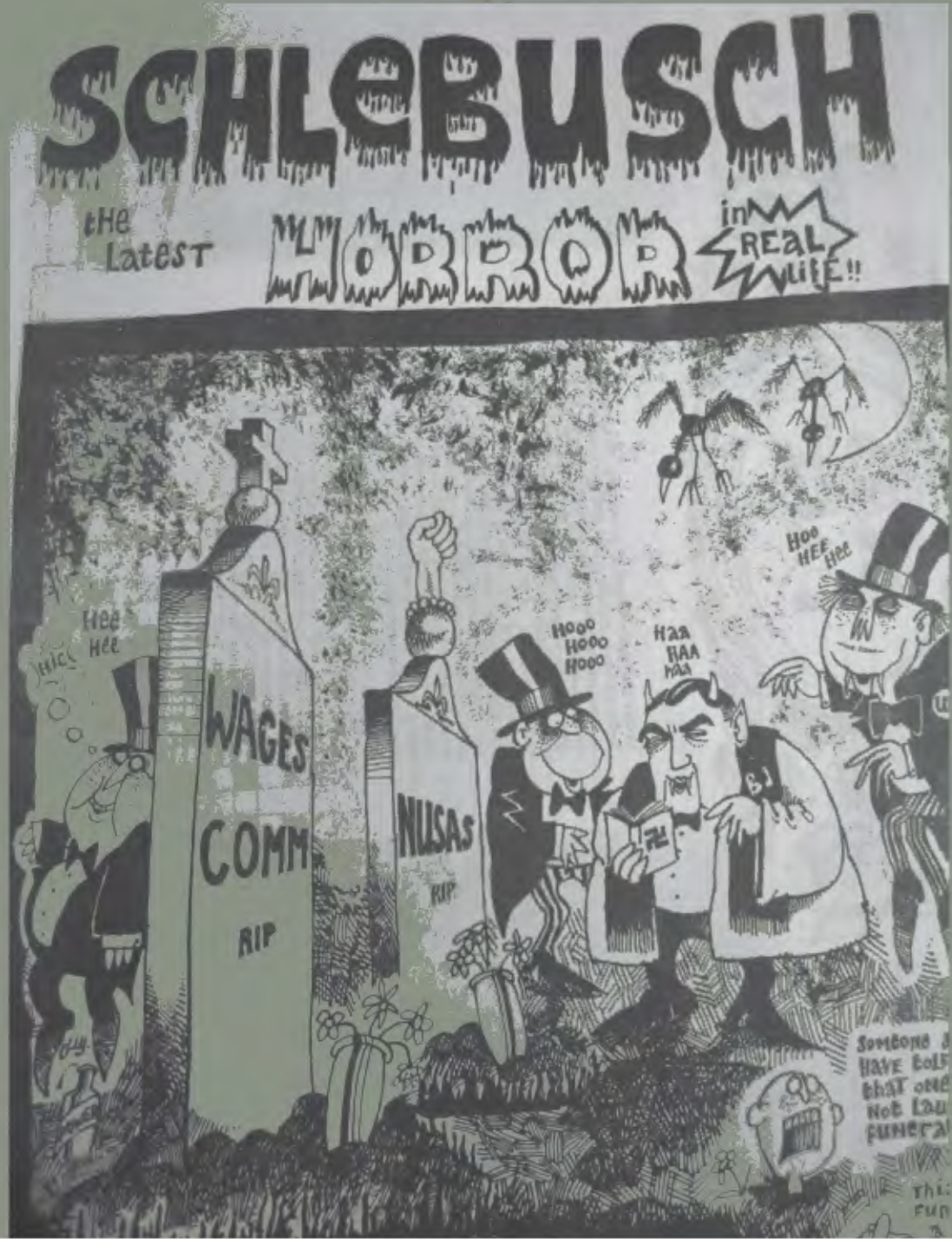


The final report of the Schlebusch Commission of Enquiry into NUSAS will probably be published soon after the beginning of the Parliamentary session. Rumour has it that it may appear before the end of the year or even earlier.

I have been gathering pieces of information on the likely content of the report. It must be remembered that this is only a preliminary impression.

