van Studente', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8,1 (March 1972), pp.30-36.

⁷⁶ Interview, Professor Marie de Bruyn, former Head of the Department of Social Work, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 16 November 1999.

⁷⁷ Interview, Kendall.

⁷⁸ Theron, 'The Changing Welfare Scene', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 3 (August 1972), pp.187-188: published paper first read at the Catholic Welfare Council of South Africa, Hammanskraal, 16 December 1971.

hotly debated, and in some quarters resisted in the profession, despite the fact that it now represents official policy in post-1994 South Africa.⁷⁹

Theron ended her conference paper on training with a quotation from Mary Richmond:

The open mind, the open door,
the willingness to think all over again
no matter how many times – these
I suppose are the things that keep organisations
as well as people young.⁸⁰

Theron was at the time in her sixties with retirement imminent, yet she clearly kept her own mind open. In a tribute by her colleagues written in 1972, they say this of her :

In every generation one finds leaders whose wisdom and skill enable them to function as a bridge between tradition and change ... In the field of social work and social welfare Prof. Erika Theron fills this role with distinction.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Judith Tayler, 'Combating Unfavourable Conditions': Experiments in Scientific Social Work and Community Development in the South African Railways, 1935-1950', *Kleio: Journal of Historical Studies from Africa*, 36 (2004), pp.107-125; F.J. Lund, *The Way Welfare Works: Structures, Spending Staffing and Social Work in the South African Welfare Bureaucracies*. Report ASS/BBS-32 for Co-operative HSRC Programmes: Affordable Material Provision (Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 1992), pp.61-65; interview, Kendall.

⁸⁰ Theron, 'Opleiding van Studente', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8,1 (March 1972), p.36. Source of quotation not traced. Richmond was an American pioneer in the development of social work practice, in particular case work.

⁸¹ 'Editorial', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), p.226.

Interpersonal Relations

It was characteristic of Theron's perfectionism that she aspired to produce students that were not only theoretically and practically well trained but were also 'well-rounded' individuals with 'professional personalities'. She, in common with most people in the profession, always regarded social work to be a very draining vocation. According to her, social workers needed to have additional inner resources to draw upon, to uplift and comfort them, such as religious faith for those who were so inclined, or a broad background and interest in 'culture' which could provide perspective in life.⁸² This was another reason why the three-year period of study was inadequate in her opinion. But while the structure persisted she regarded it as a duty to try to convey some general knowledge and awaken interest in students during the normal course of their studies, so that she did not send 'well-trained barbarians' out into the world.⁸³ One of her students recalls that although Theron was an organised and knowledgeable lecturer, she could be 'distracted' and led into talking of other matters.⁸⁴ This begs speculation that Theron was in fact taking whatever opportunities presented themselves for diversions that might broaden her students' intellectual landscape. De Vos relates that Theron tried to arrange for select students to lodge with a friend of hers, Katy Neethling, who could be trusted to groom them in matters of etiquette and high culture. Neethling was regarded as a distinguished resident of Stellenbosch who 'would quiz you on current affairs, opera, or literature', says De Vos.⁸⁵

⁸² Theron, 'Die Maatskaplike Werk Professie' in Inter-University Committee for Social Studies: Report of Conference on Social Work Profession, 1954.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Interview, Collins.

⁸⁵ Interview, De Vos.

One of the ways in which Theron tried to encourage reflective thinking and provide inspiration for students, social work educators and social workers in the field was through thought-provoking and uplifting quotations. Theron loved quotations. They are often to be found scribbled in her hand in the margins of documents. They are liberally reproduced (although sketchily referenced) in the journal which she edited. Theron was clearly an inspiring communicator and a memorable influence in the lives of her students. When she retired in 1972, former students arranged a grand farewell function for her at a five-star hotel in Cape Town. Students travelled from far and wide to attend the gathering, which Theron found ‘heartwarming’ and remembered with pride, including the fact that one of her best-known students, Tienie Vorster – wife of the Prime Minister – was present.⁸⁶

The evidence is abundant that Theron served her department and students with dedication. But some interviewees claim that she was inclined to take a special interest in particular students and was capable of victimising others, sometimes for quite petty reasons. For example, a capable student who chose to pursue her honours studies in another discipline fell from grace and felt the chill of Theron’s disapproval.⁸⁷ From the point of view of her staff, she was no easy taskmaster. Here too, according to some observers, she tended to adopt ‘favourites’ and could be ruthless with other individuals. Dian Joubert says of Theron that ‘she could be fierce. People were afraid of her’.⁸⁸ She is reputed to have had a razor-sharp tongue and to have reduced certain members of the department to tears over seemingly minor matters. She apparently had a habit of telephoning colleagues ‘at the most awkward times’ and ‘raking them over’ which resulted in one member of staff arranging for friends to use a coded ring so that the recipient could choose which calls to answer and which to avoid.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Recorded conversations between Erika Theron and Rykie van Reenen, cassette no.1 (transl.).

⁸⁷ Interview, Collins; interview, Helm.

⁸⁸ Interview, Joubert.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* See also interview, McKendrick; interview, Wiechers; interview, De Villiers.

Given these traits and the fact that for several years after her retirement she continued to be associated with the department for the production of the journal, the position of her successor was not easy.⁹⁰ In 1977 she wrote a short editorial in the journal about the need for the elderly to know when to step aside with grace to make way for young blood,⁹¹ and since she reproduces this reflection in *Sonder Hoed*, one may assume that she thought the sentiments were of some importance. But she does not seem to have been able to follow her own advice⁹²

Even beyond her own department, she had a reputation for being exacting and intimidating. In his tribute on the occasion of the conferment of her honorary doctorate from Stellenbosch, S.P. Cilliers referred to this reputation:

The high standards that she always set for herself, became even higher for her colleagues and personnel. Like Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Erika Theron was in many ways an 'Iron Lady'.⁹³

It was evidently an image which found resonance. The Chairman of the Department of Social Work at the University of the Western Cape also referred to her as the Maggie Thatcher of the social work scene. He had encountered her at various official events and professional meetings and says that she was indeed formidable.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Interview, De Villiers.

⁹¹ Erika Theron, 'Die Vasklouende Bejaarde', editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 13, 3 (August 1977), pp.162-163.

⁹² Interview, De Villiers; interview, Rens.

⁹³ S.P. Cilliers, 'Heildronk by Gradedagnoenmaal op Prof. E. Theron, D. Phil. Honoris Causa', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 21, 1 (March 1985), p.5. Cilliers, was Head of the Department of Sociology, University of Stellenbosch.

⁹⁴ Interview, Kotze. See also discussion above about her relationship with the Department of Social Science at the University of Cape Town.

Nevertheless, she could be the most encouraging of teachers, the most caring and steadfast of friends and sponsors to chosen individuals. Hendrien Lambrechts, later head of the ACVV⁹⁵ is mentioned by several associates as having enjoyed such a close relationship with Theron. Theron was promoter of her doctoral thesis which was published by promoter and student jointly, and they co-operated in many ways to the advantage of the social work department and the ACVV.⁹⁶

However the person who was to become Theron's closest companion for some 30 years was Annette Muller who joined her department as a technical assistant in 1957, seemingly with a scholarship from the ACVV which guaranteed her salary for five years. She was promoted to lecturer in 1960.⁹⁷ Muller was widely regarded as brilliant and charming and she undoubtedly had the potential to go far in her career. Ina Rens said of her, '*Annette was 'n magical mens*'.⁹⁸ Theron and Muller not only worked together on numerous projects but shared many other interests including the cinema, theatre, opera and travel. They had a weekend home in Hermanus where they loved to walk and Theron to swim and potter in the garden. They travelled together extensively both within the country and abroad. Muller writes that 'Dr. Erika had a soft spot for London and her "second fatherland", West Germany'.⁹⁹

By all accounts it was a deep attachment, but one that was to cause considerable heartache for Theron in the long term. Muller developed an addiction to alcohol which over time led to increasingly erratic behaviour. Theron remained loyal, caring and supportive. She removed

⁹⁵ H.C. Lambrechts took over from Ida Theron as secretary of the ACVV in 1942 and was one of MER's inner circle, which included Theron. See Steyn, *MER*, p.419.

⁹⁶ Lambrechts and Theron, *Vrouevolksdiens*. Refer also interview, Joubert; interview, McKendrick.

⁹⁷ US: Minutes of the Senate, Vol.XXXV, p.82. Report of the Executive Committee appended to Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Senate, 16 November 1956; *ibid.*, Vol.41, p.148, Meeting 1 April 1960.

⁹⁸ Interview, Rens; interview, McKendrick; interview, Wiechers.

⁹⁹ Muller, 'Erika Theron: 'n Vrou van Min Woorde en Baie Dade', *Die Huisgenoot* (4 June 1976), p.15 (transl.).

Muller from Stellenbosch to Hermanus for periods when the problem was acute. She arranged counselling and rehabilitation. She tried to protect Muller from gossip and to keep her alcoholism secret. She endured the oscillation between 'good' times and bad.¹⁰⁰ But it must have been at considerable emotional cost to her.

¹⁰⁰ See for example documents in possession of author: letters, Erika Theron to Marinus Wiechers, 18 April 1982 and 22 May 1982.

There were clearly many embarrassing scenes and at least one other friendship was compromised by Annette's actions. There were even brushes with the law – for example when Muller was involved in a drunken driving incident. In a small university town such as Stellenbosch it was almost impossible to keep such matters hidden. For Theron, a former mayor of the town and former professor at the university – by the 1980s a public figure on a wider stage – the situation must have been extremely difficult.¹⁰¹ Yet she did not abandon the relationship. In confidential correspondence she wrote that support of Muller was probably her last and most difficult task in life (*'Seker my laaste en swaarste job in my lewe'*).¹⁰² Marinus Wiechers became a close confidante of Theron during this time and extended his friendship and support to Muller.¹⁰³ He describes a conversation with Theron after a visit to Muller, who was being treated in a clinic in the Transvaal at the time:

One night when I drove her back to the airport I said, 'Doctor, isn't it ironic – you always resisted 'casework' and now you have one case which you can't solve. It was the only time I ever saw Erika crying.'¹⁰⁴

It must indeed have felt like a tragic failure for someone like Theron – someone who believed in her own ability to make things happen through sheer determination; someone who believed that social problems could be eliminated by science; someone who had trained generations of social workers to deal with alcoholism and its consequences.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Linie Leath, domestic worker employed by Theron for many years, Stellenbosch, 1 August 1997; interview, Wiechers; interview, Van Reenen; interview, De Villiers.

¹⁰² Document in possession of author: letter Erika Theron to Marinus Wiechers, 16 February 1982 (transl.).

¹⁰³ Document in possession of author: letter, Annette [Muller] to Marinus and Mrs. Wiechers, 29 May 1984 written from the Erica [rehabilitation] Centre; document in possession of author: greetings card, Annette [Muller] to Marinus Wiechers; interview, Wiechers.

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Wiechers.

Van Reenen also referred to an occasion when she was expressing sympathy with Theron over the difficulty of dealing with Muller's illness and Theron said 'with a kind of softness', 'isn't that why we are on this earth – to help one another?'.¹⁰⁵ Theron seems to have accepted the responsibility for Muller as a service willingly undertaken. She must have been disappointed when her protégée ultimately became unable to retain her place at the university, but according to Wiechers, she privately sponsored other employment for her. Wiechers says that one of Theron's last concerns before her death was over what was to become of Muller.¹⁰⁶

Despite her somewhat mixed reputation for her relations with members of her own department at Stellenbosch, and occasionally with students, Theron's ability as a lecturer and academic leader is almost universally acknowledged. She remains a towering figure in the legends of the social work academy. To quote from a memorial lecture delivered by one of her former students:

At our university class reunion 40 years on in 2002, 16 of us sat at breakfast after church in the Stellenbosch Botanical Gardens and reminisced. Each took a turn to tell a story from our student days involving Erika Theron. Every single story reflected awe.¹⁰⁷

Academic Citizen

The energy and initiative that Theron poured into running her department at Stellenbosch was equalled in her service to the wider social work fraternity. With a few exceptions she was greatly admired by her colleagues, from different ideological backgrounds, for her tireless efforts to protect and develop the social work discipline and the profession, both nationally and internationally. As Brian McKendrick put it, 'her greatest detractor cannot deny [that] she made an indelible impression that is still affecting [social work] to this day'.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Van Reenen.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Wiechers. According to Leath, Muller died of an alcohol-related accident in her home, a few years after Theron's death. See interview, Leath.

¹⁰⁷ Collins, 'Erika Theron, George Bernard Shaw and Social Action'.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, McKendrick.

One of Theron's most valuable contributions to the development of social work in South Africa is her creation of an academic journal for social work educators and social workers. This was the outcome of a long-standing ambition to carry through the vision of Verwoerd. It had been on the agenda of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference, minuted under a heading 'Methods of further Propaganda' and it was noted that a portion of the journal should be made available to serve the committee. For reasons that are not spelled out, it was also decided that the journal should be issued as a private enterprise by Verwoerd and not linked to the committee.¹⁰⁹ It was typical manipulation and was clearly not driven entirely by academic and professional objectives, as Theron would later represent it. In the event, Verwoerd's journal never got off the ground. The journal that did emerge from the heirs to the 1934 National Conference, titled *Volkswelstand*, did so under the auspices of the reconstituted 1939 committee, the Instituut vir Volkswelstand.¹¹⁰ Under the editorship of the conservative Geoff Cronjé, it propagated an increasingly exclusive and indeed racist view of social reality. From 1941, when the Instituut was taken over by the FAK, it became an Afrikaans policy publication ('*Afrikaanse beleidsblad*') and was ultimately absorbed by the FAK's mouthpiece, *Inspan*.¹¹¹ *Volkswelstand*, which fell so far short of the Continuation Committee's plans for an independent, bilingual professional journal, seems to have been forgotten in later years when Theron's *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* was frequently referred to as the first journal for social workers.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ INCH: PV93, 1/67/6, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of the 1934 National Conference], 17-18 July 1935.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, PV202, II/2/2/1/1/1, letter, Secretary [of the *Instituut vir Volkswelstand*] to the Secretary, Department of Welfare, 23 November 1939.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, II/2/1/1/5, letter G. Cronjé to the Secretary of the FAK, 22 April 1942.

¹¹² Theron herself corrected the misconception in an editorial note thanking the Vice Chancellor for his motivation for her honorary doctorate from the University of Stellenbosch. See 'Baie Dankie', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 21, 1 (March 1985), p.8.

What Theron did recall, was Verwoerd's plan as set out in 1936 in a 'Memorandum on the Need and Possibility of Commencing a Journal of Social Service'. When the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work (JUC)¹¹³ began to express concern about the declining standards and viability of the publication issued by the National Board for Social Research,¹¹⁴ Theron took the decision to act rather than simply to talk. With the Verwoerd outline in mind she launched *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* in 1965. Colleagues in her department wrote later:

[We] clearly remember her announcement in 1964 that we were going to publish *a professional journal*, because as usual, this announcement was made without the slightest hint of hesitation or apprehension ... we know her as a person of vision and unshakable faith; someone who can still go on ahead at top speed when those around her are yearning for a breather. This is why, when asked by Prof. Theron to do something, no matter what, one invariably says *yes*, because it would never enter one's mind to *refuse!*¹¹⁵

¹¹³ A body formed to co-ordinate advancement of the disciplines of sociology and social work. See discussion below.

¹¹⁴ See for example INCH:PV605, Minutes of the 8th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 6 June 1956; *ibid.*, Minutes of the 10th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 5 June 1958.

¹¹⁵ 'Editorial', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), p.226.

According to Theron, the initial publication ‘was made possible by a contribution from SANLAM,¹¹⁶ and one interviewer claims that Theron bore part of the costs herself.¹¹⁷ Subsequently, as the journal built a wide subscription base and attracted advertising revenue, it became self-supporting. A guest editor on the occasion of the journal’s twenty-first birthday remarked on the importance of this; being able to publish without sponsorship, the journal had been able to retain its independence.¹¹⁸ It remains the only accredited South African journal dedicated to the discipline and profession of social work. It is a bi-lingual, quarterly, and in 1985 while Theron was still editor, 2000 copies were produced per edition.¹¹⁹ Theron wrote most of the leading editorials herself, alternately in English and Afrikaans. In an interview in 1976, she claimed that no edition had ever appeared late until the extreme pressure of the last phase of the Theron Commission had caused a delay.¹²⁰ In all it is a remarkable record.

¹¹⁶ ‘Editor’s Page’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 1, 1 (1965), p.2.

¹¹⁷ Interview, De Villiers.

¹¹⁸ Alice Barry, editorial, ‘Congratulations’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 21, 1 (March 1985), p.2.

¹¹⁹ ‘Motivering vir die Toekenning van ’n Eredoktorsgraad aan Prof. Erika Theron’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 21, 1 (March 1985), pp.4-8.

¹²⁰ *Die Burger*, 18 June 1976, ‘Ons Gaan Kyk’ by Scholtz.

Of the 2000 copies, approximately 100 were distributed overseas where they stood up to

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¹²¹ 'Foreign Affairs', *Social Work Today*, 1, 4 (July 1970) quoted in 'As Others See Us!', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 7, 1 (March 1971), pp.29-31.

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¹²² Submissions from the *Maatskaplike Werkersvereniging van Suid Afrika* were published regularly, including an extract from its constitution which sets out its exclusive white membership policy. See *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 4, 1 (March 1968), p.43. See also, for example, G. Albertyn, 'Die Kleurlingbevolking en Maatskaplike Werk', *Social Work/ Maatskaplike Werk*, 1, 4 (September 1965), pp.134-135. This article discusses the view that the coloured community had a totally different culture from the white community and that a 'coloured social work pattern' needed to be developed.

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Republic of South Africa, land of our fathers, land of our children and their children – how proud we are to serve you ... You provide our happiness, our health and our life force. In your lap we find our final rest ... On this day we pledge to you our dedication and love, and if necessary, the greatest sacrifice that a man can offer.¹²³

¹²³ H.F. Verwoerd, speech 1964, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2 ,4 (October 1966), facing editorial page (transl.). See also Theron, *Verwoerd as Welsynbeplanner*, (page unnumbered).

Although it could be expected that the death of the Prime Minister would receive appropriate notice, there could be no question of the huge loyalty and respect shown here. Verwoerd is portrayed in heroic fashion, as paying the ultimate price – as giving his life for his country. At this point in its history, the editor of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* stood four-square behind Verwoerd, and the social order that he had created.

Having the same editor over a period of more than 20 years, as did *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, could have been to the detriment of a journal, but no such criticism was levelled by any of the informants interviewed for this thesis. In addition to its role as publisher of scholarly research, the journal was a highly valued medium of communication within the social work professional and teaching fraternity. From the outset it was used by Theron and her team to inform readers on a wide range of issues. Legislation affecting social work, even peripherally, was brought to their notice and debated in the journal. Information on international trends in the profession was disseminated. The JUC and professional associations used the journal to reach their members and in turn readers from a wide social and political spectrum aired their views in its columns. Theron also used the journal to debate welfare policy. She served on numerous statutory bodies and commissions dealing with social work and welfare issues at local and national level, where she was both a critical and constructive voice, and ensured that the wider welfare community was well-informed about issues affecting them. She encouraged social workers to engage in debates and where necessary to mobilise as a pressure group. In this way she played an important role in milestone developments such as the statutory registration of social workers and parity in subsidies for practitioners of different race groups.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ See from among numerous examples, P.J. Nel, 'The National Welfare Act: Act No.79 of 1975', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2, 1 (March 1966), pp.3-7; Editorial, 'Die Nasionale Welsynwet Onder die Soeklig', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 1 (March 1972), pp.2-3, 21; Brian McKendrick, untitled discussion of the Auret Committee of Enquiry on Separate Legislation for the Profession Social Work, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 13, 3 (August 1977), pp.164-170.

Theron exercised her position as editor to comment on diverse topics, from matters of national concern to relative trivia, for example courteous forms of address. Her desire to make social workers think about the world around them was reflected in her habit of reproducing newspaper articles, publishing homilies, and in the *pot-pourri* style of her editorials. On the subject of the country's race policy, she was, however, relatively silent, until the early 1970s. Thereafter, particularly following her experience in the Theron Commission, she used the journal freely for political comment and increasingly to criticise government. Just as Verwoerd had intended to use his journal as more than an outlet for scholarly writing, Theron used her journal to shape and mobilise opinion.

As a single, somewhat arbitrary example, but one which captures something of her editorial style, one could refer to an item headed 'Making Babies'. In this 1981 editorial she refers to a call on the white population by a Mrs. Bessie Scholtz, MP (herself a mother of 11 children, Theron mentions) to produce more children. Theron raps her over the knuckles, saying that overpopulation is a world problem and that everyone should keep the size of their family small. White families are shrinking because of raised living standards, Theron remarks, and suggests that the focus should be on raising the living standards of black and coloured people. 'Besides [she comments], is the manner in which whites are being urged to have more children in good taste?'¹²⁵

¹²⁵ 'Editor's page', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 17, 3 (August 1981), p.142 (transl.). The Afrikaans title of the article was 'Baba Maak'.

The tone of the journal in the latter year's of Theron's editorship is ironical given her early dedication to fulfilling what she recalled of the Verwoerd dream. In its sixth year of publication she referred back to Verwoerd's memorandum, quoting his overt reasons for founding a journal and his views on what should appear in it. She asked readers to join her in taking 'a hard look at the journal'. 'To what extent do our readers think, have we managed during the past 5½ years to attain to Dr. Verwoerd's journal? [*sic*]'¹²⁶ Within a further five years she had broken the thrall with Verwoerd and was producing a very different publication.

¹²⁶ 'Editor's page', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 6, 2 (June 1970), p.54.

In addition to her contribution through the journal, Theron played an important role in promoting social work education through various academic and professional associations. From 1956 she became active in the JUC. This body, initially known as the Inter-University Committee for Social Studies, was formed through the initiative of Edward Batson in 1938. Its main aim was to facilitate the exchange of information and development of social science research and teaching in South African universities.¹²⁷ According to I.J.J. van Rooyen, who at the time of Theron's retirement paid tribute to her for her work on this committee, by the 1950s the committee had become virtually moribund.¹²⁸ This is apparent from the records which reflect only eight meetings in 18 years.¹²⁹ Van Rooyen implies that the revival of the committee was attributable directly to the efforts of Theron. It is not possible to confirm the accuracy of his claim, but it is clear that Theron recognised the potential of the JUC and became a dynamic member. She regularly attended meetings, which were held annually after she became involved. She periodically hosted meetings at Stellenbosch, served on productive sub-committees, participated in debates, introduced new ideas and generally rallied the troops. Under her leadership the committee increasingly made a distinction between the disciplines of sociology and social work and her energies were directed mainly to the advancement of social work. It was not, however, until 1968 that the organisation was reconstituted as the Joint Universities Committee for Social Work.¹³⁰ It is clear, therefore that her contribution was important in the transformation of the committee and the development of the strong and influential organisation which continued to serve social work academics into the present era.

¹²⁷ INCH: Gemeenskaplike (*sic*) Universiteitskomitee vir Sosiale Studie (PV605), Minutes of Meeting [to establish an inter-university standing committee for social science], 24 February 1948. See also Muller, 'Opleiding vir Maatskaplike Werk', p.55.

¹²⁸ Interview with Professor I.J.J. van Rooyen, former Head of Department of Social Work, University of Pretoria; I.J.J. van Rooyen, 'Tributes' (on behalf of the Joint Universities Council for Social Work), *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), pp.276-278.

¹²⁹ INCH: PV605.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, Minutes of the 20th Annual Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 26 July 1968. Sociologists had formed their own association in 1967. See Albert Grundlingh, 'Structures for Sociologists: A Historical Perspective on Associations for Sociologists in South Africa (1967-1991)' in Norma Romm and Michael Sarakinsky (eds), *Social Theory* (Johannesburg, Lexicon Publishers, 1994), p.53.

One of the important roles of the JUC was that of providing representation for the South African social work educators in international forums, in particular the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). According to minutes of a meeting held in 1956, the committee of the JUC noted with thanks that Theron had offered to attend the forthcoming meeting of the IASSW at her own cost.¹³¹ Thereafter she was elected annually by the committee as its representative in the IASSW and in this capacity she served on the Executive Board of the international organisation for over 20 years. She attended meetings and conferences until her retirement, organising partial funding where she could, for example through her own university or the Human Sciences Research Council, but often contriving to combine these duties with private travel and bearing expenses herself.¹³² Theron may, by this stage of her life, have had access to some private financial resources – but the extent of these is not known. They were probably not vast. Apart from travelling regularly, she seems to have lived quite modestly throughout her life and to have been careful about money.¹³³ Nevertheless, the ‘spoiled’ child seemingly continued to be a relatively privileged adult with the means to overcome financial obstacles that might have constrained others. It is noteworthy that she was very generous with friends¹³⁴ and apparently willing to use her own funds for initiatives that she thought important, when other avenues were closed.

¹³¹ INCH: PV605, Minutes of the 8th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Social Studies (*sic*), 6 and 8 June 1956.

¹³² Interview Van Rooyen; Van Rooyen, ‘Tributes’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), pp.276-278; See also Erika Theron, ‘Verslag van die GUK se Verteenwoordigers in die Raad van die IASSW’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 9, 2 (June 1973), pp.133-135.

¹³³ Theron always made careful arrangements about the stipends she received and about reclaiming expenses from the numerous councils, committees, boards and other bodies on which she served.

¹³⁴ See correspondence from MER, who often thanked Theron for gifts, holidays and other generous gestures: for example, US Doc. Centre, MER, 55.KT (70): letter, MER to Erika Theron, 15 October 1964, in which MER writes, ‘Please [*‘assebliefbaas’*] let this be the final present; all the Theron gifts [*‘Trongeskenke’*] are so beautiful and durable that they will see out my days (transl.).

Theron's involvement in the IASSW and her capacity for establishing collegial relationships throughout the world were important for the development of the social work discipline in South Africa. The minutes of JUC meetings reflect numerous instances where she acted as a conduit for exchange of information which helped to keep South African practice abreast of that of countries where the profession was more established. For example she was very much involved in a JUC project to share information on teaching materials, and personally researched what was available abroad, assessing these resources and reporting back to the committee.¹³⁵ According to Theron's colleagues, her 'remarkable ability to extract and translate from international trends that which [had] relevance for South Africa' enriched not only the education and practice of social work but also 'social policies within the country'.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ INCH:PV605, Minutes of the 10th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 5 June 1958; *ibid.*, Minutes of the 11th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 18 June 1959.

¹³⁶ 'Editorial', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), p.226.

Theron also considered it important that South Africa publicise its own work in the fields of welfare and social work. She was always politically aware and was undoubtedly sensitive to a changing climate in South Africa's relations with the world as apartheid policy unfolded from the 1950s. This became more apparent as other African countries began to break colonial ties and as independent states, to obtain recognition for their own professional bodies. These were new voices in the international arena. In these circumstance, as chairperson of the JUC in 1960, Theron was very critical of the Minister of Welfare, J.J. Serfontein, for declining to submit an official report or arrange for an exhibit at an international congress planned for the following year in Rome. 'Valuable contacts are established at such congresses', she pointed out, and it would have 'contributed to the prestige' of South Africa if there were an appropriate presentation.¹³⁷ As a member of the National Welfare Organisations Board (later the National Welfare Board), Theron had been a driving force behind this initiative. At her instigation the Board had approached the Minister with a recommendation in 1959.¹³⁸ She had subsequently delivered a paper on 'The Value of International Conferences for Welfare Work' at the Conference of National and Regional Welfare Boards in March 1960¹³⁹ and must have been frustrated by the tepid response of the Department of Welfare.

¹³⁷ INCH:PV605, Minutes of the [12th] Annual Meeting of the Joint Universities Council for Sociology and Social Work, 9 June 1960.

¹³⁸ NA: Department of Social Welfare and Pensions (VWN), Vol.899, SW176/52/1, Minutes of the 26th Meeting of the National Welfare Organisations Board, 10-12 March 1959.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol.896, SW176/52/2, Minutes of a Conference of the National Board for Welfare Organisations and Representatives of National and Provincial Welfare Bodies.

This incident throws light on Theron's commitment and resolution when she had decided on a course of action. As already mentioned, she had adopted Verwoerd's habit of being quick to recognise opportunities to advance a cause and of using public situations to insinuate her ideas into the minds of her audiences. This in turn placed pressure on authorities to act. She seems to have been determined that South Africa should be well represented at this conference and was prepared to use her growing connections to assist colleagues to attend the event. In 1959 she had already extended an offer to seek discounted rates for travel on an Italian shipping line for members of the JUC who wished to travel to Rome. This she had organised through the Western Province Regional Welfare Board of which she was chairperson.¹⁴⁰ Like Verwoerd, she was outspoken in her displeasure when she was unable to persuade authorities to share her vision.

One of the conventions arising from the JUC meetings was an annual conference of social work teachers. It had become regular practice for the sub-committee on social work, which was chaired by Theron, to break away from JUC proceedings for discussions directly affecting social work education. These meetings were evidently regarded as very fruitful – so much so that after one meeting Theron invited members to her home to continue discussions late into the evening.¹⁴¹ However these meetings were limited to the JUC representatives. In 1967, Theron took the decision to extend the benefit to other interested parties, and to make time available for more intensive exchanges. In that year she convened a general conference of all social work educators. The fact that this conference took place in Kimberley is probably no accident and Theron echoed the high-minded sentiments of the 1934 National Conference, the original 'Volkkongres', when referring to this 'historical gathering':

It comprised a group of people who [were] humbly aware of the importance of their work and who [were] earnestly in search of ways and means to improve their methods in order to train well-equipped and dedicated social workers for their country.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ INCH:PV605, Minutes of the 11th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 18 June 1959.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Minutes of the 14th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 21 June 1962.

¹⁴² 'Editor's Page', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 3, 2 (June 1967), p.58.

Like so many of her endeavours, this became an important institution. Attendance grew rapidly, far exceeding initial expectations. It was particularly valuable for enabling young lecturers and those from newly-established university colleges to become acquainted with their colleagues and to benefit from their experience.¹⁴³ Theron also used her networking skills to procure participation from the National Commission for Social Work (of which she herself was chairperson), and on occasion the National Welfare Board, thereby facilitating interaction between the statutory bodies and the social work teachers. As one of the lecturers put it, they were all ‘indebted to Professor Theron for having created this type of opportunity for regenerating intellectual and professional batteries’.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Professor J.E. Pieterse, ‘Tributes’ (on behalf of the Conference for Lecturers in Social Work), *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), pp.278-279 (transl.).

¹⁴⁴ Frieda la Grange, ‘Conference of Educators in Social Work’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 4, 2 (June 1968), pp.92-94.

While Theron's drive within the JUC and the Conference of Lecturers was contributing to the development of social work teaching and practice, being the official representative of the JUC in the world forum was an increasingly difficult task. From the 1960s the international community began to sanction and isolate South Africa because of its internal race policies. In particular, the Extension of University Education Bill enacted in 1959, which provided for racially-segregated university education, compromised the status of the JUC. After considerable internal wrangling, the newly-created institutions catering for black, coloured and Indian students, were invited to enter discussions with the committee. From 1962 representatives of some of these colleges attended the annual meeting as observers and from 1963 'as an interim measure' full membership was extended for a five-year period, subject to review in 1968.¹⁴⁵ In itself this was a bold move since it ran counter to government policy, but Theron says that she and a colleague approached H.B. Thom, at the time Rector of the University of Stellenbosch, and on his advice they had simply invited participation without attracting problems by seeking official permission.¹⁴⁶ This seems remarkable on the part of Thom. There is no corroborating evidence and Theron's recollections of actions – particularly regarding race relations – did become somewhat rose-tinted in her later years. It is possible that the decision was simply taken within the committee in response to a strong internal lobby. Certainly some of the English-language universities were determined to break down the racial exclusivity of the body.¹⁴⁷

Theron seems to have believed that the nominally multiracial character of the JUC should have legitimised it in the eyes of the international association. She does not show much sensitivity to the inherent contradiction of normal professional relations in an abnormal society. For example, in the early stages of opening up the committee, all representatives of the so-called non-white

¹⁴⁵ INCH:PV605, Minutes of the 14th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 21 June 1962; Minutes of the 15th Annual General Meeting of the Joint Universities Committee for Sociology and Social Work, 20 June 1963.

¹⁴⁶ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.87.

¹⁴⁷ According to Helm, there was bitter internal wrangling throughout the process. See interview, Helm.

university colleges were probably white.¹⁴⁸ Thereafter for several years state regulation banned all racially mixed accommodation. In other words, representatives from different race groups would have had to be put up in separate accommodation when the committee met, until the creation of the so-called 'international hotels' which allowed for social mingling of the races in designated venues.¹⁴⁹ Theron was in the future to decry and defy petty apartheid, but the emergence of this change of heart clearly dates from a later era. In 1958 she wrote to MER from Amsterdam making specific mention of the fact that there were black guests in the hotel in which she was staying, and judging from the nature of her comments, she was very uncomfortable with this. It is a personal letter, and her guard is down, revealing deep-seated prejudice.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ See for example Kogila Adam, 'Dialectic of Higher Education for the Colonized: The Case of Non-White Universities in South Africa' in Heribert Adam (ed.), *South Africa: Sociological Perspectives* (London, OUP, 1971). Adam shows that even a decade after the introduction of the separate ethnic-group university colleges, academic staff were overwhelmingly white and Afrikaner, pp.209-210.

¹⁴⁹ Interview, Helm.

¹⁵⁰ US Doc. Centre, MER, 55.M.1.K.18 (6): Letter Erika Theron to MER, 28 August 1958.

If she ever overcame a sense of otherness in relation to black people, it was not until much later in her life and long after she had withdrawn from the IASSW. During the 1960s and even the early 1970s she almost certainly had reservations about their ability to mix and participate on equal terms in the organisation. Relating an anecdote from this period in her memoirs, Theron talks about a ‘man from Uganda’ who had objected to the South African membership of the IASSW. She goes on to say that the following year the Ugandan had not turned up at the meeting of the Board and was never heard from again. In her blunt fashion she says that she does not know what became of him – ‘Idi Amin probably swallowed him up, the stupid little man!’¹⁵¹ There are numerous other scattered references in the sources which show race-related intolerance, particularly when individuals did not measure up to her standards. Reporting on the last IASSW conference which she attended as the JUC representative, she pointedly expresses an opinion that group discussions had been hindered by the ‘heterogeneous’ nature of the groups, particularly since there had been ‘greater participation by people from developing countries’. According to her, proceedings were slow because of this and discussions lacked substance. In the same report she refers to a paper delivered by a delegate from Ethiopia in scathing terms. Most of its contents should have been familiar even to an undergraduate student, she comments.¹⁵² These were not privately-expressed points of view; they were published commentary.

¹⁵¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.86 (transl.). Theron writes: ‘*Idi Amin het hom seker ingesluk, stomme klong!*’

¹⁵² ‘Conference News’: IAASW: Report by Erika Theron, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 9, 1 (March 1973), pp.34-36 (transl.).

It is therefore reasonable to assume that Theron would have viewed the creation of a multi-racial JUC to some extent pragmatically. Its formation did not necessarily imply any conviction on the part of Theron, as well as several other members, that they were essentially opposed to segregation. Nor did the gesture satisfy the IASSW, and pressure to end the JUC affiliation continued to mount. Not only were there objections from the Scandinavian countries and from newly-emerging African national social work associations, but UNESCO, to which the IASSW was affiliated, appealed directly to the international body to break its ties with South Africa.¹⁵³ According to Katherine Kendall who was secretary general of the IASSW at the time, there were opposing positions on the IASSW Board which helped to preserve South Africa's tenuous connection to the body. There were members who wanted immediate expulsion and isolation of South Africa, but others who supported constructive engagement.¹⁵⁴ Kendall herself favoured 'continuing to listen and talk to the South Africans', which may well have been encouraged by her long-standing friendly association with Theron. She says that Theron was a good representative of the South African profession. She always attended meetings and was scrupulous about co-operation and responding to queries.¹⁵⁵ In a tribute to Theron on behalf of the IASSW in 1972, Kendall was full of praise. Theron was 'conscientious and meticulous', she wrote. She had a 'keen and trained intelligence, a strong sense of responsibility, an enviable depth of professional knowledge and an ability to communicate with others'.¹⁵⁶ According to Kendall, Theron took part in professional discussion in the IASSW but 'never got into the political issues'¹⁵⁷ - which one may assume was strategic on the part of Theron. Neutral observers, friends and foes alike, seem to agree that Theron's influence

¹⁵³ Unisa: Acc.72, 56/1, Report [by Erika Theron] on the 16th International Conference of Schools of Social Work at the Hague, August 1972, and on the Board Meeting of the IASSW (transl.); interview, Van Rooyen.

¹⁵⁴ Interview, Kendall.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Katherine A. Kendall, 'Tributes' (on behalf of the International Association of Schools of Social Work), *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), pp.274-275.

¹⁵⁷ Interview, Kendall.

was important in staving off expulsion, even though some (such as Helm¹⁵⁸) would probably have supported sanctions.¹⁵⁹ Theron had good friends in high places in the international arena and was very plausible in explaining and excusing the South African situation.¹⁶⁰ She regarded international ties as crucial for maintaining standards in South Africa, for exposure to new ‘trends, theories and techniques’,¹⁶¹ and was ready to use all her resources to protect these.

Van Rooyen, who took over from her, lacked her diplomacy and standing in the international arena. In fact it is difficult to understand why he was elected by the JUC. Kendal says that he was a public relations ‘disaster’.¹⁶² However international pressure on South Africa was escalating on all fronts by this time and even Theron could not have prevented sanctions indefinitely. Despite meeting various criteria imposed by the IASSW, and progressive developments within the JUC, including the election of Dr. Moses Bopape as the first black chairman in the late 1970s, membership of the South African association fell into a state of semi-suspension which lasted into the new political era of the 1990s. The South African association was, however, never expelled from the IASSW which in itself was noteworthy.

Organisation and Division in the Social Work Profession

¹⁵⁸ There were deep divisions within the JUC concerning political issues and about race in particular. One interviewer remembers the organisation being almost paralysed by endless debates in which the University of Cape Town and in particular Brunhilda Helm took a strongly anti-apartheid and anti-government position. See interview, De Bruyn.

¹⁵⁹ Unisa: Acc.72, 56/1, Report of the 16th International Conference of Schools of Social Work, 1972: Theron states that only one of nine South African universities who had responded to a questionnaire (eight did not respond) had been in favour of the IASSW breaking its ties with the JUC and extending membership to individual universities ‘that were opposed to government policy’. There is no evidence of which university this was but in the interview with Helm she indicated that she believed that the JUC retained its membership because of ‘lies’ about the situation in South Africa.

¹⁶⁰ Interview, McKendrick; interview, Van Rooyen; interview, Helm.

¹⁶¹ Unisa: Acc.72, 56/1, Report of the 16th International Conference of Schools of Social Work (1972) (transl.).

¹⁶² Interview, Kendall.

Theron's participation in the process of professional organisation of social workers was relatively low key compared with her activity on behalf of social work educators. Her position as member of the National Welfare Board may have militated against overt involvement. It was the professional associations which negotiated with the Board on such matters as terms and conditions of employment of social workers, subsidies and salaries. There was no ban on officers engaged by the Department of Welfare from joining any of the associations. However this had been debated at some length before an open policy was agreed upon and there is little doubt that there was, potentially, a conflict of interests.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, her commitment to the professionalisation of social work, and her belief that community engagement was part of the academic's role and responsibility, ensured that she maintained an interest in developments in this area.

The South African social work profession, as opposed to the lecturing departments, was far less successful in establishing an even nominally viable, single non-racial association within the country, or credibility with the relevant global body, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The formation of a professional association for qualified social workers had been strongly advocated by Verwoerd as far back as 1936, as a means of maintaining standards and asserting professional status.¹⁶⁴ It took a long time for steps to be taken in this direction and when they were, it was not to be as he envisaged.

¹⁶³ NA:VWN: Vol.287, SW47/7/7, memoranda and correspondence.

¹⁶⁴ Verwoerd, 'Maatskaplike Werkers in Suid- Afrika en Hulle Opleiding' in *Report of the National Conference on Social Work, 1936*, p.95.

Black social workers were possibly the first group to take the initiative of organising themselves. In May 1946 they formed an association which, after various name changes, became the South African Black Social Workers Association.¹⁶⁵ It was almost a decade later, in 1951, that the Maatskaplike Werkersvereniging van Suid-Afrika was established, formed out of four regional associations.¹⁶⁶ Membership of this association (and its forerunners) was limited to white social workers, which was reflected in a change of name in 1970 to the Blanke Maatskaplike Werkersvereniging van Suid-Afrika.¹⁶⁷ Theron was instrumental in the creation of a professional association for coloured social workers. During a refresher course held at the University of the Western Cape in 1964, she urged workers to establish their own association and provided support in the founding of this regional association under the name of the Maatskaplike Werkers-Bond van Wes-Kaapland (later reconstituted as an open association known as the Africa-South Social Workers Association). On the second anniversary of the association she was invited as guest speaker and was obviously held in esteem.¹⁶⁸ On the one hand she showed herself to be concerned to see the interests of coloured social workers protected and advanced; on the other hand she showed no reservations about this expression of ‘separate development’.

¹⁶⁵ NA: VWN, Vol.287, SW47/7/10, ‘Notes for the Minister’s Speech at the Occasion of the Third Biennial Conference of the Non-European Social Workers’ Association’; *ibid.*, SW47/7/2, ‘Bulletin of the Non-European Social Workers’ Association’, no.1, August 1946.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol.SW47/7, Circular letter from the chairman of the Social Workers Association of South Africa, 27 September 1951. The first regional (white) association was apparently that of the Orange Free State formed on 25 September 1946. See *ibid.*, Vol.287, SW47/7/3, letter, secretary, Vereeniging van Maatskaplike Werksters(ers) van die Vrystaat to Department of Welfare, 22 May 1947.

¹⁶⁷ J.A. Cerff, ‘Die Blanke Maatskaplike Werkers-Vereniging van Suid Afrika’ (M. Social Science dissertation, University of the Orange Free State, 1979), p.24.

¹⁶⁸ Cerff, ‘Blanke Werkers-Vereniging’, pp.115-116. See also ‘Notes and News’, ‘Die Wes-Kaapse Bond vir Kleurling Maatskaplike Werkers’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2, 3 (September 1966), p.124.

A liaison committee was formed to allow for interaction between the various associations, later followed by a co-ordinating agency, but this body functioned with limited success. In the highly-charged political climate of the mid-1970s the black association withdrew from the co-ordinating body on the grounds that it was an artificial creation ‘clearly calculated at using SABSWA as a stepping stone by White social workers to escalate into the international arena’.¹⁶⁹ At the same time various branches of the white association were attempting to have racial restrictions on membership lifted, but without success. As a result, individual branches detached themselves and formed new racially open associations in a number of regions, in defiance of government restrictions. The first of these was the Southern Transvaal Branch which broke away in terms of a motion by two lecturers from the University of the Witwatersrand, McKendrick and Isadora Hare.¹⁷⁰ By 1976 the co-ordinating council of associations was effectively defunct and membership of the IFSW ceased.¹⁷¹

An open association called the Society for Social Workers in South Africa was established in May 1980, but the whites-only association doggedly carried on functioning in parallel (despite a reversion to its original neutral name). Periodic attempts at rapprochement, followed by renewed fragmentation was to be the pattern of social worker associations,¹⁷² leaving the profession isolated and in disarray until, and beyond, the 1990s.

Theron’s personal attitude to the racial fragmentation of the professional associations is not on record. While lecturers from other universities, particularly the Universities of the Witwatersrand

¹⁶⁹ ‘News from Professional Societies, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 11, 1 (March 1975), pp.58-59.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Readers’ Comments’, letter from Isadora R. Hare and Brian W. McKendrick, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 9, 2 (June 1973), p.136.

¹⁷¹ Cerff, ‘Blanke Werkers-Vereniging’, p.326.

¹⁷² ‘Briewebus’, letter from H. Rose (University of the Western Cape), *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 16, 2 (June 1980), pp.124-125; ‘News from Professional Societies’, ‘Establishment of the Society for Social Workers of South Africa’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 16, 3 (August 1980), pp.195-196.

and Cape Town, were active in the affairs of the associations and took principled stands against segregation in the profession, she remained aloof. She certainly did not show public disapproval of the whites-only association, as did McKendrick, Hare and Helm, for example. In 1975 she made a donation towards a merit award, which was to be administered by the white social workers' association. The presentation was known as the Erika Theron Award for 'a social worker who has distinguished him-/herself in the field of the profession as such, the Professional Association or the wider field of welfare work'.¹⁷³ In 1984 she is mentioned as being the only honorary member of this association.¹⁷⁴ It is apparent therefore, that at least she did not choose to disassociate herself from this exclusive society.

¹⁷³ 'News from Professional Societies', 'Die Blanke Maatkaplike Werkers-Vereniging van Suid-Afrika', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 11, 1 (March 1975), p.59.

¹⁷⁴ 'News from Professional Societies', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 20, 2 (June 1984).

However, Theron did exercise her influence and play an indirect role in a number of ways, to prevent the liberalisation of professional organisation from being stifled. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* (the contents of which she virtually controlled) published the newsletters of all the associations which chose to submit them. This applied equally to the more vociferous integrated associations and the equally adamant ‘whites only’ association. These newsletters and memoranda were published without comment, providing a record of the upheavals within the profession – this despite mutual acrimony and the radically anti-government tone of some. It can, therefore, be argued that she at least facilitated the debate and allowed the voices for change to be heard.

It was only after her re-evaluation of the position of coloured people in South African society in the 1970s, that Theron publicly took a position on the question of mixed associations. The Theron Commission included in its report in 1976, a recommendation (no.9) that professional and scientific associations should be free to decide whether or not to admit whites and coloureds (the commission was precluded from commenting on black affairs). It was a not a radical recommendation, but like many of the commission’s findings it marked a retreat from the total segregation of extreme apartheid.¹⁷⁵ Since it was one of the recommendations accepted by government, it created the potential for the legal formation and recognition of multi-racial professional societies. The mandate of the commission to limit its deliberations to matters affecting the coloured population makes it difficult, however, to draw conclusions as to its attitude, or that of its chairman, to open societies that included black members. It seems likely that in the 1970s, Theron had not yet accepted the implications of such a step – in common with many Afrikaner nationalists, she was still committed to all the ramifications of apartheid in relation to black Africans.

¹⁷⁵ For discussion of the Theron Commission see Chapter Five.

For much of her career at Stellenbosch, Theron's attitude to professional relations with coloured people seems to have been cast in a conservative mould, based on notions of inherent differences in culture and 'levels of development'. There is evidence of change over time, but the sources do not make it possible to trace this evolution with any certainty. In her early professional career, the fundamentally racist and segregationist assumptions that she had displayed in her work for the SAR remained evident. In this, she was in the mainstream of thinking in the Afrikaans-language universities at the time, in opposition to the English-language institutions. Indicative of this was the heated debate over mixed conferences. The National Conference on Post-War Planning of Social Work held in 1944 under the auspices of the UP government allowed for attendance of 'non-Europeans' and discussion of social problems of all race groups. During the planning stages, the conservative Afrikaans University of Pretoria raised the strongest objections on the grounds that 'it was not in the interests of the Europeans that Non-Europeans should be present when such matters as the degradation of poor whites was discussed. Further it was against the interests of Non-Europeans that they should have their special problems take a subordinate place in the general discussion'.¹⁷⁶ Geoff Cronjé had taken it upon himself to write to the senates of all universities concerning the matter. In response he received support for the Pretoria position from the senates of Stellenbosch, the then Orange Free State and Potchefstroom. On the other hand John Gray, Head of the Department of Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand, threatened to resign from the general committee of the conference if the decision were taken not to admit 'non-Europeans'.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ NA:VWN, Vol.109, SW17/41/1, Notes on the Second Meeting of the General Committee for the SA Conference on Post-War Planning of Social Work. Professor Samuel Pauw attended the meeting on behalf of Cronjé who was unavailable (transl.).

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

In the event the conference proceeded on the basis of the original planning, including all race groups (although under elaborate conditions which guaranteed virtual segregation). It was duly boycotted by Pretoria and ‘the majority of the Afrikaans-speaking charitable organisations, universities and poor relief committees [of the Afrikaner churches]’.¹⁷⁸ In his reply to the invitation to attend the conference, the rector of Potchefstroom University College declined on the grounds that it would undermine the ‘national’ character of the conference if ‘non-whites at this stage of development take part in discussion and policy-decisions in relation to interests of the white population’.¹⁷⁹

When the next national conference on social work was planned for 1951, the battle was resumed, but against a different political background. A policy of separation of the races in all spheres was in process of being imposed under the NP government which had assumed power in 1948. The conference was held at the University of Cape Town, and at the time the Minister of Welfare announced that a separate conference would be organised in due course to look into welfare issues affecting coloured people. No mention was made of black welfare. At the conference, Batson was scathing about its exclusive ‘European only’ character, causing a storm of debate among delegates. Having alluded to the fact in his opening address, he returned to the issue in his paper:

So long as we live on the same earth, our social problems will be in a large measure common to us all. And, if we are to achieve anything that may be rightly called social welfare, some body of persons must concern itself with the needs of us all ... Let it be assumed that we have a conference to deal with European social welfare and another to deal with Non-European social welfare. Each will come to its own conclusions and report its own findings. Where and how are we going to consider the relations between the two? Are we going to have a third conference to consider the relations between the findings of the first two? And if so, who is going to comprise the personnel of this co-ordinating conference ... who is going to be available for discussions of *national* social welfare?¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, memorandum, Secretary for Welfare to Minister of Welfare, 12 October 1944 (transl.).

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol.110, SW17/41/2, letter, the rector, Potchefstroom University College for Christian Higher Education to Secretary for National Welfare, 10 August 1944 (transl.).

¹⁸⁰ [Verslag van die] ‘Nasionale Konferensie insake Maatskaplike Werk, Kaapstad 1951’.

Since Batson had been the chairman of the organising committee for the conference, it must have been particularly galling to have had to comply with a stricture that was contrary to his university's policy as well as his own principles.¹⁸¹ Theron was also a co-opted member of this conference committee but there is no record of whatever debates may have taken place within the committee in advance of the conference, nor during the conference. That the personal and professional animosity between Theron and Batson was growing seems evident from other sources. Helm, whose relationship with Batson seems to have been very similar to that of Theron with Verwoerd, refers to an incident in which Theron 'snubbed' Batson in a blatantly rude manner¹⁸² which would suggest that although all three necessarily interacted in a professional capacity, relations were very strained.

At another conference, held in 1954, Batson again indulged in some sniping at government policy when discussing specialisation in the social work profession. Having come out against specialisation in general he referred to 'the most controversial point ... should South African social workers be specialised ethnically? Should we distinguish two, or four, or eight racial fields of social work? And, if so should we distinguish a corresponding number of sub-species of social workers?' On this occasion, Theron gave some evidence of her own views on the question of segregation within the profession, at the same time suggesting that 'local' people had a better understanding of the situation than 'outsiders' (such as Batson):

... [with reference to] social work among the 'Bantu' and Coloureds. I believe that our methods as they have been adopted and adapted to conditions in our country, cannot in all respects be applied when we work with those population groups in the stage of development in which they are currently. As a Bolander¹⁸³ I know that although the Coloureds have the lifestyle of the whites, in the professional field we often have to speak 'another language' ...¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Batson states in his welcoming address that UCT had hoped 'to be host to an even more widely representative gathering', p.1. See also *The Cape Times*, 21 August 1951, 'Scope of Coming Welfare Talks. Restricted mainly to Europeans. Batson Expresses Disappointment'.

¹⁸² Interview, Helm. It is a matter of common knowledge, however, that Batson had difficult relations with many colleagues including those at his own university.

¹⁸³ Inhabitants of the Western Cape are referred to as 'Bolanders'. It is a term which sometimes carries connotations of 'insider' status.

¹⁸⁴ 'Inter-University Committee for Social Studies: Report of Conference on Social Work

This view is consistent with other evidence of her support for the general ideological position of the NP as will be discussed in later chapters and she does not at that time seem to have recognised any fundamental inconsistency between this position and what could be expected to be the universalist values and tenets of the social work profession.

Nevertheless, in many ways, in relation to coloured people Theron demonstrated a will to assist in overcoming the development handicap which she believed existed¹⁸⁵ and her desire to serve the social work profession extended equally to coloured workers. As chairperson of the Western Cape Regional Welfare Board, from 1962 she organised an annual welfare conference for ‘coloured welfare leaders’.¹⁸⁶ It was at such a conference that she had encouraged coloured social workers to organise as a professional association and continued to support and advise them. The conferences became increasingly popular and well-attended and it must be assumed that they were regarded as very useful. According to the guest speaker at the 11th conference, the papers delivered at the conference had become more substantial and of a higher quality over the years and in his view ‘this encouraging state of affairs [could] be attributed to Professor Theron and her Board’.¹⁸⁷ These meetings, however, clearly also served as a platform to rationalise government policy. Theron invariably invited guest speakers from state organs with which she was involved. For example in a memorandum from the ‘regional representative’ of the Department of Coloured Affairs and Planning it is observed that the Secretary for Planning, Dr. P.S. Rautenbach, had used his paper, *Beplanning van Nuwe Groeipunte* to calm coloured anxieties about plans for a coloured homeland (*Kleurlingstan*) in the wake of a ‘poisonous’ article in the *Sunday Times*.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ See for example a tribute to Theron written in 1972, in which it is stated: ‘South Africa has a complex welfare machinery to deal with the welfare needs experienced by the different population groups which are, in Dr. Theron’s view, at different stages of development.’ Ceciel Muller, ‘Come, Everyone, Lend Her Your Ears’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), p.251.

