

# Review Essay

## Living in cloud cuckooland: politics and cricket in white South Africa

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Bruce Murray and Christopher Merrett (2004) *Caught Behind: race and politics in Springbok cricket*. Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg: Wits University Press and University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Rodney Hartman (2004) *Ali, the Life of Ali Bacher*. Johannesburg: Viking.

One of the things which struck me forcibly when I read accounts of the exploits of white Springbok cricket and cricketers was how little there was about politics in these narratives. I did not of course expect much reflecting issues of black and white politics, but I did expect something about the tensions *within* the white establishment cricket, the internal politics, if you like, including the struggles of white working class players to make it into the top leagues; of the battles by Afrikaans-speakers and Jewish players for proper recognition in the face of the dominant upper-class English gentiles who ruled the cricket roost for so many decades. Mike Marqusee's book, *Anyone But England* (1994), for example, brilliantly captures the racism, elitism and classicism which pervades English cricket. A few passing references to these kinds of issues are made in South African cricket literature. In a co-authored book with his brother Graeme, Peter Pollock reflected enthusiastically on the increasing fondness of Afrikaners for the game of cricket, predicting that 'such is his temperament and personality that in years to come he will become an even more faithful patron than his less volatile English counterpart' (1968:154).

While little was ever written about intra-white politics in cricket, a few white cricketers did make comments on black cricket. Thus, for example,

Dudley Nourse, captain of the white Springbok team, wrote a message of support in the brochure celebrating the Sixth Inter-Provincial Tournament organised by the South African Indian Cricket Union (SAICU) in 1951. In extolling the merits of Indian test cricketers, he only mentioned those who played for England, such as Ranjitsinji and Duleepsinji, the ultimate brown Englishmen, with ‘impeccable social credentials and total devotion to English institutions, all the way from college to Crown’. Unlike other Indians, when whites watched their exploits ‘wile became guile, trickery became magic, weakness became suppleness, effeminacy was transformed into grace’ (Appudurai 1995:31). Nourse failed to comment on the contradiction that Indian and other black South Africans could not play for the Springboks as the imagined South African nation was all-white (Desai et al 2003:12).

But there is one exception to this. In a book published in 1961, a year after Sharpeville, and in the year that South Africa became a republic and left the Commonwealth, Springbok wicketkeeper-batsman John Waite, while slamming anti-apartheid activists like the Rev David Sheppard for refusing to play against white cricketers in the 1960 to tour to England, makes this observation:

I for one believe that it would be a wonderful thing, provided the Africans, Indians and Coloureds could satisfy the whites that they are ready. I believe this because I believe South Africa can never be happy or really prosperous until there is abiding friendship between all its many races and because I believe that sport can bring such friendship in a way and to a degree that no other social activity can achieve. And inter-racial friendship alone can provide a successful foundation for a multi-racial society. (1961:48)

The rather paternalistic tone apart, this is still a remarkable commentary about race, sport and society in a South Africa where the violent policing of racial boundaries was dramatically being stepped up.

In researching *Blacks and Whites*, Desai et al concluded that there was little reason to doubt that the real history of racism and cowardice among white cricket administrators and cricketers was still to be written. On the very few occasions when white cricketers expressed their views on race and politics in cricket ‘it only reinforced how ignorant, deliberately or otherwise, they were of the conditions under which their “fellow” Black cricketers played’ (Desai et al 2003:12).

Blacks appear in white cricket annals as waiters, groundstaff and political

trouble-makers. Louis Duffus, covering white schools cricket, refers to ‘the native, Jim Fish...pulling up the last strip of matting’ (Nauright 1997:35). Renowned cricket commentator Jack Fingleton, witnessing the Timeless Test at Kingsmead between England and South Africa in 1939, which was stopped after nine days because the ship was departing to England, observed that ‘at 3.15pm, an Indian came out with a tray of cool drinks’ (Nauright 1997:35). Sometimes blacks got to bowl to whites. In the 1930s Davidson Chellan bowled to white pupils at Michaelhouse where his father was a labourer. Later he was to find fame as ‘one of the most stylish batsmen produced in the history of black cricket’ (Reddy 1999:24). Toplan Parsuramen, the great Natal spinner whose father cut the turf at Kingsmead, drawn by two oxen, remembers earning a few quid bowling to Denis V Dyer and other white Natal cricketers who came to practice at the Old Fort Road nets. They also fielded for white players. After practice, Parsuramen and his friends would stand outside the dressing rooms waiting to be tipped. It was during this time that Parsuramen developed the ‘wrong “un”’. Often he would knock off the stumps of white batsmen to the general laughter of the batsman’s teammates (interview, Parsuramen, in Desai et al 2003).