16 THE MOST I CAN DO IS BE THE LEAST OBSTRUCTION

The government was not about to stand by and watch a small core of progressive white intellectuals link up with emerging black worker organizations. The state response came in the form of a protracted enquiry pegged to the time-worn claim that whites were inciting black revolution.



CARTOON DEPICTING THE OUTCOME OF THE SCHLEBUSCH COMMISSION REPORT ON NUSAS. (COPYRIGHT: WITS STUDENT, AUGUST 19, 1974)

The report is likely to be very extensive, embellishing on points raised in the three interim reports. It may be just as well to reread these reports to get an indication of what factors the commission emphasized and what points

No one can deny that it is good and desirable that the standard of living of South Africa's working class should be raised so that all will be able to lead a decent life. In the case of NUSAS's actions, however, certain other considerations come into play. It is clear that the upliftment of the Bantu worker is not their principal aim. It is one of the special issues around which agitation has to be built up in accordance with the lessons in the technique of successful incitement and agitation which NUSAS leaders went to learn in Europe and the United States of America.

NUSAS's action in this connection is really a means to another end, and that is political change to overthrow the existing order in South Africa and to replace it with an anti-capitalistic system which has sometimes been described as 'black socialism'. This has to be brought about by stirring up industrial and labour unrest and by inciting black and white against each other, and eventually by inciting them to conflict, even violent conflict, against each other.

This situation is fraught with dangers to which the Commission feels constrained to draw the attention of Parliament and the government. The possibility of dangerous outbursts must always be borne in mind, and this calls for constant vigilance and readiness for quick action, coupled with sustained imaginative and determined action to eliminate unhealthy economic conditions. The Commission was convinced by the evidence that people and organizations are encouraging arms boycotts and economic boycotts against South Africa as part of an attempt to bring about radical change in the existing political order. The Commission is of the opinion that this is a form of subversion of the state and recommends that steps be taken to combat it.

Conclusion of 'Schlebusch Commission Report on NUSAS', 7 December 1973¹

The Schlebusch Commission succeeded in scaring off potential NUSAS supporters and demoralizing NUSAS members. In accordance with the commission's recommendations, student leaders were banned, detained, deprived of their passports and deported. NUSAS was declared an 'affected organization' that could receive no foreign funding, and several white campuses renounced their NUSAS affiliation.² Young white progressives had never felt so isolated and immobilized.

(Blackout. A spot comes up on four figures representing different sectors of bourgeois society.)

FIRST FIGURE: Offer! Advertising! Position, wealth, status! A studio of your own! Provided that for our money you give us your art.

USELESS MAN: You don't want art. You want manipulation. Creating false needs in people who cannot afford to buy necessities. Reducing everything to a commodity. I reject your offer with contempt.

SECOND FIGURE: Offer! Journalism! A career! Articulate opposition to the government. Part of a young, dynamic work force.

USELESS MAN: A newspaper owned by business will not criticize business.

THIRD FIGURE: Offer! Teach in a progressive school!

USELESS MAN: Provide education for an elite to take up the reins of business and management? A progressive school presupposes a radically changed society.

FOURTH FIGURE: Offer! Law! Assist in the maintenance of the rule of law. Temper justice with mercy! Radical law!

USELESS MAN: Radical law: contradiction in terms. Maintaining the rule of law simply means that the system obeys its own rules — rules made by its rulers. Tempering justice with mercy — impossible! The system is founded on oppression and exploitation.

(The lights fade as the figures silently move aside, to reveal a machine gun.)

COMPERE: What are you prepared to do?

(Watched by the figures, the Useless Man crosses the stage. He reaches to take the gun but is unable to take it. He turns away and the group of actors collapse on to the floor in cramped, grotesque positions.)

USELESS MAN: There is going to be a war, a war between those who have power and wealth and will not relinquish it, and the broad mass of the people who live voiceless at the edge of poverty. What I have I would willingly give up to avoid that war, but I am a dreamer and a fool. The class that sheltered me from violence now leads me to violence. Many people I know are gearing themselves — willing that war. In their bloodlust they are buying guns and preparing shelters and making emergency preparations. They will bar up their wealth and their lives rather than share them.