¹⁸⁶ WCA: Department of Planning (CDC), Vol.691, 5/4/2/1, circular letter from Erika Theron, Chairman, Western Cape Regional Welfare Board., 12 July 1972.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, L. Fouché, paper delivered at The 11th Conference for Coloured Welfare Leaders, 18 August 1972.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, memorandum from the Regional Representative [Department of Planning and Coloured Affairs], Cape Town, 22 August 1972, no addressee.

Theron was later to claim that her eyes were opened to the awful consequences of apartheid only during her work on the Theron Commission. This strangely blinkered position is difficult to understand given her evidently regular contact with coloured people and especially with social workers who daily confronted the problems of the displaced, alienated coloured community. Nor can it be argued that Theron fell into the trap of which social workers are sometimes accused: that of applying their skills to promote adaptation and conformity to the norms of society, thereby maintaining the status quo. That would not have been consistent with her position that it was a crucial part of a social worker's role to be critical of society, to challenge and to change. There remains only the conclusion that at least into the early 1970s Theron was genuinely convinced that apartheid was the correct policy for the country. As Giliomee puts it, 'bedazzled by Verwoerd, many Afrikaner intellectuals for a decade believed with some fervour that apartheid was the restructuring of South Africa according to a vision of justice: all with a view to lasting peace, progress and prosperity'.¹⁸⁹ This was undoubtedly where Theron stood.

Doyen of Social Work

Within the limitations of her belief in the benefits of separate development, Theron nevertheless served social work education and the profession with integrity and drive. She was widely recognised by her peers as an exceptional academic leader and by extension, her department at Stellenbosch held a dominant position in the field of social work education.¹⁹⁰ Since she trained a substantial number of the next generation of social work academics, her influence was profound and lasting. But she did not confine herself to enjoying comfortable tenure within her university. She demanded of herself and of her students that they apply themselves to making a difference in society.

¹⁸⁹ Hermann Giliomee, 'The growth of Afrikaner Identity' in Heribert Adam and Hermann Giliomee (eds), *The Rise and Crisis of Afrikaner Power* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1979), p.118.

¹⁹⁰ See for example interview, McKendrick; interview, De Vos; interview, Kotze.

Theron had retired from the lecture halls by the time that the radical intellectual challenge began to influence South African scholarship significantly. There is little in the sources to indicate what her views were concerning Marxist analysis¹⁹¹ which gained a foothold in other disciplines such as history and sociology, nor what she thought of overtly politically-committed research. She would almost certainly have rejected the challenge to the notion of value-neutrality with which these perspectives were associated.¹⁹² She continued throughout her life to uphold scientific objectivity as the path to truth and understanding, and to meeting the needs of human society. Nevertheless, as her attitudes concerning the social and racial order within South Africa gradually shifted, she worked for new goals with the same vigour as she had pursued old ideals.

¹⁹¹ See Chapter Five and the debate about the concept of ‘structural poverty’ in the coloured population which suggests that Theron was not hostile to the insights provided by structural analysis, for example, without necessarily accepting its ideological implications.

¹⁹² For discussion of the intellectual debates and scholarly alignments of the 1970s and 1980s, with particular reference to sociologists, see Grundlingh, ‘Structures for Sociologists’ in Romm and Sarakinsky (eds), *Social Theory*.

In her later years, a number of institutions recognised the important role that Theron had played in advancing the social work discipline and profession across a wide field, from coloured community halls to world forums. In 1972 the Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns bestowed a medal of honour upon her for the advancement of social work,¹⁹³ and the honorary degree conferred on her by the University of Port Elizabeth was also ‘in recognition of her pioneering work in elevating social work to the level of scientifically oriented profession’.¹⁹⁴ In 1981 she received the Claude Harris Leon Foundation¹⁹⁵ award for her ‘lifelong pioneering work in the training of social workers and the elevation of the profession as a whole as well as for [her] untiring effort to improve the standards of living of the less privileged people ...’.¹⁹⁶ The Federale Vroueraad bestowed an award of honour upon her in 1983 ‘in recognition of her contribution in the field of welfare in the interests of our Afrikaner women’s associations and in particular for the contribution in respect of social work’.¹⁹⁷ Citations for her honorary degrees at the University of the Western Cape and at her Alma Mater, Stellenbosch, also included among her long list of achievements, commendation for her role in the training and professionalisation of social work.

As a lasting memorial of her commitment to the advancement of social work, and particularly to coloured social workers, Theron left an endowment (the bulk of her estate) in her will to fund post-graduate study in social work. Only ‘promising female graduates’ of the University of the Western Cape were to be eligible for these bursaries.¹⁹⁸ For many reasons, Theron truly earned the title which the profession bestowed upon her – South Africa’s ‘Doyen of Social Work’.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ *Die Burger*, 18 September 1972, ‘Akademie Vereer Vyf Grootes’.

¹⁹⁴ *Eikestadnuus*, 2 April 1976, ‘Port Elizabeth Vereer Merkwaardige Stellenbosser’.

¹⁹⁵ The Foundation is a charitable trust which *i.a.* promotes scholarship in the sciences.

¹⁹⁶ ‘A Tribute to Professor Theron’, Editor’s Page, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 17, 1 (March 1981), p.4.

¹⁹⁷ Unisa: Acc. 72, 56/1, letter, secretary of the Federale Vroueraad to Erika Theron, 18 January 1983 (transl.).

¹⁹⁸ Last Will and Testament of Erika Theron, signed 19 September 1990 (transl.).

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Professor S.P. Cilliers, Stellenbosch, 23 April 1999; H.L. Rode,

(Registrar, S.A. Council for Social Work), 'Doyen of Social Work', editorial , *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 26, 3 (1990).

CHAPTER FOUR

COUNCILLOR AND MAYOR: SERVING WHITE STELLENBOSCH

Given the extent of Theron's involvement in the establishment of the local and international social work profession as well as in the welfare structures of the country, it is remarkable that she could find the time to immerse herself in the wide-ranging affairs of local government. A contemporary, who relinquished the post of mayor after a year, claimed that in a town like Stellenbosch a conscientious councillor needed to give the equivalent of two working days per week to these duties. In his view, it was 'too much of a sacrifice to ask of anyone'.¹ Yet Theron made this sacrifice during a critical period in her own professional career and in the development of the town. From the early 1950s she served Stellenbosch as a councillor for 11 years, including spells as deputy mayor and mayor.²

As with all her ventures, Theron spared no effort in meeting her commitments, applying herself with energy and initiative and generally attempting to ensure that talk was translated into action. She says of this experience that she was totally ignorant of council affairs when she took office – she did not even recognise the incumbent mayor when she was sworn in – but that she learned a great deal in these years, about management and about people.³ The experience certainly complemented her developing abilities as a leader and her reputation for getting things done.

¹ *Eikestadnuus*, 15 November 1957, discussion column, 'Stem U Saam? Mnr. John Collins Vra: Is Ons Stelsel van Plaaslike Bestuur Uitgedien?'

² Unless otherwise specified, in this chapter general statements made about prevailing conditions, refer to the period during which Theron was a member of the town council, i.e. 1951 to 1963.

³ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.28.

The skills that Theron learned and the diligence with which she carried out her duties did not, however, serve all of Stellenbosch's people equally well. The leadership qualities that she brought to upgrading facilities, conserving what was of value, beautifying and promoting the town, were applied with equal vigour to segregating and excluding some of its inhabitants from access to its facilities – to removing coloured residents to the outskirts of the town and as far as was legal and practical, to banishing black residents altogether. The zeal with which the council pursued the apartheid ideal under Theron's leadership was to earn Stellenbosch the dubious distinction of even outpacing legislation and serving as a test-bed for government policy. Her term in office was thus of service almost exclusively to white residents of the town. At the same time she contributed to a period of grave disservice to the black and coloured residents.

Entry into Local Politics

Theron joined the council of Stellenbosch in June 1951 having been unopposed in a local bi-election. In a television interview aired in 1984, Theron says that the 'Ratepayers Association' (also referred to as the Civic Association) had decided that the position should be filled by a woman and had combed the town for someone willing to accept nomination.⁴ She creates the impression, therefore, that she was not necessarily a first-choice candidate, and that she was not particularly keen to enter local politics. This may have been true, but equally it may simply be a characteristic projection of a modest image. Theron liked to make fun of herself. She often portrayed herself as unpretentious, inexperienced or even ridiculous in particular situations, as emerges in interviews and in her memoirs. There is abundant other evidence, however, that she was not devoid of pride and vanity, still less of self-assertion. These were qualities that could have positive implications for any cause that she espoused because she liked to see things done well.

⁴ SABCTV, *Profiel (Erika Theron)*, broadcast 22 February 1984. See also, Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.28.

The local newspaper gave an additional reason for her nomination. According to *Die Eikestadnuus*, the backing of the Stellenbosch Civic Association which she enjoyed was linked to a movement to effect change in the town. Theron entered local politics with a particular vision of the future of Stellenbosch. She and the Association were in favour of expanding Stellenbosch as a residential and educational centre, but were opposed to any form of industrialisation that might alter the character of the town.⁵ It was a perspective that was not shared by all Stellenbosch voters. An editorial published in the local newspaper during the previous year sketched the debate between ‘two factions, academic and commercial’ as follows:

The old controversy ... whether Stellenbosch should permit industrial sites to multiply in and around the town has so far not been allayed. [According to the academics] with its universities and schools, the town has cultivated throughout the years an atmosphere of learning which will be shattered when high chimney-stacks disgorge black soot ... [According to the] commercial fraternity large staffs cannot be maintained on an eight month year.⁶

There was clearly an overlap between the Civic Association and the ‘academic faction’⁷ and Theron’s service in the council reflects a faithful commitment to their shared mandate. She recognised the need to promote Stellenbosch, to encourage development and even modernisation within limits. But she was vigilant about any threat to the town’s image as a site of natural beauty, high culture, learning, and historic significance. Stellenbosch represented the maturing self-confidence of Afrikaners and all Theron’s upbringing, education and experience fitted her to serve and take pride in this process.

⁵ *Eikestadnuus*, 29 June 1951, ‘Dr. Theron Lid van Stadsraad’ and ‘Hostel at Stellenbosch. Dr. Theron’s Opinion’.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22 June 1951, editorial, ‘Hasten Slowly’.

⁷ Many members of the Civic Association were academics or were in favour of maintaining the character of Stellenbosch as a university town.

Theron's first years in the council were, however, deeply frustrating. According to her, the management of the town was in the hands of a group of 'fortune hunters' who had controlled the council for a number of years.⁸ The local-election system in force at the time had encouraged this kind of entrenchment of interest groups since only a third of sitting councillors were required to retire in rotation every three years. This made for continuity but no doubt also made councillors complacent and the electorate apathetic. Theron clashed with members of this group from the outset.⁹ In September 1952, recently having been returned for her second year of service, Theron was part of a small coalition within the council which attempted to prevent a long-serving councillor (G.P. Blake, a local businessman involved in the brick-making industry) from being elected mayor. However the dissidents were narrowly out-voted and the entrenched coterie prevailed.¹⁰ For Theron, working with these 'opportunists' became increasingly difficult. In her terms they were rogues ('*skelms*'), who were misusing their positions for personal gain.¹¹

Apart from questions surrounding the integrity of some members of the council, there were fundamental differences over development of the town, which by 1952 had assumed political implications. The fear of ugly 'chimney-stacks' was not the only reason why further industrialisation had become a thorny issue. Equally important was the question of the labour needed to service industry. On the one hand, businessmen were seeking free access to cheap black labour in the towns and on the other hand, the NP government was seeking to reverse the flow of black job-seekers from rural areas. Even during the tenure of the business clique in the council, Stellenbosch was moving towards curbing black influx, but it was Theron's view that individuals were all too ready to make exceptions for their own advantage.

⁸ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2. See also interview, Hannes Fagan.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ WCA: Stellenbosch Municipality (3/STB), 1/3/1/1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 16 September 1952.

¹¹ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2.

Theron remained in the council for a further year but then resigned before her term was up, together with John Collins, a local architect.¹² According to her memoirs she could not recall the specific incident that precipitated the resignation. However minutes of council meetings reflect deep differences of opinion between Theron and the mayor in particular. It seems clear that personalities as well as principles were involved – she later made a point of not attending Blake’s funeral.¹³ But it is also clear that she did not believe that Stellenbosch was being well-served by its councillors and was determined to rally voters to unseat them. It was typical that she resorted to organised activism.

From 1951, regulations governing municipal elections had changed and in terms of the new system instead of rotational retirement, all municipal councillors would be subjected to the electoral process every three years,¹⁴ thus forcing councillors to be more accountable to their constituencies. This provided Theron and the Civic Association with an opportunity in 1954 to try to put an end to the ‘maladministration’ of the town.¹⁵ Before the elections the reformers mounted a campaign for nomination and support of their own candidates. In *Sonder Hoed*, Theron states that the campaign was supported by the local newspaper, the *Eikestadnuus*. She and the editor, Johanna van Graan, were like-minded and on friendly terms.¹⁶ Besides, Theron held a 40 per cent share in the newspaper, which she says had been offered to her by the owners for a nominal sum.¹⁷ The newspaper had its own axe to grind with the council. In December 1951 it had been announced that in future only the mayor and town clerk could make statements to the press about municipal affairs, effectively silencing dissenting voices within the council and obstructing informed reporting. This

¹² WCA:3/STB, 1/1/114, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 15 September 1953.

¹³ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2.

¹⁴ *Eikestadnuus*, 23 March 1951.

¹⁵ *Sonder Hoed*, p.28.

¹⁶ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2.

¹⁷ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.28-29.

was construed as a ‘boycott’ of the press and was not well-received by the paper.¹⁸ In the circumstances, *Eikestadnuus* was enthusiastic in its backing of a new order in the town hall.

¹⁸ *Eikestadnuus*, 21 December 1951, ‘Boycott of Press. No Reports in Future’.

It was characteristic of Theron, disciple of Verwoerd, that she would ensure that she had a sympathetic mouthpiece through which to promote her cause. It was also characteristic that with her energy behind it, the campaign to ‘clean up’ the council was successful even beyond expectation. Ten of the 12 nominees of the Civic Association were elected to the council in September 1954,¹⁹ including a number of Stellenbosch academics. Theron herself gained the second highest number of votes.²⁰ Collins was chosen as mayor in the first term and Theron (unopposed) as deputy mayor, the first female ever to hold this office in Stellenbosch. The councillor who nominated her, J. Winshaw, supported his proposal with the statement that he was convinced that ‘she would have only one goal in view, namely the welfare and progress of Stellenbosch as a whole’.²¹ This is debatable. Stellenbosch ‘as a whole’, included black and coloured residents who would not benefit equally from this ‘progress’.

After only a year, Collins declined a second term due to personal problems and Theron was unanimously elected mayor of Stellenbosch – another ‘first’ for a woman.²² As mayor she became *ex-officio* member of all standing committees and it is evident from the records that she took this seriously. The workload must have been enormous for she took an active part in virtually all meetings. At the end of her first mayoral year (1956) she was nominated and confirmed unopposed for a second term. Both the proposer and seconder were full of praise for the manner in which she had fulfilled her duties. Councillor S. Liebenberg said of her that she was held in the highest esteem in many circles, and that Stellenbosch had benefited from this. It was also noted that she had taken important decisions under difficult circumstances.²³ This was indeed so.

¹⁹ *Sonder Hoed*, pp.28-29; recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2.

²⁰ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/119, Report of the Town Clerk, 14 September 1954.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 17 August 1954.

²² *Ibid.*, 1/1/130, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 6 September 1955; *Eikestadnuus*, 9 September 1955, ‘Stellenbosch Kry Eerste Vroulike Burgemeester. Mnr. Collins Nou Voorsitter van Finansies’.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/142, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 4 September 1956.

With her background in sociology and social work Theron brought considerable expertise to her council work. As can be seen from the municipal records she applied her knowledge and influence to ensuring the welfare of a sector of the townsfolk, but always within the framework of a Verwoerdian South Africa. In the critical years that she served on the council, apartheid society was in process of taking shape, widening and legally entrenching the distance between different ethnic communities in social, economic and political spheres. Theron played an active role in this, yet with all her training and insight into social processes she showed no recognition of the injustices or foresight of the damaging long-term consequences.

Reversing Black Influx

Theron's general attitude to black people probably included a degree of racial prejudice although this is never overtly reflected in the records of Stellenbosch Council proceedings. Of more importance, her perspective on black residents in the Stellenbosch area fell squarely within the so-called 'total apartheid' stream of NP thinking during her years on the council. This is evident from her implacable commitment not only to segregation but ultimately elimination of any black presence in the municipal area.

During the early 1950s there appears to have been some indecision and confusion in the ranks of the NP while the new government found its feet. As *The Cape Argus* expressed it 'even the backroom boys of the National Party [were] divided' on 'how to give effect to its apartheid policy'.²⁴ Deborah Posel has shown that in particular there were differences of opinion within the party concerning black residence in urban areas. On the one hand there was a pragmatic school of thought, mainly with vested economic interests, that regarded a degree of black urbanisation and proletarianisation as necessary. On the other hand some influential opinion-makers in Afrikaner academic and professional circles, in the Afrikaner press and the Dutch Reformed Church adopted a more 'idealised' approach and advocated complete separation of races in all spheres. This entailed

²⁴ *The Cape Argus*, 2 January 1953, leading article, 'The Great Delusion'.

freezing black African urban settlement, progressive extrication from dependence on black labour in urban areas and in the longer term, the reversal of black influx.²⁵ Within Stellenbosch, and particularly under the leadership of the ‘civic’ council, it was this uncompromising vision of apartheid that prevailed.

In terms of the total apartheid view, until the process of replacing black labour was complete, urban black communities would remain in ‘white’ areas only as rightless sojourners at the discretion of white authorities. As Verwoerd put it in a speech before the senate in 1948, NP policy on black urban dwellers demanded that ‘[t]he native in our urban area must be regarded as a “visitor” who will never have equal political rights or equal social rights with whites in their area’.²⁶ This was to be seen within the context of the larger scheme in which ‘negative apartheid’ was supposedly balanced by the ‘positive’ aspects envisaged by its more idealistic proponents. According to the vision propagated widely by apartheid ideologues, although black people were being deprived of rights in proclaimed ‘white areas’ or ‘coloured areas’ they were to be encouraged and assisted to create viable, national communities in the areas set aside for black occupation. In these areas they would enjoy the same rights that were reserved for other groups in their areas. To quote Verwoerd’s 1948 speech again, a ‘determined policy of apartheid’ was ‘the only basis on which the essential nature and future of each race could be protected and made secure through development in accordance with their own national character, capabilities and purpose’.²⁷ This was the idealism which Rykie van Reenen claimed was pervasive in Afrikaner nationalist intellectual circles at the time.²⁸

²⁵ Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961: Conflict and Compromise* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.50-60.

²⁶ A.N. Pelzer (ed.), *Verwoerd aan die Woord. Toesprake 1948-1962* (Johannesburg, Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, 1963), p.8 (transl.).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7 (transl.).

²⁸ Interview, Van Reenen.

Several writers have argued that one important strand in the ideology which inspired these nationalists and underpinned apartheid was the notion of the ‘centrality of nations in God’s creation’.²⁹ Nico Diederichs, for example, argued that the individual can fulfil his or her human potential only within and through the ‘most inclusive human community’, the nation.³⁰ It has been argued that Afrikaner intellectuals who had studied abroad were influenced by the writings of philosophers such as Fichte and Herder as well as more directly by German national socialist ideology.³¹

Brits has suggested, however, that both Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid evolved from local, South African social-historical circumstances rather than being transferred directly from European political philosophies.³² Hermann Giliomee, too, has rejected the notion that there are strong and direct links between Afrikaner nationalism and the origins of apartheid on the one hand, and Nazi ideologies, including race theory, on the other. Scholars based in the northern provinces of South Africa, such as Piet Meyer and Geoff Cronjé who had studied in Germany and who became associated with explicitly racist social theory, had little influence on the conceptualisation of apartheid, in his view. In his article, ‘The Making of the Apartheid Plan’, Giliomee argues that apartheid theory evolved in the Western Cape, influenced particularly by social scientists based at Stellenbosch University, by the Cape National Party and by editors of *Die Burger* newspaper during the 1930s and 1940s. The underlying reasoning, he argues, was ‘squarely in the mainstream of conventional Western racism and imperialism, with a heavy emphasis on paternalism, indirect rule and trusteeship’.³³

²⁹ Hermann Giliomee, ‘The Ideology of Apartheid’ in Pierre Hugo (ed.), *South African Perspectives. Essays in Honour of Nic Olivier* (Cape Town, Die Suid-Afrikaan, 1989), p.84.

³⁰ N. Diederichs, *Nasionalisme as Lewensbeskouing* (Bloemfontein, Nasionale Pers, 1936), pp.17-18, quoted in Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.157.

³¹ See discussions in Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika*, pp.8-81, 88; Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, esp. chapter 8; Aletta Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (London and New York, Verso, 1996), *i.a.* pp.76-84.

³² Brits, *Op die Vooraand van Apartheid*, pp.89-93.

³³ Hermann Giliomee, ‘The Making of the Apartheid Plan, 1929-1948’, *Journal of*

Southern African Studies, 29, 2 (June 2003), pp.373-392. Quotation from p.391.

That Theron had been exposed to elements of neo-Fichtean philosophy in her studies abroad and through her long membership of the OB, as well as in the nationalist and academic circles in which she moved, may be assumed as certain. To what extent, if any, she was influenced by it cannot be said with any certainty.³⁴ Nothing in her writing suggests any such philosophical leaning; but she rarely expressed herself in philosophical or romantic terms. Her admiration for the nationalism of pre-Second World War Germany seems to have been more pragmatic in nature. She identified with the loyalty, pride and protectiveness towards one's own, and resistance to outside domination which was its concomitant. This was very similar to the views expressed by MER about nationhood and national socialism³⁵ and relates to Afrikaner experience of British imperialism rather than racial exclusivism.

In her work on *Deconstructing Apartheid*, Aletta Norval brings a further dimension to the debate, also emphasising local circumstances. She has suggested that the dislocation of Afrikaners in a modernising, industrialising, urbanising South Africa was crucial. For example, 'from the start, the terrain in which the poor white question was formulated and solutions were sought was coupled with that of the 'Native question'.³⁶ This is evident from the brochure released to publicise the 1934 National Conference which opens with a cartoon showing two looming mountains which the nation needs to climb: in the foreground the mountain of the 'poor white question'; beyond and towering above it, the 'Native question'.³⁷ It is a powerful image. As Norval shows, in terms of Afrikaner nationalist discourse of the 1930s and 1940s these linked 'problems' assumed the nature of a threat to the survival and identity of Afrikaners.³⁸

³⁴ See discussion in Chapter One concerning ideological influences on Afrikaner students who studied in Europe.

³⁵ See discussion in Chapter One.

³⁶ Aletta J. Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (London and New York, Verso, 1996), p.18.

³⁷ *National Conference on the Poor White Problem, Kimberley 1934*. (Information brochure) (Kimberley, Diamond Fields Advertiser, 1934), frontpiece.

³⁸ Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*, pp.18-19. Norval argues that the problems were articulated as problems of white survival initially, but by the late 1940s, as a threat

specifically to Afrikaners.

One aspect of this argument relates to the idea of Afrikaners being swamped, overwhelmed by the numbers of a competing black population. Theron had been in the forefront of the campaign to rescue poor whites and had been intensely exposed to arguments that the future of the Afrikaner nation was at risk. Her record as a councillor in Stellenbosch suggests that she was indeed influenced by this vision of Afrikaner vulnerability because of ‘numerical weakness’.³⁹ MER’s portrait of the courageous Afrikaner pioneers, sent to inspire her, the ‘mere handful of whites who tried to tackle the whole, vast South Africa’ undoubtedly also remained with her.⁴⁰ Reinforced by Verwoerd’s dire predictions (see below), as mayor of Stellenbosch she resisted black influx as though Afrikaner survival and identity were indeed at stake – but also coloured survival.

Theron’s attitude to black immigrants in the Boland was no doubt also shaped by her own life experience. Growing up in the South-Western Cape, her contacts with people of other race had been predominantly with coloured people. The flow of black people into urban areas had occurred later than it had in the industrialised interior of the country. Although the migration into the area grew dramatically from the late 1930s, it was off a very low base and was still not in any way comparable with, for example, the Southern Transvaal.⁴¹

³⁹ In an ‘explanation of apartheid’ offered by Jordan Ngubane in 1963 he argues that the Afrikaner was ‘fighting for survival’ in the interior of southern Africa since his ‘numerical weakness exposed him to extinction’: ‘His guarantee of security in this situation was to hold on to whatever was his own with a fierce tenacity ...’. See Jordan Ngubane, *An African Explains Apartheid* (1963) quoted in Hermann Giliomee and Bernard Mbenga, *New History of South Africa* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2007), p.324.

⁴⁰ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.M.1.K.18(1), letter MER to Erika Theron, 7 April 1930 (transl.). This letter is quoted in Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.20-21.

⁴¹ See for example W.W.M. Eiselen, ‘Die Kleurling en die Naturel’ in Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede, *Die Kleurling in die Suid-Afrikaanse Samelewing: Referate Gelewer op die Sesde Jaarvergadering van SABRA* (Stellenbosch, SABRA, 1955), p.16. In the Western Cape black employment rose from 7 915 in 1938/39 to 16 177 in 1945/46 and 28 534 in 1951/52. The comparative figures for Southern Transvaal were 81 689, 130 385, 189 908.

Verwoerd's predecessor in the Ministry of Native Affairs, Dr. E.G. Jansen, expressed the commonly held view that

whatever claim, moral or otherwise, the Natives have in other parts of the Union, they have no real claim to be here in the Western Province at all. It is within the memory of many people today that there was a time that a Native was unknown in the Peninsula.⁴²

⁴² Quoted in Vivian Bickford-Smith, Elizabeth van Heyningen and Nigel Worden, *Cape Town in the Twentieth Century* (Cape Town, David Philip Publishers, 1999), p.174.

This was certainly an exaggeration,⁴³ but it reflects a common Western Province perspective. Speaking specifically of Stellenbosch at a town council meeting in 1952, Danie Craven⁴⁴ remarked that when he had been a student he virtually had never seen a black person in the town.⁴⁵ Craven was three years younger than Theron and would have been a student in a similar period; they would have had much the same experience of the demographics of Stellenbosch. As a result of familiarity with an exclusively coloured working class and the earlier lack of visibility of black people in daily life, in common with many Bolanders Theron no doubt regarded them as recent intruders who had no real rights comparable with those of the white and coloured inhabitants of the region. Accordingly she gave little consideration to their role and their claims in the country as a whole. Her memoirs reflect this clearly. Throughout the book she refers with a certain warmth and familiarity to the 'brown' people who were part of her Tulbagh childhood and with whom she came into contact in later years. But black people form virtually no part of the narrative, until she inserts an article about Elsa Joubert's *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*,⁴⁶ into her final chapter.⁴⁷ She seems only to have woken up to the plight of black people very late in life, which is extraordinary given her exposure during her years in the council. Her Stellenbosch colleague Ben Vosloo says of her that she 'didn't understand anything about the black majority ... she had a limited Western Cape understanding of politics'.⁴⁸ Both Marinus Wiechers and S.P. Cilliers expressed a similar opinion

⁴³ See for example Christopher Saunders, 'The Creation of Ndabeni: Urban Segregation and African Resistance in Cape Town' in Christopher Saunders (ed.), *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, Vol.1, 1984, (Cape Town, the History Department in Association with the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1984), pp.165-193.

⁴⁴ Dr. D.H. Craven (1910-1993), a well-known South African rugby player and administrator. Craven was a member of the academic staff at the University of Stellenbosch.

⁴⁵ WCA: STB, 1/3/1/1, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council in Committee, 4 November 1952.

⁴⁶ Elsa Joubert, *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1978). The book was based on the oral evidence of Joubert's Xhosa housekeeper. This book affected Theron profoundly. See Chapter Six.

⁴⁷ See Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.101-102.

⁴⁸ Telephonic interview with Professor W.B. Vosloo, former Head of the Department of Political Science, University of Stellenbosch, and member of the Theron Commission, 11

that she had a simplistic view of the issues facing South Africa and that she did not see ‘the bigger picture’.⁴⁹

December 1997.

⁴⁹ Interview, Wiechers; interview, Cilliers.

Even her work with SABRA reflects her interest in matters affecting the coloured people rather than the ‘Bantu-problem’.⁵⁰ SABRA was one of the most important institutions in which the implications of the idealised policy of total ‘positive’ apartheid was hammered out. It was formed in 1948 essentially to study and promote the principle of apartheid, and according to Theron, partially to provide a counter-voice to the ‘un-Afrikaans’, South African Institute of Race Relations.⁵¹ Theron was invited to join the body in 1948 and over the years held various offices including that of vice-chairman.⁵² In the 1950s she also frequently represented the Stellenbosch council, which was affiliated to the Bureau, at SABRA meetings.⁵³ She claims that her own involvement was limited, and that ultimately she fell out with other members of the Executive Committee who were at odds with Verwoerd. The ill-feeling related to Verwoerd’s rejection of key recommendations for the development of black homelands as set out in the Tomlinson Report, which went to the heart of total apartheid theory.⁵⁴ Theron told Van Reenen that she could not endure the endless, distasteful criticism of Verwoerd at meetings and eventually absented herself.⁵⁵ She ‘held him in high regard because she had seen the other side of him’.⁵⁶ In *Sonder Hoed* she

⁵⁰ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.45.

⁵¹ INCH: PV202, II/2/1/1/6, letter, C.B. Brink, N. Diederichs, W.W.M. Eiselen, M.D.C. de W. Nel, N.J.J. Olivier, H.B. Thom, B.I.C. van Eeden, J.C. van Rooy and A. van Schalkwyk to G.B.A. Gerdener, 19 November, 1947; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.45; See also Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners*, p.483.

⁵² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.45.

⁵³ WCA: 3/STB, 1/1/1/111, Report on SABRA Congress by Erika Theron, 29 January 1953, appended to Report of the Town Clerk, 3 February 1953 (transl.).

⁵⁴ Report of the Commission for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bantu Areas Within the Union of South Africa under the chairmanship of Professor F.R. Tomlinson appointed in 1949. For discussion of Verwoerd’s attitude to the Commission and its report see Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.515-519; Dan O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press and Athens, Oh., Ohio University Press, 1996), pp.70-71.

⁵⁵ She did, however, remain a member of SABRA and only resigned in the 1970s.

⁵⁶ Recorded conversation between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2 (transl.). Theron was speaking in 1982, by which time Verwoerd’s reputation was that of a dictatorial racist in many quarters. Theron believed that she knew another side of him – the idealist who believed

expresses this somewhat differently for her wider audience. She says that ‘because of [her] former connections with Dr. Verwoerd, [she] maintained a sense of loyalty towards him although [she] could not agree with all his points of view’.⁵⁷ Essentially she admits that her attachment to Verwoerd alienated her from SABRA at this stage.

that apartheid was practicable and moral.

⁵⁷ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p. 48 (transl.).

Although she may not have wished to be associated with any confrontation with Verwoerd, there is much evidence to suggest that in the 1950s and 1960s she in any case accepted the basic tenets of the Tomlinson Report. As a member of the town council, she was directly involved with the moral dilemmas of turning back desperate job seekers and ‘repatriating’ individuals to the economic wasteland of the reserves. She frequently expressed herself on the frustrations of this situation. But at the time she did not reject the policy and its underlying ideology – rather she sought solutions to particular problems in order to carry through Verwoerd’s policy. In her memoirs she says that she was part of a SABRA delegation to Verwoerd in which the Tomlinson Report was discussed and an attempt made to convince him of its merits, although her own presence was related to some other issue and not the report. The lengthy debate turned out to be fruitless, however. Ultimately, she says, Verwoerd was so ‘full of enthusiasm, full of energy, absolutely sure of himself ... that we could make no impact’.⁵⁸ As usual showing the diffidence which she reserved for Verwoerd, in *Sonder Hoed* she attempts to explain and give some credit to Verwoerd’s opposition to the use of ‘outside’ (white) capital to establish industry in the homelands, one of the main sticking points between Verwoerd and SABRA. However she admits with hindsight that the ‘*Sabra-manne* had got it right’.⁵⁹

In the event, the failure of the black reserves to make sufficient progress towards maturing as self-sufficient ‘homelands’ that could support the growing black population and stem the exodus was but one of the challenges to NP policy regarding black urban dwellers. Even before the Tomlinson Report was released in 1954, escalating demands for black labour on farms and in urban areas had already tilted the balance against total apartheid theorists and forced compromises. One such compromise had been the acceptance that a section of the black population had become urbanised and ‘detribalised’ and that it was ‘impractical’ to attempt to expel them from ‘white’ areas. Verwoerd, both as Minister of Native Affairs and later as Prime Minister continued to project a vision of some distant realisation of ‘pure’ apartheid, or total segregation, thereby sustaining its

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, (transl.).

⁵⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.48. For a discussion of the breach in Afrikaner nationalist ranks related to the Tomlinson Commission see John Lazar, ‘Conformity and Conflict: Afrikaner Nationalist Politics in South Africa, 1948-1961’ (DPhil thesis, Oxford, 1987), esp. pp.186-193.

moral foundation. But at the same time he continued to accommodate the variety of interest groups lobbying for access to black labour by providing an urban labour pool.⁶⁰ While the government statements about commitment to 'total separation' became increasingly woolly, and the time-frame extended to 'future generations', confusion and tensions grew within all sectors of the population.

⁶⁰ See Posel, *The Making of Apartheid*, pp.65-73.

Local authorities often bore the brunt of this muddle, as Theron experienced to her cost. Administration of increasingly complex influx control policy and management of the urban black population was substantially in their hands.⁶¹ Even within their own ranks there were differences in the interpretation and application of the rough-hewn legislation of the early 1950s, which led to heated arguments in many forums.⁶² Municipalities were subjected to contradictory demands from their ratepayers on the one hand to reduce the number of black residents, and on the other hand to increase the labour supply; to adhere strictly to regulations, and to make exceptions; to provide adequate housing but halt expansion of the black locations.⁶³ Added to this was the growing disaffection and obstructionism of urban black communities as the NP hastened to push through legislation which would further curtail their rights and opportunities.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.100, 117.

⁶² See for example WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/109, Report of the Technical Advisory Committee of the Western Cape Committee for Local Native Administration, 3 October 1952. This committee consisted of representatives of local councils and members of the Department of Bantu Studies of the University of Stellenbosch.

⁶³ The term 'location' has been used in preference to 'township' when referring to black urban residential areas since this was the contemporary terminology and is less ambiguous.

⁶⁴ See for example minutes of Stellenbosch ratepayers and council meetings (WCA:3/STB) and discussion below.

From the time that the NP government came to power, there had been incidents reflecting restiveness in black locations in the Transvaal⁶⁵ which escalated into a country-wide ‘campaign of defiance’ in 1952, led by the African National Congress (ANC). Although the leadership had appealed for peaceful action, violence broke out in several areas, causing waves of alarm through the white population and a hardening of attitudes towards ‘subversive’ elements.⁶⁶ Stellenbosch suffered its own minor disturbances as a result of a banned gathering in September 1952.⁶⁷ As a member of the town council and specifically its Native Administration Committee, Theron was concerned with these issues in a very direct way, being drawn into crucial debates and decisions surrounding the management of the black community in the town.⁶⁸

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s the population of Kaya Mandi, the black township administered by Stellenbosch, ranged around the council’s self-imposed ‘quota’ (dating from 1955) of 1700 individuals, plus 250 seasonal workers and a further small number of workers residing outside the location by special arrangement.⁶⁹ Although the numbers were not large, in Western Cape terms they were significant and of greater concern was the persistent tendency towards growth.⁷⁰ The Native Advisory Board representing Kaya Mandi residents appears to have been

⁶⁵ Posel, *The Making of Apartheid*, p.76; D.M.Scher, ‘Triumph over Imperialism’ in Liebenberg and Spies (eds), *South Africa*, p.377.

⁶⁶ Leo Kuper, *Passive Resistance in South Africa* (London, Jonathan Cape, c.1957), pp.154–155; see also Edward Roux, *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man’s Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp.386–393; Scher in Liebenberg and Spies, *South Africa*, pp.378–381.

⁶⁷ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/109, Report of the Technical Advisory Committee of the Western Cape Committee for Local Native Administration, 3 October 1952.

⁶⁸ It is not always possible to ascertain from the sources what Theron’s personal opinion was on all issues dealt with by the council. However, care has been exercised to determine this where possible and where there is room for doubt this has been noted.

⁶⁹ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/158, Agenda for a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 11 March 1958. See also statistics provided periodically by the Location Superintendent (later known as the Manager, Native Administration).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/162, Agenda for Ordinary Council Meeting, 25 November 1958.

relatively restrained in its dealings with the council in the early 1950s. Grievances are frequently recorded in its reports but usually in measured, reproachful terms. However, relations did deteriorate as the burden of new regulations and the unsympathetic attitude of the council began to erode the security and trust of black residents, giving rise increasingly to confrontation.

From 1951 to early 1952 municipal records still show ambivalence about black influx control. Theron had newly joined the council and since she represented the view of the Civic Association, it can be assumed that she was not in favour of expansion of industry or of the location. However, the pro-industrialist faction had other views and plans were set in motion to build 30 hostels and 20 family homes in Kaya Mandi, as well as shops and other facilities.⁷¹ The project was slow in getting off the ground, delayed by a group of ratepayers who had petitioned against the scheme, and the matter was taken up by the Native Affairs Department (NAD). The Commissioner for Urban Areas for the Western Cape took the unusual step of attending a council meeting in Stellenbosch to take part in discussions. He informed the council that the Minister (Verwoerd) had ‘concerned himself personally with the matter’ and had submitted detailed conditions that he wished to see met if the expansion was to go ahead.⁷² Under the circumstances the project had stalled pending further evaluation.⁷³

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/106, Report of the Housing Committee, Meeting 11 March 1952; *ibid.*, 1/1/1/107, Report of the Native Administration Committee, Meeting 15 July 1952.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/107, Report of the Native Administration Committee, Meeting 15 July 1952.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/108, Report of the Native Administration Committee, Meeting 27 August 1952; *ibid.*, Report of the Housing Committee, Meeting 26 August 1952.

By late 1952 in the wake of the black unrest the climate had changed. In November of that year, the Native Administration Committee, of which Theron was a member, forwarded a strong recommendation that the council should peg the number of black workers in Stellenbosch, that it should work towards housing all within the location and that it should halt its plans for expansion.⁷⁴ The rising determination to regulate the urban black population can possibly be attributed in part to the very immediate influence of particular apartheid theorists attached to the university and to SABRA, who were based in the town. It is noticeable in the municipal records that Stellenbosch was able to draw on considerable depth and variety of expertise both from within the ranks of its council and from the wider academic community to provide specialist advice on almost any issue affecting the town. Concerning race relations, N.J.J. (Nic) Olivier was to play a prominent role in directing municipal policy. Olivier was Professor of Bantu Law and Native Administration at Stellenbosch and an active member of SABRA. He was a contributor to the Tomlinson Report. His views regarding black-white relations in South Africa were uncompromisingly in favour of total apartheid at whatever cost or sacrifice to white South Africans.⁷⁵ He was drawn into council affairs virtually from the time that Kaya Mandi was established⁷⁶ and was regularly called upon for advice thereafter.

Requested to sit in on the special meeting of the town council called to discuss the 1952 disturbances, Olivier expressed the opinion that no security measures would resolve the problem 'as long as the native has a permanent residence among whites'. In his view, the 'tendency to want to participate in life outside the native areas must be cut off' and that this could take place only 'if the native areas which are now so weak and poor, can be developed'.⁷⁷ In other words, he always saw policy relating to the urban black population as contingent on a comprehensive strategy of apartheid

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/110, Report and Minutes of the Native Administration Committee, 18 November 1952.

⁷⁵ Lazar, 'Conformity and Conflict', pp.165-74.

⁷⁶ WCA:3/STB, 4/1/116, file 29/16, letter, Town Clerk to N. Olivier, 21 December 1944.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1/3/1/1, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 10 November 1952 (transl.).

including the provision of land and capital to promote black self-sufficiency, and a moral basis for exclusion in white areas. Although government had yet to be persuaded of the urgency of the development of the reserves, at the local level his position was that the black community should have no permanent place in Stellenbosch. It was evidently a view shared by several of the councillors and as Craven put it, if the coloured population was of sufficient strength to supply the workforce, not a single black person should be allowed in the town.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

In the nervous atmosphere of the time, the voices of the ‘industrialist’ councillors who believed that the progress of the region depended on black labour, were silent, at least in the record. A decision was taken at the special meeting, that the Native Administration Committee of the council should co-opt Olivier to provide advice whenever necessary. He was present at the following meeting when the tone was set for future ‘native policy’ of the town. Thereafter he was a regular participant in committee affairs and during Theron’s term of office as mayor he played a very important role in detailed policy formation. Although there was later some friction between the two, occasioned by the antagonism between Olivier and Verwoerd, Theron seems to have worked well with him during her years on the council and to have been very much in accord with his views on black urbanisation. The nature of their co-operation is reflected in the fact that they were frequently both members of small sub-committees, formulated correspondence and undertook delegations together. During a meeting in June 1955, Theron thanked him profusely for the ‘help and service that he rendered to the council’.⁷⁹

Under Olivier’s influence Stellenbosch was ahead of many other municipalities in the implementation of urban influx control measures.⁸⁰ He was later to claim that it ‘was one of the few local authorities in the Union which realised the implications of allowing a big Native labour force to develop within its boundaries’ and acted decisively.⁸¹ This was in contrast to Cape Town in which the UP-led council was very unco-operative. Theron seems to have been fully committed to this line of policy and determined to serve her constituency from the outset.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/128, Report and Minutes of the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 12 June 1955 (transl.).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/113, Summary of the Report of the [Regional] Technical Advisory Committee, 8 May 1953.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/127, Report and Minutes of the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 14 June 1955.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1/1/111, Minutes of a Meeting of the Native Administration Committee, 10 February 1953.

During the defiance campaign of 1952, there had been greater consensus in the council about security measures. The council even passed a resolution in favour of government declaring an immediate state of emergency. A decision was also taken to institute a curfew in the Stellenbosch area.⁸³ This was well in advance of government legislation of emergency powers. The Stellenbosch Native Advisory Board informed the council that it had ‘learned with regret’ of the curfew which it regarded as ‘repressive, unnecessary and altogether derogatory’,⁸⁴ but the council went ahead with its plans.⁸⁵

Stellenbosch was also extremely efficient in putting in place the registration of black women, undertaking house-to-house inspections and taking action against unregistered and ‘disallowed’ women.⁸⁶ With these, as with so many other measures imposed in the following years, the Native Advisory Board was powerless to divert the council from its chosen path. As an institution the Native Advisory Board system had always afforded very limited influence to urban blacks as local authorities were not in any way bound by their advice and under the NP government their status became increasingly eroded through both internal and external pressure.⁸⁷

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1/3/1/1, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 10 November 1952.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/111, Minutes of a Meeting of the Advisory Board, 28 January 1953, appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the Native Administration Committee, 10 February 1953.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/113, Report and Minutes of a Meeting of the Native Administration Committee, 30 June 1953.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/111, Minutes of a Meeting of the Native Administration Committee, 10 February 1953; *ibid.*, 10 March 1953; WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/113, Report of the Location Superintendent, 3 June 1953.

⁸⁷ Posel, *The Making of Apartheid*, pp. 34, 37-38; WCA: 3/STB, 1/1/1/143, Agenda for Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 16 October 1956 in which the location superintendent reports on steps to curb Advisory Boards as per instruction from the Secretary for Native Affairs.

After Theron's first resignation from the council late in 1953, she retained a lively interest in municipal affairs for the year that she was out of office. In particular she continued to lobby against any increase in local black residents as illustrated by her vocal leadership at a meeting of ratepayers in 1954, called to discuss the extension of Kaya Mandi, as well as the proposed erection of a temporary camp to house coloured people.⁸⁸ At the time a new round of council elections was imminent, and Theron seems to have been using the occasion to embarrass the council and in particular the mayor.

Having failed to force changes in policy from within the council, Theron now launched an attack from outside. She was of the view that no steps should be taken to ease the pressure on black accommodation or in any way make urban living attractive to black residents or potential migrants. She also focused on coloured housing, always a priority in her eyes, which she claimed was being neglected at the expense of black housing, and by implication condemned the Kaya Mandi extension scheme. She had marshalled her facts and could quote data that one of her students had gathered. She had visited the proposed site of the camp and consulted the Commissioner of Coloured Affairs, Izak du Plessis,⁸⁹ who was a personal acquaintance. She was of the view that a 'shanty town' was unacceptable in Stellenbosch. When Mayor Blake suggested that Du Plessis had agreed to the erection of the temporary accommodation, Theron claimed that this was a misrepresentation. Effectively she was accusing Blake of dishonesty and of misleading the Stellenbosch public.⁹⁰

This incident has been described in some detail in order to illustrate Theron's approach to the affairs of the town, which replicated her attitude to her profession. Her experience of working with Verwoerd, her training, diligence and ever-expanding range of contacts meant that little escaped her

⁸⁸ WCA: 3/STB, 1/3/1/1, Meeting of Voters in Terms of Article 259 of Ordinance no.19 of 1951, 22 July 1954.

⁸⁹ Dr. I.D. du Plessis (1900-1981), poet and author. Du Plessis published work (*i.a.*) about the coloured community and held various posts relating to coloured affairs. He preceded Theron as chancellor of the University of the Western Cape.

⁹⁰ WCA: 3/STB, 1/3/1/1, Meeting of Voters in Terms of Article 259 of Ordinance no.19 of 1951, 22 July 1954.

attention. She was always well prepared and ready to carry the fight to the opposition to achieve her goals. She was clearly determined to show up the mayoral clique and to bring public pressure to bear on them.

Under the well-orchestrated attack, the council had no choice but to agree not to build further accommodation at Kaya Mandi and also to refrain from building temporary accommodation in the coloured township. In a way it was a triumph for Theron, but the new council, of which Theron would form a part, was to inherit a serious black housing problem, which it could resolve only by shrinking the numbers of its black population. This was to prove an intractable problem.

At the beginning of 1955, shortly after Theron had returned to the council – now as deputy mayor – government made a major policy statement concerning labour in the Western Cape. Werner Eiselen,⁹¹ at the time Secretary for Native Affairs, used a SABRA conference to confirm that the NP government was aiming at ‘the ultimate elimination of Natives’ from the Western Cape and the systematic substitution of coloured labour.⁹² Attacked in parliament during the no-confidence debate, Verwoerd elaborated on and defended the policy of coloured labour preference, providing full support for an approach such as that to which Stellenbosch was committed – in fact he named and praised Stellenbosch along with a few other Boland towns for accepting the guidance of the NAD and refraining from expanding locations.⁹³ Theron’s struggle against the industrial expansionists in Stellenbosch had possibly been followed with interest by the NAD and perhaps even carried out under their advice. Throughout their acquaintance, Theron sought to please

⁹¹ Dr. W.W.M. Eiselen (1899-1977), anthropologist, African linguist and Secretary for Native Affairs. Eiselen headed the Native Education Commission (1949-1951), which was influential in the formulation of the Bantu Education Act of 1953.

⁹² W. Eiselen, ‘Die Kleurling en die Naturel’ in SABRA, *Die Kleurling in die Suid-Afrikaanse Samelewing*. See also *Die Burger*, 28 January 1955, ‘Naturel se Lot in W.P. Sabra Maan Kritici tot Beter Begrip van Verskuiwingsplan’.

⁹³ H.F. Verwoerd (Minister of Native Affairs, NP): Union of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly*, vol. 87, 28 January 1955, columns 200, 202-203. See also *Die Burger*, 29 January 1955, ‘Apartheid Maklikste in die W.P. Gebiedskeiding Moet Kom, Sê Verwoerd’.

Verwoerd, often slavishly so.⁹⁴ She would have taken pleasure in the recognition of Stellenbosch's precociousness, and the potential for leading the way in the bold new experiment of apartheid.

According to Verwoerd, the Cape Western Province was a region particularly suited for the application of black labour substitution:

⁹⁴ Interview, De Villiers.

[It is] in the Western Province where the large-scale influx of Natives is still in the early stages; here where the large majority of Natives are still single labourers; here where the serious social results of the influx of Natives are to be seen; here where the increasing numbers of Coloureds can take their places as they become vacant; here where there is enough initiative to prevent the wasteful use of labour by means of making a study of the work and in other ways; here where conditions are most favourable for a process of repatriation which is essential if White civilization is to be saved. ... I now warn the white inhabitants of the Western Province and more especially those of the Boland, that they are living in an area fraught with more danger than any other part of South Africa.

Verwoerd promised that there would be no sudden withdrawal of black labour, but a systematic reduction ‘until eventually there are no longer Natives in the Western Province or until they are no longer required’.⁹⁵

Verwoerd’s speech provided excellent justification for an inflexible policy on the black influx into Stellenbosch. In fact the councillors passed a resolution that he be thanked in writing and assured that Stellenbosch was devoting ‘serious and sustained attention’ to this matter and wishing him success in putting his policy into practice.⁹⁶

The *Eikestadnuus* backed the ‘reformist’ council in their stance. According to the newspaper, certain sectors of the public and press were claiming that the policy would have a negative effect on the development of the Western Cape. The Stellenbosch newspaper argued, however, that the government had to look at the ‘broader picture’ and not just the economic interests of the few. If there were economic interfusion, this would eventually lead to integration and to the loss of identity by the numerically smaller group, according to the article. Was the businessman ‘prepared to confront the long-term consequences and take responsibility for these, rather than see his dividend reduced?’, it asked.⁹⁷ The article reflects clearly the ‘greedy capitalist’ versus ‘idealist’ theme of many of the struggles in which Theron and the council engaged in the following years.

⁹⁵ H.F. Verwoerd (Minister of Native Affairs, National Party): Union of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly*, vol. 87, 28 January 1955, columns 200, 202-203.

⁹⁶ WCA: 3/STB, 1/1/123, Minutes of the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Stellenbosch Town Council, 1 February 1955.

⁹⁷ *Eikestadnuus*, 28 January 1955, ‘Toekomstige Posisie van Naturelle in Wes-Kaapland’ (transl.).

The Stellenbosch council's drive to implement coloured labour preference was, however, complicated by the fact that the council itself was one of the larger employers of black workers, along with the university and the brickworks of the former mayor (whom Theron had labelled as a self-seeking industrialist).⁹⁸ Theron took up the matter personally with the university. She pointed out that the council was placed in an awkward position by the university's request that it be allowed to retain live-in staff, since this was not permitted to other employers and was contrary to government policy.⁹⁹ But the council itself was caught in the same dilemma. It is minuted from time to time how difficult it was to find sufficient coloured labour for public works.¹⁰⁰ It was generally acknowledged that coloured labour was more expensive and employers such as the university claimed that 'Coloureds refused to do certain jobs as they regarded these as beneath their dignity'.¹⁰¹ There was also a suggestion from the public works authority that coloured labour was unreliable; it was difficult to find coloured workers of a 'better class' who could be depended upon. This created problems of another kind. When individuals failed to turn up for work, labour gangs had to be reconstituted causing logistics dilemmas if supervisors were to comply with the general policy of avoiding 'mixed' teams.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ See for example WCA: 3/STB, 1/1/1/145, List of Major Employers of Native Labour in Stellenbosch: Report of the Manager of Native Affairs to the Meeting of the Town Council, 4 December 1956.

⁹⁹ *Eikestadnuus*, 8 July 1955, 'Naturelle in Diens van Universiteit. Samesprekings Tussen Stadsraad en Koshuiskomitee'.

¹⁰⁰ See for example *ibid.*, 26 August 1955, 'Die Dilemma van die Stadsraad. Word Gedwarsboom Deur Eie Beleid'.

¹⁰¹ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/127, Interview with Members of the University Hostels Committee Regarding Employment of Natives by the University, appended to Report and Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 14 June 1955.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/128, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 26 July 1955.

Notwithstanding the obvious structural difficulties inherent in the coloured labour preference system, and the reluctance of employers to come to terms with utilising relatively freer and less tractable labour, the Stellenbosch Council threw its weight in behind the policy. Apparently taking Verwoerd's warning very seriously, from 1955 the council began to administer the town as though the Boland was indeed uniquely under threat of being overwhelmed by a tidal wave of black migrants and had a special mission to stem the flow.

In practice certain categories of urban black people had been granted residential rights in terms of the 1952 amendment to section 10(1) of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act and could not be summarily removed. These included permanent residents who had been born in an urban area and others with defined unbroken labour records.¹⁰³ Nevertheless local authorities could apply the law with greater or lesser rigidity. Subsequent amendments to the Act could be used to expel even those who qualified for residence, on a variety of pretexts. For example, individuals who had incurred certain specified sentences in court, or had failed to comply with local regulations, or had simply been pronounced 'idle and undesirable' or 'troublemakers' could be endorsed out of the area.¹⁰⁴ The Stellenbosch Council was one of the least sympathetic local authorities in the Boland, as its Native Advisory Board pointed out on more than one occasion. Following a particularly harsh ruling, a black member of the Board told the council representative that 'feelings among the people run high'. 'Some think that the officials are carrying the policy far above the limit ... this tends to give the Municipality of Stellenbosch a bad name.'¹⁰⁵ In a memorandum submitted at this meeting the council was accused of contriving excuses to withdraw residence rights and deliberately attempting to 'override even the meagre protection contained in the Act'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Posel, *The Making of Apartheid*, pp.98-103.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.217-220.