In *Blacks and Whites*, Desai et al try to avoid the bland aggregations of the racial categories that were imposed upon all South Africans and explore deeper divisions and tensions than those between whites and blacks, or indeed between Indians and coloured, Indians and Africans. They show not just how, for much of the first half of the twentieth century, Indian, African, Coloured and Malay cricket was also played separately, but that, for example, within the rubric of ‘Indian’ there was a constant definition and re-definition of the position of Coloureds and Malays. Sometimes they were in and at other times they were out. The notion of ‘Indian’ itself was rent with its own divisions, some home-grown and some imported from the ‘motherland’. There were the usual differences of place, but also teams based on religious injunctions and class and caste affinities. Clubs like Kismet, Bharat and Crescents had clear religious underpinnings. Schools were mainly the preserve of the emerging educated elite and Young Tailors and Railways reflected occupation with caste-like underpinnings (Desai et al 2003:6).

Academic studies into the relationship between sport, politics and society in South Africa is relatively new. Archer and Bouillion (1982), Booth (1998), Nauright (1997), and Gemmel (2003) are among the major exceptions. On cricket specifically, Andre Odendaal’s 1977 edited collection

written in the season when the short-lived experiment at ‘normal cricket’ was played, examines issues of race and politics in South African cricket. The slew of recent books, dealing especially with the ‘lost’ history of black cricket was sparked, as culture and sports historian Goolam Vahed (2005) correctly points out, by the United Cricket Board’s adoption in 1999 of a Transformation Charter which, among things, called for the history of black cricket to be recorded. The books in this series which have already been published include Mohamed Allie’s history of the Western Province Cricket Board (2001), Aslam Khota’s book on non-racial cricket in the Transvaal (2003), and Desai et al’s (2003) book on black cricket in KwaZulu-Natal in the period 1880-2002. Then there is Andre Odendaal’s beautifully produced 2003 (coffee-table) book entitled *The Story of an African Game – black cricketers and the unmasking of one of cricket’s greatest myths, South Africa, 1850-2003*. These books on black or non-racial cricket, though different in style and approach, do attempt to locate cricket in South Africa within a historical and (changing) political context.

In *Blacks and Whites* we made the point that ‘it is indicative of the poverty of white cricket writing in South Africa that the game is written exempt from any detailed historical and political context’ (Desai et al 2003: 12). *Caught Behind* by eminent Wits historian Bruce Murray and UKZN’s Christopher Merrett, a committed player, umpire and administrator in non-racial cricket in the Pietermaritzburg area for decades, tries to address this yawning gap. In a comment in their Preface, they refer directly to this observation by Desai et al and suggest that their book ‘seeks to provide such a “historical and political context” for the racially exclusive teams – the Springboks – that represented South Africa in international Test match cricket between 1888/89 and 1969/70’ (2005:viii).

The book examines cricket in the context of South African politics and society, from its location within the British imperial project, through segregation and apartheid. The Springboks played 172 test matches against just three ‘white’ cricketing nations, Australia, New Zealand, and of course the ‘mother’ country, England, between 1888/89 and 1969/70. Much of the first part of the book deals with little known episodes in black-white politics, such as the story of CB Llewellyn, the only player of colour to represent the Springboks in this time (15 tests), and ‘Krom’ Hendricks the ‘formidable Coloured’ fast bowler whose nomination for the first South African team to tour England in 1894 was vetoed by Cecil Rhodes, Cape Prime Minister and gold baron, on grounds of his race. Later, over breakfast

in Oxford in 1895 Rhodes is reputed to have told England's Pelham Warner: 'they wanted me to send a black fellow called Hendricks to England...but I would not have it' (Murray and Merrett 2004:16).