And there are those who wish to alleviate oppression and suffering without themselves giving. They refuse to understand the relationship between their wealth and another's deprivation. These men are White Men. White is not a colour. White is an attitude. And myself. I am a coward and a useless man — the most I can do is be the least obstruction.³

'The Fantastical History of a Useless Man', play workshopped by the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, first performed by students at the University of the Witwatersrand, 20 September 1976⁴.

BREYTENBACH THE POET AS VICTIM



If radical white English-speaking students felt useless, politically aware Afrikaners experienced that alienation even more acutely.

“All the way through, in my own political thinking and in the translation of this thinking into forms of action, there was this one given element of being an Afrikaans writer. And I rejected that fairly early on. I could not agree to being an Afrikaner in any accepted definition of that term, because obviously if you’re going to say it’s only a matter of language, then it cannot be white only. If you say it’s a matter of certain political beliefs, including religious beliefs, then I disagree with those so violently that I couldn’t consider myself an Afrikaner.

But I couldn’t stop being an Afrikaner myself. Not that there’s a deep urge in me to be one — it is a condition, it is that. I express myself through that bloody language. And it is not at all the possession of those who think they control the language — it’s becoming something else. For me, Afrikaans is a very beautiful tool and I watch it with great interest to see how it’s moving. It’s a creole language. It’ll keep on being bastardized, and developing. Fine.

Part of my contradiction is concretely reflected in the type of confrontation I had with the Security Police: being interrogated in Afrikaans, for instance, with the complicity that that immediately implies. They don’t see me as an opponent — they see me as a traitor. If they have a black activist in their hands, he’s an opponent. He cannot possibly be a traitor. They would do the same thing if they were black.

If they have an English-speaking white, they can justify or understand his being in opposition through many other reasons. He’s probably of Jewish descent, therefore he’s, as far as they are concerned, genetically against them — you know all the justifications. Then even the Boer War would come in, all the rest of it. It’s the class distinction. ‘He’s a rich bloody Englishman. He’s a spoilt city brat. He’s gone to university. He’s a cosmopolitan. He’s been exposed to international ideas. He’s not one of us. We grew up the hard way, in a small town, on a farm’ — whatever the case may be. But in my case, no. It is really being a traitor from within. And sensing this from them also gives me a peculiar relationship to them.”

BREYTEN BREYTENBACH, a writer and artist who left South Africa in 1960 and settled in Paris following his marriage to a Vietnamese woman, returned clandestinely in 1975 to try to recruit white progressives to a proposed white liberation movement, was arrested and served seven years in prison

“I got a phone call from Johannesburg: ‘I’ve got something I’m sending down with a friend, could you meet him on the steps of UCT tonight at eight o’clock?’ I arrive, and it turns out to be Breyten, calling himself ‘Christian Galaske’ — I remember the pseudonym on the passport that he had forged for himself. I was very excited to see him, first of all, because of the academic importance that he had for me, and also I had been very impressed with his poetry, with what he stood for in a whole range of ways. So he arrives with this scheme, this organization called ‘Okhela’ that was going to be started and that he claimed had a lot of support. He had this document with him called the Manifesto. It was a document for white activists to define themselves, because of the reality of South Africa, a separate existence — and yet a supportive existence to the ANC. That’s how he presented it.⁵ And then the shit hit the fan, and we were followed and ultimately all picked up after a fiasco all round, because what the Security Police then did, they made use of that opportunity and the lack of knowledge around it to pick up a whole range of white activists.

So did that experience clarify anything for you about white South Africans’ political role?

It’s a very difficult question to answer, I think partly because so few people have been willing to talk about the Okhela experience. In a way, it was so badly done that it was easy to just write it off. I think one thing that it did do was that it cast doubt on any white-initiated separate activity, and I think it forced whites into very much a secondary role. Remember, there was the total gap of 1960s politics. There was a tradition of way back, of the older people — what had we got? We had nobody to refer to. I don’t think there was ever an awareness that there was a role within or in very close proximity to the ANC. So that was part of it: our activity had to be in relation to the ANC.