¹⁰⁵ WCA: 3/STB, 1/1/1/127, Minutes of the Advisory Board Meeting, 25 May 1955.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Addendum titled Memorandum by Mr. G.L. Mangoela in defence of Gxuluwes Case: Expulsion of Natives from the Municipal Area of Stellenbosch.

Nor could the council claim to be ignorant of the harsh decisions taken by its officials. The black population of the town was small enough for most cases to be discussed on an individual basis and to form part of the record routinely sent by the Native Affairs Committee for rulings by the council. Over the years Theron was personally present at the majority of these committee meetings, either as chairman, designated committee member or *ex officio*. She heard numerous cases of expulsions that must have cast doubt on the morality of the system. One among many examples was the tragedy of a widow, Johanna Pheto, who on the death of her husband lost her residence rights. Pheto and her husband had occupied one of the first batches of houses built in Kaya Mandi, and had lived there for 13 years. In a plea for withdrawal of the notice served on her, one of the members of the Native Advisory Board, Mr. G.L. Nyovande, said of her:

She is a lady and a woman of strong moral character ... The primary duty of the state is to protect its subjects and this applies in the same way to a local authority ... Mrs Pheto has adopted civilised standards of living and it would be difficult for her to go back to the reserves and start a new life. Besides there are no opportunities to earn a living.¹⁰⁷

The superintendent of the location replied that it was the policy of the council to ‘reduce the number of widows’ and that Pheto would have to leave. When the matter was referred to the Public Health Committee for endorsement, the case was discussed and the resolution taken simply that ‘the Council’s policy should be adhered to’.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/125, Minutes of the [Native] Advisory Board Meeting, 30 March 1955, appended to Report and Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 12 April 1955.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Report and Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 12 April 1955.

Frequently Theron took an even more inflexible position than did some other members of the council. She was particularly opposed to making exceptions. This is demonstrated time and again in the records, for example when the widowed 'Headman' of Kaya Mandi, Wilson Mtshemla, requested permission to bring in a woman from Cape Town 'as his wife',¹⁰⁹ when the university requested permission to hire additional black workers because it could not find suitable coloured help,¹¹⁰ or when applications were received to bring black domestic workers into the town – even under special circumstances.¹¹¹ Theron was clearly impressed by Nic Olivier's view that Section 10 was the thin end of the wedge which undermined the whole principle of separate development. Olivier was constantly warning against the 'leakage' which it allowed.¹¹² Theron may also have felt that she needed to give leadership to her council and that inflexibility was the best safeguard against acting on sentiment. At a ratepayers' meeting held in 1956, the then chairman of the Native Administration Committee, Theron's friend Francois Smuts,¹¹³ spelled out policy. Above all, the council must be absolutely consistent. 'If it made allowances in one case, it would open the door to dozens of similar requests which would then necessarily also have to be conceded, with catastrophic results.'¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/121, Report and Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 9 November 1954.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/127, Report and Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 14 June 1955.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/132, Minutes of the Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Commission, 15 November 1955.

¹¹² See for example *Eikestadnuus*, 26 August 1955, 'Die Dilemma van die Stadsraad. Word Gedwarsboom Deur eie Beleid'.

¹¹³ Professor F. Smuts, at the time Professor in Latin, University of Stellenbosch and member of the town council.

¹¹⁴ WCA: 3STB, 1/3/1/1, Meeting of Ratepayers in Compliance with the Regulations of Article 259 of the Ordinance no.119 of 1951, 29 August 1956.

An interesting exception to the rule was a request by the former Prime Minister, D.F. Malan, who had moved into Stellenbosch and wished to retain the services of a black domestic worker who had worked for him for 10 years. The committee, of which Theron was chairman, resolved to notify Malan that ‘in keeping with policy established in 1952 ... the request could not be acceded to’.¹¹⁵ In this instance, however, Theron seems to have bowed to pressure or sentiment because following correspondence a temporary permit was finally granted,¹¹⁶ and apparently thereafter regularly renewed. Later Malan applied for a permit for the man’s wife to join him, and a concession was again made, apparently by Theron personally. This breach of policy had unpleasant consequences as it came to the notice of *The Cape Times* where it was discussed critically. The report highlighted the fact that this concession was exceptional and that standing policy forbade black Stellenbosch permit-holders to have their husbands or wives living with them. This elicited liberal protest about the council’s ‘inhumane policy’ as well as its ‘blatant cynicism’.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1/1/122, Report and Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 18 January 1955.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/124, Minutes of the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Stellenbosch Town Council, 1 March 1955.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1/1/156, letter, Mrs. H. de Wet to Town Clerk, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 5 November 1957 (which includes discussion of *The Cape Times* article).

During 1955, possibly with the looming black accommodation crisis in mind and spurred on by Verwoerd's scaremongering in his coloured-labour preference speech, Olivier was requested by the council to conduct a full study of and devise a strategy for managing Stellenbosch's black population. By the end of the year with Theron invested as the new mayor, the Commission of Investigation into Native Affairs, headed by Olivier and Jan Sadie, delivered its report.¹¹⁸ It contained little that was new to the debate, but given Theron's great faith in scientific studies and ordered plans of action, she would have been very pleased to have the report to lend weight to future policy and action under her leadership. Indicative of the dictatorial high-handedness which seems to have marked apartheid ideologues, the commission did not consult the Native Advisory Board at any stage of the process. Nor did it call for any representation from the residents of Kaya Mandi during its deliberations. Not surprisingly the constitution of the commission and the legitimacy of its findings were contested by the Advisory Board.¹¹⁹ Even its request to view the completed report was refused by Theron's council and Olivier, who decided in a closed meeting that it was a 'confidential' document and that its contents might place the council 'in a difficult position' if it were made available in its entirety. Amongst themselves they justified this on the grounds that the Board need concern itself only with the recommendations and not the reasoning behind them. It was resolved that the Board would be provided with an outline of the recommendations.¹²⁰

No copy of the report has been traced in the Stellenbosch municipal files, and only the resolutions of the council, based on the report, are in the record. These largely re-state much of what was already agreed council policy, but arguably with greater urgency and less flexibility. One can only speculate on the reasons for denying the Board access to the full report; it must have revealed a particularly ruthless indifference to the interests of the black urban population which potentially could have fuelled hostility and resistance.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/133, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 13 December 1955. Professor J.L. Sadie (1918-2005) was Professor of Economics at the University of Stellenbosch and a specialist in Economic Demography.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/137, Minutes of a Meeting of the Advisory Board, 28 March 1956.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Report and Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 10 April 1956.

Among its recommendations, the report included some seemingly petty regulations which served mainly to disempower and inconvenience black people thereby making life in the location increasingly difficult – presumably for precisely that purpose. One example is the withdrawal of licences from the few black entrepreneurs who provided various services in Kaya Mandi.¹²¹ Among these was a syndicate headed by a Milton Hani, whose general dealer trading licence was revoked. The explanation for this was that it was NAD policy to allow black people (other than those with Section 10 exemption) to remain in the Western Cape only if they were in the employment of white employers. As an independent trader, the licensee did not meet this requirement. However, it was also noted that two members of the syndicate, including Hani, were ‘known to be active in politics’ and that trading

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/133, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 13 December 1955.

in the location could provide an opportunity for him to exercise ‘an undesirable influence’.¹²² This was undoubtedly a critical consideration.

The private shop was eventually closed down and Hani required to demolish the building. To replace this facility, a small council-owned general dealership was established in a converted garage adjacent to the Native Administration office, to be run by a black resident of Stellenbosch on a concession basis. When tenders for the three-year concession were called for, Hani submitted an application. His bid was well-motivated, including the information that he had been trading in the location legally for six years, had paid rent timeously, had no record of financial difficulties, was well known to the community and suppliers, possessed stock and was ready to commence operations immediately. It was nevertheless turned down.¹²³

¹²² *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/138, document titled: Discussions with the Secretary for Native Affairs, Dr. Eiselen, 8 May 1956, addendum to Report and Minutes of Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 8 May 1956; *ibid.*, 1/1/1/141, Memorandum Regarding Trading in Kaya Mandi [drawn up by the Manager, Native Administration] for Submission to the Sub-Committee on Trading in the Location, addendum to Report and Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 14 August 1956.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/148, Agenda for the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 12 March 1957.

The main thrust of the Olivier commission's recommendations was focused on the reversal of the black influx. In summary, it sought 'as far as possible within the law' to prevent the entry of women and children into the Stellenbosch municipal area, to do everything possible to gradually restrict black residence in the town to single, migrant labourers, and to keep even these numbers to a minimum. As a means of achieving this it offered a number of specific practical recommendations. These measures included even more detailed record-keeping and ferreting through personal and court records, presumably with a view to finding pretexts for withdrawing permits and residence rights. Some of the recommendations would serve to define the future development of the region. For example it was proposed that as a matter of policy industries with need of black labour be discouraged and that special licences be sought from government to facilitate importation of labour-saving machinery.¹²⁴

The response of the Advisory Board, set out in a systematic memorandum dealing with every proposal, was of a reasoned nature. Essentially it appealed for a humane application of existing law rather than unseemly zeal and dubious methods 'which tend to disregard the victim'. Above all the memorandum highlights the grave flaws in the piecemeal application of apartheid policy:

Our attitude however is well known on what appears to us as arbitrary removal of families from their place of domicile and employment. Our deepest concern is on the unnecessary human suffering ... We are totally opposed to a system of migratory labour in which is inherent the seed of social evils as found in African communities today ... Our suggestion on this matter would rather be that the Council peg the number of families to what it stands at present, and continue with a limited number of migrant labour force until such time as the Government shall have progressed with its native development schemes near and in the reserves ... [W]hen the African can be assured of a positive alternative plan (not airy promises in the distant future) with an adequate labour market, it will require little persuasion to remove him from the Urban Areas ...¹²⁵

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/133, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 13 December 1955. See also *ibid.*, 1/1/1/136, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 15 March 1956.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/139, Minutes of the Advisory Board Meeting, 9 May 1956.

Theron cannot have been blind to the consequences of the migrant labour system. However, there is nothing in the council records to indicate sensitivity or concern about the long term implications. At a meeting of municipal voters, called to discuss aspects of the Olivier Commission's recommendations, Theron spoke as she often did, as an academic. 'The problem of Natives in the Western Cape was a complicated problem which demanded research ... and even the Council was struggling for clarity on the wisest course to take.'¹²⁶ Yet when she was asked directly whether it was council policy ultimately to have only migratory black labour in the town, and to exclude all black women, she admitted that this was so. One of the ratepayers in attendance, L.Marquard, concluded: 'In other words the policy is definitely to break up the family life of the native ...?'. Theron replied that the council intended that 'people would come and work and then return to their own [home]lands'.¹²⁷ It was a naive prevarication from someone of her intellect and professional background. Theron may have regarded migratory labour as merely a stop-gap arrangement until there was no need for black labour of any kind in the Western Cape, the grand scheme being to harness coloured labour resources efficiently.¹²⁸ However, in 1956 there was clearly no immediate prospect of total labour substitution, nor of viable reserves to absorb the black returnees and Theron must have recognised this.

The main point on the agenda of this voters' meeting was, once again, to discuss housing in Kaya Mandi in the light of the Olivier report. There were strong and opposing views within the council, and Theron insisted that ratepayers be consulted. The proposal was that family accommodation should be converted progressively into single accommodation and that all black people currently living outside the location (149 individuals) should ultimately be housed in Kaya Mandi. The only exception to this would be the few privately-employed domestic workers who had permission to live in registered quarters. This would have the effect of 'cleaning out the town for once and all'. The

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/141, Meeting of Voters in Terms of Article 259 of Ordinance no.19 of 1951, 29 August 1956 (transl.).

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ See for example Ian Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa* (London and New York, Longman, 1987), p.88.

question before the meeting concerned the means of achieving this. One possibility was that additional hostels should be built. (Theron had petitioned successfully against this in 1954). As an alternative, the black employees of the region's Divisional Council and the Stellenbosch Tanning Company, situated outside municipal limits (approximately 170 individuals), could be evicted. This would release additional housing for black labour employed within Stellenbosch.

Providing accommodation for the labour of the Divisional Council and tanning factory had been a long-standing agreement. Nevertheless, Olivier's commission recommended that it be terminated. According to Olivier, the contract set a dangerous precedent. At the meeting the Divisional Council argued for maintaining existing arrangements and threatened to build its own location on the border of the town, adjacent to Kaya Mandi, if its workers were expelled. This would create another 'black spot' in the area. In the event, the meeting failed to resolve the dilemma¹²⁹ and negotiations dragged on over many months. Eventually the Divisional Council did embark on establishing a new location at Eerste Rivier, Emfuleni. Stellenbosch promptly requested that all married men and women and children from Kaya Mundi be accepted at Emfuleni.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ WCA: 3/STB, 1/1/141, Meeting of Voters in Terms of Article 259 of Ordinance no.19 of 1951, 29 August 1956 (transl.).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/158, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 8 April 1958.

Family accommodation was due to become available at the new location at Emfuleni only in the course of 1962,¹³¹ as Theron's council days were drawing to a close. Meanwhile the housing crisis in Kaya Mandi continued to fester. At the time that the Olivier commission was conducting its investigation, conditions under which labourers lived in the location were appalling. In April 1956, the Manager of Native Administration, P.J. Oosthuysen, reported severe overcrowding. Hostels designed to hold 14 tenants were occupied by as many as 28 individuals. Many labourers found themselves having to sleep outside even in inclement conditions and some attempted to erect makeshift shelters.¹³² That such conditions could have developed in the mayoral term of Theron who had at one time fought for the right to decent housing on behalf of poor whites, and had spoken out on the social implications of overcrowding, is indicative of a commitment to apartheid which was overriding of professional judgement. Nevertheless the council was shamed into action by Oosthuysen's report and by rumblings from the NAD. On Theron's recommendation it was agreed, albeit with dissension, that additional housing for 110 single workers only be provided. Theron's proposal included an explicit reaffirmation both of the policy of reducing the number of black residents as well as the council's commitment to 'take all possible steps to persuade the authorities to provide measures whereby families can be removed from urban areas'.¹³³ It was a grudging concession which once again illustrates the fact that Theron did not recognise the black residents of Stellenbosch as entitled members of the community she had undertaken to serve as mayor.

Not content to apply its own influx controls rigorously, the Stellenbosch Council wanted surrounding municipalities to be equally diligent. Theron brought to the notice of her colleagues a newspaper report that Paarl, a like-minded council, was unhappy about the laxity of some of its

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/171, Agenda for Meeting of Council in Committee, 9 June 1961.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 1/1/137, Agenda for the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 10 April 1956; *ibid.*, 1/1/144, Agenda for the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 13 November 1956.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/144, Report and Minutes of the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 13 November 1956.

neighbours. In response, Stellenbosch resolved to organise a conference of local authorities to discuss proper compliance. In the event, Eiselen persuaded them to shelve the idea on the grounds that things would fall into place in time.¹³⁴ However, the incident is indicative of the determination of Stellenbosch Council under Theron's leadership and its role as a pace-setter. Unlike many councils throughout the country who were overwhelmed by the legislation and its application,¹³⁵ Stellenbosch had Olivier constantly interpreting, advising and encouraging the most unyielding of positions. Observations and recommendations were regularly fed back to the NAD. This often offered an opportunity for sustained pressure on government to give attention to the 'positive' side of the apartheid scheme – in particular the creation of an infrastructure to deal with the relocation of black people expelled from the urban area for whatever reason.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/136, Minutes of an Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Council, 6 March 1956.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1/1/143, Agenda for the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 16 October 1956. At a congress for the Institute of Administrators of Non-European Affairs held in September 1956 the NAD indicated that it would compile a handbook to assist the 'less-experienced' officials (transl.).

A sub-committee of the Stellenbosch Council, which included Theron and Olivier, was formed in June 1956 to look into the matter of re-settlement. This was prompted by the concerns of Oosthuysen.¹³⁶ Oosthuysen's position was becoming increasingly difficult as he confronted the incompatible expectations of the Kaya Mandi residents and the Stellenbosch Council. In November 1956, the sub-committee met to discuss a memorandum drawn up by him. He seems to have provided a rare voice of conscience in the council records and it is perhaps thanks to his input that decisions were taken showing occasional signs of sympathy for the deteriorating position of the black residents. Decisions by this sub-committee include a number of recommendations for mitigating the hardships of individuals forced to leave the town. The council was undoubtedly also moved by pragmatic considerations: the easier the process of re-settlement, the less difficult it would be to force black people to relinquish their foothold in the urban area. The first recommendation states that the NAD should 'make provision for allotments, accommodation and services in the reserves for the resettlement of Natives removed from urban areas, particularly those from the Western Cape'. It was also recommended that the NAD establish machinery for advising local authorities on available re-settlement areas, that those expelled from the town be given some choice of where they were sent and that the travel costs be borne by the local authority. It was decided that the report as a whole be forwarded to the Western Cape Committee for Local Native Administration and that it be submitted for discussion at the congress of the Cape Association of Municipalities. It was also forwarded to the Minister of Native Affairs through the Secretary for Native Affairs.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/139, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Affairs Committee, 12 June 1956.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/144, Minutes of a Meeting of the Sub-Committee Concerned with the Re-Settlement of Natives and the Possible Amendment of the Urban Areas Act, 20 November 1956.

However, despite wishing to soften the effects of resettlement, the sub-committee showed no signs of questioning the underlying principles. Its second order of business was to discuss proposed amendments to section 10(1) of the Native (Urban Areas) Act, intended to close loopholes in the regulations. This had been distributed to local authorities by the NAD for comment. Not only did the Stellenbosch committee agree to advise the Secretary for Native Affairs that they were in favour of the amendments, but recommended ways in which the law could be tightened. They added a request that the exemptions in terms of 10(1) (a), (b) and (c) should not be applied to the Western Cape.¹³⁸

Stellenbosch was evidently in regular communication with Eiselen. There are a number of references to conversations between Theron and the Secretary for Native Affairs when she seems to have met him in the course of her other public interests and duties. On her recommendation Eiselen was invited to lunch by the Stellenbosch Council to discuss a wide range of issues, with a delegation led by Theron herself and including Olivier. On this occasion Eiselen requested the input of the council in relation to proposed future legislation.¹³⁹ The impression is that Stellenbosch in many cases represented a testing ground for the applicability and effectiveness of influx-control machinery and that its feedback played a role in the refining of national policy and legislation. On the other hand, in the process the town may have put some pressure on the NAD. For several years the department wrestled with the practical application of its apartheid policy and it may not have welcomed the stream of enquiries, suggestions and criticism, however politely phrased, which flowed from Stellenbosch.

The NAD was at loggerheads with several UP-dominated municipalities who resented the erosion of their discretionary powers in relation to their urban black population and resisted various government directives during the 1950s.¹⁴⁰ At a congress of the Institute for Administrators of

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ See *ibid.*, 1/1/138, document titled: Discussions with the Secretary for Native Affairs, Dr. Eiselen, 8 May 1956, appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Affairs Committee, 15 May 1956 (transl.).

¹⁴⁰ Simon Bekker and Richard Humphries, *From Control to Confusion: The Changing*

Non-European Affairs Verwoerd rebuked 'some local authorities' which wanted 'to go off in their own direction'. He made it clear that only the state and no other authority would determine 'native policy'.

Role of Administration Boards in South Africa, 1971-1983 (Pietermaritzburg and Grahamstown, Shuter and Shooter in association with the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1985), pp.3-6.

Verwoerd was no doubt chiefly concerned with municipalities such as Johannesburg, Durban and Benoni which were opposing fundamental issues of policy and authority. But a town like Stellenbosch which was keen to comply, but was demanding rapid, watertight solutions to influx questions must have created another set of problems. In his address to the Institute, Verwoerd made specific reference to the fact that although black locations in white areas were of a temporary nature, adequate housing had to be supplied.¹⁴¹ It was clearly impossible to enforce 'white-by-night' towns if locations could not hold all the black residents. It was equally unsatisfactory having locations bursting at the seams and squalid conditions which would invite the condemnation by government critics. Oosthuysen reported back on Verwoerd's speech, making a strong point that Stellenbosch was not in compliance with the requirement of sufficient housing.

The following year Oosthuysen again took the council to task for the precipitate pace of its programme to shrink its black population to a small number of single male labourers. In a report which revealed his frustration he argued that the town council was completely out of step with national policy: while the government was focusing on 'phase (a)' he said, Stellenbosch had raced ahead to 'phase (b)'.

The result of Stellenbosch's attempt to get ahead of state policy, is serious overcrowding with the accompanying undesirable social conditions. A [group of] people are being created who will be a burden rather than an asset to the community, and a poisonous attitude is being stirred up in natives towards the whites, which promises no good for the future. It is clear to me that a policy of limiting the opportunities of natives in some areas while there are no feasible alternatives or in fact no opportunities at all elsewhere, is unsustainable.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/143, quoted in Agenda for the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 16 October 1956.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, Report of the Manager, Native Administration, appended to Agenda for the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 11 June 1957 (transl.).

Despite its being on the agenda for discussion in June 1957, Theron proposed to the meeting that the report be held over for consideration by the incoming council after the forthcoming municipal elections. The proposal was carried unanimously. She was nearing the end of her second term as mayor and by customary agreement would not be eligible for a third term, so would not be in charge when this nettle had to be grasped. In a sense it could be regarded as an admission of defeat. In her many remaining years in the council she seems to have played a far less active role in matters of black administration and to have concentrated instead on white and coloured housing, and more especially on Stellenbosch's architectural and historical heritage.

Relations between the council and the Native Advisory Board remained strained and for long periods of time meetings had to be cancelled because there was no quorum. In 1958 the Board refused to pass the Native Administration budget 'because the Council fails to consult the residents of Kaya Mandi about matters concerning their interests'.¹⁴³ The high-handed approach of Olivier and Theron had come back to haunt the council. Chief among the grievances was the closing of Hani's shop and substitution of the dark, inconveniently situated concession store on the perimeter of the location. Second, there was the refusal to allow a black-operated taxi service, despite repeated, well-reasoned applications.¹⁴⁴ It seems that these relatively petty issues were most bitterly resented. Perhaps it was simply recognised that it lay within the power of the council to eliminate at least the 'pinpricks';¹⁴⁵ they were not a necessary concomitant of national policy, but seemed to reflect arbitrary mean-spiritedness on the part of the local authorities.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/160, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Native Advisory Board, 16 July 1958, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 29 July 1958.

¹⁴⁴ See for example *ibid.*, 1/1/1/157, Minutes of Meeting of the Native Advisory Board, 26 November 1957 appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 3 December 1957.

¹⁴⁵ Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, p.413. Roux quotes Paul Sauer, Acting Prime Minister after the attempted assassination of Verwoerd, as pleading for the removal of 'pinpricks ... which had ripened the Natives for propaganda'.

The deadlock over the budget was broken by the white chairman's deciding vote,¹⁴⁶ and a warning to the Advisory Board that matters could be made unpleasant for them. However, thereafter the records generally reflect an attempt to improve relations – it cannot have escaped the council that they were courting a dangerous situation by ignoring the growing hostility in Kaya Mandi. With Theron no longer mayor and Olivier out of the picture, concessions were made. New shops were built and Hani, who had taken his case against council as far as the Supreme Court, was given permission to run a milk depot. Theron was not present at the meeting when this decision was taken.¹⁴⁷ Under the advice of the chief traffic officer eventually a licence was issued for a black taxi, followed by others.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ WCA:3STB, 1/1/1/160, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Native Advisory Board, 21 July 1958 appended to the Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Affairs Committee, 5 August 1958.

¹⁴⁷ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/164, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 15 September 1959. After Hani's tender for this concession was granted, he withdrew his case.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/161, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 11 November 1958; WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/164, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 21 July 1959.

It was a victory for the black members of the Advisory Board but it seems that relations had been irretrievably soured. The rising black disaffection in Stellenbosch was not unique to the area. Throughout the country as the 1950s drew to a close, opposition to NP race policy was manifesting itself in demonstrations and boycotts. The urban areas of the Western Cape where the policy of exclusion had given rise to particularly oppressive conditions, were receptive to resistance politics.¹⁴⁹ The authority of many Advisory Boards, including that of Stellenbosch, often perceived as weak and compliant, were challenged by more militant elements in the black community.¹⁵⁰ In particular the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), formed in 1959, found ready adherents in the overcrowded hostels of the Western Cape locations.¹⁵¹ When anti-pass demonstrations broke out in the streets and locations of Cape Town¹⁵² in the wake of the Sharpeville killings, Kaya Mandi too went up in flames between 28 and 30 March 1960.¹⁵³ According to a report of the incident, following a night of arson 'all the inhabitants' of the location attempted to march into town. Although the police managed to turn back the protestors, they then went on the rampage, burning offices, workshops and family homes. Among the items looted from the administration buildings were the cabinets containing registration cards.¹⁵⁴

The policy of the Stellenbosch Council, like that of the central government appears to have been in the first instance to keep the public calm and, as far as possible, ignorant of the seriousness of the

¹⁴⁹ Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983), pp.212-214; Scher in Liebenberg and Spies, *South Africa*, pp.392-395.

¹⁵⁰ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/157, Minutes of a Meeting of the Native Advisory Board, 26 November 1957, appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 3 December 1957.

¹⁵¹ Lodge, *Black Politics*, pp.212-214.

¹⁵² Lodge, *Black Politics*, pp.216-223; Bickford-Smith, Van Heyningen and Worden, *CapeTown*, pp.177-179.

¹⁵³ WCA:3STB, 1/1/1/167, Minutes of an Ordinary Monthly Meeting of Council, 5 April 1960.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Report of the Manager of Bantu Administration Regarding Current Bantu Conditions, appended to Minutes of Special Meeting of the Council in Connection with Bantu Administration, 14 June 1960.

situation. There was no statement forthcoming in the *Eikestadnuus* whose reporting was remarkably low key and thin on detail: Kaya Mundi had been cordoned off and most of the town's white residents had been little disturbed by events, according to the newspaper. The main focus of the report is on the generosity of the townsfolk in providing food for the hard-working police force and the spirit of the students who had fended for themselves in the absence of black staff in the hostels.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ *Eikestadnuus*, 1 April 1960, 'Ons Moeë Polisie sê Dankie. Baie Onware Gerugte in Omloop'.

Again following the lead of central government, on the one hand stricter controls and heightened security measures were introduced while on the other hand, attempts were made to appease and distract the urban black population.¹⁵⁶ Six additional guards were engaged in Kaya Mandi and white officials working there were supplied with firearms.¹⁵⁷ Black clubs and associations in the location became the subjects of suspicion and surveillance, perhaps not without reason. In 1963, as Theron was about to end her service as a councillor, 21 workers from the Stellenbosch area were found guilty of belonging to the banned military wing of the PAC, *Pogo*, and of planning a local insurrection.¹⁵⁸ The perennial question of reducing the number of black residents was revisited by the council. Plans to build additional accommodation in Stellenbosch were abruptly halted and again a concerted effort was made to gain the co-operation of local employers of black labour to reduce their numbers.¹⁵⁹ At the same time questions of black welfare and recreation were beginning to engage official minds. During 1961 the Department of Bantu Administration and Development (the former NAD) distributed a questionnaire to local authorities about facilities available to black urban dwellers. At the Tenth Annual Conference of the Institute of Administrators of Non-European Affairs, the Minister of Bantu Education, W. Maree, stated in his opening address that although he was not appealing to councils to ‘indulge’ black residents, he did

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964* (Stanford, Ca., Hoover Institution Press, 1977), p.315.

¹⁵⁷ WCA:3STB, 1/1/1/167, Minutes of an Ordinary Monthly Meeting of Council, 5 April 1960.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/180, Minutes of a Meeting of the Advisory Board, 8 August 1963; *ibid.*, Minutes of an Ordinary Monthly Meeting of Council, 13 August 1963. *Pogo* was a black liberation movement linked to the PAC and particularly active in the Cape. It was associated with radical aims and violence. See Lodge, *Black Politics*, pp.241-245.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/167, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council in Connection with Bantu Administration, 14 June 1960; *ibid.*, 1/1/1/168, Proceedings of Discussions with Employers of Bantu, 16 August 1960, appended to Minutes of Ordinary Meeting of Council, 23 August 1960. See also *Eikestadnuus* 27 July 1962, ‘Belangrike Beleidsverklaring Insake Verdere Nywerheidsontwikkeling te Stellenbosch’.

want to point out that one of the most important issues was ‘the happiness and welfare of the urban Bantu’.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/172, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 12 September 1961.

When Theron stepped down from the council in 1963 she could not have been satisfied with what had been achieved regarding Stellenbosch's handling of its black population. Her intention over a decade earlier had been to act decisively and to play a role in realising the apartheid ideal of a municipal area accommodating a very small number of black workers on a temporary basis, and serviced almost entirely by coloured labour. In her attempt to achieve this she had been party to what the Manager of Native Affairs in the town had called a 'morally indefensible' situation.¹⁶¹ Not only was Kaya Mandi reduced to gross overcrowding, its residents had become an embittered, unco-operative and ultimately violent community on the outskirts of the town. This was not a situation unique to Stellenbosch, but the town's overzealous implementation of apartheid policy clearly exposed the inherent weaknesses in the system. For this reason, Theron and her council may not even have won unmixed approval from Verwoerd's department in the 1950s. In retrospect Theron says of her time as mayor that she made many mistakes.¹⁶² With hindsight she might have regarded the course that she adopted in relation to the black community of Stellenbosch as one of the more important of these mistakes.

Group Areas and the Coloured Community

Another 'mistake' which Theron freely admitted to in later years, was her support for and active involvement in the application of the Group Areas Act which had been passed in 1950 shortly before she joined the council. Theron had long been on record as favouring 'partial segregation' of the coloured population in many areas of life, including the occupational, political and administrative spheres, as well as separate residential areas. This was necessary to 'place the relationship between Coloureds and whites on a healthy footing'.¹⁶³ As a councillor and mayor, she 'put a great deal of

¹⁶¹ WCA: 3/STB, 1/1/1/151, Report of the Manager, Native Administration, appended to Agenda for the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 11 June 1957 (transl.).

¹⁶² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.29.

¹⁶³ Theron set out her vision for the future of the coloured population in 'n Handves vir Kleurlinge', *Wapenskou* 6 (June 1945). See Jacobus Johannes Broodryk, 'Stellenbosse Akademië en die Politieke Problematiek in Suid-Afrika, 1934-1948' (MA dissertation, University

effort into trying to implement [group areas provisions] ... in the Boland' seeing it as 'the only logical and sensible' route to take.¹⁶⁴

of Stellenbosch, 1991), pp.156-157.

¹⁶⁴ *Eikestadnuus*, 28 January 1955, 'Letters to the Editor', 'Misverstand i.v.m. Kleurlingbeleid. Verklaring deur Dr. Erika Theron'.

She was later to write that she had ‘believed in all sincerity (and naivety!) that the policy concerned would offer the various population groups wider scope for more effective self-determination and that, particularly by division of residential areas, possible friction might be avoided’.¹⁶⁵ It was a view in keeping with ideological currency in influential Afrikaner circles. Giliomee quotes the following from the findings of the 1947 Commission of the Federal Mission Board of the Dutch Reformed Church:

...[that the coloureds] would shake off their feelings of inferiority only when they developed a pride in themselves as a nation. This could be facilitated by giving them separate residential areas where they could get better housing, more say in their own administration, and all the facilities provided to whites.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ John Western, *Outcast Cape Town* (Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg, Human and Rousseau, 1981). Foreword by Erika Theron, p.x.

¹⁶⁶ Giliomee, ‘The Ideology of Apartheid’ in Hugo, *South African Perspectives*, p.87.

Also, the notion that friction was an inevitable concomitant of interaction between the different 'groups' as defined in the population register seems to have been well established in apartheid thinking. As Giliomee puts it, the 'Cape Town-Stellenbosch axis of the nationalist intelligentsia ... almost without exception defended apartheid on the grounds of its assumed capacity to reduce conflict by curtailing the points of interracial contact'.¹⁶⁷ Not surprisingly the 'friction theory' was used to justify the Group Areas Bill when it was introduced in parliament. According to the Minister of the Interior the legislation was 'designed to eliminate friction between the races ... because we believe [that if] you reduce the number of points of contact to the minimum you reduce the possibility of friction'.¹⁶⁸ In the event, according to Muriel Horrell, writing in 1956, the Act 'probably caused more uncertainty, anxiety, hardship and resentment than any other recent measures'.¹⁶⁹ It took Theron a good deal longer to recognise this but seemingly the Theron Commission brought it home to her and by the late 1970s she could echo this assessment and agree that 'no other statutory measure had evoked so much bitterness, mistrust, and hostility' among coloured people.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.497.

¹⁶⁸ Western, *Outcast Cape Town*, p.85.

¹⁶⁹ Muriel Horrell, *The Group Areas Act – Its Effect on Human Beings* (Johannesburg, The South African Institute of Race Relations, 1956), p.25. For discussion on the impact of the Group Areas Act, see also the following, somewhat polemical works: D. Innes, *Disqualified: A Study of the Effects of Uprooting of Coloured People of South Africa. Studies in the Mass Removal of Population in South Africa*,(No.5) (Africa Publications Trust, London, 1975) and R.H. Du Pré, *Separate but Unequal. The Coloured People of South Africa – A Political History* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1994).

¹⁷⁰ RP38/1976, Republic of South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1976), (hereafter referred to as Report of the Theron Commission), p.27. Theron quotes this in the foreword to Western, *Outcast Cape Town*, p.ix.

In 1951, however, Theron was eager to play her part in the realisation of apartheid South Africa in which different 'racial groups' would be assigned to designated separate residential areas where rights of occupation and ownership were controlled in terms of qualification by race.¹⁷¹ Although new to the council Theron volunteered to organise and supervise the necessary census and survey of housing, which had to be carried out with 'great urgency' (the stress on urgency was later to prove pointless). This was accepted by the council 'with great gratitude'.¹⁷² She first arranged to visit the Land Tenure Advisory Board (later known as the Group Areas Board) to be fully informed before tackling this 'huge task'.¹⁷³ The survey was carried out by one of her post-graduate students, Gertrud Heydorn,¹⁷⁴ and was completed by April the following year.¹⁷⁵ The exercise was typically 'scientific' and efficient and Theron must have impressed her colleagues as a valuable new recruit to the council. It was also she who pointed out that since the local black community was least affected by the legislation,¹⁷⁶ the council's Native Administration Committee which initially dealt with Group Areas, was not the appropriate forum. She suggested that a special committee be

¹⁷¹ V.G. Hiemstra, 'An Analysis of the Group Areas Act' in Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede, *Groepsgebiede en Woonbuurtskeiding: Referate Gelewer op die Derde Jaarvergadering van SABRA* (Stellenbosch, SABRA, 1952), pp.52-59. The Act established three groups, the 'White', the 'Native' and the 'Coloured' groups. Other sub-groups, such as the 'Asiatic' and 'Malay' groups were proclaimed by the Governor General in particular regions.

¹⁷² WCA:3STB, 4/1/142, file 14/1, Report of the Housing Committee, 3 July 1951 (transl.).

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, letter, Town Clerk [Stellenbosch] to Mr. H. Boonzaaier, Land Tenure Advisory Board, 21 August 1951 (transl.). In some documents this authority is referred to as the Land Allocation Advisory Board. To avoid confusion the term Land Tenure Advisory Board is used until the new designation of Group Areas Board is officially introduced.

¹⁷⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p. 32. According to Theron, thereafter students from her department carried out similar projects for a number of local authorities in the Cape under her supervision. See also *Eikestadnuus*, 27 July 1951, 'Groepsgebiede van Stellenbosch. Studente Sal Opname Maak'.

¹⁷⁵ WCA:3STB, 4/1/142, file 14/1, extract 'Statements by Councillors', 29 April 1952.

¹⁷⁶ In Stellenbosch the majority of black residents lived in Kaya Mundi, at the time situated on the outskirts of the town. The delimitation of black group areas was not contentious and the question of removals in terms of the Group Areas Act did not arise.

established to deal with Group Areas compliance, and was appointed convenor.¹⁷⁷ Theron thus became drawn into coloured affairs in the Western Cape, forming contacts with the growing bureaucracy concerned with the lives of coloured people and becoming identified as having special knowledge of and interest in this community.

¹⁷⁷ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/105, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council 4 March 1952.

As chairman of this municipal Committee for Group Areas and Land Occupation, Theron admits that she committed herself to ‘selling’ group areas to the coloured residents of Stellenbosch.¹⁷⁸ It was also in this committee that she was to fight some of her hardest battles in the council. The Committee for Group Areas was responsible for drawing up a zoning proposal for consideration by the town council. In terms of the relevant legislation, the proposal would need to be published and representations invited from interested parties. It had then to be assessed by the Land Tenure Advisory Board which would evaluate it, if necessary refer it back to the council and ultimately to the Minister for approval and proclamation.¹⁷⁹ It was at best to be a lengthy process, but no one could have anticipated the extent to which in-fighting in the council, confusion in the Group Areas Board, and bureaucratic delays would drag it out. Writing in 1956 Horrell commented that the effects of the Group Areas Act had been ‘particularly pernicious because so few actual decisions [had] been promulgated, and the Sword of Damocles [had] been left in uneasy suspension for some six years ... over the heads of many thousands’.¹⁸⁰ In the case of Stellenbosch the ‘uneasy suspension’ lasted for over a decade.

¹⁷⁸ SABCTV, *Profiel (Erika Theron)*.

¹⁷⁹ WCA:3STB/1/1/1/110, document titled: Procedure in Connection with the Creation of a Group Area, appended to Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 8 December 1952.

¹⁸⁰ Horrell, *The Group Areas Act*, p.25.

Reading between the lines of Theron's summary of the activities of the committee which she assembled during March 1952, these were far from harmonious. Despite her invitation to all members of the town council to attend meetings, only one took up the offer, and even designated members of the committee did not participate consistently.¹⁸¹ The committee included Theron's frequent antagonist, Mayor Blake. He and another member of the council (one of the businessmen) both owned property in an area which potentially could be affected by the Group Areas delineation. They recused themselves from decision-making in meetings, but it did not prevent them from strongly arguing for alternative plans. Meetings were often heated and inconclusive.¹⁸² In October 1952 with little progress towards consensus, it was decided that the Committee for Group Areas would delegate its mandate to a smaller sub-committee, headed by Theron, assisted by Nic Olivier, at her request, and the relevant technical personnel.¹⁸³ Theron clearly trusted Olivier to take a 'scientific' and principled position that was as fair as possible to the coloured community. This committee presented its proposal to the full council at a special meeting held in December 1952.¹⁸⁴ By this time the initial deadline for submission to the Land Tenure Advisory Board had passed and expiry of a second extension granted to Stellenbosch, was imminent.¹⁸⁵ The requests to the Board for more time had been made despite the express ruling that no extensions would be granted, and entailed an appeal for indulgence because 'the position in Stellenbosch [was]

¹⁸¹ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/110, Summary of Activities of the Committee for Group Areas and Land Occupation (transl.), appended to Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 8 December 1952.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 4/1/142, file 14/1, Report of a Meeting of the Committee for Group Areas and Land Occupation, 29 September 1952.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, Report of a Meeting of the Committee for Group Areas and Land Occupation, 7 October 1952.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/110, Summary of Activities of the Committee for Group Areas and Land Occupation), appended to Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 8 December 1952.

¹⁸⁵ The original deadline was 30 August 1952: *Die Burger*, 15 July 1952, 'Proklamering van Groepsgebiede in die Kaapse Skiereiland'. An extension was granted on request, to 30 September 1952. See WCA:3STB, 4/1/142, file 14/1, telegram, Land Tenure Advisory Board to Town Clerk [Stellenbosch], 25 August 1952.

complicated'.¹⁸⁶ It was certainly not Theron's usual style of working and must have caused her considerable frustration.

At the special meeting of the council, a separate counter-proposal was submitted by the mayor. The debate was taken up by the council yet again, with diverse opinions proliferating, and was only concluded when Theron suggested in desperation that the main proposal be accepted with certain exclusions and forwarded to the Land Tenure Advisory Board. As she pointed out, it was merely a recommendation and might not even be accepted.¹⁸⁷ The discord clearly continued to simmer in the council, however, and in February of the following year it was re-opened with a motion to overturn the compromise of December 1952. A vote produced a deadlock which meant that the motion was considered defeated and the recommendation to the Advisory Board was allowed to stand.¹⁸⁸ In a sense it was a victory for Theron, but it clearly left her totally disillusioned with the council. The Group Areas struggle was probably the key issue that precipitated her resignation and determination to eliminate her adversaries in the next election.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, letter, Town Clerk [Stellenbosch] to the Head, Land Tenure Advisory Board, 23 September 1952 (transl.).

¹⁸⁷ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/110, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 8 December 1952.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/111, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 3 February 1953.

There had been a number of interrelated issues at the centre of the dispute. Possibly one of the most contentious was the recommendation of Theron's sub-committee that a coloured group area be created to the north of the municipal boundary (in the vicinity of Du Toit Station), also known as Cloetesdal, which would meet the future needs for expansion of the coloured population. It was recommended that land also be acquired between this new growth point and the existing coloured residential area at Idasvallei for the purpose of creating various coloured public facilities and linking the two residential points.¹⁸⁹ The concentration of coloured group areas to the north, was in keeping with the recommendation of the town planners whom Theron had consulted. It was also, as Theron and Olivier consistently argued, the plan which would cause least disruption to the coloured community. Only a relatively small number of coloured residents, mainly from within the town, would need to be re-located. As Theron summed up her position, 'what had to be avoided was to give the coloured people more reason than they already had to say that the Group Areas Act was being used to strengthen the position of whites'.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/110, Report of the Sub-committee appointed by the Committee for Group Areas and Land Occupation on 7 October 1952 (transl.), appended to Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 8 December 1952. See also Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.3.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3STB/4/1/142, file 14/1, Report of a Meeting of the Committee for Group Areas and Land Occupation, 29 September 1952.

The objections raised in the municipal council against this were twofold. In the first instance it was argued that creating a coloured area in the north would be expensive, since there was no vacant municipal land in this direction and property would need to be purchased.¹⁹¹ It was an argument calculated to appeal to ratepayers. Second, much was made of the fact that the planned new coloured area was located in the valley of the Plankenbrug River, along the main northerly, ‘most pleasant and attractive’¹⁹² entrance to the town and some councillors felt that the dense building and ‘small houses’ of the coloured township would ‘make a poor impression’.¹⁹³ It was a concern apparently shared by some members of the public as emerged at a meeting of the Farmers’ Association. *Eikestadnuus* reported that a member of the association had pleaded that the entrance to the town should not be marred in this way and suggested an alternative site (Jamestown/Lynedoch) some distance to the south of the town.¹⁹⁴ Theron would later say that to send the coloured people to Lynedoch was the ‘old story of “simply toss them behind the hill [out of sight] and let them find their own way to work”’.¹⁹⁵ *Eikestadnuus* agreed with Theron, although it put a spin on its position which could appeal to pragmatic ratepayers. There was no point in building housing for the coloured community at a distance from town, it argued. Coloured workers could then choose to work for industries attached to other municipalities and Stellenbosch, having funded the housing, would lose its labour force.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, extract from Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 3 February 1953.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 1/1/110, Report of his Honourable the Mayor (Councillor G.P. Blake) in connection with Group Areas and Land Occupation for presentation at the Special Meeting of the Council, 8 December 1952 (transl.).

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/111, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 3 February 1953.

¹⁹⁴ *Eikestadnuus*, 6 February 1953, ‘Groepgebiedewet Word Bespreek. Boerevereniging Hoor Verkeie Gesigspunte’. See also Hermann Giliomee, *Nog Altyd Hier Gewees: Die Storie van ’n Stellenbosse Gemeenskap* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2007), p.198. Giliomee attributes the idea of a coloured town in the Lyndoch/Jamestown area to a suggestion by homeowners in the Cloetesdal area in 1956. However, it had a longer history.

¹⁹⁵ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.35 (transl.).

¹⁹⁶ *Eikestadnuus*, 6 February 1953, leading article, ‘Die Groepsgebiedewet Weereens’.

Theron and her supporters argued from the outset from a range of considerations over and above the official guidelines. They continuously insisted that the interests of the coloured community should not be ignored. Where possible, travel over long distances to places of work should be avoided. 'Fairness towards all groups must prevail'.¹⁹⁷ Given that limited discretion was allowed to local authorities in relation to the Group Areas Act, Theron's faction does seem genuinely to have shown sympathy,¹⁹⁸ attempted to mitigate disruption and to ensure as far as possible that not all sacrifices had to be made by the coloured community.

¹⁹⁷ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/110, document titled: Points taken into Consideration in the Planning of the Areas for Different Groups (transl.), appended to Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 8 December 1952.

¹⁹⁸ Giliomee, *Nog Altyd Hier Gewees*, p.209.

Ultimately though it seemed that ‘white covetousness and selfishness’¹⁹⁹ were not to be denied and the dispensation handed down was somewhat different from what Theron had envisaged. After submission of the Group Areas recommendations to the Land Tenure Advisory Board, the very long wait began. At the end of 1953 the Board sent a telegram stating that the Commission of Enquiry (the next phase of the process) hoped to visit Stellenbosch early the following year. This was followed in January 1954 by another telegram in response to an enquiry by the council, stating that a date had not yet been decided.²⁰⁰ By August there was no further word and at the prompting of Theron, who had just returned to the council, it was decided to enquire about progress.²⁰¹ An assurance was received that a regional sub-committee was about to be appointed and would visit Stellenbosch early in 1955.²⁰² Meanwhile as time passed, new factors began to arise which impinged on the original proposal. Among other things, the announcement that a new provincial road was to be built to the north of town meant that the natural dividing line between areas would be altered. Also the government had required release of certain crown lands for the establishment of what was to become the Western Province Fruit Research Station. This 20 morgen lot would need to be designated for ‘white’ use.

¹⁹⁹ Western, *Outcast Cape Town*. Foreword by Erika Theron, p. x.

²⁰⁰ WCA:3STB, 4/1/143, file 14/1, part 2, telegram, Land Tenure Board to Town Clerk, 11 November 1953.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/119, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 17 August 1954.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 4/1/143, file 14/1, part 2, extract from Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Affairs Administration Committee, 12 October 1954.

As a result of the changed circumstances, Theron visited the Land Tenure Advisory Board and obtained permission to reformulate the council's proposal.²⁰³ Finally in January 1955, the Investigating Committee paid its long-awaited visit, to receive and consider the proposal of the council and submissions by other interested parties. Thereafter representations and objections were advertised.²⁰⁴ It was not until October that the public enquiry in connection with the proposed proclamation took place, and it then transpired that there had been a procedural error on the part of the Board.²⁰⁵ Another lengthy delay ensued while further proposals were solicited and advertised. Inevitably the much-debated scheme for coloured settlement south of the town in the direction of Lyndoch was submitted for consideration.²⁰⁶ The council lodged formal objections to the scheme in a strongly worded submission:

The Coloured people regard themselves as an integral part of Stellenbosch and the council cannot associate itself with wholesale uprooting and relocating of a section of this community. Such a removal would have the result that the Coloureds would see themselves as nothing more than outcasts. Apart from the practical and financial considerations, my council views these moral considerations in a serious light.²⁰⁷

The position expressed in this letter could not have represented a unanimous opinion of the town council. The fact that it had been sustained against considerable internal and public opposition says something about the principles of Theron and her supporters. They were undeniably concerned to have the Group Areas Act implemented in an ethical way, to the extent that this was possible.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, letter, Town Clerk [Stellenbosch] to Land Tenure Advisory Board, 28 October 1954; Report and Minutes of Meetings of the Committee for Group Areas and Land Occupation, 16 and 23 November, 1954; letter, Town Clerk [Stellenbosch] to Land Tenure Advisory Board, 4 December 1954; letter, Secretary, Land Tenure Advisory Board to Town Clerk [Stellenbosch], 20 December 1954.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 4/1/143, file 14/1, Report of the Mayor, 1 March 1955; *Die Burger*, 12 April 1955, 'Adviserende Raad vir Grondbesit'.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, part 2, Report of the Mayor, 1 November 1955.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/137, Report of the Acting Town Clerk, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 3 April 1956.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 4/1/143, file 14/1, letter, Deputy Town Clerk to the Group Areas Board, 4 April 1956 (transl.).

Theron did not, at the time, show any intent to circumvent government policy. She was as diligent in her attempts to apply apartheid to coloured people as she was to reduce the black population of the town. But her Western Cape roots show in her recognition of coloured rights in the region and her desire to treat them 'fairly'. Theron would much later recognise the inherent injustice of the Act and accept culpability for her part in its application. But on the face of the evidence, she was not knowingly callous at the time. A degree of pragmatism undoubtedly also played a role, however, bearing in mind her implacable position on the need to dispense with black labour in favour of coloured labour.

In the following years, various attempts were made by Stellenbosch to have the Group Areas issue resolved, but without results. In 1956 it was decided that Theron would raise the issue at the Congress of Cape Municipalities. The council agreed on the following submission:

That Congress discuss the desirability of approaching the Honourable Minister of the Interior with the request to provide the organisation required to apply the provisions of the Group Areas Act to local authorities and to complete the definition of the areas for the various groups, wherever necessary, within the shortest possible time ... The Council views with concern the effect of the delay in arriving at finality because of the hardships which are caused by uncertainty²⁰⁸

In mid-1956 the Group Areas Board resumed its sitting in Stellenbosch to hear representations in relation to a competing proposal,²⁰⁹ whereafter another long silence ensued. The following year the matter was again raised at the next municipal congress. In Theron's submission the increasing urgency of the matter was spelled out:

Stellenbosch is experiencing great difficulties because of the delay in making a final decision in regard to group areas. Uncertainty in particular as to where developments for the coloured group should go, is frustrating all attempts to find a solution for the most unsatisfactory housing position. ... It is surmised that the same difficulties are experienced elsewhere.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/134, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 10 January 1956.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4/1/143, file 14/1, part 2, letter, Western Cape Committee of the Group Areas Board to Town Clerk [Stellenbosch], 21 May 1956.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/146, document titled: Motions to Congress, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Council Meeting 5 February 1957.

Even the local press approached the Board and were told by the Director, Advocate Hugo, that Stellenbosch was ‘a particularly difficult case’ – no recommendation had yet been sent through to the Minister.²¹¹ In April 1958 it was agreed that the member of parliament for Stellenbosch be asked for his personal support.²¹² Theron was to write jokingly in her memoirs that eventually she accused the MP, Otto du Plessis, of trying to avoid her whenever she approached.²¹³ When Du Plessis left parliament, his successor inherited the fruitless task of attempting to bring the matter to finality.²¹⁴

In May 1958 the mayor reported that the Congress of Municipalities had again been fobbed off. The Group Areas Board had ‘given its assurances that everything possible was being done to speed up the process’.²¹⁵ Early in 1959 it was decided that the council should supply the regional Welfare Council with a résumé of negotiations with the Group Areas Board. Theron, who was chairman of the Western Province Welfare Council, was to attempt to bring pressure to bear from another quarter.²¹⁶ For Theron it must have been a rare experience that with all her connections and the full application of her energy, she was unable to conclude this process.

²¹¹ *Eikestadnuus*, 22 February 1957, ‘Groepsgebiede: Nog Geen Besluit’.

²¹² WCA:3STB, 1/1/158, Agenda and Minutes of the Committee for Public Works and Traffic, 15 April 1958.

²¹³ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.34.

²¹⁴ WCA:3STB/4/1/143, file 14/4/3, letter Town Clerk to H, Smit, M.P., 5 September 1958.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1/1/159, Report of the Mayor appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Council Meeting 27 May 1958.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/162, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 24 March 1959.

By 1960, when it had been reported that proclamation was imminent, the Group Areas Board began to raise a new set of questions concerning a separate area for Indians.²¹⁷ in the Stellenbosch area. Rumbings were again emerging from within the then current council about the desirability of a coloured area alongside the northern entry to the town.²¹⁸ For Theron it must have seemed like *déjà vu*, but she had now outlasted the sympathetic council of the mid-1950s. She personally visited the authorities in Pretoria yet again late in 1960 and was told that the Group Areas Board had finally completed its proposal which had been sent to the Minister for approval.²¹⁹

Early in 1961 when the Board furnished the council with its plan, it was noted with concern that in fact two areas proposed for coloured use, which had formed part of the council's original submission (that supported by Theron), had been omitted. Seemingly, during the protracted delays the government had proceeded to acquire about one-third of the total coloured area envisaged, to be developed as an experimental wine farm.²²⁰ The land purchased, the farms 'Nietvoorbij' and 'Helderfontein', fell within the proposed bridging zone between the two designated coloured residential areas and had the effect of physically separating them. Not only did this significantly reduce the area available for coloured use, but it meant that the public facilities planned for the zone, such as schools, would have to be duplicated.²²¹

²¹⁷ In this study, following common usage in South Africa, the term 'Indian' refers to the people of Asian descent.

²¹⁸ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/166, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 23 February 1960.

²¹⁹ *Eikestadnuus*, 11 November 1960, 'Mayoral Review. Group Areas'.