*Caught Behind* has many fascinating new vignettes which are revealing for what they say about race and politics in Springbok cricket. We read about how in a game between a Malay XI and a European XI in the inter-war period, Rosslyn Club's Malay spinner Taliep Salie once took ten wickets in an innings, including those of three Springboks (Dave Nourse, Xenophon Balaskas and AW Palm), and how he turned down an invitation to play club cricket in England 'out of fear that he would not find mosques close to cricket grounds' (2004:41). While some would be aware that Frank Worrell almost played in apartheid South Africa in 1959 as part of an all-black West Indian team, how many are aware that had it not been for the Anglo-Boer War the Springboks would have played the West Indies at Lords in 1900! Many observers may have been surprised – given its strong anti-apartheid stance – that India proposed South Africa's re-admission to test cricket in 1991 and hosted the South Africans in a historic match at Calcutta's giant Eden Garden's stadium in November that year, but not many will know that the then newly formed Board of Control for Cricket in India invited the South African Cricket Association to become the very first Test team to tour the sub-continent in 1928! The BCCI was chaired at the time by an Englishman RE Grant-Govan (which arguably explains things) but SACA turned down the invitation on the grounds of their forthcoming 1931/32 tour to Australia. As Murray and Merrett point out 'clearly relations with India were not a high priority among the SACA hierarchy' (2004:38).

The book offers a detailed account of the country's growing isolation within world cricket, in which the now infamous 'Basil D'Oliveira Affair' of 1968 and accounts of subsequent tour controversies and cancellations, are key. Using archival material which became available both in the UK and South Africa in terms of the 30 year rule, they provide a fascinating and important look into what many believe were turning points in the way sport became more centrally articulated into the struggles for South African democracy and emancipation, both internally as well as in the strategic plans of the anti-apartheid movement (AAM) in the UK and elsewhere. Its significance is captured in this observation by Abdul Minty, who served as the secretary of the AAM for many years: 'In those days, people told us not to mix sports and politics, so it took some time before our campaign brought

us support...In 1968 the South African government again played into the hands of the UK boycott movement when Prime Minister JB Vorster refused to allow the MCC to tour the country if South African coloured cricketer Basil D'Oliveira...who had left the country...was included as part of the UK [English] team' (Callinicos 2004:499).

The saga of how D'Oliveira was initially omitted from the tour party to South Africa; the withdrawal from the squad through injury of an English player Tom Cartwright; and D'Oliveira's subsequent selection as his replacement are well known to many. In their account of this affair Murray and Merrett attempt, on the basis of their new sources, to answer two questions: would South African Prime Minister John Vorster have accepted Basil D'Oliveira had he been selected in the first place? Secondly, if not, was this made known to cricket administrators in both countries, making this a factor in their decision. They answer the first with a definite 'no' – he would never have been accepted by the Vorster government. On the second, they found that this information was indeed communicated to both cricket bodies, but '[p]recisely how this information was handled at Lord's remains something of a mystery' (2004:90).

One other question which they ask is why D'Oliveira wanted to come to South Africa at that time? Did he feel that going to South Africa would bring pressure on the regime? Or that he owed it to his supporters, especially Cape Coloureds, among whom he was reputed to be very popular? The Anti-Apartheid Movement view, which Murray and Merrett report on, is that while the MCC/England should not have been endorsing apartheid by going to South Africa in the first place, their initial decision not to select D'Oliveira was in effect bringing apartheid principles into selection (2004: 112).

D'Oliveira's thinking about contacts with South Africa at the time were rather puzzling all round. According to Peter Osborne he had been 'very deeply interested' by an offer made just before the proposed 1968 tour by a certain Tienie Oosthuizen, an employee of Rembrandt boss Anton Rupert, to take up a post with the South African Sports Foundation as a coach for coloured South African cricketers. It would not have taken more than a call (say, to the AAM) for him to establish that despite its so-called autonomy the SASF was a front organisation of the apartheid-state. Although the money was big (and cricketers were at the time pitifully paid) the downside was that he would have to take up the post immediately and would have had to make himself unavailable for the forthcoming tour to South Africa. Some

would argue that agreeing to coach coloureds only ('his people'), he would hardly be doing much to break down racial boundaries! Osborne discusses this episode in detail in a chapter called 'A Bribe is Offered'. He points out, using evidence from Vorster's golfing partner and confidant, Gerald Roux, that the Prime Minister had indeed been involved in this plan at least six months before the offer was made. In the end D'Oliveira broke off contacts with Oosthuizen, but only after many meetings, lots of telephoning and much agonising on his part (Osborne 2004:162-80; also see Murray and Merrett 2004:96).