I think what I took from that is, first of all, that a white leftist, at that point in time, did not have any organizational discipline. It might not be the case now, but organizational discipline was foreign to the experience of one generation of white leftists. I don’t know whether it was the correct perception or not, but that came out for me — that I was in detention as an individual.

And that individual politics isn’t on?

Individual politics isn’t on, ja.”

GERHARD MARÉ, a NUSAS activist who was writing his masters thesis at the University of Cape Town on the literature of Breytenbach in 1975

I think it's because all the way through...and this is specific to me perhaps...all the way through in my own political thinking if you can call it that, and the translation of this thinking into forms of action, there was this one given element of being an Afrikaner writer. In other words, what is the nature of my Afrikanerness, and I rejected that fairly early on. I could not agree to being an Afrikaner in any accepted definition of that term.

national student

10c

No. 1



APARTHEID
WHITE CONSCIOUSNESS
WHITE LIBERATION
AFRICANISM

THE AFRICANIZATION CAMPAIGN WAS PRECEDED BY A DEBATE OVER RELATED CONCEPTS LIKE 'WHITE CONSCIOUSNESS; WHICH WAS CRITICIZED AS 'A FORM OF NATIONALISM WHICH BLURS CLASS DISTINCTIONS'.⁶ THE NEXT CAMPAIGN, 'EDUCATION FOR AN AFRICAN FUTURE', ENCOURAGED STUDENTS TO MAKE THEIR EDUCATION RELEVANT. THE CAMPAIGN INFLUENCED YOUNG MEN WHO WERE LEAVING THE COUNTRY TO AVOID MILITARY SERVICE TO REMAIN WITHIN THE REGION. AS A RESULT, SOME WENT TO BOTSWANA, A FEW TO MOZAMBIQUE, AND WITH ZIMBABWE'S INDEPENDENCE IN 1980, EVEN MORE SETTLED THERE.

(SOURCE: FREDERIKSE, JULIE. THE UNBREAKABLE THREAD: NON-RACIALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA. RAVAN PRESS, 1990)

FH: In fact it was at a stage where black consciousness was on the way, about '77 onwards. Firstly the growth of non-racial movements, in particular with the development of a line of thinking with Msasa which was critical of the Biko position.

It was really centred in Durban, and beginning to find expression in the Msasa journal. Like Jelase G.

JF: Is he in Durban now?

It took the 1976 Soweto uprisings to dissipate the widespread disaffection among white progressives. By the end of the year, NUSAS had adopted a theme for its revival: the 'Africanization Campaign'.

“ One of the things we were attempting to respond to was the negative aspect of the BC movement. People had been saying, 'Whites have got no role to play, it's a black struggle.' They would use that as a justification either for doing nothing or for leaving the country. So the Africanization Campaign was a way of saying, 'Listen, this is your country as well and you've got just as much right — in fact, as much duty — to see it work as a democratic and non-racial country and to expect of it as secure and happy a place for your children as anybody.'

The campaign reflected the development of the move away from protest politics towards more of an orientation by white students towards a long-term political commitment, towards non-racial democracy, to finding the structures which would incorporate their activities. We were redefining a person's conception of South Africa, that it's not just white or First World South Africa — it's non-racial South Africa, which encompasses a broad variety of problems.

In fact, it came at a stage when Black Consciousness was on the way out, from about '77 onwards, with the growth of non-racial movements — in particular with the development of a line of thinking within SASO which was critical of the Biko position. In the early '70s, when white students were attempting to formulate a response to SASO, there were two responses in NUSAS. The one was a liberal response: if people want to set up racially exclusive organizations then we should have nothing to do with them. The other was the dominant response, and I think Rick Turner had a large part to play in that. It was understanding the reasons for a critique of the limitations of white student organizations, and appreciating the need for a period of developing BC militancy and assertiveness.

I think there was a third response, which came later, and it was one which I eventually had some part in. It was to actually say that BC was a very limited philosophy, that its results reflected essentially a philosophy of consciousness of self, that it by and large appeals to the aspirant elites. I felt this was evidenced by the lack of success that SASO had in developing a relationship with workers, and the tremendous success they had amongst journalists and doctors and lawyers.