²²⁰ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/171, Minutes of a Special Meeting of Council, 28 March 1961.

²²¹ *Eikestadnuus*, 24 March 1961, 'Wynproefplaas Belemmer Groepsgebiedeplan'.

At this stage the proclamation process seems again to have frozen as no final delineation was forthcoming. Apparently reluctant to delay matters further by contesting the scheme, the council awaited a ruling, but by late 1962 decided that the Board should again be approached and an attempt made to submit an alternative proposal even at that late stage.²²² However, the Minister of the new Department of Community Development, P.W. Botha,²²³ had decided to act where his predecessor had been dragging his heels. The proclamation was finalised abruptly, and he declined even to consider any review.²²⁴ As Theron put it, he at least was not afraid to cut the Gordian knot (*'ten minste nie bang om die knoop deur te hak nie'*). The shrunken, divided coloured group areas which Stellenbosch had finally to accept were significantly different from what Theron had envisaged and fought for. Furthermore the populous urban area known as Die Vlakte, which Giliomee equates to Cape Town's District Six,²²⁵ was declared a 'controlled' (mixed) area, with an uncertain future. Two years after Theron had left the council, it was designated a white group area, resulting in severe disruption of this long-established coloured community.²²⁶

The years of uncertainty surrounding the determination of coloured group areas in Stellenbosch forced the council into an untenable position regarding coloured housing and services. It was an issue with which Theron concerned herself throughout her time on the council and in which she seems to have taken a personal interest.²²⁷ Whereas she justified the overcrowding in Kaya Mandi,

²²² WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/176, Minutes of a Special Meeting of Council, 28 August 1962; *ibid.*, 1/1/1/177, Minutes of a Special Meeting of Council, 2 October 1962; *Eikestadnuus*, 5 October 1962, 'Burgemeeste se Rubriek. Groepsgebiede'.

²²³ P.W. Botha (1916-2006), Minister of Coloured Affairs, Community Development and Housing, later Prime Minister and first Executive President of South Africa.

²²⁴ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/177, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council 23 October 1962; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p. 35.

²²⁵ This neighbourhood was a racially-mixed but predominantly coloured residential area. It contained schools, churches and shops patronised by the coloured community. See Giliomee, *Nog Altyd Hier Gewees*, pp.xiii. See also Hilton Biscombe (compiler), *In Ons Bloed* (Stellenbosch, Sun Press, 2006) which contains the oral testimony of former residents.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.200. See also Biscombe, *In Ons Bloed*, especially pp.209-218.

²²⁷ Even after Theron had left the council, she continued to work for decent housing

because she did not accept the rights of black residents to remain in Stellenbosch, overcrowding in coloured housing was not acceptable in her view. Yet for almost ten years she had to stand by watching coloured living conditions deteriorate, so that shortly before final proclamation, the then mayor pronounced the situation as ‘nothing short of desperate’.²²⁸

conditions for coloured people, and to put pressure on future councils via other agencies, for example as chairman of the regional committee of the National Housing Commission. See NA: Department of Community Development (GEM), vol.103, file 2/5/2/3, pt.2.

²²⁸ *Eikestadnuus*, 15 June 1962, ‘Mayoral Review’.

Reports of appalling conditions under which many coloured people lived, are a regular feature of the council minutes.²²⁹ In 1956 even the local Child Welfare Society submitted a memorandum pleading with the council to take action. It refers to large families living in single rooms and to the social problems of alcoholism, abuse and delinquency which were aggravated by these conditions. At the time that this petition was received, Stellenbosch had a backlog of applications for economic and sub-economic housing for coloured residents of 407 units. This is in comparison with 48 applications for the slightly larger white population.²³⁰ A council building scheme was in progress in Idasvallei but all other plans had to be put on hold. Repeatedly it is minuted that no new coloured housing could be built until coloured group areas had been proclaimed and land became available.

²²⁹ See for example WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/135, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 14 February 1956; *ibid.*, 1/1/1/138, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 15 May 1956.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/139, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 12 June 1956. According to the 1951 census, there were 8271 white residents in the Stellenbosch municipal area and 7440 coloured residents. See *ibid.*, 1/1/1/110, document titled: Certain Information in Connection with the Population Distribution in the Municipal Area (transl.), appended to Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 8 December 1952.

As a result of the halt in building it became increasingly difficult to deal with squatting, the erection of illegal structures in backyards and various other measures to which the coloured community resorted for shelter. The council was constantly being called upon to make decisions on whether to tolerate a ‘lowering of standards’, which must have gone against the grain for Theron, the proud resident and councillor. The alternatives were evictions and demolitions, despite there being no alternative accommodation.²³¹ This must have been equally insupportable to Theron, the social work academic. The local politics of coloured housing clearly became increasingly uncomfortable for her. In 1954 she had led the petition of municipal voters against the proposed building of an ‘emergency camp’ for coloureds, claiming to be ‘astonished’ that the council was even thinking about a prefabricated shanty town.²³² Yet during her own mayoral term, precisely this kind of solution was again under serious consideration. Theron served on the sub-committee created to study the matter.²³³ It was ultimately decided to try to avoid this compromise which could lead to slum conditions. It was also concluded in a later meeting that it would take almost as long to provide the temporary housing as it would to build permanent structures.²³⁴ The council could not have envisaged at that stage, that a further five years of haggling lay ahead.

²³¹ See for example *ibid.*, 1/1/1/137, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 3 April 1956; *ibid.*, 1/1/1/140, Minutes of a Meeting of the Sub-Committee in Connection with Temporary Structures, appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 17 July 1956; *ibid.*, 1/1/1/149, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 16 April 1957.

²³² *Ibid.*, 1/3/1/1, Meeting of Voters in Terms of Article 259 of Ordinance no.19 of 1951, 22 July 1954 (transl.).

²³³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/149, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 16 April 1957.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/149, Summary of Discussions of the Housing Sub-Committee held on 23 April 1957 (transl.); *ibid.*, 1/1/1/150, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 14 May 1957.

The long wait for proclamation of group areas also created anxiety concerning other facilities, such as schools. All the private coloured schools (mainly church-run), were destined for removal in terms of the delimitation proposal and were kept in a state of uncertainty awaiting a decision. The only coloured high school, the Lückhoff School, was seriously overcrowded and in need of extension but all plans were placed on hold.²³⁵ By 1960 the current mayor was reporting that the situation was ‘growing ever more grave’. ‘From experience, one can never catch up on this kind of backlog.’²³⁶ (The state took a decision to move the Lückhoff School to Idasvallei in 1964 but it was not until 1972 that the new school was opened.)²³⁷

Even a decision concerning the expansion of the cemetery in Stellenbosch was held up. New ground was urgently needed for coloured burials and vacant municipal land was available adjacent to the existing cemetery. However, Theron suggested to the council that until the ruling of the Land Tenure Advisory Board was known, this land should be reserved for white use and no decision taken concerning the siting of a new coloured cemetery.²³⁸ Plans for building public conveniences for coloured people in the town, were held up for similar reasons.²³⁹

The Reservation of Separate Amenities by Local Authorities Ordinance, promulgated in September 1955, taken together with the delay in proclaiming the coloured group areas, caused further vacillation. For example, the decision to create a ‘whites only’ park was stalled while attempts

²³⁵ See for example *ibid.*, 4/1/145, file 16/15/2, letter, Secretary of the School Board to Town Clerk [Stellenbosch], 1 July 1960 and 22 October 1960; *ibid.*, letter, Town Clerk to Dominican Congregation of Sisters, 14 October 1960; *ibid.*, Summary of a Meeting with a Delegation from the School Board, 1 November 1960.

²³⁶ *Eikestadnuus*, 14 November 1960, ‘Mayoral Review, Toekoms van Kleurlingskole’.

²³⁷ Giliomee, *Nog Altyd Hier*, p.204. See Biscombe, *In Ons Bloed*, pp.63-86, for recollections about the Lückhoff School and its role in the coloured community of Stellenbosch.

²³⁸ WCA:3STB, 1/1/111, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 20 January 1953; *ibid.*, 1/1/113, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 12 May 1953.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/139, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 19 June 1956.

were made to find out whether an equivalent park had to be provided for the coloured community and if so, where it must be located.²⁴⁰ Plans for a picnic site for coloured use also remained bogged down.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/135, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 7 February 1956.

²⁴¹ *Eikestadnuus*, 1 July 1960, 'Piekniekplek vir Kleurlinge'.

These are merely examples of the numerous anomalies and absurdities with which the local authority was confronted in the 1950s while apartheid legislation and practice was being hammered out. There was also a debate about whether notices could be fitted to taxis to indicate for which group they were intended and whether the municipality had the power to enforce this. As usual Stellenbosch was ahead of other local authorities as it was not yet accepted practice.²⁴² The council had to decide whether or not the bus operators could allow coloured domestic workers to travel in the back of vehicles transporting white passengers. Alternatively, could they use the same buses (duly cleaned between trips) to transport different groups, separately,²⁴³ since the Boland Bus Company had advised that they could not economically run two fleets. There was a tortured discussion in council about whether or not coloured taxis might be used to transport students from the station to the university at the beginning of term when white taxis were unable to cope with the demand. This was finally conceded after much rationalisation²⁴⁴ but the government then turned down the proposal.²⁴⁵

²⁴² WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/126, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 17 May 1955.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/134, Report of Discussions in Connection with the Bus Service at Stellenbosch, 17 January 1956, appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee 24 January 1956.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/164, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 21 July 1959.

²⁴⁵ *Eikestadnuus*, 14 August 1959, 'Burgemeester se Rubriek. Huurmotor-Apartheid Skep Probleem'.

Within the structural constraints of apartheid legislation, Theron gave generously of her time and energy to the coloured community of Stellenbosch. It is reflected in the records that she took a keen interest in their welfare, and often became involved in the plight of individual families. There are indications of compassion in her dealings with coloured residents that are not evident in her attitude towards the black residents of the town. For example, Theron responded to a call at 10 o'clock one night to appeal to the owner of some flats in Idasvallei not to evict certain tenants. According to the report of the town clerk, 'her worship the mayor pointed out that particularly at this time of year, it is impossible to deprive people of their accommodation, however poor, before they have somewhere else to go'.²⁴⁶ In this instance she managed to halt proceedings and to strike a bargain with the landlords.²⁴⁷ On another occasion, together with the town clerk, she carried out an inspection of a household where 10 people were living in a 2-bedroomed council house in Idasvallei. Complaints had been received about these tenants. Reading between the lines of the report, it was a volatile situation. In the bland wording of official minutes it was reported that the older woman in the household was very 'cheeky in the presence of the mayor'.²⁴⁸ On another occasion when she heard that houses erected in Idasvallei were not to specification she visited the area personally and reprimanded the housing superintendent sharply for not bringing the matter to her attention sooner. She insisted that the narrow chimneys be replaced and that the smoke-blackened walls be re-whitewashed by the contractor. Little seems to have been beneath her attention.

²⁴⁶ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/139, Report of the Town Clerk appended to Minutes of the Ordinary Monthly Meeting of Council, 3 July 1956.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 17 July 1956.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/146, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 22 January 1957.

A number of other projects for coloured welfare and recreation were instituted during Theron's time on the council, with her active participation, although it remains evident that there were wide disparities between provisions for white residents of Stellenbosch and those for coloured residents.²⁴⁹ For example, a decision was taken to lay out sports grounds and a picnic area in Idasvallei in what was known as the 'old pear orchard'. The planning for this project went ahead while permission was awaited from the Group Areas Board,²⁵⁰ but it was still being carried forward in the minutes in the 1960s pending proclamation. In 1956 an opportunity for providing a free library scheme for the white and coloured constituencies arose. This provincial project would replace the existing arrangements and all that was required of the municipality was to provide a building and someone to manage the service. Theron decided that the existing facilities for white residents were adequate and that there was nothing to be gained by taking up the offer, but she was very enthusiastic about providing a library for the coloured community. It was a project that she pursued with vigour, persuading her council to agree, consulting representatives of coloured schools and ratepayers and following up through hitches with finance and planning.²⁵¹ The building was finally completed on the site of the proposed coloured park and on Theron's recommendation, I.D. du Plessis was invited to open the library with due ceremony at the end of 1959.²⁵² There were other smaller acts of consideration. For example, Theron was among a group of councillors who sponsored a proposal for a 'café' to be built at the Bergzicht Market 'to provide a place to shelter and rest' for coloured people of the town.²⁵³ During her mayoral term she arranged for an end-of-year function for coloured municipal employees – seemingly the first such event.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ R.E. van der Ross, 'Holiday Season Amenities' in J.L. Hattingh and H.C. Bredekamp, (compilers), *Coloured Viewpoint: A Series of Articles in the 'Cape Times', 1958-1965 by R.E. van der Ross* (Bellville, University of the Western Cape, 1984), pp.91-93.

²⁵⁰ WCA:3STB, 1/1/1/133, Minutes of a Meeting of the Chairmen of Committees, 13 December 1955.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/135, Report of the Mayor, appended to Minutes of a Meeting of Council, 6 March 1956 (transl.); *ibid.*, 1/1/1/139, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 19 June 1956.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/164, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 15 September 1959. The opening took place on 7 November 1959.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/141, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native

Administration Committee, 14 August 1956.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Special Meeting of Council, 13 December 1955.

These, among many other examples, are important for the light that they throw on Theron's awareness of the needs of the coloured community. She was able to promote the provision of small amenities and gestures of kindness, but was also brought face to face with the growing dislocation and deteriorating living conditions through the 1950s and early 1960s. Theron had access to the reports of her Health Department, confirming that the coloured population of Stellenbosch showed all indications of severe social disorder. A high infant mortality – more than three times that of the white population – malnutrition and susceptibility to the marker diseases of poverty and overcrowding, such as tuberculosis and gastro-enteritis, were a matter of record. The Municipal Health Department suggested that alcoholism and ignorance played a role in these appalling statistics but concluded that the 'tragic' housing situation was chiefly responsible.²⁵⁵ Theron and some of her fellow members of the Theron Commission were much later to claim that they had been unaware of the true plight of the coloured people in South Africa. She may well have seen even more desperate situations as she travelled around the country gathering data for this commission, but she could not have been totally unprepared for them.

Cultural and Environmental Conservation

Perhaps the most gratifying outcome of Theron's term as mayor and councillor of Stellenbosch was her contribution to the preservation and development of the town's historical and natural assets. According to the historian D.J. Kotzé, into the early 1930s Stellenbosch had remained an 'undisturbed reflection of its past'. He describes it in this way:

... old private homes from different periods, large and small, even in the middle of the town, many with fruit and vegetable gardens; a number of churches, schools and administrative buildings that had been built in the nineteenth century; numerous oak trees alongside the streets and the banks of the Eerste River; a mill-run and water furrows that daily performed their function. In the middle of town there was virtually no building over the height of two storeys.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1/1/152, Report of the Municipal Health Department for the Year Ended 31 December 1956, appended to Report and Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Public Health Committee, 30 July 1957.

²⁵⁶ D.J. Kotzé, 'Kultuurlewe: Bewaring' in F. Smuts, (ed.), *Stellenbosch Drie Eeue* (Stellenbosch, Stadsraad van Stellenbosch in samewerking met Die Oudemeester-Groep, 1979), p.419 (transl.).

This was the Stellenbosch where Theron spent her student years and to which she returned from Germany. In 1934, the historic Wesleyan Parsonage was pulled down to make way for a new town hall,²⁵⁷ which should have alerted preservationists to the dangers of unmonitored development. However the war years intervened, putting a brake on building, and it was not until the 1950s that the value and vulnerability of Stellenbosch's special character again began to draw the attention of a group of activists.

As has been discussed, Theron's entry into local politics had much to do with the fact that Stellenbosch had reached the crossroads in its development and was being tugged in different directions by factions with different aspirations for its future. In common with many towns in South Africa, its population had mushroomed in the post-war period. (According to *Eikestadnuus* it had doubled in a period of 14 years.) In the case of Stellenbosch, the number of students had also spiralled, precipitating a building boom to meet the demand for accommodation and commercial facilities in and around the town centre.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.420.

In 1950 *Eikestadnuus* warned that careful planning was critical if ‘the spirit and traditions of Stellenbosch’ were to be preserved,²⁵⁹ but even this local newspaper seems to have been ambivalent about what was good and what was bad for the town. On the one hand it published a positive editorial about the first five-storey building in Stellenbosch with the first passenger lifts in the town (a ‘branch of a well-known financial institution’).²⁶⁰ A year later it led with an article, ‘*Quo Vadis?*’, questioning the direction of the town’s development. The enthusiasm for the modern buildings seems to have waned dramatically and the ‘town fathers’ are asked to take stock of the trend towards ‘shiny new’ structures which do not look at home amid ‘past architectural splendour’.²⁶¹ Throughout this period the debate is reflected in published letters to the editor in which the diametrically opposed positions are vehemently expressed. The same building is defended as ‘labour saving and efficient’,²⁶² and condemned as ‘screamingly out of place’ by different correspondents.²⁶³

At the same time buildings of great antiquity were increasingly under threat of demolition to make way for modern structures or simply to provide parking in the town. The struggle to save what could be saved and foster a culture of civic pride in historic Stellenbosch was one which Theron embraced with a sense of mission. There are individual buildings which today form an important part of the Stellenbosch heritage, which owe survival directly to her personal activism. This passion was shared by a small group of like-minded conservationists who formed part of the ‘reformed’ town council elected in 1954. Francois Smuts and the town clerk Walter Bleresch played a very important role in the drive for conservation. In her memoirs Theron gives credit to Smuts for having been the leading figure in the movement²⁶⁴ – he had certainly been agitating for the town

²⁵⁹ *Eikestadnuus*, 10 November 1950, ‘Stellenbosch Beplan vir Toekoms’.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1950, leading article, ‘Our Future?’.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13 April 1951, leading article, ‘*Quo Vadis?*’.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 25 May 1951, letter to the editor.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18 May 1951 (transl.). See also for example *ibid.*, 21 July 1950, ‘Mure van Stellenbosch’; 18 August 1950, 17 April 1951, 8 June 1951, letters to the editor.

²⁶⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.29.

council to take an interest in old Stellenbosch even before Theron's entry into local government.²⁶⁵ Blersch was town clerk from 1924 to 1956 and thereafter retained as 'professional officer' until his death. He was an amateur historian and architectural designer²⁶⁶ and his knowledge and experience were invaluable to Theron.

²⁶⁵ See *Eikestadnuus*, 18 August 1950, letters to the editor: letter from Frans Smuts.

²⁶⁶ See C.K. Johnman, 'Kerke: Anglikaanse Kerk' in Smuts, *Stellenbosch*, pp.266, 333. See also *Eikestadnuus*, 30 March 1951, 'In die Eikestad' (column on local personalities).

Some aspects of the endeavour were arguably heavy-handed, particularly while Theron was at the helm. Theron always enjoyed a challenge. She was unafraid of ambitious schemes and of confronting vested interests. At times her approach was successful but, at other times, possibly provoked resistance. With the mandate of the Civic Association to manage development within the town, Theron and her council decided in 1955 on a comprehensive scheme to preserve the unique 'character' of the core of historic Stellenbosch. For this purpose a committee was established with an unwieldy title of the Committee Appointed by the Council with the Object of Deciding on and Implementing Measures in the Interests of the Preservation of What is Unique and Attractive in Certain Parts of Stellenbosch (later referred to as the Committee for the Cultural and Historical Preservation of Stellenbosch).²⁶⁷ Theron attempted to secure the participation of various interest groups in this committee and its activities. For example, representatives of the Historical Monuments Commission were persuaded to meet the Stellenbosch Council in April 1956. Although they expressed sympathy for the concept of systematic conservation, their powers were too limited for them to become directly involved. Nevertheless, an important contact had been made and a representative of the commission was thereafter regularly involved in discussions surrounding the preservation of old Stellenbosch.²⁶⁸

Theron was also determined to involve the Chamber of Commerce. As she put it, the town council had to convince businessmen that modern buildings, which were virtually the same everywhere, were not what attracted people to an area; it was the particular atmosphere of a town that must be commercially exploited. Although Theron referred frequently to the necessity of keeping Stellenbosch attractive for its residents, she seems also to have had a vision of the tourism potential

²⁶⁷ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/147, Agenda for the Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 19 February 1957.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/137, document titled: Communication by Her Worship the Mayor to a Meeting of the Council, 1 May 1956.

of the town, and others like it in the Boland.²⁶⁹ Local architects were also invited to a meeting to discuss the initiative and an attempt was made to gain their support.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.* See also *Eikestadnuus*, 16 August 1957, 'Dis Goeie Besigheid om die Natuurskoon te Bewaar. Burgemeester Onthaal Sakemanne'.

²⁷⁰ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/146, Report of the Mayor, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 5 February 1957; *ibid.*, Report of the Meeting of the Committee Appointed by the Council with the Object of Deciding on and Implementing Measures in the Interests of the Preservation of What is Unique and Attractive in Certain Parts of Stellenbosch, 24 January 1957, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 5 February 1957.

The scale of intervention envisaged by the preservation committee was considerable and it is not surprising that their enthusiastic activism was not shared equally by all interested parties. The area designated as the 'old town' which the committee wished to subject to regulation was defined in terms of particular streets or sections of streets. Together they formed a significant portion of Stellenbosch at the time. According to a report of the committee drawn up in 1957:

It was felt that a definite style should not be prescribed but that a number of features and characteristics should be preserved or prescribed, where they affected buildings, existing as well as new ones. They were the oak trees, existing widths of streets the water furrows, the colour of buildings, the construction and the colour of the roofs, the heights of buildings and window areas.²⁷¹

To achieve this would have entailed an amendment to the existing town-planning scheme in order to reduce the permitted height of buildings, as well as the introduction of other broad areas of regulation. Not surprisingly, objections were raised by those with business interests in the town. Local architects also showed 'reticence to accept control as far as their activities as members of their profession were concerned'. Although the meeting between the committee and architects apparently ended on a 'sympathetic note' it is clear that the architects felt that the council was over-reaching its powers.²⁷²

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*

Possibly on the grounds of this resistance, and after some very heated debates within the council,²⁷³ a resolution to reduce the allowable height of buildings in the area from five to three storeys, was later rescinded.²⁷⁴ However Theron and the preservation committee were not diverted. To obtain guidance on how to approach the problem, they arranged a meeting with representatives of the Cape Provincial Institute of Architects. Not a great deal of concrete advice seems to have emerged. The Institute was clearly reluctant to recommend that architectural designs be subjected to, and possibly turned down, on the basis of lay opinion – however well-meaning. Professional hegemony was at stake. It was nevertheless suggested that if an advisory committee were set up by the town council, the goodwill of local architects might be relied upon and they were likely to be sensitive to its objectives.²⁷⁵

Despite the lukewarm reception by architects, the council continued to pursue its objective of maintaining architectural harmony, at least within Dorp Street (a focal point of the old town). To this end they applied to the provincial authorities for promulgation of special building regulations to apply to construction in that street. This was finally agreed to in 1959. It seems that a less dogmatic approach was adopted after Theron's mayoral term, which may have eased negotiations.

Another successful initiative in connection with Dorp Street, commenced by Theron and her colleagues while she was still in office, was the struggle to prevent the provincial administration from turning this street into a main thoroughfare through the town.²⁷⁶ This would have involved widening the road, at great cost to the oak trees and other unique features such as the original water furrows. In the longer term the heavy traffic flow would also have had a detrimental effect on all

²⁷³ See *Eikestadnuus*, 9 August 1957, 'Warm Besprekings op Stadsraadvergadering. Dorpsbeplanning en Kleurlingbehuising onder die Soeklig'.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 November 1957, 'Stadsbeplanning'.

²⁷⁵ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/156, document titled: Preservation of Old Stellenbosch: Amendment of the Town Planning Scheme: Meeting, 19 October 1957, appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 12 November 1957.

²⁷⁶ *Eikestadnuus*, 23 August 1957, 'Die Beplanning van Stellenbosch'.

the old buildings lining the street. After protracted negotiations the province finally agreed to withdraw the proclamation in 1958.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ WCA:3STB, 5/2/1/1, Report of His Worship the Mayor, Councillor S.W. Liebenberg, for the period September 1957 to August 1958.

One of the first threatened historic buildings which Theron and the conservationists were able to rescue was the Ou Burgerhuis,²⁷⁸ a derelict structure situated on the common on the north side of town, known as the Braak. During 1950 at the request of the Stellenbosch Council, the government had purchased land for the building of a new magistrate's court and police headquarters. The erection of these public buildings would require the demolition of a cluster of old structures including some coloured housing and a school. As part of the agreement, the government wished to include a provision that the municipality take over one of the buildings, the Ou Burgerhuis, and preserve it as a national monument. Despite the fact that the Ou Burgerhuis dated from the eighteenth century and was recognised as a good example of the Cape Dutch building style, the sitting council was unwilling to accept this condition. It regarded the building as too rundown to restore.²⁷⁹ The controversy dragged on into 1951-1952 by which time Theron had a seat in the council. However this was the council reputedly controlled by business interests, in particular the building industry. They were undoubtedly more concerned with new construction than with the preservation of the past, and clearly Theron did not have sufficient influence to sway opinion in favour of assuming responsibility for the building at this stage.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Identified as the residence of Antonie Fick and dating from 1797. See memorial plaque at the site.

²⁷⁹ *Eikestadnuus*, 24 November 1950, 'Nuwe Magistraatskantoor vir Stellenbosch. Ou Burgerhuis nog in gedrang'.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1951, 'Burgerhuis en Publieke Geboue. Wat Gaan aan?'; WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/107, Report of the Public Works Committee Meeting, 15 July 1952.

As indicative of the attitude of this council, it even proposed to use part of the Braak to build a parking lot, and was only prevented from doing so by the intervention of the Historical Monuments Commission. *Eikestadnuus* was outraged that Stellenbosch should need to be told from outside that it should not treat its cultural heritage with such disdain.²⁸¹ The Braak was in itself an historical site. It had been set aside by Simon van der Stel²⁸² for the use of the community and numerous significant military, sporting and civic gatherings had taken place there over the centuries. According to *Eikestadnuus*, it was thought to be one of the oldest town squares in the country and potentially the ‘most picturesque in the southern hemisphere’.²⁸³ The Civic Association came out strongly against the council over the controversy eventually forcing the mayor to issue a statement. He denied that there had ever been any intention to ‘do any harm’ to the Braak: there simply was no municipal land available for parking.²⁸⁴ The struggles over this affair may well have been another contributing factor in the resignations of Theron and Collins from the council in that year and Theron’s determination to oust ‘self-interested’ councillors.

In 1954 Theron returned to the town hall as part of a reformed council. First as a pro-active deputy mayor, then as mayor with the backing of the more sympathetic council, Theron was determined to inculcate a new attitude to Stellenbosch’s heritage and to resolve the dilemma of the Ou Burgerhuis. It was, she said, an issue in which she had taken a particular interest. In her usual style of direct intervention she made arrangements to meet officials of the relevant state departments, held discussions with the municipal committees and extracted an agreement that the public be approached for a loan to finance restoration.²⁸⁵ This did not occur overnight however, and it took

²⁸¹ *Eikestadnuus*, 27 February 1953, leading article, ‘Die Braak in Gedrang’.

²⁸² Simon van der Stel was a commander (later governor) at the Cape under the Dutch East India Company. He founded the settlement at Stellenbosch in 1679.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16 January 1953, ‘Die Braak – Erfstuk van Vervloë Dae’, (transl.). See also Hannes Meiring and Ters van Huyssteen, *Footloose in Stellenbosch: A Visitor’s Guide* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1993), pp.78-81. The Braak has since been declared a historical monument.

²⁸⁴ *Eikestadnuus*, 27 March 1953, ‘Die Braak. Statement by His Worship the Mayor’.

²⁸⁵ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/132, Communication by Her Worship the Mayor (transl.), appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 6 December 1955.

several years before the goodwill translated into concrete action. In 1958 as the new public buildings were nearing completion, the Minister of Public Works announced that the Stellenbosch public must finally decide on the future of the Ou Burgerhuis as it could no longer remain in its present state.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ *Eikestadnuus*, 7 March 1958, 'Lot van Burgerhuis in Weegskaal. Minister sal Hom Deur Openbare Mening Laat Lei'.

Restoration commenced only in 1959.²⁸⁷ The state Department of Public Works eventually notified the council that it had decided to donate the site of the building to Stellenbosch (replacing the original proposal which involved an exchange of property)²⁸⁸ and the restored building was formally opened by Minister Paul Sauer on 1 May 1960.²⁸⁹ In an interview in her later years, Theron said with a degree of sarcasm that even councillors who had been opposed to the project had turned up at the function to share in the accolades. According to her, an amused fellow councillor and supporter, George Osler, had turned to her and said, ‘just look at them strutting!’.²⁹⁰ It must have been a satisfying moment for Theron. She so obviously thrived on overcoming resistance and triumphing over adversaries. She had been involved with the rescue mission from the outset. She was a close observer throughout the lengthy restoration period, taking an interest in every detail. Ultimately, she was able to see it transferred into safe hands. After some enquiries from potential tenants which came to nothing, Distillers Corporation offered to lease the building for 20 years at favourable rates, placing it at the disposal of the local community, free of cost.²⁹¹ As a final vindication of the value of the project, the Historical Monuments Commission declared the Ou Burgerhuis a national monument in 1960.²⁹²

From the start of the Ou Burgerhuis campaign, the preservation project snowballed as Theron, her supporters, and various consultants became convinced that not only this building but an annex and other historic structures surrounding the Braak formed a unique, coherent architectural landscape and should be protected as such. In a letter to the National Director of Public works, written by the town clerk on Theron’s instructions the following statement was made:

²⁸⁷ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/163, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 14 April 1959.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/164, Minutes of an Ordinary Council Meeting, 21 July 1959.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/168, Minutes of a Meeting of Council in Committee, 13 September 1960.

²⁹⁰ SABCTV, *Profiel (Erika Theron)*.

²⁹¹ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/166, Minutes of an Ordinary Council Meeting, 24 November 1959; *ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of an Ordinary Council Meeting, 23 December 1959.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 1/1/169, Minutes of an Ordinary Council Meeting, 25 October 1960.

The opinion of Dr. Mary Cook²⁹³ has reinforced the wish of the council that this historic section of Stellenbosch, with its examples of the old Cape building style, should be preserved in the interests of the town and the country as a whole. Any demolition and removal of any of the aforementioned buildings would detract from the powerful impact that could be created [by keeping this intact].²⁹⁴

At the same time, in consultation with her deputy and the town clerk, Theron decided that the proposed design of the new magistrate's court was unsatisfactory and not a suitable backdrop to the historic buildings on the Braak. Again the experts were consulted to lend weight to the objections, and a telegram sent to the Minister of Public Works.²⁹⁵ This secured an interview with the Minister and, ultimately, modifications to the plans by the architect.²⁹⁶ It was a coup of which Theron was proud – one of the memories she shared with Rykie van Reenen 30 years later.²⁹⁷

²⁹³ Author and authority on Cape Dutch architecture, later attached to the South African Museum.

²⁹⁴ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/139, Report of the Mayor appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 3 July 1956 (transl.). The buildings named are the Rhenish Church, the Rhenish Girls' High School, the Dutch East India Company Powder Magazine (Kruithuis), the Ou Burgerhuis and the thatch-roofed building (Ou Rietdakgebou also referred to as Koetsierhuis).

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/142, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 4 September 1956.

²⁹⁷ Recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.2.

A long struggle ensued to persuade the Department of Public Works not to demolish the annex to the Ou Burgerhuis, sometimes referred to as the Van der Riethuis (1809), and to transfer the land on which this building stood to the municipality. However, the department had little interest in this structure and furthermore was of the opinion that it hindered access to the new public buildings. Theron again resorted to a direct approach to the Minister,²⁹⁸ J. de Klerk, and the backing of experts, including a representative of the Historical Monuments Commission. In a letter to the Minister she warned that in the future there could be deep regret over the destruction of antiquities that could never be restored.²⁹⁹ But she was unable to find the resources to offer a viable alternative.

Perhaps indicative of a gradual reverse of the pendulum after Theron's two terms as mayor, by 1958 C.F.D. Smit was back in the council (one of the businessmen in the 'self-interested council' of 1952). Smit argued that 'a small community like Stellenbosch could hardly undertake heavy commitments in respect of non-productive schemes such as museums etc.'³⁰⁰ He was not alone in this view. In his annual report, the mayor stated that repairs to the Ou Burgerhuis had cost around £10 000, and the council simply could not afford to undertake any further schemes of this nature.³⁰¹ Thus, since no other funder could be found to meet the costs of restoration, and the council concluded that it could not further burden ratepayers, the annex was ultimately pulled down. Theron was abroad at the time. The remaining preservationists on the council could not muster

²⁹⁸ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/146, document titled: Site of New Police Station and Quarters between Alexander and Du Toit Streets, and Ou Burgerhuis Property (transl.), appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the [Stellenbosch] Public Works and Traffic Committee, 22 January 1957. See also *ibid.*, Report of the Meeting of the Committee Appointed by the Council with the Object of Deciding on and Implementing Measures in the Interests of the Preservation of What is Unique and Attractive in Certain Parts of Stellenbosch, 24 January 1957.

²⁹⁹ *Eikestadnuus*, 30 November 1956, 'Burgerhuis-anneks in Gevaar. Nuwe Vertoë aan Minister'.

³⁰⁰ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/158, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Public Works Committee, 20 March 1958.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 5/2/1/1, Report of his Worship the Mayor, Councillor S.W. Liebenberg, for the period September 1957 to August 1958.

sufficient votes even to carry a proposal that a letter be written to the Minister to express 'disappointment' at his decision.³⁰²

³⁰² *Eikestadnuus*, 26 August 1958, ' 'n Verlore Stryd. Van der Riethuis ook Gesloop'; M.J. Le Roux and D.J. Kotzé, 'Die Museums van Stellenbosch' in Smuts (ed.), *Stellenbosch*, p.406.

Another old building in which Theron took a personal interest was a thatch-roofed house (c.1791) on the Braak, known as the Koetsierhuisie. She is generally credited with having rescued it from oblivion in 1957. Negotiations had been underway between the owners of the building (Stellenbosch Development Corporation) and the council for some *quid pro quo* arrangement in terms of which the town could take over ownership of the building. An agreement in principle was reached in April 1957. The owners would donate the building to the municipality in return for the construction of an access road to one of their properties.³⁰³ While the transaction was still mired in red tape, the house was brought to the brink of ruin by torrential rains in the district.

³⁰³ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/151, Minutes of a Special Meeting of Council 2 July 1957.

The following story is told by Frans Smuts in the 1984 television documentary about Theron. While Theron was in a meeting on 18 June 1957, it was reported to her that one of the walls of the Koetsierhuisie was collapsing. Unable to leave the meeting she telephoned Smuts and instructed him to rush over to the Braak, assess the situation and make whatever arrangements were necessary to shore up the building and forestall further damage.³⁰⁴ In the subsequent special meeting of the council which Theron hastily convened, she reported that she had decided to act in her personal capacity, since the council had no title to the property as yet, and even if transfer could be expedited there were no funds available in the current budget for repair work. Moreover, as the Stellenbosch ratepayers had still to be approached for funding for the restoration of the Ou Burgerhuis at that stage, it might be unwise to seek additional finance. It seems that Theron and ‘other interested parties’ may have personally advanced money for the initial repair work although this is nowhere stated explicitly.³⁰⁵ *Eikestadnuus* refers to ‘a woman who holds these matters close to her heart’ who had come to the rescue.³⁰⁶ In a later reference it states that this anonymous female donor had made the funds available interest free and was in no hurry to be repaid.³⁰⁷ It was an act of considerable generosity and evident passion for conservation. Funds for further work on the cottage were raised in various ways, including an exhibition of photographs of old Stellenbosch, which became a popular standing exhibit in the temporary museum³⁰⁸ and donations for a booklet depicting old homes in the area.³⁰⁹ In 1961 the building was sold to St. Mary’s Anglican Church who completed the restoration.³¹⁰ Whether or not Theron was involved in the funding,³¹¹ it was, according to

³⁰⁴ SABCTV, *Profiel (Erika Theron)*.

³⁰⁵ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/151, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Council, 18 June 1957. See also *ibid.*, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 2 July 1957.

³⁰⁶ *Eikestadnuus*, 21 June 1957, ‘Herstelwerk aan Rietdakhuisie Begin. Sal Stellenbosch Help Betaal?’.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 28 March 1958, ‘Rietdakhuisie Amper Klaar’.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15 November 1957, ‘Stadsraad Wil Begin Met Argief. Vra Foto’s van Die Dorp en Sy Mense’.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 August 1957, ‘Boekie Oor Ons Mooiste Ou Huisie’.

³¹⁰ Joy Collier, *Stellenbosch Revisited* (Stellenbosch Booksellers and Publishers, 1959), p.38; WCA:3/STB, 4/1/142, file 13/9/1, untitled newspaper clipping, 7 April 1961.

Johnmann, through her drive and initiative that the little coach-house was saved from certain destruction.³¹²

³¹¹ It has not been possible to establish with certainty whether or not Theron was the anonymous benefactor.

³¹² Johnmann, C.K., 'Anglikaanse Kerk' in Smuts, *Stellenbosch*, p.266.

A number of other historic buildings were the subject of struggles between the council and owners (and at times among members within the council) with mixed results. Among these were the so-called Ou Pastorie, belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church and destined to make way for the Utopia old age home, and the Ou Uitspan on Plein Street. Permission had been granted for the demolition of the Ou Pastorie by an earlier (1952) council³¹³ and some members of Theron's council felt strongly that the commitment should be honoured. They were, however, outvoted by a majority³¹⁴ and protracted negotiations ensued. The old rectory had been built in about 1860 by 'the unforgettable Ds. Jan Neethling'³¹⁵ and was situated at the end of the historic Dorp Street, apparently rounding off the street in an attractive manner.³¹⁶ The issue was a sensitive one, however. If the Ou Pastorie building remained, it would exclude light and outlook from the new old age residence, and providing access from the road would also be a problem. A narrow, busy service road would subject the elderly to noise and other hazards. Theron says that she and Smuts were much maligned in the town ('*maar het hulle nie destyds veral Frans Smuts en vir my in die dorp beskinder nie!*') for hindering progress and for being callous towards the elderly.³¹⁷ However, they remained dogged in their attempts to find a solution, consulting architects and summoning whatever influence they could to persuade the church council and the Utopia Committee, which was steering the building project, to accept alternatives.

³¹³ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/151, document titled: Die Ou Pastorie: Statement by Councillor L. van Coppenhagen, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 4 June 1957.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/148, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 5 March 1957.

³¹⁵ *Eikestadnuus*, 11 January 1957, 'Ou Pastorie Word Dalk Gesloop. Waardige ou Woning het selfs 'n Prins Gehuisves'.

³¹⁶ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.32; *Eikestadnuus*, 4 October 1957, letters to the editor, Frans Smuts, 'Laat Ons Die Ou Pastorie Red'; WCA:/3STB, 1/1/1/155, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 24 September 1957.

³¹⁷ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.32. See also *Eikestadnuus*, 5 February 1957, 'Tehuis vir Bejaarde Dames Nader Verwesening' by Mrs. B Stofberg. In this article the writer takes issue with the reasons advanced by the council to forestall demolition of the old rectory.

H.B. Thom threw his weight behind the campaign in his capacity as a former member of the National Monuments Commission. Conceding that the current town council was legally bound by the resolutions of its predecessors, he was complimentary towards the council for its positive efforts to preserve what was of historic value in Stellenbosch in contrast to the ‘unco-operative’ attitude of former councils.³¹⁸ After another spirited debate in the council, Theron, Smuts and their supporters were able to carry a motion, narrowly, to continue to try to dissuade the church from proceeding with the demolition. It was evident however that it was not within the interests or power of the council to enforce this.³¹⁹ Ironically after the old building had been levelled, one of the councillors who had been most adamant that the council should not renege on the agreement of its predecessor, admitted that ‘a kind of vandalism’ had been committed when the *Ou Pastorie* was demolished.³²⁰ This must have galled Theron who had so often warned that regret would come too late.

³¹⁸ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/151, Summary of Discussions held in Connection with the Preservation of the *Ou Pastorie*, 20 June 1957, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 2 July 1957.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/156, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 29 October 1957.

³²⁰ *Eikestadnuus*, 23 October 1959, ‘Utopia Feestelik Ingewy. Beton Vriendskap aan Bejaardes vra Mev. Z. Steyn’ (transl.).

The Ou Uitspan, which had been the Faure family farmstead, dating from 1838 was the subject of a delegation to the Administrator of the province.³²¹ This building had particular sentimental value as it had once been the ACVV Koffiehuis, frequented by Stellenbosch students of past generations.³²² Provincial authorities had decided to pull it down to extend the playing fields of the Bloemhof Primary School. Although the building was not regarded as representative of the high-point in Cape Dutch architecture it had attractive features,³²³ and, it was argued, its demolition would leave an ugly gap in the building line, directly opposite the northern end of Drosty Street.³²⁴ It was hoped that this building could be restored and converted into an Africana museum, but also to no avail. As always, funding was a problem when the council proposed the preservation of a building that had not been declared a national monument. Also, the property owners had rights which could not be arbitrarily ignored. All that could be done when demolition could not be averted was for the Museums Committee of the council to attempt to save what they could. Building materials and fittings of aesthetic or historic value were identified and new owners were asked to incorporate these in the replacement structures, or to donate them to the municipality for use in other restoration projects.³²⁵ The warnings of Theron and the ‘obsession’ with historic buildings of which people such as Frans Smuts and Theron were accused³²⁶ would seem to have been vindicated: plans have been made to rebuild the Ou Uitspan on its original foundations. One of the architects involved in the project is the son of Frans Smuts.³²⁷

³²¹ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/171, Minutes of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 18 April 1961.

³²² See for example, John D’Oliveira, *Vorster – The Man* (Johannesburg, Ernest Stanton Publishers, 1977), p.36.

³²³ WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/171, Memorandum by F. Smuts: Die Ou Uitspan-Gebou, appended to Minutes of the Museum Committee, 18 April 1961.

³²⁴ *Eikestadnuus*, 7 April 1961, ‘Mayoral Review. The Old Uitspan Building’.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 6 June 1961.

³²⁶ *Eikestadnuus*, 9 June 1961, Letters to the Editor, Prof. Frans Smuts, ‘Slaan Plat! Ry Weg!’.

³²⁷ *Die Burger*, 5 November 2005, supplement, ‘Kultuurkroniek’, ‘Eikestad se Verdwene Geboue Gerekonstruktuur in Nuwe Ontwikkeling’.

Theron was grieved by every loss of a building. At a symposium on the preservation of old buildings, held in Cape Town in November 1959, she used the example of the irreversible loss of the Ou Pastorie to illustrate the need for a more co-ordinated approach to architectural conservation. As she pointed out, Stellenbosch was a small town with an exceptionally high percentage of non-rated properties. With its limited tax base it could not alone protect a national heritage; central authorities had to become involved. Ever aware of the benefits of publicity to promote activism, she used the occasion to raise the matter of the Ou Utopia, the original old age home on the same site, also destined at the time to be rased.³²⁸ The resultant press coverage may well have contributed to the church's decision later, to restore and use the old building as a community centre.

³²⁸ *Eikestadnuus*, 20 November 1959, 'Ons Kan Ons Las Nie Alleen Dra Nie. Prof. Erika Theron Stel Stellenbosch se Saak'.

In terms of architectural conservation much had been achieved by Stellenbosch in the time that Theron was on the council and she played a vital part in this. The town had gained a reputation for its pro-active approach to preserving its historic buildings and was in many respects a leader in the gathering awareness of heritage trusteeship. This was given recognition by the Simon van der Stel Foundation, established in 1959 and welcomed as a beacon of hope in Stellenbosch.³²⁹ According to Willem Punt, a director of the foundation, the Stellenbosch Council had ‘done more than any other for the preservation of old buildings’.³³⁰ It is a tradition and reputation that has been carried forward.³³¹

³²⁹ *Eikestadnuus*, 1 May 1959, leading article, ‘Kom Ons Stel ’n Voorbeeld aan Ons Buurdorpe’; *ibid.*, 2 October 1959, leading article, ‘Hoe Staan Dit met die Stigting?’ by Anna de Villers.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1959, ‘Restourasie van Ou Geboue. “Dis Wyd en Syd Bekend: Stellenbosch Doen die Meeste.” Dr. Punt Wens Stadsraad Geluk’. See also *ibid.*, 10 June 1960, ‘2700 Kaap-Hollands Huise is Afgebreek. S.A. Oplaas Bewaringsbewus’.

³³¹ See Hans Fransen (compiler), *A Guide to the Old Buildings of the Cape: A Survey of Extant Architecture from c.1910 in the area of Cape Town - Calvinia - Colesburg - Uitenhage* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2004).

Theron was equally concerned with the development of other enterprises to conserve and promote what was of historical and cultural value in the town. The four-member Museums Committee in which she played a lively role, was arguably something of a misnomer, since Stellenbosch cannot be said to have possessed a true museum until 1962 when the Stellenbosch Museum was founded.³³² However throughout the time that Theron was part of the town council, a number of buildings were considered for this purpose and discarded for various reasons (including the VOC Kruithuis, the Ou Burgerhuis and Ou Uitspan). The committee was, however, responsible for setting up temporary exhibitions of various kinds, mainly in the so-called Phillimore-Ives House and Memorial Gallery. This historic building, originally known as Grosvenor House, had been acquired by the town council in 1951 to house a collection of paintings donated by Lady Phillimore of England. The acquisition was not uncontentious at the time since the Deed of Donation included a provision that ‘if the Union of South Africa should secede from the British Empire, the entire gift must be returned to the donors’.³³³ It seems more than likely that there would have been sufficient pro-republic sentiment in Stellenbosch in the 1950s to make this problematic. Nevertheless the donation was accepted and a director, R. Henniker-Heaton, engaged. A grant from the province and assistance from the Abe Bailey Trust covered the costs of restoration and maintenance for the first few years but thereafter funding was a perennial problem which the Museums Committee confronted.³³⁴

Theron and her colleagues in the committee were responsible for a number of initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s which were to feed into Stellenbosch’s growing reputation as a cultural centre. In August 1957, Theron opened an exhibition of historic photographs of Stellenbosch in the Phillimore-Ives annex and appealed to the public to contribute to the collection.³³⁵ In October 1957 the committee

³³² Le Roux and Kotzé, ‘Die Museums van Stellenbosch’ in Smuts (ed.), *Stellenbosch*, p.406.

³³³ WCA:3/STB, 4/1/141, file 13/8/1, Deed of Donation, 12 July 1951; *Eikestadnuus*, 20 July 1951, letters to the editor, letter from C.J. van Brakel; *ibid.*, 3 August 1951, letters to the editor.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, sundry correspondence.

³³⁵ *Eikestadnuus*, 15 November 1957, ‘Stadsraad Wil Begin Met Argief. Vra Foto’s van

took a formal decision to give attention to the preservation of old documents, maps, publications and other antiquities as well as photographs. It was specifically noted that not only were such collections of local interest, but also of historical value and an attraction to tourists³³⁶ – the committee was already beginning to look ahead to Stellenbosch's third centenary. Donations began to flow in from the public. So great was the response that storage facilities became problematic, let alone organisation of the kind of display which donors expected. From time to time fragile and valuable goods had to be moved while Phillimore House was let for other purposes.³³⁷

Die Dorp en Sy Mense' (see above).

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/155, Minutes of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 22 October 1957.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1/1/160, Report of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 26 August 1958; See also *ibid.*, 1/1/164, Minutes of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 4 August 1959; *ibid.*, 1/1/170, Minutes of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 14 March 1961.

In the wake of the referendum in which South Africa voted to become a republic, the future of the Phillimore-Ives complex once more came under discussion and attempts were made to obtain clarity from the trustees in England. There were differences of opinion within the council as to whether or not attempts should be made to persuade the trustee, the Honourable Claude Phillimore, to allow the donation to stand. Theron, who had visited Phillimore in England in 1959, was adamantly opposed.³³⁸ Although the record does not state as much, she would have regarded any request for favours from a British donor as demeaning, particularly if the new-born republic of which she was so proud was implicitly being slighted. The council did, however, make representations to Phillimore, but without success. The relevant clause was invoked and the collection ultimately packed up and returned to England.³³⁹ The Museums Committee thereafter decided that Phillimore House (which was to revert to the name of Grosvenor House) would continue to be run as an art centre but that an effort should be made to collect Africana.³⁴⁰ In May 1962 a trust was created under the direction of the council, through public appeal, to establish a local cultural-history museum in the townhouse, which was officially opened in September 1967.³⁴¹ Thus Theron can be said to have played an active part in the emergence of Stellenbosch's first dedicated museum.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4/1/141, file 13/9/2, letter, C. Phillimore to Town Clerk [Stellenbosch], 29 December 1959.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/172, Minutes of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 11 July 1961; *ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Council in Committee, 8 August 1961.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 15 August 1961.

³⁴¹ Le Roux and Kotzé, 'Die Museums van Stellenbosch' in Smuts (ed.), *Stellenbosch*, pp. 406, 408.

An important step taken by the Museums Committee was that of arranging for a comprehensive survey of old structures in Stellenbosch in order that they might be systematically monitored and careful decisions made about their preservation. The recommendation that all buildings considered important to the character of the town be identified had emerged from the meeting with the Institute of Architects in 1957. In the past, interventions to save specific buildings seem to have been fairly *ad hoc*, prompted by threat of collapse, rumours of a sale, applications for demolition or building permits and resulting in frantic negotiations.³⁴² What was reputedly the oldest building in Stellenbosch was pulled down because the owners, the Dutch Reformed Church, were not prepared to pay for its upkeep while the council tried to find a financier to purchase it.³⁴³ The creation of a record did not eliminate the risk of loss of historic structures, but it did give the Museums Committee time to act, and they spared no effort. Minutes of meetings of the committee reveal a drive, commitment and at times emotion that must surely be rare in public bodies. This is reflected in the fact that most informants talking about Theron's lifetime achievements place her activism for the preservation of historic Stellenbosch high on the list.

Another positive point emphasised by the Institute of Architects in 1957 was the need to ensure the survival of the oak trees of Stellenbosch. This had already been identified as crucial by Theron and her council at the beginning of their campaign³⁴⁴ and was merely confirmed at the meeting with the Institute. According to the architect O. Price Lewis of Cape Town:

The charm of Stellenbosch, as far as its buildings were concerned, did not depend on uniformity of style. They were in fact highly heterogeneous in character ... Although there was thus no unified style, there was a highly unified town. This was due to the oak trees and nothing else.³⁴⁵

³⁴² WCA:3/STB, 1/1/171, Minutes of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 13 June 1961; *ibid.*, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 20 June 1961.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/170, Minutes of a Meeting of the Museums Committee, 14 February 1961.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1/1/137, document titled: Communication by Her Worship the Mayor to a Meeting of the Council, 1 May 1956. See also files in *ibid.*, 4/1/140: oak trees in various areas were declared national monuments over a period of time.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1/1/156, document titled: Preservation of Old Stellenbosch: Amendment of the Town Planning Scheme: Meeting, 19 October 1957, appended to Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 12 November 1957.

Trees were a passion of Theron, as reflected in minutes throughout her service in the council. From 1952 she frequently brought personal observations and recommendations to meetings – for example suggesting that the Jacarandas in the town be replaced by oaks.³⁴⁶ In 1953 she became part of a small, informal sub-committee established to decide on general policy concerning tree planting as well as the circumstances under which trees could or should be removed.³⁴⁷ In time she seems to have become familiar with almost every individual public tree in Stellenbosch. When applications for trimming or removal of specific trees were received, she often carried out inspections in person. When a tree was damaged needlessly, she could become very angry.³⁴⁸ When trees appeared sick, expert advice was sought from the forestry officer or the university.³⁴⁹

Emphasis on the protection and planting of trees did not apply only to the historic oaks or to central Stellenbosch. This is illustrated by a council resolution that when new roads or suburbs were being planned, routing of cables, pipes, drains and overhead wires had to be submitted for consideration to the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee well in advance to facilitate expeditious planting and allow maximum space for trees.³⁵⁰ When a conflict of priorities arose, Theron expressed the

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1/1/107, Report and Minutes of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 25 November 1952.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1/1/114, document titled: Recommendations of the Lands and Parks Committee in Connection with Future Policy Regarding the Planting of Trees in Stellenbosch, 30 July 1953.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/1/143, Minutes of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee. Theron had inspected a camphor tree cut back for power lines to be installed, and submitted a strongly worded rebuke.

³⁴⁹ See for example *ibid.*, 1/1/139, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health Committee, 12 June 1956. In this case after inspection it was decided that the ‘pretty oak tree’ should be retained and that the council should cover the cost of damage to the property of the complainant seeking its removal. See discussion of a number of specific trees: *ibid.*, 1/1/148, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Department, 12 February 1957; *ibid.*, 1/1/155, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 24 September 1957.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/140, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 17 July 1956.

opinion that 'the beautification of any part of the town should not be completely subject to service mains'.³⁵¹

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 24 July 1956.

Trees were also regarded as important for their functional value in hiding the ‘other’ Stellenbosch. Where rapid coverage was needed, Theron recommended fast-growing trees to screen unsightly buildings and hide the signs of industry.³⁵² Concealing reminders of disparities in living conditions between different Stellenbosch communities was no doubt behind the decision to plant a forest of trees between white Stellenbosch and the coloured area of Idasvallei.³⁵³ Although Theron was opposed to a group areas scheme that would remove the coloured community to some out-of-sight location she would not have been oblivious to the aesthetic sensitivities of a section of the white community.

