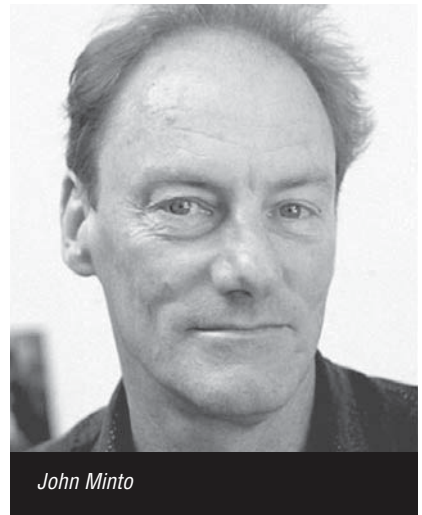


Bullshit development

Transfer from one elite to another

In the 1980s **John Minto** and others in the New Zealand anti-apartheid movement led the impressive Halt All Racist Tours to force their government to cut sporting ties with South Africa. He recently visited South Africa and in this interview with **Kally Forrest** gave his impressions and made it clear why he cannot accept one of South Africa's highest honours, the Oliver Tambo Award.



John Minto

South Africa has been a big focus in your life. Why is this?

In the early 1970s South Africa was a big issue at universities and internationally. It was the issue of race, but also that race was used as a means of oppression and a way for the corporate sector to access cheap labour.

In 1983 the Springbok rugby tour to New Zealand was a hot debate on campuses. I had been a rugby player at school and so I was drawn into this debate and got involved. I became an activist although I've never joined a political party. Our activism was successful – the government was forced to cancel the tour.

I was very proud to be part of this campaign. It tightened dramatically because of our participation.

What do you feel about South Africa now?

I put at least five years of my life into isolating South African sport

and so I was very interested in what was happening in the new South Africa and also dismayed.

I was never caught up in the euphoria like others of post-apartheid South Africa. In New Zealand we had experienced neo-liberal policies with a vengeance. Financial regulations were abolished, our manufacturing industry was decimated, high quality jobs were lost and low quality jobs took their place. By 1994 we had seen ten years of neo-liberal reforms where reduced income had become the order of the day and inequality was massively increased. And this is what the ANC government introduced in South Africa!

When Mandela came to visit New Zealand he gave a talk to about 8 000 activists and he got hammered for his government's policies. For us he wasn't untouchable. We never bought the South African miracle.

Makhenkesi Stofile came to my

house and pressed me to accept a nomination on behalf of the anti-apartheid movement in New Zealand. We discussed it and most people felt we shouldn't accept. We wrote an open letter to [President] Mbeki explaining why we couldn't accept and many people in South Africa responded to this gesture in agreement.

I had a close relationship with Stofile. He and others stayed with me in the 1980s. I always thought there were good people in the ANC. I never for a moment thought they would go corporate.

I went to Kliptown the other day to the Walter Sisulu monument and just 50 metres away I was confronted by the most squalid conditions I have ever encountered. The ANC government will never be able to deliver to these people because they cannot afford the electricity, the water and the houses that government builds. So this means they are automatically locked out of the economy.



Dromedaris primary school in Reiger Park, East Rand is in a disgraceful condition.

All I see is that wealth and power still resides with the whites alongside a shoddy BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) which has produced a few black millionaires.

So what have your impressions of South Africa been?

I have been struck at how people are doing the best for themselves, often women led.

I stayed on the pavement in Cape Town in Symphony Way for a night with people who don't want to be moved to Blikkiesfontein (transit camp). They've blocked the road and are camping there. The thing that blew me away was that in the morning after a cold wash the kids came out of these squalid conditions to go to their first day at school. They were a picture in starched shirts, uniforms perfect, perfectly dressed. They could have walked out of a million dollar mansion.

In the morning sunshine I talked to their mothers and they were telling me about the kids, not just their own kids, and how out of 140 kids living in these shacks last year all but three passed their exams. Because these people had come together over one issue they could now talk about education, about health. They were involved in deep political discussions about their community and that they had completely lost confidence in the ANC.

I also visited a community in Newfield's Village where about 400 houses had been shoddily built on the Cape Flats. People were told that if they paid R350 for five years

they would own these modest houses in a rent-to-buy scheme. There was an issue about how badly these houses had been built. The steel frames of the windows and doors were rusting out.

It was originally a public/private partnership but the houses were later sold to a private group and immediately the rents started racking up, within a year in some cases, to over R800 a month. Many families couldn't afford this so they got evicted. The whole community came together and fought these evictions and were able to keep a roof over their heads. They have now regained some power to negotiate with the local authorities. In the process of coming together they have ensured a drug and alcohol free community and they've dramatically reduced the crime rate.

Again it's a community coming together to do the best they can for themselves.