The success of this campaign was followed by another setback — the revelation that a long-time NUSAS activist, Craig Williamson, was a Security Police spy.⁷ What was the ultimate effect of that development on student politics?

There was a lot of cynicism, people saying it was typical of student activists, that the whole thing is rife with informers. It can be self-defeating: it's no use doing anything because there is going to be a spy next to you. I don't know what information spies get, and it may be important and it may not be, but more generally, I think the negative effects of it are more organizational than information loss. What it sets up in the organization is a distressing distrust. It also allows political conflicts and questions to be resolved through personal maligning, and you can see the potential that has to break up groups.

Was the Williamson affair seen as a particularly white phenomenon?

Some people said, 'You can't work with white groups because they have spies in them.' But spies and infiltrators are not confined to the white movement, I don't think. The police spend a lot of money trying to infiltrate the white left, tapping phones and so on. I think there was a time when the unrest wasn't as rooted in the townships as it is now, when they probably wanted to monitor who was who and what was what and the white group would have been an important group to infiltrate.

I don't know how much use it would really be today. Things are not coordinated by the white left. There is that lingering fear of a relationship between white activists and blacks, partly a racist idea that it's whites telling blacks what to do. Also, whites are more identifiable to the police than black people.

The white left has always been perceived as a greater threat than it actually is. At one stage there were conscious decisions not to have non-racial organizations because they were the ones that were most targeted by the police. In other words, BC organizations or all-white organizations could get away with more. ”

FINK HAYSOM, NUSAS Wages Commission member in Durban from 1973 to 1975, UCT Student Representative Council (SRC) president in 1976, and NUSAS president in 1977

Jennie realised that there was a very definite role for her as a white in the political struggles at home and in the trade union struggles at home. But then Jennie was always an activist. I think many of the white intellectuals had been convinced by certain elements in the BCM, but there was in fact no role for whites as activists - that the only possible role for whites was to make some form of an intellectual input.

Then I think a large number of whites made a basic ideological mis-

The revitalization of NUSAS was only one of many factors that helped breed a new generation of white political activists. The ANC also played a role.

“ We'd spent a lot of time talking in prison about what I should do when I came out. We'd taken decisions in prison that I should do as much as I could to try and swing a substantial part of the white left behind the ANC.

Then, a few days before I was released from prison I was served with a very stringent banning and house arrest order. I was very fortunate in that I met Jenny Curtis⁹ within a couple of weeks of coming out of prison. Jenny was able to introduce me to very wide sections of the white left — people in the trade unions, in the community organizations, students — and Jenny and I did a solid nine months political work at home before we were eventually forced to go. We both deliberately decided that we were basically going to ignore our banning orders. We saw a large number of people. We argued the case for the ANC, we argued the case for the ANC-SACP alliance.

Perhaps I flatter myself, but I feel that the work that Jenny and I did actually made a substantial difference to the white left. I don't think there's anyone on the white left now who can seriously say that the ANC is irrelevant. For the first time, many of these young people were actually being challenged about the incorrect views that they had about the ANC.

The enemy had had a very great propaganda success — and this was not only true of whites, it was true of blacks as well. The enemy deliberately and very consciously denies us our own history. I've spoken to numerous black comrades who left home following '76, and the thing that has impressed them more than anything, once they had made contact with the movement, is that resistance in South Africa did not begin in '76.

Now this was very, very true of whites as well, and I will say whites had less excuse for this, because the bulk of whites on the left are, in fact, intellectuals, and intellectuals always have access to information. In fact, when I came out of prison the white left was all very much into Marxism, but they weren't reading the stuff written by South African Marxists.

Now perhaps I'm being unfair, but I think that at that stage of the struggle a very exciting new generation of radical whites had not yet made the step from intellectual involvement to activism. I think subconsciously people denigrated the ANC because if they actually supported the ANC they would have to be involved in activism, and a lot of the white radical activity was, in fact, intellectual activity.

Then the older people in the white left had experienced the SASO breakaway and I think they'd misinterpreted it. I think many of the white intellectuals had been convinced by certain elements in the Black Consciousness Movement that there was, in fact, no role for whites as activists — that the only possible role for whites was to make some form of intellectual input. Then I think a large number of whites made a basic ideological mistake, in that they thought that the only role there was for them was in the trade unions.

