

## OTHER VOICES

# It's all in the name

By Fred Bridgland

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**T**en years after the last apartheid government stepped down, the dramatic changes that have taken place in South Africa are nowhere more apparent than in the country's schools.

If JG Strijdom, South Africa's hardline white racist prime minister from 1954 to 1958, came back from the dead now and saw Nkosana Mlambo saunter into Höerskool JG Strijdom [JG Strijdom High School] he might choke on the memory of when he ordered the trial for treason of a certain 39-year-old black hothead, Nelson Mandela.

Not only does 16-year-old Mlambo, from Soweto, have no idea who Strijdom was – “He was, like, some guy, uhm, who was, uhm, important” – but it was certainly not part of Strijdom's vision to have a non-racial school, and especially not one named after him.

When the “slegs blankes” [whites only] school in South Hills, an industrial suburb in southern Johannesburg, opened its doors in 1955, Strijdom said he hoped the school would inspire future generations of white leaders.

Strijdom, a dour man, laid down much of the infrastructure of apartheid. He spoke of the “swart gevaar” [black threat], removed remaining enfranchised mixed-race “coloureds” from the voting roll and arrested Mandela and 156 others who then faced a lengthy treason trial.

Never in Strijdom's worst nightmare would he have imagined that 825 out of Höerskool JG Strijdom's 970 pupils would one day be black. Nor would he have dreamed that the black and white pupils would be allowed to vote to change the school's name.

Headmistress Anita Maritz, an Afrikaner like Strijdom, said her staff and pupils decided last year that a name change was overdue.

“We realised the learners couldn't take pride in a school whose name was symbolic of apartheid,” she said.

A snap quiz among both black and white pupils, in their traditional scarlet and grey uniforms, revealed that it was not only Mlambo who had no idea who Strijdom was. One boy thought his school was named after a Johannesburg hospital, which indeed also bears the name of the former prime minister.

A lot has changed since Maritz joined the all-white Afrikaans language school in 1986 as

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a junior English teacher. Then, she said, most of the parents supported either the ruling white supremacist National Party under President PW Botha or the neo-Nazi Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) led by the flamboyant Eugene Terre Blanche, currently in prison after beating a black farm worker to death.

Now most of the parents support the black-dominated African National Congress – a banned organisation when Höerskool JG Strijdom opened.

Maritz, one of many Afrikaners who has adjusted to the transformation from white domination to black majority rule with philosophical graciousness, said that in 1994, when the ANC won the first all-race election, staff at the staunchly conservative institution realised that they had to re-invent their school.

First, the language policy was adjusted to make it a so-called “parallel medium” school, with teaching in a mixture of Afrikaans and English – even though the new black students came mainly from Soweto, where the predominant languages are Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Tswana and five other African tongues.

“As time went on, there was a dramatic, radical influx of black pupils,” said Maritz. “Staff and pupils were quite mature about the situation. It was the law and we had to accept the challenge. We knew, though, that JG Strijdom High School would never be quiet again.”

The headmistress asserted that there had been no major racial clashes. “When boys fought, as they do everywhere, it was not over racial issues,” she said. “We never had a situation, as in some other schools, where classes had to be stopped.”

However, there was one incident at the school when black pupils staged a *toyitoyi* [a knee-raising, foot-stomping ANC revolutionary dance] in protest against one of their teachers. “They wanted this teacher, who was very strict, removed,” said Maritz. “The then headmaster intervened. He listened to their grievances and explained that the pupils and the teacher had to find common ground. The incident reinforced our realisation that we had to change our approach and we had to sensitise our staff to the conditions of black pupils,” she added.

“That sensitisation continued when staff, pupils and parents were confronted with polling slips showing the proposed new names for their school – Bateleur [a particularly beautiful southern African eagle], Diversity and Liberty. Diversity, the very concept that Strijdom opposed, won and the school will be renamed at the beginning of the next academic year in eight months’ time.

As part of the transformation process, Maritz invited the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, a prominent non-governmental organisation, to set up a permanent research project at the school. This has now become a pilot for similar schemes at other schools.

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Under three researchers (an African, a white English speaker and a coloured Afrikaans speaker), a council of 15 pupils (white, coloured, African, Indian, and of both sexes) meets regularly to thrash out issues of identity, citizenship and reconciliation.

“They ask difficult questions and are grappling with big issues, said Brandeis Green, one of the researchers. “They particularly want to know what makes someone a racist.”

Strijdom is no longer around to answer that question. He died almost half a century ago.

In a country that was dominated by Afrikaans, English and Scottish names – there are suburbs in Johannesburg called Carse of Gowrie and Glen Esk – the ruling ANC has acted with remarkable restraint in changing names.

Although South Africa's “Whites Only” signs rapidly disappeared from toilets, park benches and post office entrances long ago, much of the nation still bears signs honouring people or events despised by the black majority.

Some of the offensive old names did go quickly, however, particularly Kafferrivier, a village whose name literally meant Nigger River.

Some smaller town names have also been changed – Pietersburg, named after a Voortrekker general in the Boer war, is now Polokwane – while the Eastern Transvaal province, home of the magnificent Kruger Park, has been given the Shangaan name Mpumalanga, which means “land of the rising sun”.

And if the council of Durban – named after a 19th-century British governor, Benjamin D'Urban – has its way, the Indian Ocean city will soon have a spanking new, but as yet undecided, Zulu name.

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