³⁵² For example she recommended that the Deciduous Fruit Board on the southern side of Adam Tas Street be asked to plant poplars to screen their property. See WCA:3/STB, 1/1/131, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 11 October 1955.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1/1/140, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 3 July 1956.

Theron was very aware of any part of the town that appeared neglected and often initiated efforts to improve such areas by arranging for repairs, cleaning, maintenance, laying out gardens, paving or installing benches.³⁵⁴ She was not above berating fellow councillors for neglect of their duties. In one report as mayor she commented that it grieved her to raise the issue of pavements yet again. ‘Those councillors who meet their obligations and regularly visit *all* wards in the town, will agree with me that some pavements look like a wilderness reserve ...’.³⁵⁵ At the end of the report she recommended that letters of thanks be sent to residents who maintained their own pavements and she offered to supply their names.³⁵⁶ By implication, she personally monitored every pavement in Stellenbosch. Possibly as a result of Theron’s persistent emphasis on cleaning and developing pavements, parks and other public areas, a horticulturalist was engaged as the first full-time Superintendent of Parks in Stellenbosch during her term as mayor.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ For example, repairs to public conveniences and improvements to the area known as ‘The Avenue’ were made on Theron’s initiative. See WCA:3/STB, 1/1/1/111, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 20 January 1953 and *ibid.*, 1/1/1/149, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Health, Housing and Native Administration Committee, 9 April, 1957; an irrigation system was laid on for gardens in Adam Tas Street. See *ibid.*, 1/1/1/136, Minutes of a Meeting of the Public Works and Traffic Committee, 20 March 1956.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/145, Report of the Mayor, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of Council, 8 January 1957 (transl.).

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1/1/1/148, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 12 March 1957.

In addition to her enthusiasm for the cultivated order of the town's gardens and parks and its European trees, Theron was probably ahead of her time in her interest in indigenous vegetation.³⁵⁸ Together with the local forestry officer, possibly at his instigation, she proposed a scheme to establish a nature reserve in an area known as Botmaskop, which was scheduled to become a pine plantation. In a report to her council, Theron stated that 'it would be a sin against ourselves and the future generations to plant pine trees on this site'. At no great expense the area could be cleared, different varieties of protea planted and walking paths laid out. She expressed optimism that the provincial administration would be sympathetic and might be persuaded to support the project financially.³⁵⁹ A decision was taken to proceed with this the following year.³⁶⁰ Awareness of the need to protect and propagate indigenous plants was seemingly gaining greater recognition at the time,³⁶¹ and it is to Theron's credit that she was open to emerging opinion, particularly scientific opinion, and always ready to act where she was convinced. Another example of this arises from a decision of the council to chop down trees on the new cemetery site and to sell them to General Box Company. Theron and Smuts were absent from this meeting, but on their return they immediately intervened and carried an amended resolution that 'the indigenous trees be preserved as far as possible'.³⁶² This kind of vigilance, and attention to detail, was a mark of Theron's terms as mayor.

³⁵⁸ She was to become a keen gardener after she and Annette Muller acquired their holiday home at Hermanus. According to Theron, not a single exotic plant was tolerated in the garden. See *Die Burger*, 18 June 1976, "'Ons Gaan Kyk!" het Erika Theron Oor en Oor Gesê'.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/141, Report of the Mayor, appended to Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 7 August 1956.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1/1/148, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 12 March 1957. See also Memorandum from the Professional Officer to the Town Clerk, appended to the minutes.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1/1/14. See Report on a Conference of the Institute of Park Administration, 8 February 1957, referred to in Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 12 February 1957.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 1/1/148, Minutes of a Meeting of the Lands, Parks and Forestry Committee, 12 February, 1957.

Theron recognised the need not only to preserve what was beautiful or historically significant in Stellenbosch for the benefit of the town's residents but also as a national heritage, and moreover a marketable asset. Tourism was important for a town that had to weather a four-month commercial slump every year when the university was in recess. During her term as mayor, the need to publicise the town gained momentum and during 1957, in co-operation with the Chamber of Commerce, a permanent committee was set up to formulate a positive advertising campaign, with a view to creating a dedicated publicity bureau eventually.³⁶³ An advertising brochure, long in the planning, appeared in 1958. Theron had been pressing for the publication of some kind of leaflet to introduce Stellenbosch to the outside world from as far back as 1951, but cost had always been an inhibiting factor.³⁶⁴ It was finally decided that a brochure should be produced in co-operation with the South African Railways Publicity Bureau. It appeared in 1958, after Theron had taken the matter up with the bureau.³⁶⁵ Theron's personal interests were well represented in the brochure – in particular the historical significance of the town. Stellenbosch's grape and wine industry were, however, overlooked. More significantly, non-white residents of the town were virtually invisible.³⁶⁶

³⁶³ *Eikestadnuus*, 23 November 1956, 'n Publisiteitsvereniging, Nou of Nooit! Stigtingsvergadering Volgende Maandag'.

³⁶⁴ See for example WCA: 3/STB, 1/1/1/105, Minutes of an Ordinary Meeting of the Council, 8 January 1952.

³⁶⁵ *Eikestadnuus*, 15 November 1957, 'Publisiteitsbrosure vir Stellenbosch'.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 February 1958, 'Nadruk op Historiese Aspek van Eikestad'.

In the time that Theron served Stellenbosch as a councillor, the town underwent considerable change. Stellenbosch was not unique in this. It was a seminal time in the country's history and in many ways the town reflected wider transformation as Afrikaner nationalists consolidated political and cultural power. Theron's individual contribution to the shaping of Stellenbosch's future is often hidden, because of the nature of the records. However there is sufficient evidence that her convictions, energy and will had a considerable influence. When she finally retired from local politics in the early 1960s, Stellenbosch bore the credentials and scars of an iconic Afrikaner nationalist town. For this, Theron could take a significant share of credit and blame.

CHAPTER FIVE
CHAIRMAN OF THE THERON COMMISSION:
CHAMPION OF COLOURED RIGHTS

Chairmanship of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group was probably the crowning moment of Erika Theron's public life. In 1972, at the age of 65, her long lecturing career at Stellenbosch was finally over. She still had many other responsibilities but she could have been facing the difficult adjustment often experienced by those whose identity is closely associated with their occupation. Instead she was about to embark on a major project which was to catapult her into prominence (and controversy) in a vastly greater arena. There are very mixed opinions on the ultimate significance of this commission, but at the time it made headlines and it continues to be cited by some scholars as a milestone on the path to structural change in South Africa.¹ More than any of her other achievements, the Theron Commission made Erika Theron a household name within her lifetime and secured for her a place in South African history.

¹ See for example, Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*, p.194; Davenport and Saunders, *South Africa*, p.441.

The Theron Commission had its origins in the shortcomings in NP policy relating to the coloured population. The role and place of coloured communities within the apartheid scheme had been an intractable problem for the party from the time that it assumed government in 1948. Unlike the black population, coloured people had no language, religion or territorial base that clearly distinguished them from the white population. Even the identification of the coloured population in terms of the Population Registration Act reflected its anomalous position. According to the definition in the Act a 'Coloured person' was someone who was 'not a White person or a Bantu'.² This residual group did not fit into the idealised apartheid dispensation in terms of which separate nations should aspire to realising their full potential and unique identities in their own homelands. The hard question of how to accommodate the coloured population in ways that were not overtly racist and did not disturb the moral veneer of apartheid, was thus a constant challenge to government. The official policy which emerged at the beginning of the 1960s, 'parallel development',³ always appeared contingent and lacking in practicable long-term objectives. Socially, economically and politically the coloured population remained significantly disadvantaged. As a result, coloured-white relations were frequently strained.

All these factors ensured that the future of the coloured people was the subject of continual discussion. Even within Afrikaner nationalist circles, and among intellectual and political leaders, opinions diverged significantly. Periodically the controversy escalated to a point where NP unity was threatened. The Theron Commission of 1973 was the outcome of this national debate.

The 'Coloured Question', 1948-1973

² *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.3.

³ 'Parallel development' was introduced by Verwoerd as an alternative to the polarised 'homeland'/'integrationist' perspectives. Through parallel development, the coloured group would evolve into a kind of 'state within a state'. See D.Y. Saks, 'The Failure of the Coloured Persons' Representative Council and its Constitutional Repercussions, 1956-1985' (MA dissertation, Rhodes University, 1991), pp.48-49.

NP policy relating to the coloured population as set out in general terms in the 1947 report of the Sauer Commission,⁴ emphasised formalisation of segregation in all spheres.⁵ Shortly after it came to power in 1948, a series of laws was passed to give effect to this policy. In 1949 the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act was extended to prohibit marriage between coloured and white persons and in the following year the Immorality Act placed a ban on sexual relations between the white and non-white populations.⁶ During the 1950s the delineation of separate residential areas in terms of the Group Areas Act commenced, as well as segregation of public facilities. Theron played a role in implementing these laws diligently at local level. During this period government set in motion the process to transfer functions such as education and welfare out of the common state structures into a Department of Coloured Affairs, causing considerable anxiety among coloured people that they would in future receive inferior services.⁷ After a protracted struggle, the coloured population was removed from the common voters' roll. In terms of the Separate Representation of Voters Act (1956) they were placed on a separate register and empowered to vote for four white representatives in the House of Assembly, one in the senate and two in the Cape provincial council.⁸ The Act also made provision for the establishment of the Union Council for Coloured Affairs (UCCA). Regarded by many coloured people as a puppet organisation, it was the subject of endless controversy and boycotts.⁹

The sidelining of coloured voters was achieved through cynical methods of dubious constitutionality and not all Afrikaner nationalists were comfortable with this. MER, for example,

⁴ This was an NP commission established in 1947 under the chairmanship of Paul Sauer to set out the policy of apartheid in a comprehensive form. See Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.476.

⁵ Saks, 'The Failure of the Coloured Persons' Representative Council', pp.26-27.

⁶ *Report of the Theron Commission*, pp.26-27.

⁷ US, Doc. Centre: S.P. Cilliers papers (289), Councils, Committees and Institutes (Cou.), South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (35), SABRA Report of the Committee on Coloured Affairs, 18 January 1961.

⁸ Saks, 'The Failure of the Coloured Persons' Representative Council', pp.31-34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.39-42; Du Pré, *Separate but Unequal*, pp.150-151.

expressed strong misgivings in correspondence with friends, including Theron. ‘These methods are not to our credit’ she wrote.¹⁰ There is no record of Theron’s reply. It was one of the rare occasions where her two great mentors would have been on opposite sides of the fence. Even at this early stage of NP government, policy relating to the coloured population had the potential to divide Afrikaners, in particular along regional lines. Afrikaners from the northern provinces tended to have less sympathy for coloured interests than did those from the Cape.¹¹

¹⁰ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55 KT (29 and 29a), letter and enclosure, MER to Theron, 6 September 1955 (transl.).

¹¹ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.501-502.

Reflecting the many doubts about coloured policy, various bodies initiated conferences and studies devoted to coloured affairs from the 1950s. The theme of the sixth annual conference of SABRA, for example, was ‘The Coloured in South African Society’. At this conference, Theron delivered a paper titled ‘The Coloured and His Social Problems’.¹² Her discussion, which focused on welfare, was prefaced by a quotation from a ‘recently-published SABRA statement of principles’. According to this statement, ‘separate development’ would be in the interests of both the coloured and white groups. Consequently ‘apartheid measures’ would need to be applied ‘*where necessary*’.¹³ The statement is so hedged with provisos that it says little. It could be argued that SABRA had no clear policy on the future of the coloured population at this time. However, resolutions flowing from the conference lean towards increasing group separation. A significant number of these resolutions deal with issues raised in Theron’s paper – economic competition with black labour, housing, welfare and recreational facilities.¹⁴ This emphasis on socio-economic rehabilitation was to become a common refuge of NP supporters to offset or divert attention from the constitutional stalemate.

¹² Erika Theron, ‘Die Kleurling en sy Maatskaplike Probleme’ in Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede, *Die Kleurling in die Suid-Afrikaanse Samelewing. Referate Gelewer op die Sesde Jaarvergadering van die Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede* (Stellenbosch, SABRA, 1955), pp.27-49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.27. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.27-49; Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede, *Die Kleurling in die Suid-Afrikaanse Samelewing*, pp.126-128.

At the time that the SABRA conference was held, a second project was being planned under the leadership of another Stellenbosch academic with a growing reputation for an interest in coloured affairs, S.P. Cilliers. This multi-disciplinary study based at the University of Stellenbosch and titled 'The Socio-Economic Position of the Non-White Population of the Western Cape', commenced in 1956.¹⁵ Cilliers had studied in the USA and had been influenced by its civil rights debate. He was convinced that South Africa must move away from segregation of the coloured population.¹⁶ Following the Stellenbosch project Cilliers undertook a second study as chairman of a newly-formed SABRA Committee for Coloured Affairs. Cilliers says, mistakenly, that up until that time Theron 'had never been in SABRA'.¹⁷ It is, however, possible that she had become a dormant member following the internal clashes over anti-Verwoerd sentiment and that Cilliers was not aware of her history in the organisation. For whatever reason, Theron was not appointed to this SABRA committee.¹⁸

The 1956 Stellenbosch University study provided the core of the research on which the SABRA committee based its report and recommendations. This report, completed at the end of 1960, was later to be described by Theron as an 'explosive' document.¹⁹ It was far from radical but suggested a new direction in coloured policy. What was of particular significance was its timing and the ominous fissures which it revealed within Afrikaner leadership.

¹⁵ *The Cape Argus*, 16 May 1956, 'Stellenbosch Starts Three-Year Study of Coloured People'.

¹⁶ Interview, Cilliers. Cilliers equated the position of African Americans to the South African coloured population rather than the black population.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Among the members of this committee was Professor G. [Gerrit] van N. Viljoen, later Vice Chancellor of the Rand Afrikaans University and chairman of the *Afrikaner Broederbond*. See US, Doc. Centre: 289, Cou.,35, Minutes of a Meeting of the Committee for Coloured Affairs, 6 August 1960.

¹⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.49.

The SABRA conference of 1955 in which Theron had participated, had been vague about the future of the coloured people but it clearly did not support even gradual merging with the structures of white society. By 1960, however, the political climate had changed. In particular the Sharpeville-Langa unrest had highlighted the extent of black disaffection within South Africa. In these circumstances loyal coloured allies were regarded by some as more desirable than a united 'non-white' opposition. Furthermore, the fact that there was little coloured participation in the revolt, had stirred consciences in some quarters, including respected figures in the Afrikaner establishment.²⁰ To some, particularly Cape Afrikaners, the time appeared right for a re-evaluation of white-coloured relations. Against this background, rumours of imminent, dramatic change were fuelled by the media.²¹ In the absence of public contradiction by the government, pressure and hopes of a 'new deal' mounted.²²

Both reflecting and helping to shape this climate was an influential book, published in October 1960 by a minister of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, David Botha. In the words of the coloured leader and later prominent academic, Richard van der Ross,²³ Botha was an 'Afrikaner in the very best tradition'.²⁴ In this study Botha rejected a racially-determined caste system from which coloured people could never escape.²⁵ Lending special significance to this publication was a foreword written by the revered Afrikaner poet and intellectual, N.P. van Wyk Louw, endorsing Botha's view.²⁶ Doubt and re-evaluation of particular issues had also begun to surface within

²⁰ See for example, *The Cape Times*, 18 May 1960, 'Matie Professor Wants Coloured MPs', referring to an article by J.P. van S. Bruwer, Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Stellenbosch; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.522-525.

²¹ *The Cape Argus*, 29 June 1960, 'State has Opened Door to New Coloured Affairs Policy'; *Die Burger*, 23 July 1960, quoted in O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.106.

²² R.E. van der Ross, 'Those "New Deal" Reports' in Hattingh and Bredekamp, *Coloured Viewpoint*, pp.120-121.

²³ See Introduction, fn.97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Van der Ross, 'Afrikaner and the Coloured', p.145.

²⁵ D.P. Botha, *Die Opkoms van Ons Derde Stand* (Kaapstad, Human en Rousseau, 1960).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, N.P. van Wyk Louw, Foreword.

sections of the 'white' Afrikaner churches by the late 1950s. From early in 1960 a number of informal, inter-denominational study groups formed to examine church policy on the question of race relations.²⁷

²⁷ Lazar, 'Conformity and Conflict', pp.262-265; Louis Louw (compiler), *Dawie, 1946-1964: 'n Bloemlesing Uit die Geskrifte van Die Burger se Politieke Kommentaar* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1965), p.203 (ref. *Die Burger*, 17 December 1960).

As 1960 drew to a close, while members of the church, academy and rank and file Afrikaners wrestled with issues of theology, morality and ethnic survival, Verwoerd kept his counsel.²⁸ Public silence may have been read as tolerance, feeding the rising tide of optimism. However this would have been a misinterpretation. In October a crucial referendum was due to be held, to decide whether or not South Africa should become a republic. The outcome was far from guaranteed and in the months leading up to the ballot Verwoerd would not have wanted to antagonise any section of the voting population. The time was not right for contentious policy pronouncements. But after the referendum, which the pro-republicans won with a reasonably comfortable margin, these constraints were lifted.

²⁸ Although Verwoerd withheld public comment, he apparently let it be known among some NP insiders that he had no intention of making concessions concerning direct coloured political representation. See J.C. Steyn, *Penvegter: Piet Cillie van Die Burger* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2002), p.145.

On 24 November 1960, while the deliberations of the clerical study groups and those of the SABRA committee were still in progress, Verwoerd's views were published in what J.C. Steyn refers to as 'harsh and controversial' terms – 'the most unfortunate announcement of [his] career'.²⁹ Verwoerd stated unequivocally that government policy in relation to coloured people would remain one of separate development. He added that neither in the present nor in the future would coloureds ever be represented by coloureds in parliament. Even the 'smallest concessions' would open the door to 'Black domination' and 'biological integration'.³⁰ He cautioned nationalists to 'stand like walls of granite' in defence of the government's policy upon which the survival of the nation depended.³¹ Verwoerd's categorical repudiation was a shock, even to some of his supporters.³² MER, for example, expressed her deep consternation to local friends and correspondents, including Theron.³³ Even in a conservative town such as Swellendam, she said, the statement had caused widespread reaction and condemnation of Verwoerd.³⁴ To Theron she wrote that she had grave reservations about Verwoerd's 'never' declaration. She also believed that he had been misguided in saying that the only reason why the coloured community had not joined the recent black unrest was out of self-interest. It was a pity to interpret the motives of allies in this cynical way – to throw such an accusation in their faces.³⁵

Again, there is no record of Theron's reply to MER. From the tone of the letter, evidently MER believed that she was writing to someone who had also been dismayed by Verwoerd's speech, but she may have been mistaken. Within a day of Verwoerd's statement that coloured people would

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.148.

³⁰ *Sunday Times*, 27 November 1960, 'Verwoerd Break with SABRA is Complete'.

³¹ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.526.

³² *Sunday Times*, 27 November 1960, 'Big Nat Row Threatens Over Coloured Policy. Verwoerd Shocks Cape with "No New Deal" Plan', by Stanley Uys.

³³ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.KT (60), letter, MER to Theron, 7 February 1961.

³⁴ Steyn, *MER*, p.489-490.

³⁵ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.KT (60), letter, MER to Theron, 7 February 1961.

never be granted direct representation in parliament, Theron sent him a telegram to tell him that she was 'very pleased about [his] clarification of coloured policy and thankful for [his] wise leadership'.³⁶

Whether Theron's telegram genuinely reflected her convictions cannot be determined. It is possible that, seeing Verwoerd widely criticised for his statement, Theron's words of encouragement had more to do with sympathy and loyalty than commitment to a specific political policy. On more than one occasion in order to support or shield Verwoerd, Theron had shown herself willing to compromise her self-image as one who spoke her mind honestly and fearlessly. It is equally possible that she continued to believe in the separate development ideal and admired Verwoerd's courage in taking a firm stand. At the time she was still engaged with the Stellenbosch council, attempting to implement Group Areas. She would continue to serve on state bodies dealing with the structures of parallel development for many years.

³⁶ INCH: PV 93, 1/30/1/10, telegram, Erika Thehen (*sic*) to Verwoerd, 25 November 1960 (transl.). The reply, on file, confirms that the telegram was from Theron: *ibid.*, unsigned letter [from Verwoerd] to Erika Theron, 29 November 1960. The writer wishes to thank Professor Alex Mouton for bringing this document to her attention.

Verwoerd's inflexible declaration was followed up by a conciliatory statement a few days later and a raft of supposedly 'positive' measures relating to the coloured community was announced, including the usual promises of consultation and improvements in social and economic conditions.³⁷ These were the kinds of issues to which Theron related strongly, and she must have been greatly relieved. MER certainly was.³⁸ However, numbers of Afrikaners, including opinion-forming voices had now entered into and escalated the level of the debate.³⁹ In a pattern that would often be repeated, reformist opinion met with conservative reaction. Piet Cillié, editor of *Die Burger*, was not averse in principle to the notion of direct representation for coloured people in parliament⁴⁰ and was openly critical of Verwoerd's brash and dictatorial approach on the issue,⁴¹ but was always deeply concerned about the potential of the coloured question to divide Afrikaners.⁴² Cillié tried to moderate the debate through his newspaper. In his 'Dawie' column he wrote:

The people who view the idea of direct representation for Coloureds favourably are in the minority among Afrikaners, but they are not few in number. They are also not unimportant. Some of them have arrived at their point of view through deep introspection and self-reproach, some through prayer.⁴³

In this article, Cillié sounds a warning that by attacking one another, Afrikaners could precipitate a disastrous schism in the community and its institutions.⁴⁴

³⁷ *The Cape Times*, 8 December 1960, 'Coloured People Still to Have White MPs, says Verwoerd'; *Die Burger*, 8 December 1960, 'Omvattende Plan vir Kleurlinge. Verwoerd Skets Nuwe Bedeling'.

³⁸ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.M.1,K,11 (60), letter, MER to Anna Geyer, 14 February 1961.

³⁹ Steyn, *Penvegter*, pp.147-149. See also Van der Ross, 'Afrikaner and the Coloured' in Hattingh and Bredekamp, *Coloured Viewpoint*, p.146.

⁴⁰ Dommissie, 'The Changing Role of the Afrikaans Press' in Munger (ed.), *The Afrikaners*, p.101.

⁴¹ Steyn, *Penvegter*, pp.152-153.

⁴² Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.502.

⁴³ Louw, *Dawie*, p.199 (ref. *Die Burger*, 3 December 1960) (transl.).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Verwoerd's crack-down did effect some closing of ranks and was endorsed by the federal council of the NP.⁴⁵ But it came too late to halt some of the initiatives to re-examine race relations which were already well advanced. Both the church study and the SABRA study had their own momentum. In December 1960 an ecumenical meeting was held at Cottesloe, Johannesburg. Among the resolutions passed at the meeting was the view that there was no objection to coloured people enjoying direct representation in parliament, and that there were no scriptural grounds for the ban on mixed marriages.⁴⁶ Owing to the intervention of Verwoerd and the Afrikaner-Broederbond, the synods of the Afrikaner churches did not ratify these resolutions and the Cottesloe initiative was stillborn.⁴⁷ However, it briefly exposed significant ideological tensions within the Afrikaner churches, one of the most important agencies of Afrikaner solidarity.

⁴⁵ *Die Burger*, 23 January 1961, 'Nasionale Party en die Kleurlinge. Federale Raad Verwelkom Premier se Verklarings'.

⁴⁶ Louw, *Dawie*, p.202 (ref. *Die Burger*, 17 December 1960); Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.527.

⁴⁷ Andries Treurnicht later denied Verwoerd's involvement. See A.P. Treurnicht, *Dr. Verwoerd oor Kleurlingverteenwoordiging: 14e H.F. Verwoerd-gedenklesing 1988* (Pretoria, SABRA, 1988). However it is widely held that Verwoerd exerted influence – see for example Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.528; O'Meara, *Forty Years*, pp.106-107.

Cilliers' SABRA committee on coloured affairs, which was concluding its work at about the same time, was to suffer a similar fate. It must have been well warned by Verwoerd's November speech and his public attacks on Afrikaners revealing 'liberal tendencies'.⁴⁸ Central to the SABRA committee's findings was that in terms of language, culture and religion, the coloured population shared a common way of life with 'those who represented "western" society in South Africa'. Their future thus lay within the western establishment. In the light of this, the ultimate objective must be to enable them to develop towards full citizenship.⁴⁹ The report of the committee accordingly included, for example, a recommendation that coloured voters - while remaining on a separate voters' roll - should be represented in parliament by coloured members if they so chose and that the coloured vote should be extended as soon as possible to other provinces.⁵⁰ The initial reception of the report by the chairman of SABRA, Albertus Geyer, was extremely positive. In a personal letter he thanked Cilliers for a 'fine piece of work' and committed himself to publication.⁵¹

Writing about this report in the 1980s, Theron sets out the main findings in some detail. By that time, she was on record as having endorsed many similar findings in the Theron Commission, and she might have been expected to give some explicit credit to the advanced-thinking of Cilliers and his team. But she offers no comment. Perhaps she thought it self-evident.

⁴⁸ *Sunday Times*, 27 November 1960, 'Verwoerd Break with SABRA is Complete'.

⁴⁹ US, Doc. Centre: 289, Cou., 35, South African Bureau of Racial Affairs: Report of the Committee on Coloured Affairs, 18 January 1961 (transl.).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, South African Bureau of Racial Affairs: Report of the Committee on Coloured Affairs, 18 January 1961 (transl.). See also Pierre Hugo, 'A Journey Away from Apartheid' in Hugo, *South African Perspectives*, pp.26-27.

⁵¹ US, Doc. Centre: 289, Cou., 35, letter, A.L. Geyer to S.P. Cilliers, 20 January 1961.

It was the intention that this report be tabled at the annual SABRA conference due to be held in April 1961 and thus exposed to the general public. However, within a matter of days Geyer had performed a *volte-face*. In the opinion of Cilliers, Geyer had leaked the report to Verwoerd in advance of the meeting of the Executive, and Verwoerd had instructed him to suppress it.⁵² Nic Olivier, vice chairman, who had been so critical of Verwoerd's handling of the Tomlinson Report,⁵³ was unhappy that another scientific study was being dismissed in an arbitrary fashion. The Executive of SABRA had ratified the findings of the study group (with amendments) and clearly was sympathetic to a new direction in coloured policy. At a turbulent meeting of the committee held at the end of January 1961 Olivier, as well as other speakers, argued that SABRA had a responsibility towards 'non whites' and that it could not capitulate to political pressure without compromising itself as an independent institution. Others felt that it was unwise to defy government in this way⁵⁴ – Verwoerd had made his position quite clear. Geyer was adamant that the conference should be cancelled. Differences were so great and so irreconcilable, according to Theron, that the possibility of disbanding the organisation was raised.⁵⁵

Ultimately the decision was taken to postpone the conference.⁵⁶ When the conference was convened, only in September of that year, it had as its focus a far less contentious theme, 'Relations between English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans'.⁵⁷

⁵² *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of SABRA], 30-31 January 1961; interview, Cilliers. In Holleman's study of these events, he interprets Geyer's stance sympathetically as being informed by the desire to avoid a split in SABRA. See J.F. Holleman, 'The Great Purge' in Hugo, *South African Perspectives*, pp.34-35.

⁵³ The apartheid 'idealists' argued that massive investment in and development of the black reserves as well as rigid black influx control were essential components of 'pure' apartheid. See Chapter Four.

⁵⁴ US, Doc. Centre: 289, Cou., 35, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of SABRA], 30-31 January 1961 (transl.).

⁵⁵ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.48-49.

⁵⁶ US, Doc. Centre: 289, Cou., 35, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee [of SABRA], 30-31 January 1961 (transl.).

⁵⁷ Holleman, 'The Great Purge' in Hugo, *South African Perspectives*, pp.45-47.

The Cilliers committee report was never published, and never reached even the SABRA rank and file. It was to remain a 'secret document'. Cilliers was greatly embittered by what he regarded as the emasculation of SABRA.⁵⁸ His role in stoking the flames of the coloured debate in the following years should be seen in this light, as should his barely concealed resentment of Theron's ascendancy as the government's 'coloured expert' of choice.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Interview, Cilliers. See also Holleman, 'The Great Purge' in Hugo, *South African Perspectives*, p.34.

⁵⁹ In the interview with Cilliers, this resentment was very evident in the choice of language, selection of facts, and his critical assessment of Theron's activities.

The Bloemfontein conference of September 1961, with its bland substitute topic, marked a turning point in SABRA's early history. As a result of what has been described by several commentators as a deliberate stratagem, orchestrated by the Broederbond and backed by Verwoerd, a core of idealistic intellectuals was purged from, or chose voluntarily to quit SABRA.⁶⁰ In her memoirs Theron says simply that 'some members of SABRA wanted Nic Olivier's head because of his so-called liberal ideas'.⁶¹ It seems likely that Verwoerd and other conservative elements wanted more than the removal of an individual. In Holleman's words, to delve into the coloured question, 'the Achilles heel of the apartheid philosophy', was 'like playing with dynamite in the most dangerously exposed part of the Nationalist political power house'.⁶² From Verwoerd's point of view the intellectual rogue element in SABRA had become a threat to Afrikaner unity and the future of the nation. It had to be brought to heel.⁶³

⁶⁰ Interview, Cilliers; Hugo, 'A Journey Away from Apartheid' in Hugo, *South African Perspectives*; *ibid.*, Hollemann, 'The Great Purge', p.49.

⁶¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.49.

⁶² Holleman, 'The Great Purge' in Hugo (ed.), *South African Perspectives*, p. 43.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.41-47.

To achieve this, the business meeting of the September conference was packed with individuals and representatives of municipalities, church councils, various non-government organisations and other affiliates who would never ordinarily have attended.⁶⁴ Cilliers claimed that it was a totally manipulated process. He encountered people at the meeting who had no idea what issues were at stake, but knew only that they were there to ‘vote against Nic Olivier’.⁶⁵ Theron was aware of this ambush. She mentions it in a letter to Marinus Wiechers written much later, and claims to have known prominent academics who were party to it.⁶⁶ She was personally not present at the meeting,⁶⁷ either to support Olivier or to vote him off. She may have been unable to attend for legitimate reasons, but she would in any case have found an excuse to absent herself. Olivier was a professional colleague whom she respected. But her overriding loyalty was to Verwoerd.

The conspiracy was successful. Olivier and virtually all the other ‘independents’ were either voted out of the SABRA Executive, or declined nomination in sympathy. These included Cilliers and Sadie.⁶⁸ According to Theron, ‘poor Dr. Geyer was left with a largely inexperienced Executive Committee’.⁶⁹ Holleman puts it more colourfully: ‘in this brief two-hour convulsion Sabra had not only lost its independent voice but had also blown out most of its brains’.⁷⁰

Although Theron was not present at the congress, in her absence she was nominated to the stripped Executive Committee. She claims that had she been there at the time, she probably would have refused. However, she says that she had great confidence in Geyer, who remained chairman, and

⁶⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.49; interview, Cilliers.

⁶⁵ Interview, Cilliers.

⁶⁶ Document in possession of author: letter Erika Theron to Marinus Wiechers, 1 February 1982.

⁶⁷ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.50.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.49; Holleman, ‘The Great Purge in Hugo, *South African Perspectives*’, p.45.

⁶⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.49.

⁷⁰ Holleman, ‘The Great Purge’ in Hugo, *South African Perspectives*, p.45.

that ‘after the heat of the battle’ had subsided, she accepted the position. She says enigmatically, in her *Sonder Hoed*, ‘I don’t know now whether I did the right thing – but perhaps, after all, I did’.⁷¹

The new SABRA leadership was bound to be more reactionary than that which it replaced. The controversial circumstances which had created the mass of vacancies on the committee, must have left SABRA tainted in the eyes of anyone with any liberal leanings. To join the Executive at this stage, was to show one’s colours. Holleman, who was close to the events, says simply that the purged ‘independents’ were replaced by ‘people who could be trusted, for the time being at least, not to embarrass the Nationalist Government by the expression of hopes and beliefs not fully shared by it, or by the publication of scientific facts which do not accord with prescribed Nationalist wisdom’.⁷² At the time, Theron would have fitted this description.

⁷¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.50.

⁷² Holleman, ‘The Great Purge’ in Hugo (ed.), *South African Perspectives*, p.45.

Ultimately SABRA moved to the right even of the NP government of a later era⁷³ and the increasing conservatism probably began in the wake of the crisis. The head office moved to Pretoria and Geyer resigned, apparently for health reasons. Theron became chairman of the regional committee based in Stellenbosch, which included S.J. (Sampie) Terreblanche and Koos du Toit, who were later to be included in the Theron Commission.⁷⁴ She claims that there were strained relations between Pretoria and Stellenbosch from the outset and in time she chose to distance herself from what the northern faction of the organisation represented.⁷⁵ But she remained an active member and office-bearer of SABRA for a further decade.

Theron seems to have stepped into the shoes of Cilliers at SABRA, as the specialist in matters affecting the coloured community. She became the convenor of the new SABRA committee which dealt with coloured affairs and she was the compiler-editor of SABRA's *Die Kleurlingbevolking van Suid-Afrika*, published in 1964.⁷⁶ The study did not provide any dramatic new insights. As *The Cape Argus* put it, 'Coloured people [would] find few crumbs of comfort in this book, few signs of a difference from the governing policy of the day'.⁷⁷

⁷³ Lazar, 'Conformity and Conflict', p.165.

⁷⁴ *Beeld*, 14 May 1983, 'n Geknetter oor Bruines. "Partytjie-Opsytjie"-Dae Verby. Dr. Erika Lig Sabra-Sluiser'.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Erika Theron (ed.), met medewerking van Marius J. Swart, *Die Kleurlingbevolking van Suid-Afrika. 'n Verslag van 'n Komitee van die Suid-Afrikaanse Buro vir Rasse-Aangeleenthede (Sabra) Insake die Kleurling* (Stellenbosch, Universiteits-Uitgewers en -Boekhandelaars, 1964).

⁷⁷ *The Cape Argus*, 22 May 1964, leading article, 'Trying to Brake the Inevitable'.

Rykie van Reenen captured the ironies of the project in an observant article in *Die Burger*. Among all those present at the launch of the book, she noted that there was not a single coloured person in evidence – not even a coloured waiter (*'nergens 'n dooie Kleurling nie ... nie eers kelners nie'*). Nor did the book contain any contribution by a coloured writer. Van Reenen quotes Theron as saying that un-named coloured 'leaders' had been approached but had not produced work that was of adequate 'scientific' quality.⁷⁸ Richard van der Ross cast doubt on this claim, observing that no 'leader' of his acquaintance had been approached.⁷⁹ Twenty years later and transformed by her experience in the 1973 commission, Theron admitted ruefully that her SABRA committee would not have considered collaborating with coloured leaders such as Van der Ross 'and his friends' who were regarded as 'virtually communists'. Besides, the northern division of SABRA, which was already unhappy with aspects of the book, would have been outraged, she said.⁸⁰ That she associated herself with such a flawed project says a great deal about the extent of her NP conformist position while Verwoerd held the party reins.

Theron herself was a contributor to four of the chapters in the book, dealing with health, housing, social problems and welfare and the Department of Coloured Affairs. Three of these chapters were produced in collaboration with the relevant state departments, which possibly accounts for traces of official propaganda, which she clearly sanctioned. All are characteristic of her work. They are factual descriptions of structures and functions, identification of shortcomings and recommendations for improvements. As always, Theron demonstrated her social worker's primary concern for the physical welfare of the coloured people, but little awareness of the interrelated nature of social, economic and political conditions.

⁷⁸ *Die Burger*, 20 May 1964, column 'Van Alle Kante' by Rykie van Reenen, 'Maar die Bruidegom was Nêrens te Sien Nie'.

⁷⁹ *The Cape Times*, 2 June 1964, 'Soulless Book on Coloureds', by R.E. van der Ross.

⁸⁰ *Beeld*, 14 May 1983, 'n Geknetter oor Bruines. "Partytjie-Opsytjie"-Dae Verby. Dr. Erika Lig Sabra-Sluiser' (transl.).

The chapter that attracted most attention from the press was one on ‘Differential Legislation’ by Dr. M.J. Olivier of the Africa Institute, in which various laws specifically affecting the coloured population are examined (and generally justified). It is Olivier who tackles the difficult questions surrounding the civic and political status of the coloured people and examines various future scenarios. In essentials, the position adopted by Olivier seems to have left itself open to wide interpretation, avoiding the kind of recoil that Verwoerd had precipitated by his pronouncements in the past. In line with official policy declared by Verwoerd,⁸¹ Olivier dismisses the notion of a coloured homeland as impractical.⁸² He suggests, therefore, that the white and coloured populations would necessarily carry on with the business of their lives within one communal area, and ‘at least in theory’ would in future generations evolve into a united community (*‘eenheidsgemeenskap’*). Finally, Olivier concludes that the best policy in relation to the ‘Coloured question’ is ‘no policy at all’ meaning, he says, no policy directed towards predetermined end-goals (*‘eindpunte’*).⁸³

It is made clear in Theron’s introduction to the book that although this is a SABRA project, the individual authors take responsibility for their own opinions. Theoretically, therefore, SABRA, still less the government, may not have shared Olivier’s points of view. However, given the reaction to the Cilliers report of 1961, it is reasonable to conclude that this book would never have seen the light of day had Verwoerd objected. Besides, government departments had fully co-operated in the production of the study, and P.W. Botha, Minister of Coloured Affairs at the time, was guest of honour at the launch. Olivier’s chapter must have been officially condoned, despite its speculation of some future merging of white and coloured societies. Perhaps this is because it is

⁸¹ See ‘Speech by the Prime Minister, Dr. H.F. Verwoerd to the Union Council for Coloured Affairs,’ 12 December 1961 in Pierre Hugo, *Quislings or Realists? A Documentary Study of ‘Coloured’ Politics in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1978), p.59.

⁸² M.J. Olivier, ‘Differensiërende Wetgewing’, in Theron, *Die Kleurlingbevolking*, pp.213-214, 220.

⁸³ *Ibid.* (transl.).

expressed in such ‘twilight language’⁸⁴ and the time-frame is so open-ended that it presents little more than a mirage.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ *The Cape Times*, 20 May 1964, leading article, ‘Inching Forward’.

⁸⁵ Olivier, ‘Differensiërende Wetgewing’, in Theron, *Die Kleurlingbevolking*, pp.223-224.

The SABRA book was produced in a remarkably short space of time – a matter of a few months – with Theron closetting herself away on New Year’s eve to put the final touches to the work.⁸⁶ The haste to publish may have related to the fact that major legislation was expected to be announced early in 1964, affecting coloured status. The envisaged legislation was controversial since it widened the political separation of the white and coloured communities. Among other things, the CCA (the former UCCA) was to be replaced with the Coloured Persons Representative Council (CPRC, later CRC) which would in time acquire various administrative and legislative powers.⁸⁷ It is possible that SABRA hoped to take advantage of the renewed interest in coloured affairs. Moreover, *Die Kleurlingbevolking* provided generous publicity of what state departments were doing for coloured advancement in various areas.

⁸⁶ Erika Theron, ‘Introduction by Compiler’ in Theron, *Die Kleurlingbevolking*, p. xi; *Die Burger*, 20 May 1964, column ‘Van Alle Kante’, ‘Maar die Bruidegom was Nêrens te Sien Nie’, by Rykie van Reenen.

⁸⁷ *The Cape Times*, 28 March 1964, ‘Coloured Future Outlined. State has “Sky the Limit” Plans’.

Implementation of the CPRC plan turned out to be complicated and slow and Verwoerd did not live to see it come into being. In September 1966 he was assassinated in the House of Assembly.⁸⁸ His death abruptly cut off the main energy and policy source in the NP. Giliomee quotes from Schalk Pienaar, stating that Verwoerd had ‘never sketched the end of the road as he saw it [and] in that sense he left without a will’.⁸⁹ Under Verwoerd’s successor, B.J. (John) Vorster,⁹⁰ the controversial CPRC Bill, was referred to a select committee and then to a commission, and only passed into law in 1968. The process was then set in motion whereby the Executive of the CRC began to take over a number of the functions of the former Department of Coloured Affairs.⁹¹

From the outset the CRC was problematic. It was made up of a majority of elected members (40:20), chosen by universal coloured suffrage and had some powers relating to matters directly affecting the coloured population. But its decisions were subject to approval by the Minister of Coloured Affairs and dependent upon a budget allocated by the Minister of Finances. At central government level it had no power.⁹² The political rights of coloured voters were therefore inferior even to those of the residents of black homelands.⁹³ In practice it was little more than a forum for airing grievances.⁹⁴ The presence of government-nominated members and the emergence of coloured

⁸⁸ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.536.

⁸⁹ Ton Vosloo (ed.), *Schalk Pienaar: Tien Jaar Politieke Kommentaar* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1975), p.9, quoted in Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.536.

⁹⁰ Balthazar Johannes Vorster (1915-1983), Prime Minister of South Africa, 1966-1978, thereafter President of the republic. Vorster had been interned in a detention camp during the Second World War because of his activities in the *Ossewabrandwag*.

⁹¹ RP57/1971, *Report of the Former Department of Coloured Affairs for the Period 1 April 1969 to 30 June 1969, and of the Department of Coloured Relations and Rehoboth Affairs for the Period 1 July 1969 to 31 March 1970*.

⁹² Gavin Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African ‘Coloured’ Politics* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1987), p.272.

⁹³ Pierre Hugo, ‘The Politics of “Untruth”: Afrikaner Academics for Apartheid’, *Politikon*, 25,1(June 1998), p.36.

⁹⁴ R.E. van der Ross, *The Rise and Decline of Apartheid: A Study of Political Movements among the Coloured People of South Africa, 1880-1985* (Cape Town, Tafelberg,

party politics led to polarisation and often to near-paralysis of the council.⁹⁵ As the 1960s drew to a close, there was little evidence that government had found a viable way of satisfying coloured aspirations.

1986), p.346.

⁹⁵ The Federal Coloured People's Party (FCPP) essentially co-operated with the NP whereas the Labour Party rejected parallel development and adopted confrontational, disruptive tactics. See Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, p.273-274; F.A. Mouton "Personifying the Coloured Community": Sonny Leon and the Ambiguities of the Politics of Co-Option and Resistance in the Apartheid State', *Kleio*, 34 (2002), pp.33-34.

The fact that turbulent meetings of CRC took place in buildings adjacent to the University of the Western Cape⁹⁶ may have contributed to an increasing politicisation of coloured students.⁹⁷ Writing to the Minister of Coloured Affairs in 1973, Theron expressed the view that the failure of the CRC and the unrest at the University of the Western Cape were directly linked.⁹⁸ On many campuses in many countries, demands for social reform and for student rights were leading to confrontation with authorities from the late 1960s. South African universities were not immune to these currents, and even privileged 'white' universities – mainly the more liberal, English-language institutions – challenged authoritarian management and social injustice. However, at universities serving black and coloured students, such as Fort Hare and the University of the Western Cape, dissatisfaction with the *status quo* was greatly compounded by the racially-based discrimination experienced both within the university and in the wider society.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ The University of the Western Cape was the university designated to serve the coloured community. The former university college founded in 1959 was upgraded to university status in 1969.

⁹⁷ University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, Archive (UWC): Office of the Rector (Rector), file 734, Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Matters Relating to the University of the Western Cape, 21 November 1973 (Van Wyk Commission), p.6.

⁹⁸ Unisa: Acc.72, 56/1, letter, Erika Theron to Dr. S.W. van der Merwe, Minister of Coloured Affairs, 11 July 1973.

⁹⁹ Heribert Adam, 'Non-White Universities' in Adam, *South Africa: Sociological Perspectives*, pp.209-210.

Theron had been appointed as a member of the council of the University of the Western Cape in 1970¹⁰⁰ at a time when the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM)¹⁰¹ and related South African Students' Organisation (SASO) were becoming influential on black and coloured campuses.¹⁰² In 1972 a major confrontation was sparked off by a dispute over recognition of an elected students' representative council (believed by authorities to be SASO-controlled and subversive).¹⁰³ Thereafter, protests, mass meetings, class boycotts and violent conflict became a feature of the University of the Western Cape, sporadically flaring up for over a decade. Although different issues triggered renewed unrest over this period, it was the ethnically segregated university, and the racial domination which it mirrored, that were essentially under attack.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ UWC: Rector, file 734, Report of the Van Wyk Commission, 1973, pp. 3-4. The appointment was made by the state president in consultation with the Minister of Coloured Relations, who had considerable powers in the running of the university.

¹⁰¹ The BCM *i.a.* advocated empowerment through pride in a self-assertive, black identity. It attracted a significant following among coloured urban youth.

¹⁰² Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.553, 564; Davenport and Saunders, *South Africa*, pp.436-437.

¹⁰³ UWC: Rector, file 734, Report of the Van Wyk Commission, 1973, pp.6-7.

¹⁰⁴ See for example *ibid*; also *ibid.*, file 43, dealing with the campus crisis of 1976; *ibid.*, file 53, dealing with the continuing crisis in 1977; *ibid.*, file 49, dealing with the 1980s crises.

Theron became chairman of the University of the Western Cape council in 1974 and chancellor in 1978 (the first woman to hold the position of chancellor in South Africa)¹⁰⁵ and was deeply involved in attempts to address the University of the Western Cape crises over a long period of time. Unfortunately only scattered copies of minutes covering meetings of these university bodies have been traced, and among contemporaries who have been interviewed, little detail is recalled. What can be stated is that the council of the early 1970s was sympathetic towards a number of student complaints, such as the lack of senior coloured academic staff at the University of the Western Cape, the absence of coloured representatives in senate and differential salary scales for white and coloured non-academic personnel. For example, minutes reflect persistent attempts by council to persuade government to revise salary structures. Ways of attracting suitably qualified coloured academic staff are also discussed, with the proviso that 'standards' are not compromised.¹⁰⁶ From 1972, two coloured nominees were appointed to the council¹⁰⁷ and were invited to join an expanded Executive Council in 1973.¹⁰⁸ These changes related to a government decision to do away with the separate, coloured 'advisory council' in the university, and instead to introduce coloured members to the general council. It was proposed that the revised Act make provision for four coloured members.

A letter from Theron to the newly designated Minister of Coloured Relations and Rehoboth Affairs, written in 1972, provides some insight into her personal views. In the letter she asks whether it would not be advisable to avoid prescribing specific numbers of coloured members in the council. 'Is it not the intention that coloureds should in the near future have a progressively greater say in the

¹⁰⁵ M.J. de Vries, Rector of the University of Stellenbosch, 'Erika Theron: A Tribute', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 26, 3 (1990), p.218.

¹⁰⁶ UWC Archive: Rector, file 1403, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Council, 2 April 1971; Minutes of a Meeting of the Council, 13 September 1971; Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Council, 3 December 1971; Report of the Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, 17 July 1973; Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting of the Council, 5 December 1974.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee of Council, 27 October 1972.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council, 17 July 1973; *ibid.*, 14 December 1973.

management of the university?’ she asks. ‘If this is so, then it would entail further amendment of the Act, and from a psychological point of view it would be preferable not to set a quota in the first place,’ she suggests. In this letter she also proposes that provision be made in the revised Act for a vice-rector, and that the post be filled by a coloured academic.¹⁰⁹ The Minister responded sympathetically, agreeing with Theron in principle. However, he expressed the view that the time was not right for introducing a vice-rector, and that in any case this would need to be decided at cabinet level.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter Erika Theron to Dr. S.W. van der Merwe, Minister of Coloured Affairs, 5 October 1972 (transl.).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Minister of Coloured Affairs to Erika Theron, 13 October 1972.

This exchange reveals a measure of foresight and Theron's sympathy for some coloured aspirations. Van der Ross was to become the first coloured rector of the university. But the correspondence contains nothing that indicates thinking significantly outside centrist NP policy parameters. On the contrary, she was actively promoting progress towards a fully separate, coloured institution. There is nothing, for example, that indicates any sympathy for students' demand that the university be opened to black students. In a later letter she wrote that she had never seen the coloured people behaving so much like a 'nation-in-the-making' as they were over University of the Western Cape issues.¹¹¹ It is likely that even at this stage, after she had taken up her position as chairman of the Theron Commission, her thinking remained very much compatible with that of the government.

The turmoil in the CRC and the disturbances at the University of the Western Cape in the early 1970s need to be seen against the background of a general rise in the alienation and impatience of the coloured population. As had been the case in 1960, a resurgence in public debate began to fuel fresh rumours of a new dispensation and the combination of hope and frustration produced a generally unstable political climate. Also, as had been the case in 1960-1961, the government was again as much concerned about tensions within NP ranks as it was with external pressures, turning much of its energy inwards. One of the important differences between the two situations, however, was that whereas Verwoerd had been an exceptionally self-convinced and strong leader, Vorster was less able or willing to command discipline in his party.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, letter, Erika Theron to S.W. van der Merwe, Minister of Coloured Relations and Rehoboth Affairs, 11 July 1973.

From the time that Vorster succeeded Verwoerd in 1966, he had been forced to contend with a conservative element which was critical of his leadership, and what it considered to be a dilution of principles fundamental to Afrikaner survival, such as the immigration policy and racially-mixed sport.¹¹² With factions in the Afrikaans-language press fanning the flames, a breach occurred in 1969, resulting in the formation of the conservative Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP) under the leadership of Albert Hertzog. In the general election of 1970 the HNP had little success, but it remained a thorn in the side of the NP.¹¹³ Discord within the Afrikaner community continued to plague government and the ‘burning issue’ of the coloured question¹¹⁴ was to prove a recurrent source of contention.

Towards the end of 1970, a remark by Minister M.C. Botha advocating ‘greater separation’ between the white and the coloured population, precipitated a renewed flare-up.¹¹⁵ This was interpreted by many as a revival of the sensitive coloured homeland idea which flew in the face of official NP policy.¹¹⁶ It was particularly disturbing because it emanated from a senior cabinet minister. An official statement issued by J.J. Loots, Minister of Coloured Affairs, reaffirming government

¹¹² J.A. du Pisani, *John Vorster en die Verlig/Verkrampstryd. 'n Studie van die Politieke Verdeeldheid in Afrikanergeleedere, 1966-1970* (Bloemfontein, Institute for Contemporary History, UOFS, 1988), pp.33-55; See also O. Geysers (ed.), *B.J. Vorster: Select Speeches* (Bloemfontein, Institute for Contemporary History, UOFS, 1977) ‘Extract from a Speech at Heilbron on 16 August 1968’, pp.89-106.

¹¹³ B.J. Liebenberg, ‘The Struggle Against Isolation’ in Liebenberg and Spies (eds), *South Africa*, pp.422-426.

¹¹⁴ See *The Star*, 30 June 1976, Jakes Gerwel, ‘Coloured Response. More Fuel for Frustration’. Professor J. Gerwel, civil rights activist, was at the time lecturer in Afrikaans Literature, later Rector of the University of the Western Cape, Chancellor of Rhodes University, and in recent times chairman of a number of scientific, philanthropic and commercial organisations.

¹¹⁵ *Rapport*, 6 December 1970, ‘Kleurlinge: Intensiewe Debat in N.P.’.

¹¹⁶ *The Cape Times*, 7 January 1971, ‘Sovereignty Call for Coloured’.

commitment to parallel development,¹¹⁷ and support for this position from P.W. Botha, then leader of the NP in the Cape, failed to shut down the debate.

¹¹⁷ *Die Burger*, 5 December 1970, 'Kleurlinge: Integrasie en Tuisland Verwerp. Regering Klaar Verwarring Op'.

An acrimonious exchange followed, with opposing views being expressed in a number of forums by politicians, political commentators and intellectuals of various shades of opinion. In January 1971, *The Cape Argus* published a lengthy article in which S.P. Cilliers set out his 'New Year's wish', for a future in which there would be equal rights for all.¹¹⁸ In an address to the Institute of Citizenship in April he repeated his call for 'progression towards full citizenship' for all 'Coloured, Asian and permanently domiciled Africans' in the country.¹¹⁹ The English-language press picked up on this 'enlightened Afrikaner' perspective and Cilliers was widely interviewed and quoted in the following months.¹²⁰ Various public comments by NP Members of Parliament suggesting reform of coloured policy, were also seized upon as evidence of liberal pressures within the governing party.¹²¹ At the same time, a section of the Afrikaans-language press in the Transvaal waded into Cilliers personally, and the opposition press.¹²² *Hoofstad*, edited by Andries Treurnicht, published columns of critical editorial against the 'integrationists' and renewed arguments for protecting Verwoerdian principles of separate development.¹²³

¹¹⁸ *The Argus*, 4 January 1971, 'His Wish: For All to Have Equal Rights'.

¹¹⁹ *The Cape Argus*, 17 April 1971, 'Cilliers. Far Cry from the Idea of a Radical'. See also S.P. Cilliers, *Appeal to Reason*, (Stellenbosch, University Publishers and Booksellers, 1971), pp.1-12.

¹²⁰ See for example *Sunday Tribune*, 24 January 1971, 'Coloureds: This is a Problem That Can't be Ignored'; *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 April 1971, 'A Flash of Real Verligtheid', by Allister Sparks.

¹²¹ *Die Burger*, 1 March 1971, '“Moet Bruines Nie Uitstoot na Swartes”’.