A significant point in this saga raised by Osborne (and strangely not mentioned by Murray and Merrett) occurred in the match against Australia in the Oval test. D'Oliveira had had a poor tour to the West Indies, and had been dropped after the first test against Australia. But he was recalled for the Oval Test where he scored 158. This good form in fact forced him back into the reckoning for the South African tour. But with his score on 31 in that match he played back to a ball from Ian Chappell, the ball took the edge, went through to Barry Jarman, and the Australian wicket-keeper dropped it! EW Swanton, the noted commentator called it 'the most fateful drop in cricket history' (in Osborne: 2004:184) and Osborne observes that '[n]o other cricket innings has changed history' (2004:185). For had he been dismissed for a low score like 31, given his general poor form, he would most likely not have been considered on cricketing grounds as a replacement for Tom Cartwright. England's lilywhite team would have jetted off to South Africa with little fuss and John Vorster may well have had the pleasure of watching them from the VIP suite at Newlands!

The Murray and Merrett book also provides useful new insights, via the lens of the D'Oliveira affair, into some of the struggles which were occurring within the National Party (between *verligtes*, *verkrampes* and *herstigtes*). Vorster was after all trying to widen the appeal of the National Party from a narrow ethnic Afrikaner base to a more inclusive white South African nationalism, and his attempts did begin to open up cracks in the previously solid walls of the apartheid edifice. In what was then described in the Press as the 'biggest Cabinet shuffle in South African history' (2004: 98) Vorster on August 12, 1968 removed leading *verkrampes* such as Albert Hertzog and PMK le Roux; but he was not going to give the hardliners any ammunition to attack him by compromising on D'Oliveira. It was too close to home, and Murray and Merrett comment that '[r]ather than provide them [the *verkrampes*] with a potentially effective rallying-

cry Vorster's concern was to cement support for himself among the Nationalist rank-and-file' (2004:98).

Despite its undoubted significance the Murray and Merrett book is a rather oddly structured one. At its core is the D'Oliveira affair, one covered at length in Murray's 2001 article in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, and more or less faithfully reprinted here. This material is therefore known to a specialist readership, but it may well be right that it is being made available to a wider audience in book form. The early material, including the fuller stories of Hendricks and Llewellyn (largely Merrett's interest) and accounts of important post-D'Oliveira events such as the 1989/90 Gating Tour, appear sadly to be afterthoughts, not given the weight and significance or evenness of coverage which would have given the book a balanced and well-rounded feel.

Rodney Hartman's *Ali, The Life of Ali Bacher* is a more conventional biography of South African cricket's Mister Fixit (or Mister Cricket), as he was called. Hartman's book which has been nominated for a UK Sports Book award traces Ali Bacher's Jewish family back to their roots at Rokiskis on the Lithuania/Latvian border, their arrival in the eastern Johannesburg suburb of Doornfontein in 1924; his spell at Wits Medical School and his subsequent internship at Baragwanath Hospital in the black township of Soweto. It also covers his cricket experiences as player, Transvaal captain, South African captain (against the 1969/70 Australians); his rivalry with the enigmatic Eddie Barlow; his shift into cricket administration with Transvaal and then as Managing Director of SACU; his role in the unification of cricket, and towards the end his spell, as CEO of the 2003 Cricket World Cup. This is an easier and racier book to read compared to the somewhat stiff style of Murray and Merrett. But while the latter, despite my reservations about its structure and balance is academically and even politically satisfying, the Hartman book (all of 450 pages long) is hard to swallow simply because of its subject, and the way it captures and portrays the life and career of this highly controversial figure in South African cricket.