I visited a small community in the Vaal and I watched ten teenage boys training for soccer on a scrappy piece of ground. They were doing squat jumps which I can tell you are tough on the body. Yet we were told about the absolute collapse of sport in the townships. From 1996 the government effectively downgraded physical education. This is a sin because 20 years ago Sacos created

strong non-racial sport ties between coloureds and blacks.

There has been so much lost and cut adrift in this transition. It has become a shadow of democracy. Now talented sporting kids are cherry picked from schools instead of all kids benefiting from playing sport. It's all for the glory of the school. They're not interested in these kids. It's bullshit development.

You were here during the elections, what was your view?

The elections were of secondary interest to me. They were not an exercise in democracy, they were an illusion of democracy. The ANC achieved political rights but sacrificed social and economic rights to the corporate sector. Five minutes in a ballot box is useless.

Millions have been locked out of the economy. It's a corporate economy that says fuck you to everyone. When water, electricity, housing turns up it is unaffordable. Many people did not bother to register and yet the ANC takes the result as a vote of confidence. I don't get a sense of a reformed ANC. This is a country on a collision course with disaster. There has been a transfer from one elite to another with more black faces but the wealth and power still rests with white farmers and white and foreign owned business.

How could things be different?

You need a public works department where people are genuinely trained and develop real skills in building, construction, bricklaying and so on instead of using black entrepreneurs who are paying the minimum wage to mainly migrant workers because they are cheaper.

You need the absolute right to work a 40-hour week. You need to put a reasonable living at the centre of your policies and you need to develop good services especially in education and health. Then everything else will fall into place. Create enormous public works, not a public works programme to build five stadiums. It's an obscene waste of money, a two week wonder.

I was taken to a school on the East Rand in Reiger Park. It was disgraceful. The ceilings were falling in, the walls were filthy, the wooden bases of the desks were falling apart, the outside walls collapsing. I'm a teacher, I was embarrassed just looking at it.

In another school there was a new netball court surrounded by a wire mesh fence. But the principal refuses to allow kids to use it because it was not built to the right specifications.

Sport is absolutely basic for kids especially if you've got young people with nothing to do. Sport is a way to more choices in their lives. This and the education system as a whole are hugely important pillars. It's soul destroying to think of a kid walking through the front entrance of a school like this. Some model C schools have good facilities but there is such enormous disparity in the public education system.

If you put services at the centre of government policy you can shift the capitalist economy to the margins where it should be. Capitalism is fine when you are talking about a choice between baked beans but not when it comes to compromising the quality of your citizens' lives.

Are you still involved in sports boycotts?

Yes, it is an arena of struggle to use a South African term!

We led a protest about apartheid in Israel and the situation in Gaza through an organisation called 'Global Peace and Justice Auckland'. We protested outside the tennis courts where an Israeli was playing. There were only about 20 of us but the coverage of this protest went around the world.

It is still very much the beginning. It reminds me of the 1970s where outside of the big rugby tours we'd occasionally hold a protest against small South African sporting events like squash or tennis. As things go on and more people join these protests, it will gain credibility although we have few links with Israeli sport. The tennis player was denied entry into Dubai which later backed down but this is how these things gain momentum. Countries feed off each other and find the most effective tactics to bring pressure to bear.

We've got a strong Palestinian support group with good links inside Palestine. And in New Zealand you can't get away any more with the argument that if you criticise Israel you are anti-Semitic. There are a lot of Jewish people joining our protests because they see the discrimination against Palestinians.

Are you also involved with social issues in New Zealand?

I've been a teacher for 24 years and I'm involved in a group called the Quality of Public Education Coalition. I taught mainly in schools in low-income areas.

Now I'm working with Unite Union which is for low-paid workers and casualised labour which has been going for five years. We organise in sectors like fast foods - McDonalds and KFC - catering, security and hotels. It's a successful union with a campaigning style and

we use our industrial leverage to develop community-based campaigns.

The union had a successful campaign a few years ago called the 'Suipersizemypay.com'. We demanded \$2 as a minimum wage and security of hours at 30 hours per week. We have managed to stabilise hours of work. We are also campaigning for an end to youth rates as in New Zealand you can pay young people less which leads to huge staff turnovers in these sectors.

We made significant gains by mobilising the community in support of our demands. We hold community meetings such as in the Auckland Town Hall where a number of key people spoke and other unions came out in support of the campaign. Various community leaders were invited from the Pacific Island and Maori communities, as well as people representing Child Poverty Action and some members of parliament.

We organise outdoor concerts specifically for young people who mainly work in this sector and we got some key bands behind the campaign. We also involved school kids and hired buses to go all around Auckland picking them up from schools. So there were a couple of thousand students joining a protest during school time.

We have a strong profile because we actively campaign. We have close to doubled our membership in the last year. The more bureaucratic unions don't organise casual labour. They were hammered in the 1980s by our government's neo-liberal policies so we realised you've got to organise in a different way. The New Zealand union movement is mainly affiliated to the Labour Party whereas Unite is independent and our strength at the end of the day lies in our ordinary members.

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