¹²² See for example *Die Transvaler*, 23 April 1971, 'Swart Premier Aanvaarbaar, Sê Prof. Cilliers'.

¹²³ *Hoofstad*, 23 April 1971, leading article, 'Politieke Perspektief', 'Apartheid en Kleurlinge'; *Sunday Times*, 2 May 1971, 'Furious Clashes over Cilliers's Coloured Views'.

In May of 1971, Treurnicht was temporarily restrained when he won a bi-election to become an NP Member of Parliament.¹²⁴ But the debate raged on. While the Federal Council of the NP and government spokesmen doggedly committed themselves to parallel development,¹²⁵ in two speeches made to youth groups the influential Gerrit Viljoen caused a furore by stating that the principle of a coloured homeland could not be ignored.¹²⁶ Viljoen immediately refuted allegations that he was advocating territorial separation. He claimed that he had been quoted out of context and that he had discussed the homeland option only as an hypothesis.¹²⁷ But the misunderstanding, if that is what it was, highlighted once again the potential of the ‘coloured question’ to create disharmony among Afrikaners.¹²⁸ *Die Transvaler*, *Die Vaderland* and *Hoofstad* – all turned on the *Die Burger* and *Rapport* for what they called irresponsible reporting. In the case of *Hoofstad*, it suggested deliberate manipulation in order to drive a wedge between the northern and southern provinces.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ As MP for Waterberg, Treurnicht was quoted as saying that although he believed that a coloured homeland was the ‘ideal’ solution he realised that it was not practical: *The Cape Argus*, 19 July 1971, ‘Treurnicht: No Rift with PM Over Coloureds’.

¹²⁵ *The Argus*, 28 May 1971, ‘Uncertainty on Coloured People Apparent’; *Die Burger*, 28 May 1971, ‘NP Bevestig Kleurlingsbeleid van Parallel Ontwikkeling’.

¹²⁶ *Die Burger*, 1 July 1971, leading article ‘Al Weer Tuisland’; *ibid.*, ‘Referaat oor Kleurling. Viljoen Sien Nog Hoop vir Eie Tuisland’.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 July 1971, leading article, ‘Geen “Tuislander” Nie; *ibid.*, ‘Prof. Viljoen Gee Antwoord’.

¹²⁸ See for example *The Cape Times*, 6 July 1971, ‘Bitter North-South Press Conflict. Big Nat. Upheaval on Coloured People’; *ibid.*, ‘Cape Nats’ Ideas Become a Hot Potato’; *ibid.*, 16 July 1971, leading article ‘Newspapering over the Cracks’.

¹²⁹ *Rapport*, 11 July 1971, ‘Hewige Reaksie’.

In the midst of the bitter press polemic, and incidents of coloured unrest, *Die Burger* published a lengthy open letter from Erika Theron, which epitomises her escapist perspective. She begins by pronouncing herself in agreement with the Prime Minister's recent statement¹³⁰ – Vorster had reaffirmed his commitment to parallel development for the present, and thrown a veil over the future.¹³¹ In her letter Theron appeals ('for Heaven's sake') for an end to debate about either separate homelands or integration. Instead of talking and writing about 'the ultimate goal' to a point of exhaustion, a '*plan of action*' must be devised to tackle the immediate social and economic issues. Academics must 'roll up their sleeves' and get out into the field. It must be a joint project. The best of white and coloured brainpower must be applied to solving pressing problems such as poverty, 'irresponsible parenthood' and low levels of education.¹³²

The energy and rhetoric of the poor white crusade of the 1930s reverberate throughout this piece. It is once again a question of 'now or never', 'deeds not words' and 'harnessing the experts'. Theron viewed the 'problem' primarily as one of 'development', which could be solved with the application of social science and hard work. Until such time as the coloured people had reached a certain level of development, there was no point in wasting energy wrangling over constitutional matters. For a government looking for a way out of an *impasse*, Theron's approach must have held considerable appeal, and it would have been remembered when the plan to establish a commission was taking form.

Theron's point of view is further illustrated by her reaction to an initiative from the academic fraternity, to motivate advancement of the civic status of the coloured population. In July 1971 a small group of Afrikaner academics from three Transvaal universities (the majority from the University of South Africa), signed a statement calling for 'full citizenship' and 'political

¹³⁰ *Die Burger*, 13 July 1971, 'Kleurlinge se Toekoms. Blank en Bruin Moet Saamwerk', by Erika Theron (transl.).

¹³¹ See for example *Rand Daily Mail*, editorial 'This Vagueness Must End', 18 May 1971.

¹³² *Die Burger*, 13 July 1971, 'Kleurlinge se Toekoms. Blank en Bruin Moet Saamwerk', by Erika Theron (transl.).

integration' of the coloured population.¹³³ The statement was carefully worded and specifically rejected 'any idea of enforced social integration',¹³⁴ but it did reflect thinking beyond white supremacy and permanent, separate development. And it came from within Afrikaner ranks.¹³⁵

¹³³ Hugo, 'The Politics of "Untruth"', *Politikon*, 25,1(June 1998), pp.34-35. The signatories included four academics from the University of the Witwatersrand, two from the University of Pretoria (one later withdrew) and 23 from the University of South Africa.

¹³⁴ *The Cape Argus*, 30 July 1971, 'Afrikaners' Call: Integrate Coloured'; *Die Burger*, 31 July 1971, 'Akademici in Noorde Bepleit Burgerskap vir Kleurlinge'.

¹³⁵ *Rapport*, 1 August 1971, 'Party Nattes Raak Onrustig. Kleurdebat op Loop! Afrikaners in Tweestryd'.

This was followed a week later by a similarly worded declaration by 109 individuals in the Cape, including 100 academics from the universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch.¹³⁶ Although the number of signatories was small, it was particularly significant that the two declarations bridged both the English-Afrikaans and north-south divides in white South Africa.

Theron was not among those who signed the declaration. Nor were Stellenbosch academics Ben Vosloo or Sampie Terreblanche, also destined to be members of the Theron Commission. Approached for comment, they quibbled about procedure and the ‘simplistic’ wording of the manifesto. (Vosloo did, however, identify himself with the need for expansion of coloured rights.) Theron, on the other hand, dismissed the declaration as representing an insignificant number of academics, with ‘well-known’ views. As far as she was concerned, it was not even worth organising a counter-statement. It had become ‘fashionable to talk about the coloureds’ but people did not always understand the issues, she said; and it was ‘wrong to try to force the government into action’. Re-iterating her standpoint published earlier that month, she again privileged social conditions over political problems. ‘My greatest concerns’, she said, ‘are the large number of uneducated coloureds who do not live or work under decent conditions, and about the irresponsible reproduction’.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ *The Cape Argus*, 5 August 1971, ‘Matie, UCT, All for Coloured Uplift’.

¹³⁷ *Die Burger*, 6 August 1971, ‘Verklaring Los Niks Op, Sê Akademici’ (transl.).

Theron was only one of numerous Afrikaner academics canvassed by the Afrikaans-language press for opinion in the following weeks – Pierre Hugo suggests this was a deliberate attempt to swamp the dissident voices of the signatories.¹³⁸ However, government clearly could not ignore the rumblings. As the newspaper *Rapport* put it in a leading article, few people were happy with the *status quo* and ‘the time had never before seemed so ripe to do something positive for the Coloureds’.¹³⁹ P.W. Botha, addressing the opening session of the CRC, referred directly to those academics, such as Theron, who had repudiated the declaration. He appealed to the coloured population to make good use of the political instruments already at their disposal. But at the same time he remarked that ‘it was not impossible’ that a team of experts, together with representatives from the CRC, could soon be consulted about ways of improving processes.¹⁴⁰ Perhaps the idea of the commission was taking shape.

Meanwhile, the government continued to pursue its course of political separation of the coloured population to its conclusion. In 1972 the last vestige of non-racial franchise, the municipal vote in the Cape Province, was withdrawn. However, as Sheila van der Horst, president of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) remarked, this ‘final act of separation’ in no way closed the debate. The ‘war of ideas’ continued. In summing up the state of white-coloured relations for 1972 she expressed the gloomy view that the year had brought rising ‘estrangement and hostility’.¹⁴¹

One manifestation of the war of ideas was a mass resignation from SABRA. In October 1971 Theron initiated a motion at branch level, in terms of which the Western Cape membership distanced itself from ambiguous utterances by members of the SABRA council relating to territorial

¹³⁸ Hugo, ‘The Politics of “Untruth”’ *Politikon*, 25,1(June 1998) , p.45.

¹³⁹ *Rapport*, 8 August 1971, leading article, ‘Wat Nou?’ (transl.).

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ‘P.W. Botha Stel Diep Vrae oor Bruin Politiek’.

¹⁴¹ Sheila T. van der Horst, *Separate Development: Is a Consensus Possible? 1972 Presidential Address* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1972).

segregation of the coloured population.¹⁴² The contentious issue of a coloured homeland continued to be aired, however.¹⁴³ At the following congress, held in September 1972, eight Western Cape members resigned from the organisation (followed later by others). Among these were Theron, Terreblanche, Vosloo and Koos du Toit.¹⁴⁴ It seems that the conservative pressures within the bureau were becoming too great for even centrist NP members to accommodate.

¹⁴² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.53-54.

¹⁴³ See for example *Die Burger*, 7 April 1972, leading article, 'Nie Behulpsaam Nie', which criticises coloured homeland 'propaganda' by SABRA officials at a youth conference.

¹⁴⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.54.

Theron's memoirs depict the affair as relating solely to the question of a coloured homeland. This was undoubtedly paramount. Contemporary sources suggest, however, that the differences were wider in scope, including policy regarding the black urban population.¹⁴⁵ In general the group was unhappy with the election of the conservative Carel Boshoff as chairman.¹⁴⁶ Although the 'rebels' denied any personal hostility towards Boshoff they issued a statement to the effect that the composition of the new Executive presaged a policy direction that could not meet the challenges facing the country.¹⁴⁷

As 1972 drew to a close, political tension in the country relating to the future of the coloured population was reaching a critical level. It must have become evident to government that action had to be taken. In January 1973 official sources released the news that an enquiry was to be instituted¹⁴⁸ and on 23 February the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group was formally constituted by State President J. J. Fouché.¹⁴⁹

The Theron Commission: The Team and its Task

¹⁴⁵ See *The Cape Times*, 25 September 1972, 'Sabra Resignations "Verligte Response"' in which Terreblanche emphasises the urban black question; Interview, Terreblanche.

¹⁴⁶ *The Cape Times*, 25 September 1972, 'Sabra Resignations "Verligte Response"'; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.53-55.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Die Burger*, 24 January 1973, 'Kleurlinge. Regering Gelas Groot Ondersoek'.

¹⁴⁹ WCA: Department of Coloured, Rehoboth and Nama Affairs: Commission of Inquiry into Matters Affecting the Coloured Population Group (1973-1976) (Erica [sic] Theron) (CET), document titled: Commission by the State President of the Republic of South Africa, 23 February 1973; Government Gazette, 23 March 1973, 442, column no.3814.

Theron's personal letter of appointment as member and chairman of the commission of enquiry is dated 16 March 1973. In her formal acceptance to the President, she gives her assurance that it will be a privilege and honour to serve on the commission and that she and the other members will undertake their task 'with zeal and diligence'.¹⁵⁰ For her personally, this project was to expand into an enduring commitment to the advancement of the coloured population. The NP government would in time find her zeal and diligence unwelcome.

Theron relates in her memoirs that in the month between the state president's announcement and the naming of the commissioners, there was much speculation about who would serve on the commission. She says that it was later rumoured (particularly in SABRA circles) that she had been consulted in advance and had even participated in drawing up the list, but she denies this categorically. She says that she had been told in confidence that her name was indeed on the list (she does not name her source), but claims that owing to her age and gender, she did not have great expectations of being included.¹⁵¹ However, her former colleague, Jan de Villiers, describes Theron's behaviour at this time as showing increasing restlessness, anxiety and impatience as other Stellenbosch colleagues were contacted, while she had heard nothing. According to De Villiers, she was relieved and delighted when she finally received the telephone call inviting her to head the commission.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Unisa: 72, 56/1 letter, Erika Theron to Minister of Coloured Relations and Rehoboth Affairs, 22 March 1973 (transl.).

¹⁵¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.56.

¹⁵² Interview, De Villiers.

Theron's appointment was groundbreaking, adding to her long list of unique accomplishments. It was unprecedented for a woman to head such a government enquiry. Her selection does, however, provide some clues about the government's objectives. Geoff Cronjé, who also served on the commission, might have been perceived to be the more obvious candidate for the chair. Like Theron, he had a social science background and a long history of service on various official bodies, particularly related to welfare. Cronjé, however, may have had just too reactionary an image for the government's purposes. His 'explicitly racist' views were well documented, and he had a particular obsession with the position of the coloured people of South Africa.¹⁵³ As early as 1944, before apartheid had fully evolved conceptually, Cronjé was recommending not merely residential segregation of the coloured population, but total separation. As far as he was concerned, they represented 'a separate and indigenous racial group' which must develop independently towards its own nationhood.¹⁵⁴ With this background, inevitably there would have been questions about the credibility of a commission of enquiry into coloured affairs led by Cronjé. Government was clearly not averse to the conservative influence he might provide, however, as an ordinary member of the commission.

There were other prominent figures who also apparently had excellent credentials for the chairmanship, including Stellenbosch academics such as Nic Olivier, J.L. Sadie, and most conspicuously, S.P. Cilliers. All were experts in relevant fields and were both younger than Theron, and male. In fact none of these men was appointed even as an ordinary member of the commission. The omission of Cilliers was sufficiently significant for the press to comment on the fact,¹⁵⁵ but was probably predictable. Cilliers had well-publicised views on citizenship for the coloured population and he, Olivier and Sadie had all been signatories to the 1971 manifesto.

¹⁵³ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.471.

¹⁵⁴ G. Cronjé, *'n Tuiste vir die Nageslag: Die Blywende Oplossing van Suid-Afrika se Rassevraagstukke* (Pretoria, Universiteit van Pretoria,/Publicité Handelsreklamediens (Edms.) Beperk, 1945), p.39 (transl.).

¹⁵⁵ *Weekend Argus*, 24 February 1973, 'Multiracial Body to Tackle Thorny Problem. New Deal for Coloured a Step Nearer'; J.M.M. Barnard, 'Die Erika Theron-Kommissie, 1973-1976: 'n Historiese Studie' (MA dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 2000), pp. 40-41.

Christopher Hill refers to this kind of exclusion as ‘freezing out’, which he argues was typical of NP strategy of the period. ‘Unorthodox’ Afrikaners were sanctioned and their influence neutralised by their being ‘ignored’.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Christopher R. Hill, *Change in South Africa: Blind Alleys or New Directions?* (Totowas, NJ., Barnes and Noble, 1983), p.127.

Like the failure to offer the chairmanship to Cronjé, leaving Cilliers out of the process also throws light on the government's expectations of the commission. It seems that the government did not want to be confronted with any pressure for fundamental change from white Afrikaner members. Theron's appointment may, at least in part, reflect an expectation that she would not lean significantly to the left or right of centrist NP politics: she would lend an expert and sympathetic face to the body, but she would not rock the boat. She would be expected to conduct what Ashforth refers to as the 'ritualized proceedings' in which a perceived 'neutral state' appears to be party to a search for the 'common good' – but without challenging state power.¹⁵⁷

There are a number of other possibly contributory reasons why Theron emerged as the preferred candidate for the chairmanship. Primarily, she would have been well-known to the decision makers in government. In many ways she was the consummate insider and her network of contacts intersected with those of influential individuals at numerous points.

¹⁵⁷ Adam Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990), pp.7-9.

The University of Stellenbosch was the *alma mater* of Prime Minister Vorster and number of cabinet ministers. Both Vorster and his wife, Tini, had studied under Verwoerd and had greatly admired him as a lecturer.¹⁵⁸ Theron was known to be his protégé. Tini was also a past student of Theron. She was a Stellenbosch-trained social worker, who would have been in her third year when Theron joined the lecturing staff of the department. She went on to work in Railways welfare with which Theron had been closely involved.¹⁵⁹ Tini contributed a short tribute to the special edition of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* which marked Theron's retirement from Stellenbosch in 1972¹⁶⁰ and attended the grand farewell banquet at the Heerengracht Hotel.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, Vorster's close and lifelong friend, Willem Dempsey,¹⁶² also a Stellenbosch academic, had served with Theron on the Stellenbosch municipal council and had a good relationship with her.

Vorster would also have encountered Theron during his term as Deputy Minister of Social Welfare and Pensions. She was a member the National Board of Welfare Organisations (later known as the National Welfare Board) from the time of its establishment in 1947 and vice chairman from 1969, as well as chairman of the Western Cape Regional Welfare Board.¹⁶³ Vorster seemingly attended meetings and addressed the Board on many occasions.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁸ D'Oliveira, *Vorster*, pp.31, 40.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.42.

¹⁶⁰ Tini Vorster, 'Namens die Oud-Student', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 8, 4 (October 1972), p.274.

¹⁶¹ Tape-recorded conversations between Theron and Van Reenen, cassette no.1.

¹⁶² D'Oliveira, *Vorster*, p.1.

¹⁶³ *Matieland*, 3 (1990), 'In Memoriam', p.32. Dates have not been established for service on the Western Cape Regional Welfare Board due to incomplete records.

¹⁶⁴ See for example, SA: VWN, Vol.896, SW176/52/2, document titled: Speech by the Honourable B.J. Vorster, Deputy Minister of Social Welfare and Pensions on the Occasion of the Opening of the 28th Meeting of the National Board of Welfare Organisations, 15 March 1960; *ibid.*, Vol.899, SW 176/152/1, Minutes of a Conference of the National Board of Welfare Organisations and Provincial Welfare Bodies, 17-18 March 1960.

For a period of 17 years, from the early 1960s, Theron also served on both the Western Cape Regional Housing Committee (as chairman) and the National Housing Commission, which fell under the Department of Housing (as vice chairman from 1973). Initially linked with the Department of Community Development and Coloured Affairs because Minister P.W. Botha held all three portfolios, in 1964 National Housing was absorbed into Community Development.¹⁶⁵ Its work included the provision of housing for individuals who were relocated in terms of the Group Areas Act¹⁶⁶ and as such it worked closely with the Group Areas Board. In 1972 Theron became a member of the Group Areas Board and served on it for five years including a period as chairman.

The appointment to the Group Areas Board was at the request of the then Minister of Planning, J.J. Loots, with whom Theron clearly had an established friendly relationship. Loots's wife, Aletta, had been one of her MA students¹⁶⁷ and surviving correspondence between Loots and Theron reflects warmth and mutual respect. Loots was already looking to Theron for guidance from late 1970, when he inherited the portfolios of Coloured Affairs as well as Planning. During 1971 he admitted to her, confidentially, that he felt inadequately informed on coloured affairs and wanted to assemble a small group of personal advisors to act as an 'ideas bank'. He expressed a wish to discuss the matter with her.¹⁶⁸ He clearly held her in high regard and considered her knowledgeable and trustworthy.

¹⁶⁵ RP40/1966: Republic of South Africa, *Report of the Department of Community Development, Including Reports on the Activities of the National Housing Commission, the Bantu Housing Board and the Community Development Board, for the Period 1st April 1963 to 31st December 1964.*

¹⁶⁶ NA: Index of State Departments: 1910-1991; NA: Department of Planning (hereafter BEP), Vol. 7, G5, Part 1, document titled: Discussion held on 17 October 1962 [chairman, P.W. Botha] (transl.).

¹⁶⁷ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p. 71.

¹⁶⁸ Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter, J.J. Loots [Minister of Coloured Affairs] to Erika Theron, 20 August 1971. Loots, as Minister of Planning continued to receive confidential reports from Theron concerning group areas, after he had relinquished the Coloured Affairs portfolio. See for example Unisa: 72, 56/3, reports and correspondence between August and October 1972.

Service on the Group Areas Board was something which Theron felt constrained to defend later. She writes that she had come to the conclusion that ‘one could not boycott everything’: the Act was on the statute books and she had hoped by her participation to contribute to a more humane application of its provisions.¹⁶⁹ It can be said that her record on the Stellenbosch town council does reflect sympathy for the coloured community and a concern for fairness, albeit within the framework of government policy. Confidential reports sent to Loots in 1972 do likewise.¹⁷⁰ She also claims that it was on her recommendation that she was eventually replaced on the Group Areas Board by a coloured man.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.71.

¹⁷⁰ See for example Unisa: 72, 56/3, Report on Myddleton, Caledon, 28 August 1972 (transl.); *ibid.*, letter, Erika Theron to Minister J. Loots, 22 December 1972.

¹⁷¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.71.

Throughout the many years during which Theron served on the various bodies, she commuted frequently to Cape Town and to Pretoria (sometimes fortnightly) to attend sittings. In a time when frequent air travel was uncommon, she seems to have taken it in her stride. It says much for her organisational skills that she apparently rarely missed meetings despite her numerous other commitments.¹⁷² She must have become a familiar face in official corridors and her reputation for getting things done was no doubt well known. In the 1950s and 1960s she often consulted government ministers about Stellenbosch municipal affairs while she was on official duties and the tone of correspondence with certain ministers and their staff, indicates that she formed not only contacts, but friendships within these circles.

In the light of the above, it is clear that much of Theron's career had made her appear imminently suitable for the position of chairman of the commission that would bear her name. It was a role which she embraced wholeheartedly. From the outset she looked upon this commission as a parallel with the Carnegie Poor White Investigation and the 1934 National Conference. Separated by 40 years, there is little doubt that these projects were highlights in her public life and she approached them in a similar missionary spirit. She relished once again being closely involved in the scientific investigation of the developmental handicaps of a disadvantaged group. She would be applying all her professional training and personal drive to seek solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems. She was being given an opportunity to make a difference. She may have seen herself as stepping into the shoes of her great mentors, Verwoerd and MER. MER had once written to her that if she were given a second life, she would use it to 'work for the coloureds'.¹⁷³ What Theron may not have anticipated was that the commission could not be confined to socio-economic issues, and that a political minefield awaited her. But even had she thought this through, she could have found parallels with the Continuation Committee struggles of the 1930s, which she always recalled with a certain combative pride.

¹⁷² It is only in the complete record of the Stellenbosch Council minutes that it has been possible to determine this. However, even in the scant records of other bodies on which Theron served she is almost invariably recorded as present at meetings.

¹⁷³ US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.KT (67), letter, MER to Theron, 11 June 1964.

The Theron Commission was an exceptionally large body, consisting of 20 members¹⁷⁴ (one of whom died before the work was completed and was not replaced).¹⁷⁵ Under the well-worn heading again suggesting a ‘new deal’ for the coloured population, *The Cape Argus* reported favourably on the make-up of the commission, which it assessed as ‘more independent than many people believed would be the case’. Theron was described as ‘a strong-willed woman’ who had ‘vigorously and publicly opposed any suggestion of a separate homeland for the Coloured’ and who was ‘well acquainted with the needs of the Coloured population’.¹⁷⁶ (This may not have sat well with all coloured people. During the 1973 unrest, University of the Western Cape students were scathing about their rector who was reputed to ‘know the coloureds’.)¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Theron speculates that this may have been a record: Erika Theron and J.B. du Toit, *Kortbegrip van die Theron-Verslag* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1977), p.1.

¹⁷⁵ *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.v.

¹⁷⁶ *Weekend Argus*, 24 February 1973, ‘Multiracial Body to Tackle Thorny Problem. New Deal for Coloured a Step Nearer’.

¹⁷⁷ Van Wyk Commission, p.18.

The commission was heralded by the Minister of Coloured Affairs and by the press as the first ‘in South Africa’s history’ to include ‘non-white’ members.¹⁷⁸ Theron was aware, however, that this was not accurate and that the Wilcocks Commission of 1937 had included the coloured leader, Abdullah Abdurahman.¹⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the Theron Commission belonged to an era of legal segregation in virtually all spheres of life, and within that context its multiracial character was noteworthy. It included six coloured members: A.J. Arendse, school inspector and chairman of the Coloured Education Council, S.I. Arendse, a medical practitioner and member of the advisory committee of the University of the Western Cape, H.H. Beets, minister in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and member of the council of the University of the Western Cape, J.S. Feldman, a school principal and member of the Coloured Education Council, J.A. Rabie, former teacher and a Federal Party member of the CRC and Richard van der Ross, school inspector, secretary of the South African Federation of Teachers’ Unions as well as deputy chairman of the South African Institute of Race Relations.¹⁸⁰

The choice of coloured representatives inevitably attracted comment. Theron says that the fact that no ‘Malays’¹⁸¹ had been included had alienated the Cape Malay section of the coloured population. Consequently, as a group they distanced themselves from the activities of the commission.¹⁸² Also absent from the list of nominees was any representative from the coloured Labour Party, noted and criticised by the English-language opposition press. Sonny Leon, leader of the party, condemned the composition of the commission, mentioning especially the omission of Cilliers. According to

¹⁷⁸ *Weekend Argus*, 24 February 1973, ‘Multiracial Body to Tackle Thorny Problem. New Deal for Coloured a Step Nearer’.

¹⁷⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.56-57; Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall*, pp.158-159. This refers to the Commission of Enquiry into the Cape Coloured Population of the Union (1937) headed by R. Wilcocks.

¹⁸⁰ *Die Burger*, 24 February 1973, ‘Twintig Sal Besin oor Kleurlinge’; *Weekend Argus*, 24 February 1973, ‘Multiracial Body to Tackle Thorny Problem’.

¹⁸¹ A sub-group of the coloured population in terms of the Population Registration Act (Act 30 of 1950), in culture generally reflecting Malay origins.

¹⁸² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.57.

Theron, he said that the ‘chairmanship [was] terrible’ and made it clear that his party would not be co-operating with this commission.¹⁸³ However, the Executive Committee of the Labour Party had already decided two weeks earlier that it would have nothing to do with the project, as it was unhappy with its terms of reference. They also argued that by establishing the commission the government was merely shifting responsibility.¹⁸⁴ The timing of the decision makes it unclear whether this stance was the result, or the cause of the exclusion of a Labour Party representative – whether the Executive had reason to anticipate that it would not be invited to participate. The government was not likely to include a member of the party in any case, given its record of disruption in the CRC.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.58-59; *Weekend Argus*, 24 February 1973, ‘Multiracial Body to Tackle Thorny Problem’.

¹⁸⁴ Saks, ‘The Failure of the Coloured Persons’ Representative Council’, p.153.

Van der Ross claims that for the most part the coloured appointees were moderates who would not be expected to take radical positions (himself excluded). Henry Beets, for example, was ‘one of the establishment’ who as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church ‘had to work within a certain framework’. Some, such as Rabie and Feldman, Van der Ross regarded as essentially supporting separate development.¹⁸⁵ Other commentators such as Colin Eglin, leader of the Progressive Party¹⁸⁶ and the coloured intellectual, Adam Small, expressed similar reservations. Eglin conceded that the composition showed more enterprise than government had demonstrated in the past, but criticised the fact that it excluded an important section of the coloured population – ‘people who were fundamentally opposed to the direction in which Government was moving’.¹⁸⁷

All factors considered, the multiracial character of the commission could be construed as carefully calculated. As Small was to comment, ‘it would have been unforgivable ... if no Coloured persons were appointed’. At the same time he observed that this was ‘not a Government which would invite challenge to its fundamental philosophy in a commission’.¹⁸⁸ These considerations had undoubtedly weighed on government. Since it needed to ensure the legitimacy of the project a number of coloured notables had to be invited to participate. At the same time, it was ensured that they comprised less than a third of the total and extreme opponents of the tenets of parallel development were not included. Van der Ross, a well-known critic of NP coloured policy, was the exception, but he was probably regarded as a reasonable pragmatist. He had, after all, been singled out to take the helm at the University of the Western Cape. The coloured component of the commission, therefore, would not have been expected to unduly influence its outcome in radical directions. In the event, on several occasions Van der Ross showed himself to be an uncompromising and independent thinker.

¹⁸⁵ Interview, Van der Ross.

¹⁸⁶ The Progressive Party, formed in 1959, was a relatively liberal offshoot of the United Party. It favoured common citizenship and ultimately a qualified non-racial franchise: See Leonard Thompson and Andrew Prior, *South African Politics* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1982), p.104.

¹⁸⁷ *Weekend Argus*, 24 February 1973, ‘Multiracial Body to Tackle Thorny Problem’.

¹⁸⁸ *The Cape Argus*, 26 February 1973, ‘Looking at the Coloured People’.

As far as the white members are concerned, it was a body that covered a considerable spread of interests and expertise. But it, too, was undoubtedly carefully selected to try to ensure that any vote could be carried by the moderate centre. The Theron commission included two members of parliament, W. Kingwill (UP) and N.F. Treurnicht (NP). In addition to Theron there were five other academics, Terreblanche from the Department of Economics and Vosloo who was Head of the Department of Political Science at Stellenbosch, Du Toit from the Department of Sociology at the University of the Western Cape (secretary of the commission), Geoff Cronjé, retired sociologist (and former Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Pretoria) and C.D. Roode from the Department of Sociology at the University of the Orange Free State. Business was represented by J.H. Pretorius, director of companies and chairman of the Northern Transvaal Chamber of Commerce and G.J. van Zyl, chairman of Saambou Building Society as well as C. van der Berg Uys who was described as a ‘businessman’ and chairman of the Cape Divisional Council (deceased in 1974). Agricultural interests were represented by A.S. Meyer, general manager of the Western Agricultural Co-operative, director of the Coloured Development Corporation and chairman of Spes Bona Bank and J.E. de V. Loubser, chairman of the Boland Agricultural Union. F.H. Badenhorst had served on the council and senate at the University of the Western Cape and was involved with coloured education in various capacities.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ *Die Burger*, 24 February 1973, ‘Twintig Sal Besin oor Kleurlinge’.

Noticeably absent from the white contingent were the individuals who had adopted positions significantly to the left or the right of government policy in the recent debates (with the possible exception of Cronjé). None of the signatories to the 1971 manifesto was appointed. There were also no members from the right-wing SABRA.¹⁹⁰ This omission came under strong criticism from the conservative press. *Die Afrikaner*, mouthpiece of the HNP, claimed that ‘people who had stood fast to the principles of Verwoerd and Malan had been excluded deliberately’. In its view, the commission was dominated by individuals who would ‘promote integration’, including the ‘rebels’ who had resigned from SABRA.¹⁹¹

What is evident from press reactions to the naming of the commission is the emerging reputations of Theron, Terreblanche, Vosloo and Du Toit as rebels and *verligtes*.¹⁹² It raises the question as to why the government would risk appointing them. On closer examination, however, it seems clear that in the case of Theron and Terreblanche at least, in early 1973 they could be regarded as *verligtes* only in relative and not absolute terms.¹⁹³ The label said more about the hardening of the *Afrikaner* right wing than any significant liberalism of the Stellenbosch contingent. By rejecting both the 1971 declaration and the coloured homeland option, Theron, Terreblanche and Vosloo had identified themselves with the NP centre. They would have appeared well-suited to the purposes of Vorster’s government.

¹⁹⁰ *Rapport*, 25 February, 1973, ‘Regering Kap na SABRA. Net “Rebelle” in Kommissie’.

¹⁹¹ *Die Afrikaner*, 9 March 1973, ‘Integrasioniste Oorheersend in Kleurling-Kommissie’, quoted in Barnard, ‘Die Erika Theron-Kommissie’, pp. 41-42 (transl.); *Die Afrikaner*, 21 September 1973, ‘Die Kleurling’.

¹⁹² The labels ‘*verlig*’ and ‘*verkramp*’ were coined by Willem de Klerk to describe two factions which emerged within the NP from the late-1960s. The *verligtes* (‘enlightened’) were ideologically to the left of the party, favouring modernisation and change, particularly in race policy. O’Meara describes the *verkrampes* (‘reactionaries’) as the ‘extreme doctrinaire right’. See Patrick O’Meara, ‘The South African Political System: An Examination of Current Trends’, paper delivered at the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Los Angeles, 16-19 October 1968, pp.4-5.

¹⁹³ The writer has insufficient evidence to speculate on the views of Du Toit and Vosloo in 1973.

However between 1973 and 1976 when the commission completed its work, Theron and Terreblanche apparently underwent a transformation. Both claimed that the commission was a ‘Damascus experience’ for them.¹⁹⁴ According to Terreblanche, as commissioners they had come to realise what damage the apartheid system had inflicted upon the coloured people.¹⁹⁵ As a result, in his view, ‘the three Stellenbosch professors in the end delivered a report that was completely contrary to [the government’s] expectations’.¹⁹⁶

In summary, the terms of reference of the commission were, first, ‘to inquire into, to consider and report on the progress of the Coloured Population Group since 1960’ in the ‘social sphere’, ‘the economic field’ the ‘constitutional field’, ‘local government’ and ‘sport and cultural fields’ and to identify ‘obstacles’ to progress (the term in the Afrikaans version was ‘*knelpunte*’, translated differently in the English version, according to context¹⁹⁷). The commission’s second task was ‘to make recommendations on the grounds of its findings as to the manner in which development of the Coloured Population Group [could] be further promoted in respect of the assigned fields’.¹⁹⁸

According to Van der Ross, Theron imposed strict adherence to these terms of reference and in particular insisted that the study be limited to conditions relating to the coloured population. When discussion drifted towards the circumstances or future of the black population, she would

¹⁹⁴ Raphaely, ‘Erika Theron’, *Femina* (March 1990), p.77; interview, Joubert; interview, Terreblanche; interview, Wiechers.

¹⁹⁵ *Vrye Weekblad*, 7 September 1990, obituary by Sampie Terreblanche, ‘Hulde aan Erika Theron: Nou ’n “Los Hotnot” in die Hemel’, p.15.

¹⁹⁶ Interview, Terreblanche.

¹⁹⁷ According to Pretorius, ‘*knelpunte*’ was simply a euphemism for discrimination and the problems arising from it. See Louwrens Pretorius, ‘Suid-Afrikaanse Kommissies van Ondersoek – ’n Sosiologiese Studie’ (DPhil thesis, Stellenbosch, 1985), p.274.

¹⁹⁸ *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.v.

immediately re-focus the speakers.¹⁹⁹ Only where the black presence outside of the reserves had a direct impact on the coloured population, could that impact be studied.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Interview, Van der Ross.

²⁰⁰ See for example Barnard, 'Die Erika Theron-Kommissie', p.99, which refers to the investigation of the consequences of black and coloured 'mixing' and of labour policy. Pretorius observes that the commission was critical of a tendency to apply apartheid in an undifferentiated way to the coloured and black populations to the detriment of coloured 'status'. See Pretorius, 'Suid-Afrikaanse Kommissies', p.282.

In Van der Ross's view, this was an artificial constraint, but he says that Theron would not budge on the matter.²⁰¹ Vosloo expressed a similar opinion. In his words, Theron had a 'blinkered' view. 'She understood nothing about the black majority. Her guiding light was her Boland experience and she didn't see that the coloured-white thing was just a side show'. In his view, excluding the black population from the study was 'like trying to perform Hamlet without Hamlet'.²⁰² This exclusion did not escape notice when the report of the commission was finally made public. Jakes Gerwel wrote that the report had concentrated 'singularly on Coloured-White relations with an implicit and at times explicitly-stated assumption that in some areas of discussions Blacks just [did] not exist'.²⁰³

Theron's insistence that the commission be rigidly bound by the official parameters bears questioning. As Pretorius points out, a chairman who was 'politically brave enough' could have interpreted her brief more broadly.²⁰⁴ Theron did not lack courage. However, there is clear evidence that, possibly until the end of the 1970s, she personally struggled to imagine the accommodation of the black population within South Africa. This being so, it would have suited her to fall back on a circumscribed, compartmentalised approach to the task of the commission.

²⁰¹ Interview, Van der Ross.

²⁰² Interview, Vosloo.

²⁰³ *The Star*, 30 June 1976, 'Coloured Response - 2. More Fuel for Frustration'.

²⁰⁴ Pretorius, 'Suid-Afrikaanse Kommissies', p.261.

With her usual efficiency, Theron had organised a preliminary planning meeting by 9 March 1973, before the appointment of the commission had even been gazetted. The five members who were present were to play a significant role in the commission's outcome – the three Stellenbosch professors, Van der Ross and the Boland farmer, De Villiers Loubser (as well as the secretary, Du Toit, and the two assigned officials). This was a group that shared a Western Cape experience of white-coloured relations, that could assemble at short notice, that would often travel together by car. They were not always on friendly terms. Terreblanche says, for example, that he and Vosloo had serious differences. But this Western Cape cohort frequently took common cause on important principles. Together with the other five coloured members of the commission and Wally Kingwill, it was usually able to carry the majority vote when opinion in the commission was divided, as it frequently was. It was a scenario that the government was unlikely to have envisaged. In effect, because the white vote was split, the coloured members held the balance.

The group did break ranks from time to time. Van der Ross refers to one issue in particular about which he felt strongly – that of coloured labour preference in the Cape. Van der Ross objected to the reservation of any area in respect of the labour of any population group and framed a minority recommendation that existing regulations be abolished. He stood alone on this.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ *Report of the Theron Commission*, pp.495-496; interview, Van der Ross.

In opposition to this group, a more conservative voting bloc formed with a core of members from the northern provinces. This group (which Terreblanche labelled a ‘*verkrampte* pressure group’)²⁰⁶ usually included Cronjé, Meyer, Pretorius, Roode, Treurnicht, Van Zyl and sometimes Barnard.²⁰⁷ *Die Transvaler* provided an astute analysis of the essential division within the commission. It concluded that this was defined by the view of the conservatives that the coloured population was a separate ‘nation’ or ‘nation-in-the-making’, which should be served by its own structures and that its distinct identity must be preserved. On this basis the group voted against all the recommendations that tended to breach the boundaries between populations groups.²⁰⁸ For example, Cronjé, Meyer, Pretorius and Van Zyl wanted the Mixed Marriages Act and Section 16 of the Immorality Act extended to exclude relations between the coloured, black and Asian populations.²⁰⁹

One of the coloured members of the commission characterised the ideological differences between the two factions as ‘virtually unbridgeable’.²¹⁰ Aggravating the disputatious character of the commission was the large number of strongly-opinionated academics in its ranks. This is evident from the numerous, sometimes hair-splitting, minority reports which appear in the final report of the commission. The presence of these individuals and the emergence of the factions undoubtedly added greatly to the demands on Theron as chairman. There is evidence that relations became very strained at times. Theron says, however, that generally they worked together ‘in good spirit as a team’.²¹¹ According to Vosloo, ‘the benefit of [Theron’s] presence was that as a grandmotherly

²⁰⁶ Interview, Terreblanche.

²⁰⁷ As was the case with the more liberal voting bloc, this is a generalisation. On a few issues there was more unanimity in the commission and on various specific recommendations individuals from both groups chose to abstain or to take minority positions.

²⁰⁸ *Die Transvaler*, 19 June 1976, ‘Kommissie is Só Verdeel’ (transl.); see also *ibid.*, Willem de Klerk, ‘Perspektief’, ‘Twis by die Wegspring Gaan Sake Verbrou’.

²⁰⁹ *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.488.

²¹⁰ *Rapport*, 27 June 1976, ‘“Therons” Spyt oor Nic se Aanval’.

²¹¹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.61 (transl.); interview, Terreblanche.

person she could preside over discussions and resolve debates which were often acrimonious. She was good at that.²¹² Terreblanche says that she was a ‘very constructive chairman’ and well aware of the rules of governing meetings. Disagreements never descended into open hostility.²¹³ She also received praise from De Villiers Loubser, in whose assessment she had maintained good order, kept the commission on course and dealt fairly with all its members.²¹⁴ A.J. Arendse says of her that she had faced a massive task and had ‘bent over backwards to achieve consensus between conflicting viewpoints’.²¹⁵

²¹² Interview, Vosloo.

²¹³ Interview, Terreblanche.

²¹⁴ Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter, J.E. de Villiers Loubser to Erika Theron, 15 April 1976. See also Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.58.

²¹⁵ *Rapport*, 27 June 1976, ‘“Therons” Spyt oor Nic se Aanval’ (transl.).

On the basis of this testimony, taken as a whole it would seem that she acquitted herself well. This was no mean feat given the large size and heterogeneous nature of the commission and the contentious subject of its deliberations. Theron points out in her memoirs that she was not a novice in this arena. She had considerable experience in managing meetings and had benefited from observing several outstanding chairmen in action in her time. Among these ‘*uithaler-voorsitters*’ she mentions W. Nicol and H.B. Thom.²¹⁶ She does not name Verwoerd, perhaps tacitly acknowledging that his dictatorial style was a weakness.

Not all the members, however, were entirely satisfied with her management. In an interview in 1990 Theron says that one of the members, ‘a tough nut’, ‘took me round the corner one day and told me he was going to resign’. She says that she told him that she would do without him.²¹⁷ There were no resignations, so it must be assumed that Theron successfully averted the mutiny. There is no evidence of who the ‘tough nut’ was, but certainly Geoff Cronjé harboured grievances which surfaced after the disbandment of the commission. In a letter written to Theron in May 1976, he expressed appreciation for her dedication and hard work. He acknowledged that she had been required to deal with difficult people. Nevertheless, he took her to task for a lack of impartiality. He also blamed her for the ‘liberal, even integrationist direction’ that the commission had ultimately taken.²¹⁸ Given the opprobrious connotations of the term ‘liberal’ in Afrikaner circles at the time, this was strong language. Theron says that she was surprised by this criticism, which she considered unjustified. She says, however, that she was not upset by the accusations as her conscience was clear.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.58.

²¹⁷ Raphaely, ‘Erika Theron, *Femina* (March 1990), p.77.

²¹⁸ Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter, Geoff Cronjé to the chairman, Commission of Enquiry into Coloured Affairs [Erika Theron], 10 May 1976 (transl.).

²¹⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.58.

Unexpected criticism was also forthcoming from Nic Treurnicht. In a parliamentary debate after the report of the commission had been tabled he dropped a bombshell by claiming that he felt that the commission's entire focus had been 'wrong'. He said that he objected to the constant attack on government policy and claimed that too little attention had been paid to 'positive aspects' of what had been done for the coloureds since 1960. Echoing comments made by Prime Minister Vorster in parliament, he said that it was clear that the commission had been bent on prescribing policy to the government, which was not its role. He also accused Theron of bias. According to Treurnicht she had shown favouritism by allocating responsibility for 14 important chapters (out of 22), to the Stellenbosch academics. In Treurnicht's view she had sidelined other 'equally competent academics'. This had resulted in a 'discernible pattern' in the document. The Stellenbosch contingent together with the coloured members had formed a 'power bloc' which had set the tone of the final report.²²⁰

Most other members of the commission, approached for comment after Treurnicht's outburst, attempted to distance themselves from his comments. This applied to individuals from both sides of the ideological divide, including Cronjé who declined to repeat in public the accusations which he had levelled at Theron in private.²²¹ It seems that with the exception of Treurnicht's breach of protocol, there was sufficient discretion, respect and loyalty within the commission for it to rally around its individual members and protect its integrity.

Treurnicht's criticism has to be considered in the light of the discussion of Theron's political views above. Whereas she may indeed have felt greater confidence in the abilities of her Stellenbosch colleagues, and have allocated tasks accordingly, there is no evidence that this was in order to influence findings. The essential division of work was decided early in 1973 and at that stage Theron's views were almost certainly those of a loyal member of the Cape NP. Regarding her initial attitude towards the coloured people, Vosloo says that she was a 'compassionate

²²⁰ *Beeld*, 25 June 1976, 'Erika het Verkeerd Gewerk' (transl.); *Rapport*, 27 June 1976, 'Só het Bom Gebars'.

²²¹ *Rapport*, 27 June 1976, '“Therons” Spyt oor Nic se Aanval'.

conservative'.²²² It was only in the course of the commission's work and thereafter, that her views began to change.

²²² Interview, Vosloo.

While the commission was in session, all its deliberations were subject to strict rules of confidentiality. Every member and officer had to take ‘an oath of fidelity or secrecy’. Further, ‘no person [could] insult, disparage or belittle any member of the Commission or prejudice, influence or anticipate the proceedings or findings of the Commission’.²²³ This sweeping injunction caused a flurry of speculation in the press concerning its implications. The *Sunday Times* expressed the view that the CRC would find itself in ‘the astonishing position ... of being unable to discuss almost any matter connected with Coloured affairs’. According to ‘expert opinion’, the commission had the same status as proceedings in the supreme court and ‘all matters covered by its terms of reference would be *sub judice* until it tabled its report’.²²⁴

The Minister of Coloured Relations hastily refuted this interpretation and confirmed that in terms of the Coloured Persons Representative Council Act, 49 (1964) any relevant discussion within the council would be privileged. However, at the same time he expressed an expectation that the chairman of the CRC would ‘for the sake of propriety decide in view of the investigation being instituted by the Commission, that discussion on certain matters, although permissible, be rather avoided’.²²⁵ Although the government could not muzzle the CRC, it clearly wished to have some respite from the coloured debate. Whether or not this was the primary purpose of the commission,²²⁶ the NP government desperately needed breathing space to allow coloured tempers to cool and for Afrikaners to find some basis for consensus.

²²³ Government Gazette, 23 March 1973, 442. Column 3815; see also WCA: CET, 2/2/1, vol. 1, First Meeting of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group, 30 March 1973.

²²⁴ *Sunday Times*, 8 April 1973, ‘Astonishing One’.

²²⁵ WCA: CET, 1/1, Press Statement by the Honourable Dr. S.W. van der Merwe, Minister of Coloured Relations and Rehoboth Affairs, undated, c. early April 1973.

²²⁶ Ian Goldin expresses the view that getting the coloured question off the table was ‘no doubt the government’s motivation’. See Goldin, *Making Race*, p.137.

In the event, the CRC continued to become progressively more unruly and unworkable. Before the Theron Commission had completed its study, it was evident that in its current form this instrument would never function effectively or meet the political needs of the coloured population. The establishment of the commission does, however, seem temporarily to have moderated the internal debate among white South Africans. But in the three-and-a-half years that it took the commission to complete its work, expectations built up steadily.²²⁷ According to some commentators, anticipation reached unrealistic levels.²²⁸ The fact that the commission took almost double the time that was originally envisaged undoubtedly aggravated this situation. Ultimately poor timing was to prove to be the greatest weakness of the Theron Commission.

²²⁷ See for example, *Rapport*, 14 March 1976, column by Gus Adams, 'Ons Vra Net Dit Wat Ons Ontneem Is'. Gus Adams was the *nom de plume* of Richard van der Ross.

²²⁸ See for example *Beeld*, 15 April 1976, column 'Politieke Beeld' by H.J. Grosskopf, 'Nou Moet Dr. Erika Mense Help'; *Hoofstad*, 20 April 1976, leading article, 'Ons Sal Offer ...'; *Sunday Times*, 20 June 1976, 'Fleur de Villiers Comments on the Theron Report'.

Under the terms of the appointment of the commission, it was requested to report to the State President within 18 months ‘or as soon as this can be conveniently done’.²²⁹ Shortly after the commission had begun its work, Theron said in an interview that she was glad that a time limit had been set as she did not want the project to drag on – ‘I have so much else I want to do’.²³⁰ By September 1973, however, Theron was saying that she expected the report to appear early in 1975, two years after the commission’s appointment.²³¹ In personal correspondence in mid-1974 Theron mentions that politicians and newspapers were putting pressure on the commission, but that she was standing by her date of ‘the second half of 1975’. She was not going to be party to making the coloured people ‘victims of “political expediency” for the umpteenth time’ by bringing out ‘a rushed, superficial report’.²³² In the event she overran even this date by at least a further six months. Nor was the commission willing to produce an interim report on the grounds that the various issues were so interlinked that releasing sections piecemeal would be counter-productive. Research had to be correlated and the results of the investigation seen as a coherent whole.²³³

There was speculation in one newspaper (not confirmed elsewhere) that the reason for the long delay was because the report was ‘too radical’ and that government needed to test and prepare its constituency.²³⁴ This was an unlikely scenario, however, as it would have implied that the commission was in collusion with the government. Theron denied the accusation and said that the delay was occasioned simply by the size of the commission. There were 18 members ‘and it takes time for 18 people to have their say’.²³⁵

²²⁹ Government Gazette, 23 March 1973, 442, column 3814.

²³⁰ *The Cape Argus*, 16 April 1973, ‘Prof. Erika Theron’, by Beverley Roos.

²³¹ *Weekend Argus*, 22 September 1973, ‘Friction Points Give Professor a Crucial Task’.

²³² Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter, Erika Theron to H.P.J. van Vuuren, Department of Social Welfare and Pensions, 11 June 1974 (transl.).

²³³ WCA: CET, 2/1/1. vol.2, Minutes of a Meeting of the Commission, 31 July 1974.

²³⁴ *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 April 1976, ‘Probe into Coloureds Published Next Month’.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

This does not seem to be a sufficient excuse for what was by any definition a gross over-run of the schedule. Members of the commission who were interviewed for this thesis could not recall or explain satisfactorily why its proceedings had been so protracted. Cilliers, as an outsider and predisposed to be critical, observed that its methods seemed ‘cumbersome’.²³⁶ When the report was published, he commented that its main proposals merely bore out what sociologists had been saying for years. ‘Indeed these recommendations are in line with those of the Executive Committee of the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs made in 1961.’²³⁷ By implication, the commission was a wasted exercise, unnecessarily inflated and prolonged.

²³⁶ Interview, Cilliers.

²³⁷ *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 June 1976.

It seems likely that the time-consuming processes and vast volume of evidence gathered may be attributed, at least in part, to Theron's social work academic background as well as her natural thoroughness. After decades of supervising the work of students, a measure of pedantry could be expected. It is also possible that the model of the Carnegie Commission and 1934 National Conference which occupied a romantic-heroic space in the history of social welfare and Afrikaner upliftment, influenced her methodology. Marinus Wiechers certainly saw her as inspired by the example of MER and of 'reliving the past' through the commission on coloured affairs.²³⁸ She was later to deny that the circumstances of the poor whites and those of the coloured population were identical.²³⁹ In particular she disliked the suggestion that coloured people should be responsible for their own salvation as had the Afrikaners. According to her, the coloured population lacked 'political and economic bargaining power' and 'because of this there [was] no possible comparison between the position of the Coloureds and the so-called poor-White problem of the 30s'.²⁴⁰ She nevertheless frequently compared what she perceived as two great social welfare projects.

²³⁸ Interview, Wiechers.

²³⁹ *Beeld*, 18 June 1976, 'Dr. Erika se Ontdekkingsstog' by J.J.J. Scholtz.

²⁴⁰ *Sunday Times*, 20 June 1976, 'Erika Theron: Appalling Poverty – No Bargaining Power'.

At the first meeting the commission was split into work groups responsible for specific areas of study, much as Verwoerd had done in preparation for the 1934 Conference. Task teams and leaders were provisionally named.²⁴¹ These convenors were to be responsible for drafting the reports of their respective work groups, which would then be considered by the commission as a whole.²⁴² A second meeting was held within a week while members of the commission were still assembling in Cape Town and the first meeting of the full commission took place on 30 March 1973. Apart from some minor revision of the work teams the structures worked out in the preliminary meeting remained substantially intact.²⁴³ The work groups and their convenors were as follows: S.I. Arendse (Health), Badenhorst (sport and recreation), Cronjé (culture and religion), Meyer (agriculture), Van der Ross (education), Terreblanche (economy and labour), Theron (social conditions and welfare services), Theron (housing, transport and community development) and Vosloo (government and administration). An Executive Committee was established consisting of the convenors and De Villiers Loubser.²⁴⁴

At the second meeting of the Executive, principles and procedures were agreed upon to ensure maximum participation and transparency. All information gathered by work groups was to be accessible to the commission as a whole and opportunities provided for general discussion of the programmes and progress of individual groups. Minutes of all meetings were to be distributed to all members for comment before being signed by Theron.²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ WCA: CET, 2/2/1, vol.1, Minutes of Meeting for Provisional Planning of the Activities of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group, 9 March 1973.

²⁴² Theron and Du Toit, *Kortbegrip van die Theron-Verslag*, p.2.

²⁴³ WCA: CET, 2/2/1, vol. 1, First Meeting of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group, 30 March 1973.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Barnard, 'Erika Theron-Kommissie', pp.59-60.

In the course of its work the commission also called on outside expertise. Some 33 individual ‘professional collaborators and researchers’ were involved. Wiechers, for example, was co-opted to advise on legal and constitutional matters.²⁴⁶ It was during this time that the close personal friendship formed between Theron and Wiechers.²⁴⁷ A number of research institutions carried out work for the commission, such as the Building Research Institute of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, the Bureau for Market Research of the University of South Africa and the Department of Political Science and Public Administration as well as the Institute for Cartography from the University of Stellenbosch.²⁴⁸

The survey was extended to the widest possible range of informants. For example every municipality in the country was approached. Questionnaires were sent out ‘to Coloured people, authorities who have dealings with Coloured people, and anybody who might feasibly know something useful about Coloured people’.²⁴⁹ The report of the commission lists 180 individuals who provided oral or written evidence.²⁵⁰ All oral evidence was recorded and transcribed. Evidence was also gathered from hundreds of other sources, including government departments, statutory boards, councils, control boards, all four provincial authorities and over 300 local authorities and management committees, hundreds of action groups, interest groups, deputations, religious organisations, sports bodies, educational institutions, welfare organisations, library services, newspaper and periodical publishers, performing and fine arts bodies, professional associations, organised commerce, industry and agriculture and trade unions.²⁵¹ Mountains of

²⁴⁶ WCA: CET, 2/1/1, vol.3, Minutes of the Third Meeting of the Task Group on Government and Administration, 15 February, 1974; *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.553.