Ali Bacher did very well under apartheid. He has done even better in the 15 years since Nelson Mandela's release from Robben Island. This much is evident from Hartman's detailed biography, which has the now familiar and obligatory Foreword by the former President. What is also very evident is that Dr Bacher appears to have slid from operating under one regime to the next seamlessly. There is no epiphanous moment here, no expression of

regret, no apology for the various and highly controversial roles he played in propping up white cricket both as a player and administrator.

The claim is made repeatedly in the book that Bacher, like most white South Africans lived in a 'bubble' or 'cocoon', cut off from knowing about, let alone empathising with or actively joining the struggle for a non-racial society. In contrast people like Mike Hickson, Chris Nicholson and many others who joined non-racial clubs, such as Aurora in Pietermaritzburg in the mid-1970s, chose 'to fight together with black cricketers in organisations led by blacks, and play in conditions far removed from privileged white club houses and courtrooms' (Desai et al 2003:284). Bacher played in a team led by Springbok wicketkeeper-batsman John Waite against a non-racial team led by SA Haque at Natalspruit ground on April 1, 1961 and is quoted by Hartman as saying that the game showed how 'stupid the apartheid system was' (2004:148), but none of this appears to have led him into any change in his thinking, his cricket choices, or his politics. We are also told that he was not among the radical students at Wits but that he 'emphathised with them' (2004:36). He studied under Prof Phillip Tobias, one of our greatest scientists but appears to have imbibed nothing of the great man's moral and political commitment. He worked and lived in the Transvaal, but struggled to speak Afrikaans and rarely attempted to (2004:34). In short we are told by Hartman that, as late as 1970, Ali Bacher 'did not have a thorough understanding of the political problems bedevilling his country. He was not alone; the majority of white South Africans were living in a cocoon of ignorance or disinterest' (2004:126).

We are informed that 'in time' he came to criticise the government for its policies but at the only moment when a relatively mild protest by white players occurred he was strangely absent. At a match played at Newlands between Transvaal (the Currie Cup Champions) and the Rest of South Africa to celebrate ten years of the Republic in April 1971, the players staged a walk-out in protest against the government's refusal to allow two black players to be included in the side that planned to tour Australia. They returned to continue the match after they handed a statement to the media. In his absence the Transvaal team was captained by Don Mackay-Coghill. In his autobiography one of the players involved, Vincent van der Bijl, tells us that Mackay-Coghill 'was told by a national selector that he [DM-C] would never be picked for South Africa – a forecast which proved horribly accurate' (1984:5). One can only wonder what would have happened to Dr Bacher had he played on that day and been part of the walk-out. The reason

for his absence, Hartman says, is that '[h]is medical practice was keeping him busy and he did not want to leave it for what was only a festival match' (2004:133).

Let us move quickly to arguably Bacher's most notorious moment, the rebel Mike Gatting Tour to South Africa in 1989/90. Ali Bacher initiated and organised this Tour in blatant violation of ICC resolutions, in conflict with the global and local boycott and sanctions movement, and at the very moment that the country was at the cusp of its most significant political transformation. Armed instead with the view of the white political opposition that it would take another ten years for real change to come about, Bacher concluded in 1989/90 that cricket 'had to continue to find its own way along the rebel road' (2004:211).

Events around this tour also reveal that Bacher either did not have any knowledge of the history of non-racial cricket or was dismissive of it. His view appears to be that SACU's development programme represented the beginning of black cricket in this country, and of course he was its champion. At an address to the Annual Wisden Dinner in London in April 1989 (while he was surreptitiously organising the Gatting Tour) he spoke to a 'rapt black-tie audience' of the 'changing face of cricket in South Africa and the remarkable inroads that were being made by *taking* cricket to 60 000 youngsters through the development programme' (my emphasis, 2004:211). At a meeting of the SACU executive with the National Sports Congress (NSC), whose delegation included Ngconde Balfour, Mluleki George and Krish Naidoo, in October 1989, he 'addressed the meeting at length on the development programme and spoke passionately of the great benefits that township cricketers were already deriving from it...Balfour countered by saying that blacks had been playing cricket for a very long time and that their involvement with the game had not started with Bacher's development programme' (2004:217).