²⁴⁷ Interview, Terreblanche; interview, Wiechers; original documents in possession of author consisting mainly of letters from Erika Theron to Marinus Wiechers.

²⁴⁸ *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.553; *Die Transvaler*, 19 June 1976, ‘Dit was 3 Jaar se Harde Werk’.

²⁴⁹ *Weekend Argus*, 22 September 1973, ‘Friction Points Give Professor a Crucial Task’.

²⁵⁰ *Report of the Theron Commission*, pp.553-554.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp.553-561; *Die Transvaler*, 19 June 1976, ‘Dit was 3 Jaar se Harde Werk’.

paper were generated. These then had to be correlated, analysed and ultimately reduced to a usable report format. The official records of the commission, housed in the Western Cape Archive, are listed as occupying 9,6 linear metres.²⁵²

²⁵² WCA: CET, Department of Coloured, Rehoboth and Nama Affairs: Commission of Inquiry into Matters Affecting the Coloured Population Group (1973-1976) (Erica [*sic*] Theron).

Theron and her commissioners also travelled throughout the country to meet and to talk to coloured people ‘where they lived’, visiting over 130 locations.²⁵³ This ultimately involved ‘three years of uninterrupted slogging and thousands of miles of travelling’.²⁵⁴ Theron points out that the modes of travel were more convenient than the ‘tin lizzies’ with which the Carnegie commissioners had covered 16 000 km in their survey.²⁵⁵ The Theron team travelled great distances by car and by bus, but also made use of air travel where possible, including in one instance a South African Air Force aircraft. Destinations off the main air routes had sometimes to be reached in light aircraft, to the great discomfort of those who suffered from travel-sickness. Theron says that on occasion she had her work cut out persuading commissioners that it was indeed necessary to visit some remote place and that yet another flight had to be endured.²⁵⁶

Working and travelling as a racially mixed group in the 1970s presented considerable challenges. From the outset the commission was forced to confront the inconvenience and indignities arising from the Group Areas and Separate Amenities Acts and their various amendments. The offices in Parliament Towers in Plein Street, Cape Town, where they set up their headquarters, had the usual ‘whites only’ toilet facilities on the level where the offices were located. The only facilities for coloured use were in the basement. This was unacceptable in the circumstances. According to Theron, the commission rented the entire floor to obviate complaints from other tenants who might object to sharing the toilets²⁵⁷ and Van der Ross says that on his insistence, the ‘whites only’ sign was taken down.²⁵⁸

²⁵³ *Report of the Theron Commission*, pp.560-561.

²⁵⁴ *Sunday Times*, 8 May 1976, ‘Erika Theron Happy to be a “Los Hotnot”’.

²⁵⁵ Theron and Du Toit, *Kortbegrip*, p.3.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.2.

²⁵⁷ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.59.

²⁵⁸ Interview, Van der Ross.

The question of meals was not as easily resolved. White commissioners often took their midday meal in the H.F. Verwoerd Building situated opposite the commission's offices, but this was closed to the coloured members and there was no eatery in the vicinity where they could dine in comfort. They had to bring their own food or make do with 'take-aways'. Theron says that she usually chose to do the same because it was 'quicker and quieter' and after lunch she could lock her door and take a nap on the floor.²⁵⁹

When travelling, the separate amenities regulations were a constant headache. Careful advance arrangements had to be made to meet the needs of the multiracial group. Theron's strong organisational skills and those of her administration clerk were put to good use.²⁶⁰ The files contain numerous letters to hotels, guest houses and officials, requesting them to obtain permission to accommodate the coloured commissioners or to supply meals or liquor. In terms of prevailing regulations, these requests had to be justified. For example in a letter to the Manager of a Holiday Inn it is explained that 'non-European' members of the commission were 'acting on behalf of the Central Government and ... [were] officially recognised as persons of high esteem'.²⁶¹

There were occasions when arrangements could not be made. Theron refers to a visit to Clanwilliam where the manager of the local hotel could not or would not accommodate Henry Beets. Beets had to stay with friends in the area.²⁶² On a visit to the coloured township outside of Klerksdorp, local council members did not join the commissioners in their bus preferring to use their own cars. They were seemingly unwilling to share transport with coloured people. Returning to the town at lunchtime Theron was advised by the mayor that he could not offer the mixed group of visitors a midday meal, because some members of the town council would not agree to this.

²⁵⁹ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.59.

²⁶⁰ Interview, Terreblanche. See also US, Doc. Centre: MER, 55.M.1.K.18 (12), letter, Erika [Theron] to MER, 20 August 1973.

²⁶¹ See for example WCA:CET, 2/1/1, vol. 2, Secretary [of the Theron Commission] to Manager, Holiday Inn, 17 January 1974.

²⁶² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.60.

Feeling certain that they would not be admitted to any restaurant in conservative Klerksdorp, Theron says that she asked to use a committee room and sent out commissioners to purchase whatever they could find to eat.²⁶³

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.61.

In many places, the visiting team was well received and accorded due hospitality. However, even in these circumstances there was sometimes awkwardness where officials and town councillors were 'clearly in unfamiliar territory'.²⁶⁴ This occasionally led to unintended blunders and slights. Van der Ross makes the point strongly, and perhaps with a measure of bitterness, that white South Africans simply had no experience of interacting with coloured people and particularly not with educated coloured people.²⁶⁵

Theron's criticism of the prejudice encountered by the commission is usually implicit rather than explicit. Her anecdotes about the discrimination against members of her commission are related in the humorous, ironical tone that generally characterises her communications. But it would be wrong to assume that she was not gravely offended and shocked by the extent to which 'parallel development' had isolated and alienated the white and coloured communities. Theron had a nice sense of protocol and etiquette. The fact that she identifies the towns where the commission met with intolerance and discourtesy is certainly no accident. There is clear and deliberate condemnation of the ugly manifestations of 'petty' apartheid.

In an interview which took place shortly after the commission was assembled Theron responded sharply to questions about relations among the members and practical arrangements. 'There is no apartheid with us', she told the interviewer. 'I work with a fine group of people.'²⁶⁶ This loyalty and commitment to the project was probably strengthened by the obstacles and incidents experienced by the commission. She evidently developed a warm *camaraderie* with her whole crew, whom she referred to in an affectionate and proprietary manner as her 'boys'.²⁶⁷ She was protective of them at a personal level as well as of the dignity and integrity of the commission.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.60 (transl.).

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*; interview, Van der Ross; interview, Terreblanche.

²⁶⁶ *The Cape Argus*, 26 April 1973, 'Prof Erika Theron' by Beverley Roos.

²⁶⁷ Theron and Du Toit, *Kortbegrip*, p.2; interview, Terreblanche.

Like Verwoerd, whose work ethic she so admired, Theron involved herself fully in all aspects of the project. She attempted to attend every meeting of every task group, the meetings of the Executive and of the full commission as well as the countless interviews. At one stage she claimed that she was working 18 hours a day.²⁶⁸ Several other members of the commission (whom she does not name) had less robust constitutions and in the course of the three years, succumbed to the pressures and became ill.²⁶⁹ She attributed her stamina to her ability to cat-nap and the fact that she took regular breaks at her Hermanus cottage where she gardened, went for long walks and swam.²⁷⁰ It is clear, however, that she did not spare herself in her determination to see that the job was well done.

Despite the punishing hours, physical discomfort and other hardships one gains the impression that she was in fact in her element. Just as she had advocated in her letter to the press in 1971, she had ‘rolled up her sleeves’, gone into the field, and was leading a team of ‘the best brains’ to devise a plan of action.²⁷¹ She was again on a mission.

²⁶⁸ *Weekend Argus*, 22 September 1973, ‘Friction Points’.

²⁶⁹ *Beeld*, 18 June 1976, ‘Dr. Erika se Ontdekkingsog’ by J.J.J. Scholtz.

²⁷⁰ *Die Burger*, 18 May 1977, ‘Vir Prof. Erika Beteken Uittree nie Stilsit nie’.

²⁷¹ See discussion above, ref. *Die Burger*, 13 July 1971, ‘Kleurlinge se Toekoms. Blank en Bruin Moet Saamwerk’.

According to Terreblanche, Theron thrived on the on-site investigations.²⁷² Her record as mayor of Stellenbosch shows that she took pleasure in meeting people, mingling with officials and attending civic receptions. But as a social work academic, intensely concerned with the country's housing issues, she also took a keen interest in the specific living conditions of the coloured communities. Often she was deeply affected by what she witnessed. Her sense of the injustice resulting from 'petty apartheid' was compounded by the evidence of the terrible impact of the Group Areas Act on coloured lives. Initially, it was the implementation rather than the Act itself which she criticised. For example, she describes to political commentator Fleur de Villiers²⁷³ the 'most appalling slums', the rows of 'forlorn little houses and streets where gangsters thrive because schools and community centres have lagged behind the building of the little houses'.²⁷⁴

Rykie van Reenen repeats another story, apparently heard from Theron, about a visit to the Ceres district. It was a cold, wet winter's day. The coloured housing estate was bleak and flooded. Stormwater drains had not been completed before the community was forced to move in and houses stood semi-submerged. The local officials were already in the vehicles, waiting to leave when Theron was approached by a resident who begged her to come and look at the effect of the floods on the foundations of the houses. Theron immediately agreed. 'I am not in a hurry', she said. 'Those people can wait ... this is your turn to talk. You can talk your heart out ... That is why the commission is here today'. Van Reenen then describes how the coloured man broke down in tears because finally he had found someone to listen to him.²⁷⁵

²⁷² Interview, Terreblanche.

²⁷³ De Villiers was a prominent theatre critic, journalist and political commentator who later (*i.a.*) Became assistant editor of the *Sunday Times* (1981-1986).

²⁷⁴ *Sunday Times*, 20 June 1976, 'Erika Theron: Appalling Poverty'.

²⁷⁵ *Rapport*, 30 May 1976, column 'Op die Randakker', 'MER Takseer Dr. Erika' by Rykie van Reenen (transl.).

This is an emotive story, written for a human-interest column rather than as a news report. It may have been dramatised. But it reveals a compassionate side of Theron and her growing identification with the role of champion and defender of coloured rights. The anecdote forms part of a column in which Van Reenen discusses the planned publication of MER's correspondence.²⁷⁶ In it she quotes letters written by MER, commenting on Theron's character. In one such letter to Anna Geyer (written in 1933), she talks affectionately of Theron's intelligence and balanced outlook and of her exceptional passion for welfare work, given her youth at the time. 'Even if she marries, I believe this interest will be her *leitmotif* for as long as she lives', MER writes.²⁷⁷ In the 1930s she saw Theron's vocation as one of service to her 'own' people, the white Afrikaners. But Van Reenen had already glimpsed the expanded vision which had been evolving in Theron and the spark of a new crusade.

The Theron Commission: The Final Report

Exhaustive and exhausting as the research process had been, it seems clear that compiling the report was to place an even greater strain on the Theron Commission. In the last few months of the commission's work, findings had to be summarised and recommendations formulated. Theron had to try to reconcile the deep differences of approach and conviction within the group. Point after point was debated at length and at times with considerable emotion.²⁷⁸ Procedural rulings²⁷⁹ and even such matters as format were contested. Theron had to invoke her prerogative as chairman to

²⁷⁶ The collection was published as Alba Bouwer, Anna Rothmann and Rykie Van Reenen (compilers), *M.E.R. 'n Kosbare Erfenis. Briewe van M.E.R. 1916-1975* (Kaapstad, Tafelberg, 1977).

²⁷⁷ *Rapport*, 30 May 1976, column 'Op die Randakker', by Rykie van Reenen, 'MER Takseer Dr. Erika' (transl.).

²⁷⁸ *The Cape Times*, 25 May 1976, 'Dr. Erika Theron – A Dog (*sic*) in Her Life', quoted in Barnard, 'Die Erika Theron-Kommissie', p.111; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.62.

²⁷⁹ See for example WCA: CET, 2/2/1 vol.II, Minutes of Meetings of the [Theron] Commission, 15-19 and 22-26 March 1976.

make the final decision.²⁸⁰ Although the majority of the recommendations (125 of the 178), were eventually hammered into a form which the commission could accept unanimously, many of the core recommendations were passed with narrow margins and had ultimately to be published with explanations for abstentions, with recorded 'reservations' and with minority alternatives.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Minutes of a Meeting of the [Theron] Commission, 20-21 November 1975.

²⁸¹ *Report of the Theron Commission*, Annexure A, pp.523-532.

Since the names of members voting for or against each item appeared in the final report, the voting patterns were to become a matter of public record. By scrupulously having the disparate views documented, Theron was later able to prove transparency to her critics.²⁸² But the obvious lack of consensus that it revealed may well have weakened the authority of the commission. Slender victories did not constitute clear direction and were easily dismissed by detractors, particularly where they depended on the votes of the coloured members.

Indicative of how closely contested some recommendations were, Theron tells a story in her memoirs of a critical vote where opinion was expected to be evenly divided. De Villiers Loubser was the unknown quantity. It was thought that his vote could tilt the balance. Theron describes him as an independent thinker – ‘no one could caucus with him’. When the crucial recommendation was put to the vote, Theron says she sent up a prayer to MER: TaMiem, please ask the dear Lord to help us here (‘*Ag TaMiem, vra tog die liewe Here om ons nou te help*’). De Villiers Loubser duly voted with the *verligtes*.²⁸³ Terreblanche embellishes this story. According to him, the critical recommendation was no.178, relating to the political dispensation. As the commission was called to vote, he saw Theron ‘with her hand in the air and her eyes tightly shut’. Asked about this she told her colleagues that she had appealed to MER. They then enquired why she had needed an intercessor and had not asked for help ‘direct’. Apparently she replied that she was afraid that she might be asked to give an account of why it had been so long since she had last made contact. ‘There simply wasn’t time right then for an explanation’, she said.²⁸⁴

²⁸² See for example Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter, Erika Theron to Professor G. Viljoen, 6 March 1979.

²⁸³ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.62 (transl.). In fact the vote was not as close as this anecdote implies. It was carried 11:7. There were however other reasons for fearing a split vote – see below.

²⁸⁴ *Vrye Weekblad*, 7 September 1990: Sampie Terreblanche, ‘Hulde aan Erika Theron: Nou ’n “Los Hotnot” in die Hemel’, p.15; interview, Terreblanche.

One of the most contentious issues arising during the deliberations of the commission was that of ‘chronic community poverty’ which is discussed in Chapter 22 of the final report, titled ‘A Socio-Economic Perspective’. The chapter was compiled by Terreblanche at the request of Theron, although Van der Ross claims to have contributed to the original idea.²⁸⁵ According to Pretorius, this was clearly inspired by Oscar Lewis’s work on ‘poverty culture’ or the ‘sub-culture of poverty’ although these terms are largely avoided in the report, seemingly because they were conceptually too contentious.²⁸⁶ Debates about this chapter in many ways epitomise the irreconcilable ideological differences within the commission and the balancing act which Theron had to perform as chairman.

In Chapter 22, for the purposes of analysis, the coloured population is divided into a number of broad categories, which are examined separately. According to the majority report, the lowest stratum, constituting about 40% of the population was trapped in a ‘cycle of poverty’ which had become structurally determined. Among the root causes of this chronic community poverty were the relatively low level of public expenditure on coloured people and the lack of meaningful political representation.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Van der Ross claims that he was instrumental in creating awareness of the concept of the ‘poverty sub-culture’ as applicable to the commission’s work: interview, Van der Ross.

²⁸⁶ Pretorius, ‘Suid-Afrikaanse Kommissies, p.274, referring to O. Lewis, ‘The Culture of Poverty’ in D.P. Moynihan (ed.) in *On Understanding Poverty* (New York, Basic Books, 1969).

²⁸⁷ *Report of the Theron Commission*, pp.469, 472-479.

Cronjé, Meyer, Roode, Treurnicht and Van Zyl distanced themselves totally from this concept which they clearly regarded as structuralist-Marxist in essence, and declined even to take part in the discussions. Badenhorst participated in the discussions but nevertheless placed on record that he did not accept the chapter in its final form and voted against its inclusion in the report.²⁸⁸ In the preamble to their minority report, this group claimed that during the discussions of other chapters they had ‘consistently objected to the spirit’ in which parts of these chapters were written. Despite some reformulation the ‘broad approach’ was ‘still unacceptable’ to them. Chapter 22 represented a culmination of this perspective. They argued that the theoretical approach was highly controversial ‘in social science circles’. In particular it was based on ‘unacceptable’ philosophical and ideological premises which *i.a.* placed undue emphasis on environment and too little on the ‘innate ability and potential’ of the subjects.²⁸⁹

When the commission had completed its work, Terreblanche published a monograph on the topic titled *Gemeenskapsarmoede*.²⁹⁰ In her foreword to this book Theron says that she had originally envisaged that this would form the opening chapter in the report. It was her intention that it should establish the central theme of the study and provide coherence to the report as a whole. Although she does not say so here, the bitter dissent over the chapter would have made that impossible. In the event it was published in a radically condensed form, as the concluding chapter. Theron nevertheless expressed the view that it was one of the best and most important sections in the report.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.483. See also *Beeld*, 19 June 1976, ‘Meerderheid, Minderheid Bots. Skerp Verskille in Kommissie’.

²⁸⁹ *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.482-483.

²⁹⁰ Sampie Terreblanche, *Gemeenskapsarmoede: Perspektief op Chroniese Armoede in die Kleurlinggemeenskap na Aanleiding van die Erika Theron-Verslag* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1977).

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Foreword by Erika Theron, pp.1-3.

Theron was often to refer to the need for seeing the report of the commission *as a whole*. She clearly believed that it had a central logic and unity and that it offered a coherent blueprint for the future.²⁹² Yet in the view of Dr. Oscar Wollheim who analysed the report for the SAIRR, ‘the overriding impression’ was one of ‘ambivalence’.²⁹³ Pretorius also identifies and attempts to explain the anomalies, ambivalence and ambiguity that occur throughout the report.²⁹⁴ To cite one example, in Chapter 22 it is stated that the ‘upper group’ in the coloured population ‘consists of educated and civilised Western people’ and that ‘it is usually only the colour of their skin that sets this group apart from the average White’.²⁹⁵ Elsewhere it is conceded that there are persons classified as coloured who are white ‘in appearance’.²⁹⁶ It is denied by the *verligtes* that the coloured people can be regarded as a separate ‘nation’ or ‘nation-in-embryo’, and their heterogeneous nature is emphasised by all members.²⁹⁷ Yet they are consistently discussed as a separate, identifiable group.²⁹⁸ As another example, it is recommended that important functions, such as welfare, be moved out of the Department of Coloured Affairs and into the central welfare department, that there be increased (though not total) sharing of industrial and commercial group areas and of facilities such as beaches – even that the Mixed Marriages Act and section 6 of the Immorality Act be reviewed. There is strong condemnation (particularly in Theron’s Chapter 9)²⁹⁹

²⁹² *Rapport*, 10 April 1977, ‘Die Theron is ‘n Ééneid’.

²⁹³ O. Wollheim (ed.), *Theron Commission: Comment* (n.p., SAIRR, 1977), p.1.

²⁹⁴ Pretorius, ‘Suid-Afrikaanse Commissies’, pp.264-295. An important source of these ambiguities is the differing ideologies and perspectives of the two factions as well as attempts to reconcile these. Another is the inconsistencies within the thinking of the factions, particularly the *verligte* group.

²⁹⁵ *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.469.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.487.

²⁹⁷ Pretorius argues that the *verligte* members of the commission used the term ‘Coloured’ as a ‘statutory construction’ while the ‘minority’ (*verkrampes*) regarded them as a distinct community. See Pretorius, ‘Suid-Afrikaanse Kommissies’, pp.267-26.

²⁹⁸ See also Wollheim, *Theron Commission*, p.1.

²⁹⁹ *Report of the Theron Commission*, pp.212-219.

of the way in which the Group Areas Act had been applied and its impact on coloured people. Yet there is no recommendation for the repeal of either this or of the Population Registration Act.³⁰⁰ Although direct representation in the three tiers of government and a range of statutory bodies is recommended, ultimately no clearly defined constitutional proposal is forthcoming.³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.488; Wollheim, *Theron Commission*, p.1.

³⁰¹ *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.519.

The apparent limitations and contradictions in the report are obviously, at least in part, the result of the difficulty in reaching any conclusions with such disparate opinions represented. Also, there were external constraints. The commission had to work within the parameters of its brief. Nor could it have expected any serious consideration in the 1970s, had it recommended an immediate and radical restructuring of the social and political order. Yet despite the valid Wollheim critique, the majority position in the report does reflect a fundamental recognition of the severe disadvantages under which the coloured population lived and a will to progress towards a more just dispensation.

In the last weeks of the commission's activities, the difficulties of seeking elusive consensus were compounded by growing pressure to finalise the report and have it edited and printed in time for it to be discussed before the close of the parliamentary session in June 1976. Rumours were already circulating that it might not be tabled at the sitting and Theron would not have wanted to provide any excuse for a delay from her side.³⁰² According to Theron the report was complete, signed and in the hands of the printers during April 1976.³⁰³ To expedite publication a few members of the commission, including Theron, travelled to Pretoria to read the proofs at the government printers.³⁰⁴ The requirement of presenting the report in both official languages was waived – translation could come later.³⁰⁵ On 16 May 1976 printed copies of the report were received in Cape Town and preparations were made to deliver the official volume to the Minister of Coloured Affairs, H.H. (Hennie) Smit.³⁰⁶

³⁰² Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter, Erika Theron to Dr. Schalk van der Merwe, 18 May 1976. Theron says that she wishes that she could have been delivering the report to Van der Merwe, whom she clearly trusted, rather than the new Minister.

³⁰³ *Vaderland*, 21 April 1976, ‘“Hy kon Minstens Gewag het vir die Verslag.” Prof. Erika Theron Boos vir Min. Smit’.

³⁰⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.63.

³⁰⁵ Theron and Du Toit, *Kortbegrip*, p.4.

³⁰⁶ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.63.

Relations between the commission and Smit were somewhat strained at the time, as discussed below, but Theron attempted to follow protocol. She observes in her memoirs that the formal handover of the final report of a commission of enquiry is usually marked by a ‘small ceremony’. She had asked Koos du Toit to attempt to arrange this for the following day, 17 May, which happened to be her birthday. As Theron relates events, the Minister’s staff fobbed her off throughout the day. Finally in exasperation she and Du Toit marched to the Minister’s office and handed the report to his secretary with instructions that he deliver it to the Minister.³⁰⁷

She does not say so, but it must have been an anti-climax. For over three years she had been immersed in the work of the commission. The last few months had been frenetic. The report was a massive document – 567 pages in length – scrupulously compiled. She had invested huge amounts of time, energy and emotion in the project. It had cost the taxpayer R408 000.³⁰⁸ She certainly wanted all this effort to produce results – she wanted it to make a difference in the lives of coloured people. But signals from government suggested, at best, a lukewarm reception of the fruits of this labour. Another month was to go by before the report was tabled in parliament, only a matter of days before the recess. Simultaneously, a three-and-a-half page *Interim Memorandum* in response to the report, compiled by government, was tabled,³⁰⁹ seemingly calculated to smother any hopes of real change. For a crusader such as Theron, who had developed a strong commitment to the cause of coloured upliftment, this was a bitter pill to swallow.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.63-64.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.68.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.64; , WPS/1976. Republic of South Africa, *Interim Memorandum. Provisional Comments by the Government on the Recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group.*

She was, however, not unprepared. For weeks before the commission's report was published, the writing had been on the wall that the government was unhappy with some of its conclusions. Theoretically, no one outside of the commission knew what it contained. However, in spite of the strict rules of confidentiality, according to Theron there had been leakages.³¹⁰ Some members of government clearly anticipated the tenor of the report and began taking counter-measures in advance to reduce its impact. For example, Terreblanche and Vosloo claim that they (together with Theron) had been summoned to a meeting with Vorster at the Prime Minister's residence during the last week of the commission's sitting. This was at a time when the critical recommendation 178 was in the process of being formulated. A telephone call was received from the Minister of Coloured Affairs with instructions that the committee members should request the meeting, since it could not appear on the record that Vorster had initiated the discussion.³¹¹ Barnard, whose source is Terreblanche, interprets this 'interference' by Vorster as 'unconstitutional'.³¹² In the event, Vosloo did not advise Theron of the approach and informed the premier's staff that she was unable to attend. Terreblanche says that Vosloo 'cut her out'.³¹³ According to Vosloo, he was afraid that she might be intimidated or influenced by Vorster,³¹⁴ although this seems unlikely. She was, however, apparently kept informed of proceedings by Terreblanche.³¹⁵

During the discussion it became evident that Vorster had foreknowledge of leanings within the commission and was concerned that a majority recommendation would come out in favour of direct coloured representation in parliament. He was probably already in possession of a draft version of the proposal. Theron says that on a later occasion, after the report had been tabled, he was seen referring to this earlier draft, apparently unaware that it differed significantly from the final majority

³¹⁰ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.62.

³¹¹ Interview, Terreblanche; interview, Vosloo.

³¹² Barnard, 'Die Erika Theron-Kommissie', p.133 (transl.).

³¹³ Interview, Terreblanche.

³¹⁴ Interview, Vosloo.

³¹⁵ Interview, Terreblanche.

recommendation.³¹⁶ There could be no clearer evidence that some member or members of the commission were providing him with information.

³¹⁶ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.62.

Terreblanche says that among other matters in the discussion at *Groote Schuur*, the Prime Minister's official residence, he and Vosloo had outlined to Vorster their reasons for believing that the CRC was unworkable. Vorster had reacted strongly, stating categorically that the CRC had to be made to function.³¹⁷ In other words he was not prepared to consider moving away from the existing system of separate political structures. According to Terreblanche, Vorster's clandestine attempt to influence proceedings had the opposite effect from what he intended. It made Theron even more determined that the *verkrampste* faction should not have its way. He says that she persuaded coloured members who favoured a radical minority position, not to neutralise the moderate *verligte* position by splitting the vote three ways.³¹⁸ A clear majority was obtained for a proposal which did include a recommendation that 'provision be made for satisfactory forms of direct Coloured representation and a direct say for the Coloured at the various levels of government ...'.³¹⁹ This incident had made Theron very aware of Vorster's sentiments.

There were many other indications of what could be expected. A number of announcements by government and by the ruling party were timed deliberately to undercut the impact of the report. For example, on 13 April 1976, the Minister of Coloured Affairs informed an NP gathering that a 'committee of experts' was to be appointed to look into the establishment of fully independent coloured local government.³²⁰ This was widely reported in the press. Theron's reaction revealed her frustration. As she told reporters, the question of local authority formed part of the commission's brief. The commissioners had travelled the length and breadth of the country investigating every aspect of coloured affairs and had devoted an entire chapter to government. She expressed astonishment that Smit had not waited for the delivery of her report, which he must have known was already on its way to the printers.³²¹

³¹⁷ Interview, Terreblanche.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ *Report of the Theron Commission*, p.519.

³²⁰ *Die Burger*, 14 April 1976, 'Selfstandige Besture vir Bruines'.

³²¹ *Beeld*, 20 April 1976, 'Aankondiging "Vreemd". Prof Erika Kla oor Nuwe Plan'; *Die Vaderland*, 21 April 1976, 'Hy kon Minstens Gewag het vir die Verslag.' Prof. Erika Theron

Boos vir Min. Smit'; *Hoofstad*, 21 April 1976, 'Prof. Theron Kwaad oor Nuwe Komitee'.

Smit tried to justify the odd timing of his announcement by saying that the government could no longer delay action.³²² ‘Things could not stand still’ while the report of the Theron Commission was awaited.³²³ It was an unconvincing explanation by any standards. But the failure of the commission to complete its work timeously had provided the excuse. This was just one of a number of ways in which the impact of the final report would be compromised by slow delivery.

In the midst of the exchange between Smit and Theron, Vorster added a further dampener to expectations. During a debate in the House of Assembly shortly before the release of the Theron report he told members that he did not have ‘the faintest idea’ what it contained (which was untrue). However, he pointed out that what he required of the commission was merely that it should ‘establish all the facts’, assemble them in one document and ‘identify the bottlenecks [which were hindering progress]’. He emphasised that he had *not* appointed the commission ‘to work out political policy’. That would be decided by his party’s congresses and by no one else. He wanted ‘to make that very clear’.³²⁴ Following this speech, Bob Connolly published a cartoon in the *Rand Daily Mail* showing Vorster building a shelf labelled ‘For Theron Commission Report’, where it would presumably be archived and left to gather dust.³²⁵ For Theron, waiting for the final production stages of the report to be completed, it must have been deeply disheartening. Attempts by the Afrikaans-language press to correct an ‘over-hasty’ interpretation of the premier’s words could not dispel the growing conviction that the work of the commission would have scant influence on government decisions.

³²² *Rapport*, 18 April 1976, ‘Regering Wag Nie vir Erika Theron’.

³²³ *Beeld*, 21 April 1976, ‘Smit Antwoord Erika Theron’ (trans.); *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 April 1976, ‘The Astonishing Mr. Smit’.

³²⁴ Republic of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly*, Volume 61, 1976, col.5133, John Vorster (NP), 21 April 1976.

³²⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 April 1976, cartoon by Bob Connolly, ‘Government Carpentry’.

To reinforce this, shortly thereafter there was a strategically-timed press release from the Planning Committee of the Cape NP, concerning an investigation into ‘matters affecting the coloureds’. The chairman, P.H. Meyer, announced that the recommendations of this committee had important implications for parallel development and would possibly be placed before the Federal Board within the current year. Meyer denied that the committee was pre-empting the Theron Commission or trespassing on its domain³²⁶ but the announcement was clearly a further example of machinations to undermine its status.

However, the events that most effectively eclipsed the release of the Theron Commission report were not engineered by the NP. These were the Soweto uprising and the following unrest. Early in 1976 attempts by government to enforce the increased use of Afrikaans as medium of instruction in black schools became a focus for the wider frustrations and insecurities in the black urban population. The explosive situation which began to build up was poorly understood and badly managed by the government and its agencies. Through April and May as the report of the Theron Commission was being prepared for delivery, strike action and protests were mounting in Soweto.³²⁷ On 16 June, a mass march of school children ended in tragedy when the police opened fire on the marchers. A week of rioting ensued, followed by months of unrest which spread to other areas including the streets of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape campus. Hundreds of lives were lost and South Africa entered a new phase of intensified internal oppression and external isolation.³²⁸

³²⁶ *Hoofstad*, 30 April 1976, ‘Kaap het Nuwe Plan vir Kleurlinge’.

³²⁷ Soweto was the vast black location on the south-western border of Johannesburg.

³²⁸ Davenport and Saunders, pp.449-454; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.578-580.

It was under this cloud that the report of the Theron Commission emerged and was considered by government. It could not have been more ill-timed. Hannes Fagan, Theron's nephew, says that Theron was aware of this and deeply concerned.³²⁹ But there was nothing that she could do about it. With hindsight, Koos du Toit, secretary of the Theron Commission, says that 'the Erika Theron Commission was swept off the table by the flames of Soweto and the government closed ranks. They had their hands full and decided that it was not the time for concessions. This reduced its effect dramatically.'³³⁰ In her memoirs Theron attempts to extract something positive from the coincidence and quotes an article by Piet Cillié, writing in his 'Dawie' column in *Die Burger*. According to Cillié the timing was something of an 'ironical blessing'. Soweto had provided both 'perspective and a warning' to the country. The white and coloured populations must respond by addressing their 'relationship problems' with greater urgency, with the aid of the 'valuable and comprehensive picture of the facts, tasks and areas of friction' provided by the report of the Theron Commission.³³¹ Theron evidently took heart from this compliment, suggesting that in 1976 neither she nor Cillié comprehended the depth of black and coloured disaffection and how inextricably they were linked. Clearly neither recognised the Soweto riots for what they would prove to be, the 'watershed moment in the history of apartheid'.³³²

Although Soweto increased polarisation on racial issues and may have encouraged conservative white South Africans to entrench their positions, the Vorster government had already decided to dig in. The *Interim Memorandum* delivered in response to the report of the Theron Commission, was presented to parliament on 18 June 1976. It was almost certainly prepared before the outbreak of violence. This memorandum re-affirms government's commitment to parallel development and rejects any recommendation that would tend to undermine 'the recognition and development of the identity of the various population groups'. Specifically, changes to the Immorality Act and the

³²⁹ Interview, Fagan. See also interview, Vosloo; interview, Terreblanche.

³³⁰ Interview, Du Toit.

³³¹ *Die Burger*, 19 June 1976, 'Soweto Gee Ekstra Gewig aan Verslag oor Bruin-Wit Situasië' quoted in Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.65-66.

³³² Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.578.

Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act were pronounced unacceptable. So, too, was direct representation by coloured people in existing white political institutions.³³³ Thus fundamental principles relating to the future status of the coloured population had been decided even before the debate was opened.

³³³ WPS/1976, Republic of South Africa, *Interim Memorandum. Provisional Comments by the Government on the Recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group*,

On the other hand – very significantly in the long run – the recommendation that adherence to the Westminster system of government be reviewed (178(c)), was accepted. The recommendation that an authoritative body be appointed to examine ‘organisational and statutory adjustments’ relating to political affairs, was also agreed to in principle. However, in both cases the commitment was merely to further deliberation.

Press and public reaction were confused by the simultaneous emergence of the two documents in parliament in June 1976 – the *Report of the Theron Commission* and the *Interim Memorandum* – and, no doubt, by the tensions within the report itself. Headlines veered from the optimistic to the despairing.³³⁴ Whatever victories Theron thought had been won by the passing of *verligte* majority recommendations, were offset by the published *verkrampste* counter-arguments. To a degree, the report was rendered sterile because of this polarisation of opinion. The most irreconcilable positions related to political issues, but economic reform and even seemingly neutral topics, such as ‘cultural affairs’ and ‘radio and television services’ were complicated by the separatist views of the conservatives.³³⁵ As Willem de Klerk commented, the irony lay in the fact that the release of the report had produced the opposite effect from what was intended. It had brought ‘confusion instead of clarity, anxiety instead of liberation, uncertainty instead of direction’.³³⁶ Fleur de Villiers made a similar observation. In her opinion the report would merely ‘turn the debate into an uproar’.³³⁷

³³⁴ See for example: *The Star*, 18 June 1976, ‘Theron a Hot Potato’; *Hoofstad*, ‘Die Vonke Sal Spat oor Aanbevelings’; *Die Transvaler*, 19 June 1976, ‘Bruines Versigtig en Vyandig’; *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 June 1976, ‘Anger as Government Rejects Theron’; *Sunday Times*, 20 June 1976, ‘Nats Give Report the Thumbs Down’; *The Star*, 21 June 1976, ‘Colour Gap to Close Under New Deal’; *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 June 1976, ‘Something to Salvage’.

³³⁵ See for example *Report of the Theron Commission*, pp.512-515.

³³⁶ *Die Transvaler*, 19 June 1976, Willem de Klerk, ‘Twis by die Wegspring Gaan Sake Verbrou’.

³³⁷ *Sunday Times*, 20 June 1976, ‘Fleur de Villiers Comments on the Theron Report’.

Coloured responses to the report of the commission, also reflected ambivalence. In many respects it fell short of aspirations if not expectations. Dr. Allan Boesak, for example, pointed out that even its most extreme recommendations did not threaten structural apartheid in any fundamental way.³³⁸ However, the study did set out, in detail, the ‘facts’ of coloured life, as Theron had intended. It threw a harsh spotlight on the indignity, deprivation and disadvantage which coloured communities experienced. It neither concealed nor excused inefficiency, ignorance, indifference and greed where these were found in the public or private sector. It was an indictment that could not be ignored entirely. Even the Chairman of the National Executive of the Labour Party, the Rev. H.J. Hendrickse, admitted that he was ‘amazed that the commission had probed as deep as it did’.³³⁹ As Jakes Gerwel conceded, ‘within a prescribed South African perspective the report [did] recommend progress’.³⁴⁰

Ultimately, the government’s pre-emptive rejection of the key recommendations of the commission, overshadowed the significance of the report itself for many coloured people. Several leaders reacted bitterly to the *Interim Memorandum*, focusing on the political issue. Adam Small said that by rejecting ‘the only truly significant suggestions’ of the Commission’, Vorster’s government was effectively ‘throwing the report into the wastepaper basket’.³⁴¹ Sonny Leon of the Labour Party was reported as warning of a growing ‘black alliance’ in the face of government ‘intransigence’.³⁴²

³³⁸ Dr. Allan Boesak, ‘Die Witskrif – ’n Grafskrif’, *Deurbraak*, 6,4 (1977). Boesak, a theologian and lecturer at the University of the Western Cape at the time, was an anti-apartheid activist – later founder of the United Democratic Front (1984), president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1982-1991), chairman of the Western Cape branch of the ANC (1991-1999).

³³⁹ *Weekend Argus*, 19 June 1976, ‘Labour Chief Amazed by Theron Probe: Fair, Honest’.

³⁴⁰ *The Star*, 30 June 1976, Jakes Gerwel, ‘Coloured Response’.

³⁴¹ *The Star*, 30 June 1976, Adam Small, ‘Coloured Response: So What? A Bitter Laugh ...’. See also *ibid.*, Jakes Gerwel, ‘Coloured Response-2. More Fuel for Frustration’; *Sunday Times*, 20 June 1976, ‘Theron, Government Slammed’.

³⁴² *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 June 1976, ‘Anger as Govt. Rejects Theron’; *ibid.*, ‘Leon Predicts a Black Alliance’.

Theron was confronted in a very immediate way, with the signs of growing disaffection. As chairman of the council of the University of the Western Cape and as friend of Van der Ross, she was acutely aware of the mood on campus and within the broader community.³⁴³ Theron relates an anecdote in *Sonder Hoed* which illustrates this. She writes that she attended a meeting at the university, held in a room where virtually every window had been shattered during campus riots. She was cold, she says. A coloured member of the council said to her with wry humour that the Theron Commission was responsible for the draughty conditions because it was responsible for the unrest. According to him, for three years the older generation had curbed the militance in coloured youth by the promise which lay in the commission. When the report finally appeared, the call for patience had seemed to be vindicated; but ‘then came the memorandum and it knocked our feet out from under us’.³⁴⁴

There is little doubt that outbreaks of violence in the Western Cape were directly linked to government’s negative response to the commission.³⁴⁵ Theron cites evidence presented to the Cillié Commission to confirm this.³⁴⁶ Confronted with disillusioned and embittered coloured people, she says that she tried to console them with the fact that at least the memorandum had dismissed the ‘coloured homeland’ option. Also, it had indicated that aspects of the political recommendation 178 would still receive further consideration.³⁴⁷ Meanwhile a protracted delay had to be endured while the bulky report was subjected to study and the government decided how to deal with the growing crisis in the country.

³⁴³ Interview, Van der Ross. See also *Die Vaderland*, 30 August 1976, column ‘Ander Dink Só ...’, ‘Bruines se Frustrasie Vrugbare Opstand-Aarde’, by R.E. van der Ross.

³⁴⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.66 (transl.).

³⁴⁵ *Sunday Times*, 15 June 1980, ‘Shadow of Theron over the Unrest’, by Eugene Hugo; *Beeld*, 22 September 1976, VKR-Afvaardiging by Vorster. “Soweto Vuur” Ook vir Bruines’.

³⁴⁶ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.66-67. The Cillié Commission was an enquiry into the unrest in Soweto and elsewhere in the Republic, established in June 1976 and carried out by Mr. Justice P.M. Cillié.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.67.

CHAPTER SIX

AFRIKANER DISSIDENT: SERVING THE CAUSE OF REFORM

When the report of the Theron Commission had been delivered in May 1976, Theron was forewarned that it would not be well received by the government. This had been confirmed by the swift release of the *Interim Memorandum* and brief, unsatisfactory parliamentary debate. Theron was disappointed but not defeated by the initial conservative official reaction. This was a project to which she had devoted vast physical and emotional resources and she had a considerable stake in its outcome.

There followed a long hiatus while concerned South Africans, including Theron and a restless coloured community, awaited government's final response. Giliomee suggests that it was one of the characteristics of Vorster's leadership that he 'preferred to wait' rather than deal with crises¹ – and the NP government was surrounded by crises. The country was being engulfed by what P.W. Botha would call 'a total onslaught' of subversion both within its borders and from outside the country.²

The sheer volume of the published *Report of the Theron Commission*, its late submission and internal contradictions, also provided government with ample justification for further delays. The *Interim Memorandum* had stated that a thorough analysis of the report by a number of state departments was required. 'Moreover, cognizance [would] have to be taken of not only the conflicting views of the Commission itself as reflected in the majority and minority recommendations, but also the reservations expressed by some members of the Commission in regard to many important matters'.³

¹ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.569.

² Giliomee and Mbenga, *New History*, p.367.

³ WPS/1976. Republic of South Africa, *Interim Memorandum. Provisional Comments by the Government on the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group*.

When the government's White Paper finally emerged in April 1977, it contained much that could have appeared to be gratifying to coloured people. There were significant concessions and the majority (numerically) of recommendations had been accepted, although in many cases conditionally. However, there were also critical exclusions. As the *Sunday Times* put it, there were 'lots of ifs and buts'.⁴ For *The Argus* it was 'so near and yet so far'.⁵ As a result, editors found it difficult to pronounce on the White Paper as a whole. They could report on the minutia of what the government had accepted, wholly, in part, or provisionally, what it had rejected and what it would refer for further investigation. But what this added up to was not clear.

Several newspapers commented on the frustrating lack of direction, the absence of any concrete schedule of action and the unenthusiastic, grudging tone of the document.⁶ *Die Transvaler*, for example, expressed disappointment at the lack of vision, the 'finality' and 'absolutism' of the White Paper. It gave credit for what it regarded as positive aspects and explicitly endorsed the rejection of integration 'at this stage' – 'neither the government nor the Theron report ever had integration in mind'. But it was critical of the fact that 'the lines had been drawn parallel into eternity'.⁷ Verwoerd's notorious 'never' pronouncement of 1960 must have come to mind. Dirk Richard, editor of *Die Vaderland*, sums it up by saying that if he were a coloured man, he 'would gain the impression that the white man does not want the coloured in his world'.⁸ This assessment is significant since it comes from an editor who was an NP supporter and who thought that the government had 'probably gone as far as was practical for it to do safely'.⁹

⁴ *Sunday Times*, Extra, 17 April 1977, 'What "White Paper" Says', by Howard Lawrence.

⁵ *The Argus*, leading article, 'The Coloured: A Golden Opportunity Missed'.

⁶ See for example *Die Transvaler*, 13 April 1977, leading article, 'Witskrif'; *ibid.*, 14 April 1977, leading article, 'Die Kleurlinge'; *Die Vaderland*, 13 April 1977, 'Die Witskrif'; *ibid.*, column 'Na My Mening', 'Witskrif: Dit is Maar 'n Klein Treetjie', by Dirk Richard.

⁷ *Die Transvaler*, 14 April 1977, leading article, 'Die Kleurlinge' (transl.).

⁸ *Die Vaderland*, 13 April 1977, 'Witskrif' (transl.).

⁹ *Ibid.*, (transl.).

Campaigning for Change

The half-hearted, piecemeal response by government was badly received by Theron. Despite the apparent ambiguities in the report, she had perceived its components as inextricably interlinked.¹⁰ As far as she was concerned the White Paper missed the point entirely. Following the release of the document, Theron and six other members of the commission met in Belville to discuss its contents and issued a joint statement. Central to their evaluation was that ‘they doubted whether the Government had correctly understood the philosophy underlying the report’. They had hoped for acceptance of ‘a form of blueprint with clear guidelines for the future co-existence of South Africa’s population groups’ and were disappointed by the lack of a coherent approach in the White Paper.¹¹ In a patronising response in parliament, the Prime Minister recommended that the members of the Theron Commission should not make the report ‘a personal matter’. He suggested that ‘the chairman’ should ask herself whether the government did not in fact understand the underlying philosophy of the report all too well.¹²

¹⁰ See for example, *Rapport* 10 April 1977, column ‘Dink Weer’ edited by Rykie van Reenen and Andries van Wyk, ‘Die Theron is ’n Eénheid’; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.67.

¹¹ *Sunday Times*, 17 April 1977, ‘Theron Group Hits at White Paper: Call for Direct Representation’.

¹² Republic of South Africa, *Debates of the House of Assembly*, 19 April 1977, col.5559, quoted in Pretorius, *Suid-Afrikaanse Kommissies*, p.311 (transl.).

Theron was very bitter about the entire process of evaluating the report of the commission, which had inevitably led to fragmentation. According to her, a copy was torn apart, literally, and separate sections despatched to various state departments for comment. Decisions thus lay in the hands of bureaucrats, some of whom, in her view, 'did not put themselves out' in dealing with the assignment. Others had clearly been offended by implied criticism in the report and reacted accordingly, she says.¹³ Still others were undoubtedly concerned with their own and their department's vested interests. In particular, if the recommendations of the commission were implemented, the Department of Coloured Affairs would shrink dramatically as most of its functions would be absorbed by state departments currently administering white affairs. This could involve re-assignment of civil servants, loss of seniority and promotions and general upheaval. Giliomee argues that at a time when the cabinet did not have 'an embracing conceptual alternative to separate development' the bureaucracy wielded considerable influence, often successfully 'sinking the recommendations of commissions' and cloaking resistance to change in ideological terms.¹⁴

The joint statement issued after the Belville meeting was, however, couched in very careful terms. One can recognise echoes of the correct, reasoned style which Verwoerd had used systematically in the 1930s in his campaign on behalf of poor whites. The statement included 'thanks' to the government for concessions and expressions of 'regret' and 'disappointment' over recommendations that had been rejected.¹⁵ Theron informed the press that the meeting had been kept 'non-political' (none of the commission's members of parliament or of the CRC was present) in order to 'be objective'.¹⁶ She was clearly determined to give the government, and any

¹³ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.67 (transl.). See also *Rapport*, 17 April 1977, article by Erika Theron, 'Nou Só Saam Verder', reproduced in Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.96-98.

¹⁴ Hermann Giliomee, 'Afrikaner Politics: How the System Works' in Heribert Adam and Hermann Giliomee, *Ethnic Power Mobilized: Can South Africa Change?* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979), pp.225-226.

¹⁵ *Sunday Times*, 17 April 1977, 'Theron Group Hits at White Paper: Call for Direct Representation'.

¹⁶ *The Citizen*, 18 April 1977, 'Coloured Leaders Voice Criticism of White Paper'.

reasonable public audience, no grounds for dismissing the arguments summarily. The comment also reflects her continuing faith in scientific objectivity, and no doubt explains her frustration that the government had not been persuaded by ‘the facts’.

The approach was not successful. Despite the measured tone of the statement, Minister Hennie Smit issued an immediate sharp retort in which he berated Theron and her group for their comments. This could only hinder the process and threaten the maintenance of stability, he said. At the same time he pointed out that the seven could not talk for the commission as a whole.¹⁷ The uneasy relationship between the government and the ‘rebel’ members of the Theron Commission was clearly set to continue. In fact it would worsen.

One point that came out strongly in the joint statement was the concern that many recommendations had been accepted only ‘in principle’.¹⁸ This was also noted by commentators in the press, who warned that the fruits of the Theron Commission and the White Paper would be judged ultimately on their implementation.¹⁹ Theron observed that it had been the fate of scores of commissions that their reports – including some ‘outstanding pieces’ – had ended up simply gathering dust. Even where recommendations had been accepted, they had come to nothing. She argued that as a matter of policy, whenever an official commission submitted its findings, a follow-up committee should be put in place to ensure speedy implementation, at least of those recommendations that had been accepted. She envisaged such committees as consisting of members of parliament, senior officials, representatives of the subject group and the chairman of the relevant commission.²⁰

¹⁷ *Volksblad*, 18 April 1977, ‘Minister Berispe Theron’.

¹⁸ *Sunday Times*, 17 April 1977, ‘Theron Group Hits at White Paper: Call for Direct Representation’.

¹⁹ See for example *Die Transvaler*, 13 April 1977, leading article, ‘Witskrif’; *Die Vaderland*, 13 April 1977, ‘Die Witskrif’.

²⁰ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.68.

This notion that the chairman of a commission should continue to have a stake in the realisation of its findings, is indicative of her own investment in the Theron Commission and her usual urge to convert research into action. It is evident that she did not see her role as finished with the handing over of the report. Her commitment was to bringing about real change in the lives of the coloured people, and this was to remain an important goal for the remainder of her life.

In Theron's imagination, the methods of the Continuation Committee of the 1934 National Conference served as a model for pursuing these objectives. Perhaps her experience as secretary of that Continuation Committee could be put to good use, she told the press humorously.²¹ An attempt to assemble interested persons and organisations was made,²² but the project failed to get off the ground. Theron attributes this mainly to the fact that the envisioned committee did not have 'a leader of the calibre of Verwoerd', with his 'brilliance, super-human diligence and enthusiasm and belief in his mission'.²³ It is telling that she could use Verwoerd as an example in this instance, apparently unaware of any irony. Many of the injustices which she was seeking to redress, had their origins in policies imposed by Verwoerd and his government. She could publicly condemn the injustice, but not the man. As far as Theron was concerned, the pursuit of sincerely held ideals was a moral act in itself. It was a point of view that permitted her to exonerate Verwoerd, as well as herself, as she gradually came to repudiate apartheid in practice.

Theron may have seen herself as falling short of Verwoerd in the qualities of leadership, but in reality the project of poor white rehabilitation was very different from coloured upliftment. There had been broad consensus among the white population in the 1930s that poverty among whites should be eradicated and that poor whites should be better integrated into white society. Disagreements had hinged largely around means rather than end. In the 1970s no such consensus existed among the dominant white electorate concerning the future of the coloured people. Nor did

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.68; interview, Van der Ross. See also Unisa:72, 56/1, letter, Erika Theron to Chairman, Society for Social Workers, 8 June 1977.

²³ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.68 (transl.).

coloured communities themselves have the tools to establish their own pressure groups. They lacked the cohesion of nationalism, the political power and institutional structures equivalent to the Afrikaner churches and Afrikaner press, all of which had provided Verwoerd's Continuation Committee with its impetus.

The failure of the Continuation Committee scheme did not, however, cause Theron to abandon her determination to keep the issue of coloured rights alive. For well over a decade, she used every opportunity which presented itself to influence public opinion and to confront the government where she believed it was failing the coloured population. In time, she began to overcome her Boland myopia and to recognise and speak out against the hardships suffered by the urban black population as well. At a critical time in the political development of the country she added her voice to those of other Afrikaner public dissidents urging change. This was almost unique among Afrikaner women of that era.

Theron's public prominence after the release of the commission's report resulted in numerous requests to deliver speeches.²⁴ These provided good platforms for propaganda, which initially focused almost entirely on coloured rights. Since the Theron Commission had studied conditions affecting only the coloured population, she would no doubt have argued that this was a topic which she could discuss with authority – where she knew 'the facts'. As one example, among many other speaking engagements, she addressed a student discussion group (*aktualiteitskring*) at the University of Port Elizabeth in 1979. In this speech she criticised continuing discrimination; she talked of the growing frustration and impatience of the coloured population; she warned of the consequences of having alienated coloured youths growing up in 'soulless' townships. Typically she encouraged her brand of scientific social activism. She urged students to bridge race gaps by contact and research, and to be prepared to speak out 'fearlessly' against things that were 'wrong'.²⁵

²⁴ See Unisa: 72, 56/1 which includes correspondence about many speaking engagements.

²⁵ Unisa: 72, 56/1, Lesing Gelewer te Port Elizabeth op 14 Maart 1979 voor die Aktualiteitskring van die Studenteraad van die UPE (transl.).

From the early 1980s, however, Theron took the decision to withdraw from all public speaking. She was by then approaching her mid-70s and had begun to experience health problems. Also, the alcoholism of her close friend, Annette Muller, was becoming unmanageable, which may have contributed to the decision. In a letter to the SA Council for Mental Health declining an invitation to deliver an address, she merely says that the time had come to ‘make way for the youngsters’.²⁶ She did not, however, retire from her campaign on behalf of the coloured population, but continued relentlessly to convey her messages through the media.²⁷ In the years following the commission Theron wrote so many articles and is so frequently quoted in the press that she could appear to have been publicity-hungry on her own account. Friends and even sceptical colleagues such as Cilliers, however, deny that she was seeking the limelight for its own sake. They are convinced that she used the media deliberately and systematically, solely to promote her cause.²⁸ But Theron the ‘rebel’ probably also enjoyed the measure of notoriety that she began to acquire. Rykie van Reenen says that ‘Erika was always good for a quote’ and that the press sought her out because of this.²⁹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, letter Erika Theron to Director of the SA Council for Mental Health, 23 June 1982.

²⁷ See for example *Huisgenoot*, 42 (21 October 1977), article by Erika Theron, ‘Ons Plakkers’.

²⁸ Interview, Van Reenen; interview, Steyn; interview, Cilliers.

²⁹ Interview, Van Reenen.