SACU President Geoff Dakin's view was that the Gatting Tour should not go ahead because it will 'uplift [white] people's spirit', so he argued '[I]et's not do that, let's maintain this state of depression and in this way put pressure on the government for political change' (2004:213). A remarkable opinion at the time, even vaguely 'Marxist' in its call to sharpen the contradictions of a dying system. But Bacher got his way and the tour went on. It was only called off later after President de Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC, PAC and SACP. In the midst of the protests Dr Bacher recognised that 'I was now afraid that someone might actually get

killed if the tour continued' (2004:226). Despite his controversial role throughout the 1980s as the man behind the rebel tours, he was appointed by SACU after the Gattling tour was called off to a one-man commission to 'investigate the way forward for South African cricket' (2004:242). From there things moved rapidly and even further up for Dr Bacher, for not long after all this he was warmly embraced by the Balfours and Mandelas and heralded and feted for leading all of us back into world cricket.

But his unease in the post-1990 South Africa is demonstrated by a little incident which occurred in May 1991. The ANC had agreed to give the South African cricket delegation a letter (addressed to High Commissioners in London) which supported the (soon-to-be-formed) United Cricket Board application for membership to the ICC. Bacher was to have picked up the draft letter from Thabo Mbeki, but Hartman informs us that 'Ali Bacher could not personally collect [it] from Mbeki's flat in a high-rise apartment block in [Hillbrow] Johannesburg because of his fear of heights'. Can one really believe this of such an internationally-travelled person?

The nature of our transition and the way in which sport was appropriated by the ANC to a national political agenda may be the real reasons why the Ali Bachers and Gary Players and their ilk have sailed into the new dispensation as true South Africans, even as heroes. Gary Player should be given some 'credit' (if that is the word) for having the courage to nail his colours to the mast: remember this comment: 'This is my land. I am South African. And I must say now, and clearly, that I am of the South Africa of Verwoerd and apartheid' (Player 1966:7). In contrast, Ali Bacher is portrayed here as apolitical, non-political, living in a cocoon, living in a bubble, oblivious to the cruel daily reality which faced the majority of South Africans who lived and died under apartheid. When in May 1991 on the way to Birmingham, England, in the company of Steve Tshwete, he received a first hand account from the future Sports Minister about what life was really like for black South Africans, especially those who were imprisoned, incarcerated, and tortured, Ali Bacher was physically ill. 'When we reached Birmingham station, I went straight to the public toilets where I vomited' (2004:268).

In his Foreword to the book, former President Nelson Mandela has this to say about Bacher:

Ali Bacher is a great example of that kind of South African that made possible the form and nature of our negotiated transition. He stood back in the middle of a crisis, reflected upon the broader meaning and

implications of the course he was following, learned to understand the views of those who differed most intensely with him, sought advice broadly and then gave a decisive lead in changing course for the greater good. (2004:viii)

In contrast to this view, former Pakistan captain Imraan Khan referred to Bacher as a ‘man of double standards [who] should never be trusted’ (Hartman 2004:387), while sports historian Goolam Vahed makes this point:

There needs to be greater accountability among those who now cloak their past collaboration with apartheid. The same applies to the process that led to unity....There will be twists in the story of how Ali Bacher, who tried so hard to destroy non-racial cricket through rebel tours and clandestine tactics in apartheid South Africa, came to lead post-apartheid cricket. (2005:5)

Rodney Hartman’s biography is not uncritical of Bacher, but it is on balance very much written in the spirit of Mandela’s tribute. As Vahed suggests, others may one day offer a very different take. I would contend that even the few critical (unguarded) glimpses offered in the book about the man and the choices he made throughout his life and career do not square with Mandela’s glowing tribute. Perhaps there is something about the ‘miracle’ of our transition that I have not yet fully grasped – miracles are after all supernatural things.

I have chosen not to point out some of the factual errors in the Hartman book, but there is one which is so egregious, and so instructive of the mindset of people like the biographer and his subject that it needs high-lighting. In a footnote on page 324, Hartman notes that ‘*Until 1991* Africans, coloureds and Indians had their own *separate associations* and *national teams* which were passionately supported’ (italics added). Talk about living in cloud cuckooland!

Reservations and limitations aside, I welcome both these books not only for the new material and insights they offer into the black and white politics of our cricket, but also for adding (often unintended) new layers to the complex story of our political transition, going back to the late 1960s.

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