The social work journal which Theron edited was one forum to which she had ready access and she frequently used it to disseminate information and comment on coloured affairs. Because social work is such a broad-based discipline and profession, there were few topics that could be regarded as falling outside the scope of the journal. The subject of the social environment of coloured communities was raised with increasing frequency from the time that the Theron Commission was first appointed. Coloured housing and the conditions in the townships were often under scrutiny.³⁰ For example, articles in the *The Cape Times* and *The Argus* were reproduced, describing degraded conditions in Mitchell's Plain and appealing to the Cape Town council not to cut the budget.³¹ Similarly a critical article on coloured removals in terms of the Group Areas Act was reproduced.³² In August 1974, a series of Van der Ross's 'Gus Adams' columns (first published in *Rapport*) was re-published as an article under the title 'Armoede en die Kleurling'.³³

³⁰ See for example, *The Argus*, 8 April 1974, leading article, 'Coloured Housing a Blot on the City', reproduced in 'Notes and News', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 10, 2 (June 1974), p.115; Erika Theron, 'A New Look at Housing', editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 15, 4 (October 1979), p.179.

³¹ *The Argus*, 23 February 1976, leading article, 'Wrong Way to Save'; *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1976, 'Mitchell's Plain', reproduced in 'Notes and News', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 12, 1 (March 1976), pp.45-46.

³² *The Cape Times*, 11 March 1976, leading article, 'An Unpleasant Luxury' reproduced in 'Notes and News', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 12, 2 (June 1976), pp.102-103.

³³ Gus Adams, 'Armoede en die Kleurling', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 10, 3 (August 1974), pp.177-184, 147.

By August 1976, with the government's *Interim Memorandum* already on the table, Theron began her campaign against the Immorality Act and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act.³⁴ By 1979 she began publicly to question the usefulness of the Group Areas Act.³⁵ This was a significant step since the Theron Commission had not recommended the scrapping of this Act; it had merely called for more humane application, the re-zoning of certain sensitive areas such as District Six and the creation of 'uncontrolled' commercial and industrial areas.³⁶ By raising questions about this 'holy cow',³⁷ Theron showed courageous willingness to re-examine her own opinions. She had been involved in the application of the Act as a member of the Stellenbosch town council, and had served personally on the Group Areas Board. Yet progressively she had come to the conclusion that the law itself was essentially problematic.³⁸ By the early 1980s, she was calling for the scrapping of all three acts – what she termed the 'unholy trio'.³⁹ She says in her memoirs that she realised that these acts were the cornerstones of the apartheid structure. She understood why her demands for their repeal evoked such strong reactions. But, she says, she simply could not do otherwise.⁴⁰

³⁴ Erika Theron, 'Immorele Wette?', editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 12, 3 (August 1976), pp.114-115. See also, for example, letter to the editor from 'Predikant van Wes-Kaap', *Die Burger*, 28 March 1977, reproduced in 'Points and Viewpoints', 'Die Wet is 'n Hindernis', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 13, 2 (June 1977), p.129; 'Omstrede Wetgewing', introduction to two articles commissioned by the editor, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 13, 3 (August 1977), p.208.

³⁵ Erika Theron, 'Kyk Weer', editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 15, 4 (October 1979), p.178. See also Erika Theron, 'A New Approach', editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 17, 3 (August 1981), pp.142-143 (transl.).

³⁶ *Report of the Theron Commission*: pp.488, 506.

³⁷ Erika Theron, 'Kyk Weer', editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 15, 4 (October 1979), p.178; *The Cape Times*, 17 October 1979, 'Theron Calls for Review of Group Areas Act'.

³⁸ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.74, 77-78.

³⁹ Erika Theron, 'Dit Sal Nie Help Nie', editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 18, 1 (March 1982), p.3. See also, for example, *The Argus*, 1 April 1981, 'This Cruel Areas Act'; *The Argus*, 3 April 1981, 'Scrap This Act', *The Argus*, 15 May 1982, '“Bad” Areas Act Must Go – Theron', by Tos Wentzel.

⁴⁰ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.75.

When the Mixed Marriages Act and section 16 of the Immorality Act were finally repealed in 1985, she wrote that ‘no tears would be shed’ over the scrapping of these ‘odious laws’, but that there remained many related laws which ‘dare not remain on the statute book’.⁴¹ The attack on Group Areas became her main focus and continued to be so beyond her eightieth year and in spite of her increasing frailty.⁴² According to Willie Esterhuyse, Theron told him in a personal discussion that the impact of the Group Areas Act had been ‘catastrophic’ and that it would ‘bedevil the political and socio-economic landscape of South Africa for decades to come’. In Esterhuyse’s view, she showed considerable prophetic insight.⁴³

⁴¹ Erika Theron, ‘Recall of Odious Laws – Only the First Blow’, editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 21, 2 (June 1985), p.78.

⁴² See for example, Erika Theron, ‘“The Group” – Will it Ever Go?’, editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 21, 4 (October 1985), pp.227-228; Erika Theron, ‘The Dompas? The Group?’, editorial comment, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 22, 1 (March 1986), p.3.

⁴³ *Die Burger*, 29 May 2007, ‘Moeder van Morele Verset’, by Willie Esterhuyse (transl.). Professor W. Esterhuyse is a former Professor of Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, later Professor of Business Ethics at Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town and columnist.

As time went on, Theron's observations and demands were couched in increasingly immoderate terms. This probably reflected some of the eccentricities and licence of advancing age. Theron clearly liked to shock her audience and to show that she remained the fearless crusader that she had been in her youth. In an editorial in late 1987, for example, she accuses P.W. Botha of remaining committed to the principles underlying the Group Areas Act, despite his undertaking to revise and phase it out gradually. Botha was the responsible minister, she says, 'when the community of District Six was destroyed', an episode which would be remembered as 'the most scandalous, unfeeling act of greed and ideological fanaticism' of the era.⁴⁴

Another recommendation of the Theron Commission over which Theron experienced a change of heart was the policy of coloured labour preference in the Western Cape. Among members of the commission, only Van der Ross had argued for this discriminatory policy to be abandoned. In October 1979, S.P. Cilliers delivered a paper at the University of South Africa in which he argued that the policy was having a negative effect on the economy. It had not, as intended, reduced the number of black residents in the area and had merely caused great bitterness.⁴⁵ According to Theron, she had been approached by the press for comment on Cilliers' paper and had asked for time to study it. Only when convinced by Cilliers' research findings, did she and Koos du Toit issue a joint statement revising the position that they had taken in the commission. Theron insists that this was the result of being persuaded by evidence not available when the commission was sitting.⁴⁶ It was a very public repudiation which laid Theron and Du Toit open to accusations of hypocrisy and bandstanding. However, it can be interpreted as a strategy to encourage other citizens to re-examine old beliefs, and to be prepared to speak out on change. It was a recurring theme in Theron's public life. She never ceased to appeal to people to test their opinions, to admit to error and to act on their revised convictions.

⁴⁴ Erika Theron, 'Druppelsgewyse?', editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 23, 4 (October 1987), p.226.

⁴⁵ *The Argus*, 5 October 1979, 'State Urged to Scrap Policy on Coloured'; *Die Burger*, 6 October 1979, 'Voorkeur gebied in Kaap "Nadelig"'.

⁴⁶ *The Argus*, 11 October 1979 'A Change of Mind'; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.69-70.

Theron's own willingness to re-examine her beliefs and to embrace new perspectives extended beyond her views on the coloured population, if far more tentatively. During the 1970s she even began to question the treatment of black residents outside of the reserve areas – a long reach from her position as councillor of Stellenbosch. For example, the breach with SABRA in 1972 had been, in part, related to the issue of the organisation's uncompromising policy on the black urban population. In *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* she gradually began to publicise issues relating to black wages, education and training.⁴⁷ She called for acceptance of the inevitability of black urbanisation, likening it to the influx of the poor whites earlier in the century. She also recognised the ominous social and economic consequences of this influx and the need for urgent measures to manage them.⁴⁸ She criticised callous application of pass laws.⁴⁹

Theron's growing disillusionment with the apartheid ideal was not unique and has to be seen in the context of a changing situation within South Africa. By the 1970s, for a number of reasons, the keystones of apartheid were beginning to appear impracticable and anomalous as well as morally indefensible. The failure to develop the black reserves as recommended by the Tomlinson Commission in 1955, combined with the massive rate of growth in the black population over the following decades, had resulted in an irrevocably changed demography. The black urban population mushroomed both through natural increase and through unstoppable migration from depressed homelands.⁵⁰ It had become clear that no amount of social engineering could create a white South Africa of the kind envisaged by apartheid ideologues in the 1950s and early 1960s. Theron, with her background in the social sciences, could no longer avoid recognising the implications and the reality that re-evaluation was essential.

⁴⁷ *The Argus*, 17 January 1973, 'The Most Pressing Problem', reproduced in *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 9, 1 (March 1973), 'Notes and News', p.54.

⁴⁸ Erika Theron, editorial, 'Black Poor Whites', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 17, 4 (October 1981), pp.216-217.

⁴⁹ See discussion below.

⁵⁰ By the mid-1980s the black urban population within South Africa outnumbered the white population. See Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.596-597.

Furthermore, relations between white South Africans and the other races had progressively deteriorated. After the Soweto crisis there could be no illusions among white South Africans about the levels of alienation within black and coloured populations as well as sections of the Asian community. Identification with the Black Consciousness movement had created the ideological basis for common goals and common action, which made this alienation even more threatening.⁵¹ Theron had witnessed the hostility and militance of students at the University of the Western Cape who were no longer willing to accept the view that coloured people were ‘dependent’ on white ‘initiative, goodwill and willingness’ to determine their future.⁵²

It had also become increasingly evident to the educated and news-reading public that the economy was being adversely affected by apartheid policies. A general, worldwide decline in economic growth was aggravated in South Africa by limitations in the labour market – including a lack of mobility, skills and productivity – which many critics blamed on race policies. The shortage of skilled labour in turn increased labour power, unrest and economic disruption. As Giliomee shows in *The Afrikaners*, from an economic point of view, apartheid had become counter-productive and ‘obsolete’.⁵³

There were other reasons why apartheid was falling out of favour among former supporters, including the border wars, sports, cultural and economic sanctions. Although there is debate about the relative effects of these external pressures, as the 1970s drew to a close the apartheid system was clearly under strain. It was becoming increasingly evident that the idealists’ vision of prosperous, free, separate and equal nations living in harmony, was unattainable.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.594.

⁵² M.J. Olivier, ‘Differensiërende Wetgewing’, in Theron (ed.), *Die Kleurlingbevolking*, pp.223-224 (transl.).

⁵³ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.597-601. See also interview, Cilliers.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

The costs of apartheid in terms of human distress were also becoming impossible to deny and were highlighted in what Giliomee refers to as ‘border and struggle literature’, to which Theron was certainly exposed. She was an avid reader who kept up to date with topical literature and discussed new publications regularly with friends who were similarly aware, such as Rykie van Reenen and Marinus Wiechers. A number of influential works written in Afrikaans and in English contributed towards discrediting the apartheid system and those who supported it.⁵⁵ As an important example, Giliomee mentions Elsa Joubert’s *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*.

⁵⁵ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.594.

Theron was profoundly affected by *Poppie Nongena*. In an editorial published in 1979 she insists that all social workers (indeed all South Africans) must read this book so that they could not at some time in the future claim that ‘they did not know’ what was going on; all enfranchised South Africans must accept responsibility for the laws that had led to such injustice and must work together towards a better future. Theron is careful to avoid the term ‘blame’ and makes the point explicitly that action should not be driven by an ‘unhealthy sense of guilt’ but rather by ‘fearless acknowledgement of responsibility’. She is also careful to include ‘all’ [white] South Africans in the process.⁵⁶ In the preceding months there had been a fierce war of words played out in *Die Burger*, primarily between Johan Degenaar⁵⁷ and Sampie Terreblanche – sparked by *Poppie Nongena* – with which she clearly did not wish to engage. Degenaar had accused Afrikaner lawmakers of the ‘structural violence’ to which black people had been subjected. Terreblanche took issue with the concept of structural violence as well as the singling out of Afrikaners.⁵⁸ Theron, who was always ill-at-ease with this kind of philosophical debate, wanted to circumvent the argument and focus on what action must be taken, on a practical level.

By 1986 black influx control legislation was finally being phased out. In the less temperate style that she adopted at this stage of her life, Theron writes: ‘by scrapping the pass laws and other measures that existed in support of the grotesquely discriminatory apartheid system, the Government has removed a number of formidable obstacles to normalising society’. But far

⁵⁶ Erika Theron, editorial, ‘“Ek Kan Nie die Wet met My Hande Breek Nie”. Poppie Nongena’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 15, 1 (March 1979), pp.3-4 (transl.). See also, *Rapport*, 18 September 1983, leading article ‘Poppie: Emosies en Nugterheid’, by Williem de Klerk, reproduced in *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 19, 4 (October 1983), ‘Notes and News’, pp.260-261.

⁵⁷ Professor J.J. Degenaar, formerly Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, who, *i.a.*, wrote a number of works on morality and justice and in particular, the political philosophy of N.P. van Wyk Louw.

⁵⁸ See J.J. Degenaar, *Voortbestaan in Geregtheid: Opstelle Oor die Politieke Rol van die Afrikaner* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1980), pp.65-92, in which the correspondence in *Die Burger* is reproduced. A number of other individuals entered the exchange which *Die Burger* finally terminated after six weeks.

greater challenges lay ahead, she said, including the future of Group Areas.⁵⁹ Like a terrier, she would not let go of this issue.

⁵⁹ Erika Theron, editorial, 'Hamba Dompas', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 22, 3 (August 1986), p.127.

In this respect, Theron set herself apart from the broad drift of some Afrikaner intellectuals towards a *verligte* pose with little substance. Giliomee says that the concepts of ‘survival in justice’ and ‘loyal resistance’ originating in the work of N.P.van Wyk Louw, had become ‘common coin’ among Afrikaner intelligentsia during the 1970s. However, he says that they were often ‘used (and abused) to propagate nationalist unity or hail reforms that only marginally altered the apartheid structures’.⁶⁰ This comfortable, tepid version of *verligtheid* was criticised by the opposition press. In a leading article in *The Argus* it was observed that it had become so ‘fashionable’ for Afrikaner academics to define themselves as *verligtes* that the term had lost its meaning. Two prominent progressive academics (Degenaar and André du Toit) even challenged such academics to define themselves by publicly ‘proclaiming opposition to such pillars of apartheid as the Group Areas Act’ in order to distinguish the ‘true reformists from the masqueraders’.⁶¹ By these criteria, Theron had become a true reformist and was not simply reading the signs of inevitable change and positioning herself strategically. It had not been a sudden revelation, despite the claim that she had ‘seen the light’ in the course of her work on the commission. It was a gradual process of adaptation involving self examination and debate with trusted friends over a long period. Letters written to Marinus Wiechers between 1981 and 1986, for example, contain numerous clippings from newspapers about the political situation and comments revealing her internal struggles, her uncertainties and changing views.⁶²

⁶⁰ Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.584.

⁶¹ *The Argus*, 16 July 1982, ‘Verligte Head Count’.

⁶² Documents in possession of the writer.

Theron's campaigns did not come without personal cost. A section of the establishment of which she was so integral a part, was not comfortable with the vocal critic who emerged from the experience of the Theron Commission. As an example of how this manifested itself, according to some newspaper reports, an attempt was made to oust her from the council of the University of Stellenbosch. Theron had been a member of the council since 1974.⁶³ In 1978, when her term of office expired, under usual circumstances she (and the other two sitting convocation members) would have expected to be re-elected routinely. However, according to the *Weekend Argus*, Theron had alienated NP leaders and was regarded in some quarters as being 'too liberal'.⁶⁴ During the opening ceremony of the university, Minister Hennie Smit delivered a speech in which he warned students against trying to 'get into the newspaper headlines' to effect change in race relations. This was widely seen as a comment on Theron,⁶⁵ whose clashes with Smit and criticism of government policy, had undoubtedly rankled. In advance of the elections an NP Member of Parliament from Durbanville, Eugene Louw, launched an aggressive campaign to try to secure a seat for himself on the council, using tactics that were previously 'unheard of'.⁶⁶ This was interpreted by some commentators as a calculated attempt to remove Theron.

In the event, Theron steadfastly declined to comment on the rumours surrounding the election⁶⁷ and retained her seat.⁶⁸ The evidence is insufficient to prove that there was in fact an attempted coup. However, the incident does indicate the extent to which Theron's one-time image as an NP insider had been eroded. It also shows how the opposition press was using Theron's name to imply or to create growing division in Afrikaner ranks.

⁶³ M.J. de Vries, rector of the University of Stellenbosch, 'Erika Theron: A Tribute', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 26, 3 (1990), p.218.

⁶⁴ *Weekend Argus*, 18 February 1978, 'Matie Move to Oust Theron'.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Sunday Times*, 19 February 1978, 'Nats Plan a Matie Shut-Out for the Verlig Erika', by Fleur de Villiers.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *The Argus*, 25 February 1978, 'Erika Theron Wins Seat on Matie Council'.

Theron's alienation from the party hierarchy was aggravated by the fact that she was so frequently quoted and published by the English-language press. She appeared to be consorting with the 'enemy', although this was almost certainly not deliberate on her part. A note pencilled in her hand on a draft article about District Six, reads: 'Rykie, I can't help it if it is only the English papers in the Cape that contact me!'⁶⁹ It is likely that Rykie van Reenen was being asked to read and comment on Theron's articles written in English and may have enquired why she was not publishing in the Afrikaans-language press.

⁶⁹ Unisa: 72, 56/4, draft article, undated (transl.). In *Sonder Hoed* Theron says that Afrikaans-language papers in the Transvaal may have been prepared to publish her comments and articles, but since these issues primarily affected the Boland, she wanted exposure in the Western Cape. See Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.79.

As a result of Theron's increasingly strident criticism of government policy, towards the end of 1981 the Stellenbosch Branch of the NP sent her a letter of censure. They were very unhappy that she, as a member of the branch, had continued to make comments critical of the NP government, and had seen fit to make these statements to a 'hostile press' instead of channelling concerns through the appropriate branch machinery.⁷⁰ She acknowledged the letter without comment, but signed herself ironically '*Met Nasionale groete*'.⁷¹ She says in her memoirs that she later heard that the idea of the letter had its origins in cabinet circles and that it was intended that she should be 'given a fright'.⁷² Her comment is typically on the offensive – Oh yeah? ('*O ja?*').⁷³ Theron invariably regarded threats as challenges. As she had said previously, she had Verwoerd's 'example and inspiration' from the poor white struggle. He did not back down.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Unisa: 72, 56/1, letter, Branch Chairman, National Party, Stellenbosch Central to Erika Theron, 16 November 1981 (transl.).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, letter, Erika Theron to Branch Chairman, National Party, Stellenbosch Central, 1 December 1981, signed 'With Nationalist regards' (transl.).

⁷² Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.82 (transl.).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Die Burger*, 26 April 1977, column 'Van Alle Kante', 'Dr. Theron Gee Haar Credo', by Maureen Joubert (transl.)

Theron's clashes with the NP hierarchy did take their toll. In a letter to Marinus Wiechers, written in 1982, she says that at times she feels tempted to resign from both the party and the DRC. But, she says humorously, both would probably ask her whether she was in fact a member.⁷⁵ She was even approached, unofficially, to stand together with Di Bishop (her former student), as Progressive Party candidate for the President's Council. She says to Wiechers that she 'naturally declined'.⁷⁶ In the manner in which she says this, it is clear that she would not have considered joining the Progressives, or certainly not at that stage. When she did decide to quit the NP, she did so quietly and without publicity in 1986. Having become 'totally disenchanted' she simply stopped paying her subscriptions.⁷⁷ It was almost certainly with a sense of loss. Theron's loyalties ran deep, and severing her ties with the NP would not have been done lightly.

One of the most dramatic examples of the fall-out from Theron's campaign for coloured rights was the breach between Theron and Prime Minister P.W. Botha. Theron had been associated with Botha over many years through her service on various statutory bodies and committees and they had formed a respectful and friendly relationship. Among other things, he had been Minister of Coloured Affairs and Minister of Community Development between 1961 and 1966. Theron says he was an outstanding leader in this capacity, never absent from meetings, always well prepared and informed. He was evidently very firm – some of his senior officials did not have an easy time of it, according to Theron. Yet, she says, she always understood that she did not have to agree with him on every point. 'Even friends can disagree with one another – Nationalists can also disagree in public.'⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Document in possession of author: letter, Erika Theron to Marinus Wiechers, 14 September 1982.

⁷⁶ *Ibid* (transl.).

⁷⁷ *Weekend Argus*, 28 June 1986, column 'Weekend Focus', 'Too Little, Too Late, Says Erika Theron', by Dale Lautenbach.

⁷⁸ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.76-77 (transl.).

Shortly after the report of the Theron Commission was tabled, however, Theron found that there were limits to Botha's tolerance of dissent. (In *Sonder Hoed* Theron misplaces the following events.⁷⁹) In a speech at Prieska in October 1976, Botha reproached Theron for critical comment which had been picked up by the press. While expressing high regard for her, he requested her to refrain from participating in the 'unfriendly remarks' being made about the government. Speeches such as hers were 'unhelpful'.⁸⁰ Theron immediately wrote an apologetic letter, claiming that her comments had been taken out of context. She expressed appreciation for the fact that he had been content to deliver only a 'fatherly admonition'. According to her they belonged to a 'mutual admiration society' and she would have been devastated had he seriously rebuked her. She goes on to say to him that she has been inundated with 'requests from English organisations – even the Black Sash!' to address them. However she is refusing all such invitations and is talking only to organisations such as 'the *Rapportryers*, where she can speak as a Nationalist to fellow Nationalists'.⁸¹

The letter is friendly and humorous. It is also unusually contrite and ingratiating in tone – but Theron does have a message to convey. In the same letter she mentions that at gatherings of Nationalists she has gained the impression that she is not alone in raising questions about the status quo – that there are others who think as she does but who are simply not expressing their views aloud. Finally she writes: 'Mr. Botha, it is our kind of Nationalist that you must nurture and dare not ignore, even if we show signs of healthy, loyal resistance', since 'that kind of Nationalist is

⁷⁹ Theron mistakenly dates this clash with P.W. Botha to October 1979 and relates it to an article which she published at that time. The correspondence is, however, dated 1976. As a result she also mistakenly refers to Botha as the Prime Minister. At the time he was in fact Minister of Defence and his letter is signed accordingly. As further evidence, the incident is referred to in a newspaper article in 1981, in which it is placed correctly in October 1976 – See *Rapport*, 12 April 1981, 'My Mond Hou Ek Nie, Sê Dr. Erika', by Jan Breytenbach.

⁸⁰ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.78 (transl.).

⁸¹ Unisa, 72, 56/2, letter, Erika Theron to Mr. [P.W.] Botha, 18 October 1976. See also Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.78 (transl.).

going to be needed on the road ahead'. She closes with further apologies about the incident but significantly says that she is not sorry that she spoke out.⁸²

⁸² *Ibid.*, (transl.).

Botha's reply shows that he was still harbouring resentment about aspects of the report of the Theron Commission. Theron had clearly disappointed the NP by failing to bring out a bland report that had the trappings of a credible investigation but that could buy time for the government. In particular the commission had failed those who had entrusted Theron with the chairmanship, because it did not provide the positive publicity that had been expected – it did not present a picture of an administration with sincere intentions to meet coloured aspirations. In his letter Botha points out that he personally had taken a lead in ensuring that the report received preferential treatment.⁸³ This was true up to a point. Botha was the leader of the Cape NP at the time, which was more favourably inclined to the reform of policy concerning the coloured population than the northern branches.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Botha writes, he believes that the commission's report paints too negative a picture and does not give a true reflection of the progressive steps taken in the 1960s.⁸⁵ This was the point that Nic Treurnicht had made shortly after the release of the report, which Theron had refuted. As the responsible minister during part of the 1960s, Botha may have taken this personally. In his letter to Theron, Botha expresses the view that 'newspapers such the *Rand Daily Mail* and *The Cape Times* are having the totally wrong influence on relations between Coloureds and whites', and expresses concern that she is being 'misused to advance their base intentions towards the Afrikaner'.⁸⁶

The fact that Theron, in the face of this personal warning, continued to criticise and challenge government, is evidence of her personal courage and conviction. In fact, the resistance probably spurred her on. In 1981, provoked by the release of plans to declare Maitland Garden Village a 'white area', she wrote two highly critical articles about the 'cruel' Group Areas Act, which were

⁸³ Unisa: 72, 56/2, letter, P.W. Botha, Minister of Defence to Erika Theron, 22 October 1976. See also Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.78-79.

⁸⁴ Goldin, *Making Race*, p.180.

⁸⁵ Unisa: 72, 56/2, letter, P.W. Botha, Minister of Defence to Erika Theron, 22 October 1976. See also Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.78-79.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, (transl.).

published in *The Argus*.⁸⁷ The timing was extremely bad from the point of view of the NP as it took place on the eve of an election. She says in her memoirs that this was not deliberate but that there would never have been an opportune time. She had said what needed to be said.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *The Argus*, 1 April 1981, 'This Cruel Areas Act', by E. Theron; *ibid.*, 3 April 1981, 'Scrap This Act!', by E. Theron.

⁸⁸ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.79.

Two cabinet ministers immediately issued statements suggesting that she was contradicting and sabotaging the findings of the Theron Commission.⁸⁹ Botha responded with a tirade. At an election rally in Cape Town he told his audience that he was sick and tired of Theron's nonsense ('*ek is sat van haar nonsens*'). He added that she had not said a word while she was helping to implement these laws and that she had 'no right to carry on this way after her years of silence while she was receiving a cheque from the National government'.⁹⁰

It was an immoderate attack. Botha was already acquiring a reputation for finger-wagging irascibility and the delivery of this reprimand was a gift to the opposition press who used it to ridicule him personally as well as his party's pretensions to a reformist image.⁹¹ The fact that Theron continued to declare herself to be a 'Nationalist' at this time,⁹² aggravated the position. As *The Argus* put it: 'She is bred in the purple of Nationalist Afrikanerdom. She condemns a law upon which NP policy is founded. No wonder she makes the Prime Minister sick'.⁹³ Theron's attack on party policy was evidence of a growing crisis of conscience within NP ranks. Dissidence to the left was the last thing that the party needed at a time of mounting conservative pressure from the right.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.81; *The Argus*, 8 April 1981, 'Kotzé and Theron Clash on Areas Act'.

⁹⁰ *Beeld*, 10 April 1981, 'Premier Sat vir Erika Theron se Nonsens' (transl.); *The Argus*, 10 April 1981, 'PM Hits at Theron "Nonsense"'.

⁹¹ See for example *The Cape Times*, 9 April 1981, leading article, 'Party of Reform?'; *The Argus*, 11 April 1981, 'That is No Way to Treat a Lady Mr. B!', by Tos Wentzel; *The Cape Times*, 11 April 1981, leading article, 'Lip Service to a Right'; *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 April 1981, leading article, 'Attack on Theron Could Boomerang'.

⁹² *Hoofstad*, 11 April 1981, 'Dr. Erika Geroskam, Maar Bly Nasionalis' (transl.).

⁹³ *The Argus*, 10 April 1981, leading article, 'The PM is Unwell'.

⁹⁴ The right wing of the NP broke away to form the Conservative Party in 1982. See Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.606-607.

Various sections of the public also responded with outrage at the tone of Botha's speech.⁹⁵ Theron says that she was inundated with letters, telephone calls and even floral bouquets.⁹⁶ Among those expressing support was David Botha, author of *Die Opkoms van Ons Derde Stand* (see Chapter Five) who commented via an editorial in the journal of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church.⁹⁷ The fact that David Botha and Theron could hold common views is evidence of how significantly Theron's perspective had moved since 1960 when *Opkoms* was published.

Theron was outraged by P.W. Botha's reference to her salary from the government, which seemed to imply that her complicity had been bought. In the first place, she says, it was simply not true that she had 'remained silent' as a member of various boards and commissions. She had delivered speeches, written articles and spoken out whenever she thought that 'things were wrong'. Furthermore, she asserted, her integrity was worth more than the value of a government cheque.⁹⁸ This is discussed in a very indignant passage in her memoirs. After reading *Sonder Hoed of Handskoen* in 1983, P.W. Botha wrote to her. In the letter he says that he still feels injured that in the heat of an election struggle, and through the medium of the English press, she could have embarrassed him in that way. It had been a great disappointment to him. The letter contains no hint of apology and only justification, but it is signed 'with friendly regards'.⁹⁹ Theron's response suggests that she chose to regard the letter as an olive branch, and she wishes him well in the 'great and difficult task which still lies ahead'.¹⁰⁰ In some respects Botha's cynicism about Theron's change of heart, though crudely expressed, was understandable. Although Theron may have acted

⁹⁵ See for example *The Cape Times*, 11 April 1981, 'PM's Attack: Colleagues Back Theron'; *Sunday Times*, 12 April 1981, 'Academics in Uproar Over PM's Attack on Dr. Theron'; *The Argus*, 13 April 1981, 'Protest at Attack on Theron'.

⁹⁶ *Sonder Hoed*, p.80.

⁹⁷ *Die Transvaler*, 21 May 1981, 'Prof. Erika Kry Sterk Kerksteun'; Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, pp.80-81.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁹⁹ Unisa: 72, 56/2, letter, P.W. Botha, Prime Minister to Erika Theron, 16 May 1983 (transl.).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, letter Erika Theron to P.W. Botha, 25 May 1983 (transl.).

honestly and in accordance with her beliefs at the time, she had undeniably for many years played an active part in defending and implementing prevailing government policy.

Theron also refuted the accusations levelled by Ministers S.F. Kotzé and Hennie Smit, that she had contradicted the report of the Theron Commission. She pointed out that throughout the report the consequences of the Group Areas Act were shown to have been devastating. It was identified as the most bitterly resented piece of legislation among coloured people. In particular she referred to her sections of the report, on housing and social problems. However, she argued, compromises had needed to be made in the formulation of the recommendations.¹⁰¹ In a later interview she re-iterated that ‘it was too much to expect an individual member of a commission to adhere rigidly, in changed circumstances ... to a viewpoint expressed in 1976 by a commission of 18 members’.¹⁰²

The accusation of inconsistency was to plague her for many years. In her memoirs she says that she refuses to have the report of the Theron Commission hanging around her neck ‘like an albatross’ for the rest of her life. ‘People grow in their ideas and arrive at new insight’. She asks rhetorically whether members of the NP still subscribed to everything that Verwoerd had ever said.¹⁰³ It is one of those rare occasions on which she admits by implication that Verwoerd had been in error, at least in some respects. But her main point was clearly that all viewpoints are time bound. By inference, Verwoerd could not be held to account for policies which belonged to another era and which he had not lived to review himself.

¹⁰¹ *Weekend Argus*, 18 April 1981, ‘No, No – You’re Wrong’, by Tos Wentzel.

¹⁰² *The Argus*, 23 April 1981, ‘Minister Hasn’t Read Report Properly – Theron’.

¹⁰³ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p. 81 (transl.). See also *Rapport*, 12 April 1981, ‘Ag Nee, Kom Nou, Sê Dr. Erika’.

Although ‘reformist’ Theron could not ever be regarded as transformed in her political views in the way that a small number of white Afrikaners of the period (or indeed English-speakers) were – individuals such as Bram Fischer.¹⁰⁴ Arguably, her views on the race issue in South Africa were never fully formed or coherent. The political naïveté which friends and critics often alluded to remained evident to a degree. Her identification with the campaign for coloured rights was always a priority. To the extent that she concerned herself with the black population, she confined herself to the plight of those in the urban areas. She generally drew a veil over the reserves and homelands and said little other than that they must be aggressively developed.¹⁰⁵ She does not seem ever to have questioned their long-term viability, still less their essential legitimacy.

Theron also seems to have had little clarity on how she thought a post-apartheid South Africa should be structured. Writing to Marinus Wiechers in 1981, she says that Rykie van Reenen was encouraging her to think this through – to take her own arguments to their logical conclusion (*‘die lyn deurtrek’*). Van Reenen said that she must decide what she believed should replace the ‘wretched laws’ of the past. To Wiechers she says that her answer would be ‘nothing’. ‘Things were not as bad before the laws as they are now, were they?’¹⁰⁶ From this it would seem that there remained limits in her imagination of South Africa’s future at the time of writing in 1981.

Last Years

Theron did not live to see the Group Areas Act repealed. At the time of her death many of the recommendations of the Theron Commission which had been accepted in principle, had still not been put into practice.¹⁰⁷ Yet there had been progress. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages and

¹⁰⁴ Abraham (Bram) Fischer was a leading member of the South African Communist Party and active in the resistance movement in the 1960s. As an advocate, he led the defence at the ‘Rivonia trial’, but after going into hiding was captured and imprisoned in 1965.

¹⁰⁵ Erika Theron, editorial, ‘Black Poor Whites’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 17, 4 (October 1981), pp.216-217.

¹⁰⁶ Unisa, 72, 56/4, letter, Erika Theron to Marinus Wiechers, 7 December 1981 (transl.).

¹⁰⁷ *Vrye Weekblad*, 7 September 1990, ‘Hulde aan Erika Theron’ by Terreblanche, p.15;

Immorality Acts were a thing of the past. In Theron's view, the debate arising from the report of the commission had contributed to a change in attitudes and to increased opportunities for at least the 'upper echelon' of coloured society. Socially and economically the lower 40% were, however, no better off.¹⁰⁸

interview, Terreblanche.

¹⁰⁸ *Weekend Argus*, 28 June 1986, column 'Weekend Focus', 'Too Little, Too Late, Says Erika Theron' by Dale Lautenbach.

Politically, Theron did witness important developments, although she labelled them ‘too little, too late’.¹⁰⁹ The government kept its commitment of 1976 to institute an ‘authoritative investigation’ into political structures to accommodate coloured people.¹¹⁰ Rising internal and external pressure would have permitted no less. These investigations had a long and complicated passage but led ultimately to the institution of a new constitution in 1984 – a ‘woefully inadequate political response’¹¹¹ to widespread unrest across the country. This theoretically provided for ‘power sharing’ through a three-chamber legislature, each chamber separately elected in proportion to population size (fixed at 4:2:1) for the white, coloured and Asian populations. The three chambers, with their respective cabinets, were responsible for their ‘own’ (group) affairs, whereas bills affecting ‘general’ affairs, such as economic and defence policy, had to be passed by all chambers to become law. Government was headed by an elected Executive President with extensive powers. No provision was made for the black population in this system and in practice power remained in white hands.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ WPS/1976, Republic of South Africa, *Interim Memorandum. Provisional Comments by the Government on the Recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group.*

¹¹¹ Grundlingh, ‘Structures for Sociologists’ in Romm and Sarakinsky (eds), *Social Theory*, P.62.

¹¹² Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.603-604; B.J. Liebenberg, ‘Apartheid at the Crossroads’ in Liebenberg and Spies (eds), *South Africa*, pp.472-479.

Whether the creation of the tricameral parliamentary system can be attributed to the Theron Commission is a moot point. Many factors were pushing South Africa in the direction of change. Some members of the commission are, however, of the opinion that it did ‘set the ball rolling’¹¹³ and Theron herself believed that there were clear links.¹¹⁴ Even F.W. de Klerk stated in the first Erika Theron memorial lecture, that the *Report of the Theron Commission* had been a beacon on South Africa’s developmental path in general, and in particular for the coloured population.¹¹⁵ In an article in *Die Vaderland*, Aletta Greyling dubbed Theron the ‘mother’ of the new constitution.¹¹⁶ This was evidently meant as a compliment, but it is difficult to say whether or not Theron regarded it as such at the time. No evidence has come to light, for example, of how she might have voted in the referendum which preceded the constitutional change.

¹¹³ Interview, Du Toit; interview, Vosloo.

¹¹⁴ Theron, *Sonder Hoed*, p.67.

¹¹⁵ ‘The First Erika Theron Memorial Lecture delivered by State President F.W. de Klerk on the Occasion of an ACVV Banquet, Cape Town, 20 March 1991’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 27, 1 (1991), p.3 (transl.).

¹¹⁶ *Vaderland*, 7 September 1984, column ‘Oor Dit en Dat’, ‘Erika Theron is Moeder van die Nuwe Grondwet’, by Aletta Greyling (transl.).

A decade after the Theron Commission had submitted its report, in 1986, Marinus Wiechers wrote that the view that the commission had advocated such constitutional developments was ‘a vast over-simplification’ of its recommendation. The report had called for direct representation by the coloured people at all levels of government. ‘No mention whatsoever was made of separate voters’ rolls, the demarcation of spheres of interest or any of the other trappings’ of the tricameral system.¹¹⁷ By this time Theron, herself, was publicly critical of the system. In an interview she expressed the opinion that the (coloured) House of Representatives was an improvement on the old CRC, but said that it still fell short of her expectations. ‘Own affairs’ was ‘nonsense’ she said. ‘I had hoped that after 10 years we would have had a mixed parliament.’¹¹⁸ Four years later she re-iterated this point of view in another interview. She said that she was concerned that Prime Minister De Klerk continued to endorse the principle of ‘own affairs’ and that she was ‘not in favour of this’.¹¹⁹ If this is understood to mean that she rejected any notion of separate groups with separate interests within the common domain, she had travelled a remarkable road. However, she was almost certainly concerned only with the political dispensation for the three population groups represented in parliament.

At the time of this interview, early in 1990, she was 82 years of age and very frail. She had lived with chronic coronary disease for several years, having suffered a series of heart attacks in 1986.¹²⁰ Thereafter her ill health had forced her to alter her lifestyle. She could no longer travel abroad, for example. However, she continued to engage in life with vigour and enthusiasm. She talks, for example, of attending a performance of *Lohengrin* in Cape Town in 1990 and going for a walk in

¹¹⁷ Marinus Wiechers, ‘Ten Years Theron Report’ (*sic*), ‘Editor’s Page’, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 22, 2 (June 1986), pp.54-55.

¹¹⁸ *Weekend Argus*, 28 June 1986, column ‘Weekend Focus’, ‘Too Little, Too Late, Says Erika Theron’, by Dale Lautenbach.

¹¹⁹ Romi van der Merwe, ‘Dr. Erika Theron: Portret van ’n Vrou’, *Rooi Rose*, 31 January 1990, p.79 (transl.).

¹²⁰ *Die Burger*, 30 August 1990, ‘Dr. Erika Theron was ’n Vrou van die Daad’. In this article it is said only that she suffered a heart attack in Hermanus four years previously. However, in the interview with Romi van der Merwe, mention is made of ‘three heart attacks in 1986’. See Van der Merwe, ‘Dr. Erika Theron’, *Rooi Rose*, 31 January 1990, p.80.

Stellenbosch the following day, singing extracts from the opera aloud. (She paid for this outing with a spell of feeling 'unwell').¹²¹

¹²¹ Van der Merwe, 'Dr. Erika Theron', *Rooi Rose*, 31 January 1990, p. 80 (transl.).

Her interests were not confined to her own immediate environment. According to Wiechers, despite her frail condition, she continued to be an avid reader of newspapers and to take a lively interest in politics. Whereas she had regularly corresponded with him, increasingly they tended to discuss current affairs in telephone conversations.¹²² She remained incorrigibly provocative – a ‘*bakleier*’ as she put it.¹²³ She retained the nominal position of editor-in-chief of the journal *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, and regularly published short (often sharp) comments on the government’s performance.¹²⁴ She still engaged in debate about local Stellenbosch affairs as is well illustrated in a letter to *Die Burger*, written in 1989. Apparently residents of the town had been complaining about the noise emanating from one of the men’s hostels, ‘Wilgenhof’. Theron writes that she has been living opposite this hostel for over 40 years and that it has been a privilege to share the triumphs and trials (*‘lief en leed’*) of her ‘boys’. ‘It keeps one young’. According to her, those who could not endure the proximity of lively young people should ‘move to a quieter neighbourhood – or to a retirement village’.¹²⁵

Erika Theron died on 29 August 1990. She was cremated and her remains buried, next to her sister Daisy, in the Tulbagh cemetery. According to Gwen Fagan ‘it was a quiet family occasion’.¹²⁶ In Theron’s personal life there remained unfinished business. She had not succeeded in that ‘last and most difficult job’ in her life, that of helping Annette Muller to achieve long-term sobriety.¹²⁷ Following Theron’s death, after a year or two of stability, Muller died of a seemingly

¹²² Interview, Wiechers.

¹²³ Van der Merwe, ‘Dr. Erika Theron’, *Rooi Rose*, 31 January 1990, p.79.

¹²⁴ See for example, Erika Theron, ‘Druppelsgewyse?’, editorial, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 23, 4 (October 1987), p.226; *ibid.*, ‘What is in a Name?’, p.227.

¹²⁵ *Die Burger*, 19 April 1989, letters to the editor, ‘E.T.’, ‘Wilgenhoffers Hou Jonk’ (transl.). Theron sent a copy of this item to Marinus Wiechers in a letter dated 20 April 1989. (Document in possession of author.)

¹²⁶ Electronic mail, Dr. Gwen Fagan to Judith Tayler, 9 November 2010.

¹²⁷ Document in possession of author: letter Erika Theron to Marinus Wiechers, 16 February 1982 (transl.).

alcohol-related accident in her own home.¹²⁸ In her public life, too, Theron had not succeeded in all her endeavours to her own satisfaction. However, she could look back on a life of unremitting endeavour and dedicated service. As she had asked of others, she had tried to make a difference.

¹²⁸ Interview, Linie Leath, long-serving domestic worker of both Theron.

CONCLUSION

Jane Raphaely, popular social commentator and editor of *Femina* magazine, wrote in 1990 that ‘when the history of South African women is eventually written one of the most interesting chapters will be devoted to Dr. Erika Theron’.¹ This thesis has sought to record and to interpret a significant part of that history – the history of Theron’s public life – within the context of a cardinal period in South African history.

Raphaely’s article was written in the last year of Theron’s life, at which time she had been in the public eye for over a decade as the champion of coloured rights. She had gained national recognition, and attracted considerable controversy, first as chairman of the Theron Commission and thereafter as government critic. Raphaely focuses on this aspect. She identifies Theron as ‘one of a kind’, ‘the only woman in a line of great Afrikaner rebels which stretches from Adam Tas to Beyers Naudé via Bram Fischer’.² The history of Theron’s public life encompasses a great deal more, however, and is also more complex. My study revealed that the commission was merely the culmination of a lifetime of dedicated service and activism in which she had committed her energies to creating order and progress, to making a difference in society, according to her convictions. She took part in (and frequently led) a wide variety of initiatives in civic life, and in the process recorded a number of unique achievements.

Born in the aftermath of the devastating Anglo-Boer War to an ardently Afrikaner nationalist family, Theron developed from childhood many of the characteristics that shaped her life: rebelliousness, compassion for the downtrodden, pride in her identity as an Afrikaner, deep loyalty to her people and a will to help build a strong nation that could withstand internal and external threats. Her years of study in Germany reinforced her world view and she brought back to South

¹ Raphaely, ‘Erika Theron’, *Femina* (March 1990), p.76.

² *Ibid.* This is clearly an exaggeration.

Africa a crusading nationalist spirit. The history of her public career is best understood against this background.

Theron challenged many social expectations and stereotypes of her time. She did not marry and did not have children. She was not greatly interested in homemaking.³ With few domestic responsibilities, she had greater freedom than the majority of women to pursue her many interests and a diverse and demanding public career. Having graduate education and training in social sciences, it was the challenges of society rather than the those of hearth and home which drove her. This was rare among Afrikaner women of her generation.

Theron ignored the many constraints which customarily prescribed the roles available to women of her time and placed limits on their advancement. She had a self-belief instilled in her during childhood and was not intimidated by rank, office or the magnitude of the task. She did not believe that gender discrimination, and specifically male superiority, should go unquestioned. She felt competent and entitled to seek whatever position she set her mind to, without reference to whether or not it was traditionally reserved for men. As a result of her confidence and her resolute attitude, she broke through gender barriers time and again. She said in her later years that she had ‘always moved in a man’s world’ and had not experienced discrimination ‘as an individual’ within that environment.⁴ This was not strictly accurate. At the University of Stellenbosch she had encountered resistance to her appointment to a professorship. However, once she had overcome that hurdle her demonstrated ability and strong personality evidently opened the way for her to set many new precedents in her professional life, including holding a seat in council at Stellenbosch and at the University of the Western Cape, where she also served as the first woman chancellor in South Africa.

³ Annette Muller wrote that one of the few ‘blank spots’ in Theron’s array of competencies was her ability in the kitchen. See Muller, ‘Erika Theron’, *Die Huisgenoot*, 4 June 1976, p.16.

⁴ Van der Merwe, ‘Dr. Erika Theron’, *Rooi Rose*, 31 January 1990, p.79.

Although not vocal on broader issues of women's rights or feminist theory, Theron said that she did not mind being known as a feminist, 'despite the term having become virtually a pejorative'. In practical ways, she was always prepared to 'break a lance' for the woman's cause.⁵ An example of this is her campaign against gender-based salary discrimination in academia. As in many areas of her life, her legacy lies less in what she said than in what she did. Her influence in advancing the potential of women in professional and public life, came from what she achieved as an individual. Theron showed the way as a role model. As lobbyist on behalf of her community's poor, as pioneering social worker, in the academic world, in local politics and administration, on numerous boards and committees, as chairman of an historic government commission, Theron carried out her responsibilities with authority, diligence and efficiency. She proved herself at least equal to her male peers, in her capacity to deliver on her commitments. She provided the example that challenged gender stereotyping, opened new pathways and provided inspiration for women, including some of the most traditional among them, her fellow Afrikaners.

⁵ *Ibid* (transl.).

Two related fields offering career opportunities for women, which Theron played a key role in developing, were those of professional welfare service and social work in South Africa. She played a pioneering role in the modernisation of welfare in the country – in persuading the state to recognise its responsibilities, in the encouragement of research, the training of professional practitioners, in progress towards efficient organisation and co-ordination. Initially she did so as assistant to Hendrik Verwoerd, to whom she gives all credit for placing welfare on a firm footing. But Verwoerd's ambitions had already carried him into national politics by the mid-1930s. I have argued moreover that his role in the poor white project was always, at least in part, self-serving. Theron, on the other hand, continued to work for the ideals that she believed she had shared with Verwoerd. Over decades she served on and frequently headed numerous committees, commissions and boards established to formulate and to reform policy related to the country's welfare structures, and to oversee implementation. She consulted and informed the social work community via the professional journal that she personally founded and edited. It was she who was in the vanguard of academics who established the independent academic discipline of social work in South Africa and played a leading role in the emergence of professionalised social work practice. Raising the standards of social work training was an ideal for which Theron worked continuously throughout her academic career. Her Department of Social Work at Stellenbosch produced trained social workers for the field, but also the next generation of dedicated social work educators. These social work academics, many of them women, carried her high standards and passion for the discipline into universities throughout the country. Her influence was formidable and she remains a legend in the history of social work in South Africa.

Theron's service as councillor and mayor of Stellenbosch, carries her trademarks of diligent effort and indeed of idealism. The chief redeeming feature of her terms of office was her dedication to the beautification of Stellenbosch and the preservation of its colonial cultural heritage. She had the advice and enthusiasm of fellow councillor, Frans Smuts, to encourage her. But it was in a large part due to her determination and gift for organisation that resources were mobilised in the cause. As a consequence of the efforts of Theron and like-minded citizens, unique features of the town were protected and historic buildings rescued and restored. This has remained a lasting and valuable legacy for Stellenbosch and for the country as a whole.

Theron's zeal and idealism also produced a legacy of a very different kind, however. Still in thrall to Verwoerd who argued that the identity and survival of the Afrikaner people depended on self-protection through separation of different 'population groups',⁶ Theron was a faithful servant of the apartheid project. In this study I have argued that Theron, in common with many Afrikaner intellectuals, was inspired by the vision of the region's future in which different 'nations' developed separately according to their own nature, co-existing in harmony. On this basis she was committed to the implementation of inflexible black influx control and to the separation of all population groups in most spheres of living.

⁶ See Hermann Giliomee, "Survival in Justice": An Afrikaner Debate over Apartheid', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36, 3 (July 1994), esp. p.535.

It is difficult to explain how the growing evidence of injustice and impracticability which she experienced at close hand, could have failed to undermine her commitment to a system which was so evidently flawed. The apparent suspension of independent, critical judgement of Theron seems best understood in terms of the overriding admiration, trust and loyalty which she had developed for Verwoerd. Theron's much-cited 'rebelliousness' was frequently counter-balanced by her loyalties. While Verwoerd lived, Theron supported, almost blindly, the policies which he espoused. She was also captive to her Western Cape socialisation. She had grown up with a compassionate but paternalistic view of the coloured population who shared her Boland experience, separated largely by custom and class. Within the idealised view of apartheid, the 'development' of the coloured community would be facilitated by removing them from unequal competition with the developed white community. The black population, on the other hand, were newcomers with no historical rights in the area in Theron's view, and represented a threat to the future of both the white and coloured communities. It is within this framework that her record in local government has been interpreted. It remains a fact that Theron was an active participant in processes which have left an intractable legacy of racial inequality, underdevelopment and tension.

Against this background, Theron's 'transformation' during the Theron Commission has been depicted as remarkable – as the event which gave her 'a place in history'.⁷ In this study it has been shown that Theron's conversion should be interpreted in the context of both her background and the broader processes at work in South Africa at the time. Of considerable significance was Verwoerd's death in 1966. Theron was no longer subject to the counter-forces of her loyalty to him, and what Rykie van Reenen claims, were rising doubts. After 1966 she was finally free to emerge from the grip of Verwoerd's influence. At the same time, from the late 1960s internal and external pressures were making it increasingly difficult for nationalists to avoid re-evaluation in South Africa – the country was on the brink of having to 'adapt or die'.⁸ Theron was not immune to these forces for change.

⁷ Raphaely, 'Erika Theron', *Femina* (March 1990), p.76.

⁸ Quoted with sources in Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.587.

What is also questioned in this study is the perception that there was a sudden, total and ‘dramatic turnabout’ in Theron’s political views, in the nature of a ‘Damascene’ experience⁹ – an impression which she helped to propagate. The findings of the Theron Commission were less than radical. Ten years after the report of the commission appeared, Theron herself assessed it as ‘really moderate’ and ‘not strong enough’. She blamed this on her attempts to ‘accommodate that minority group who had close links with Vorster’.¹⁰ However the record shows otherwise. Only gradually did she change her own views on particular features of the apartheid system as they affected the coloured population. It took a number of years before she transferred this insight to the status of the black population. In 1973 she was only beginning a personal journey which continued for the remainder of her life.

Nevertheless, the Theron Commission was a watershed in her public life – the event which caused her to interrogate deeply entrenched loyalties and convictions. That she continued to ponder and revise her views, to acknowledge errors of judgement, even ‘to accept at least some of the blame’¹¹ and to engage the public in this process was an act of courage. Her persistent demands for reform, using all means at her disposal in the years after the commission had completed its work, unquestionably helped to keep alive crucial debates on future race relations in the country. This was not without personal cost to Theron who was publicly criticised and ostracised by high-ranking members of the NP, the party which she had supported loyally for most of her life. It alienated her from a section of the university which she had served for over 50 years. It compromised some of her ‘oldest and deepest friendships’.¹²

⁹ Raphaely, ‘Erika Theron’, *Femina* (March 1990), p.77.

¹⁰ *Weekend Argus*, 28 June 1986, ‘Too Little Too Late, Says Erika Theron’, by Dale Lautenbach.

¹¹ Raphaely, ‘Erika Theron’, *Femina* (March 1990), p.76.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.76

At the same time, it brought deserved recognition and support from other quarters. On the occasion of the conferment of her honorary doctorate at the University of the Western Cape in 1984, Richard van der Ross said of her that ‘in the life history of our Chancellor, I see hope for the future of South Africa and all its people’.¹³ Theron had shown the country that even where beliefs and attitudes had seemed to be indelibly etched, change was possible. At the time of her death, obituaries and articles were published in most of the leading newspapers, recalling her achievements.¹⁴ By 1990, even her critics had begun to follow where she had led. According to *Die Burger*, the Theron Commission was ‘among the decisive events which had brought the end of apartheid a step nearer’.¹⁵ This claim is certainly extravagant. However it cannot be denied that the commission contributed to the rising pressure for change within South Africa. Theron, the ‘veteran of struggles’,¹⁶ had then set herself the task of maintaining the momentum. As she had so often demanded of her students and the wider public, she did not stand by as an observer. She kept her shoulder to the wheel and added her endeavours to the many that were steering South Africa away from its apartheid past and towards a future based on inclusive democracy.

¹³ Quoted in J.B. du Toit, ‘Prof. Erika Theron (17 Mei 1907-30 Aug. 1990)’, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 31, 1 (March 1991), p.66.

¹⁴ See for example, *The Argus*, 30 August 1990, ‘Erika Theron, a Pioneer’; *The Argus*, 30 August 1990, ‘Fighter for Change. Erika Theron Dies’, by Don Holliday; *Beeld*, 3 September 1990, ‘Diens vir Prof. Erika’; *Die Burger*, 31 August 1990, ‘Die Nalatenskap van Prof. Erika Theron’; *Business Day*, 31 August 1990, ‘E. Theron’, *The Cape Times*, 31 August 1990, ‘Erica (sic) Theron’; *The Citizen*, 31 August 1990, ‘Prof. Erika Dies Aged 83’.

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11. TELEVISION

South African Broadcasting Corporation Television (SABCTV), *Profiel (Erika Theron)*, broadcast on 22 February 1984. Video recording in possession of writer.

12. RECORDED CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN THERON AND RYKIE VAN REENEN

Two cassettes, c.1981-1982, in possession of researcher, donated by Rykie van Reenen.