Then we spoke to people a lot about commitment — about what does commitment mean? I think it's very interesting that when Ray [Suttner] and Jeremy [Cronin] and Dave Rabkin¹⁰ went to prison, they were regarded by the white left as being aberrant, as though they'd done something slightly ridiculous by actually getting involved with activities of the ANC. When our white comrades go to prison now, I'm sure there are still sections of the white left that think that these people are just wasting their time posturing, but basically the white left is now solidly behind them.

Now one of the reasons for the change of opinion is, of course, that the ANC is palpably there. When I came out of prison we were coming out of a period of quiescence, but now the climate has changed. We continually say the people have legitimized the ANC, and they not only legitimized the ANC for the black people of South Africa, they've specifically legitimized the ANC for the whites.

But I want to make another point here. I was aware all the time that I was at home that whereas we hoped that increasing numbers of whites are going to make a contribution to the liberation of South Africa, we knew we were dealing with very, very small numbers of white democrats. The real political work is going to have to be done with black people, and the real political change is actually going to be brought about by black people. Just because

I'm speaking about work done with whites, I don't want you to think that I regard that as by any means the most important work that the movement was doing. It seemed to me as though that was the work I could do at the time. ”

MARIUS SCHOON, who was politically active in Johannesburg after his release from prison in September 1976, upon completion of a twelve-year sentence for ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe activities, until June 1977, when he fled to neighbouring Botswana



UNKNOWN AT THE TIME TO THE REST OF THE 1973 UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND SRC, THE COUNCIL INCLUDED THREE SECURITY POLICE SPIES: CRAIG WILLIAMSON (STANDING, FOURTH FROM RIGHT), DEREK BRUNE (SEATED, THIRD FROM RIGHT) AND ARTHUR MCGIVEN (SEATED, SECOND FROM LEFT).
(SOURCE: NATIONAL UNION OF SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS)

NOTES:

¹The commission was convened in September 1972 by A. L. Schlebusch and Deputy Chairman Louis le Grange (later Minister of Law and Order in P. W. Botha's government) to report on 'the objects, organization and financing of NUSAS, SAIRR, the University Christian Movement, the CI and any related organizations, bodies, committees or groups of persons'.

²Disaffiliation campaigns were mounted by right-wing student groups now seen as the prototype of the more polished and well-funded fronts of the 1980s, e.g., the Student Moderate Alliance and the National Student Federation, immediately identifiable by their glossy and prolific media attacking NUSAS, the ANC, MDM, etc.

³Participants in the workshopping of this play devoted long hours to debate over this final line, and nearly chose another variant: 'The least I can do is be the most obstruction.'

⁴Workshopped and acted by Patrick Fitzgerald, Ruth Jacobson, William Kentridge, Hannchen Koornhof, Steven Sack, Ari Sitas, Pippa Stein, Anne Stanwix and Astrid von Kotze, under the direction of Malcolm Purkey, this play was the first production of the non-racial company, which went on to produce plays championing progressive political themes from the 1970s to the 1990s.

⁵Okhela, a Zulu word meaning 'to set alight', has been described as an 'anti-communist faction within the "white" ANC allegedly encouraged by Tambo as well as the late ANC International Affairs department director, Johnny Makhatini. However there is no evidence to support such claims and it is more accurately viewed as an independent and unmandated initiative. Breytenbach's Okhela disintegrated in 1979, with the return of a key member, Barend Schuitema, to South Africa, and the revelation that he had been a spy for Pretoria.

⁶*Work in Progress*, Nos 2 and 3, 1977.

⁷Williamson was exposed in 1980 while working for the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF) in Geneva.

⁸Derek Brune was unmasked when he appeared as a state witness in the 1976 trial of four students (including two of his former SRC colleagues, Glenn Moss and Cedric de Beer) and a lecturer charged under the Suppression of Communism Act. Despite Lieutenant Brune's testimony, all five were acquitted. McGiven later confessed the rather lacklustre details of his BOSS (Bureau of State Security, now National Intelligence Services, NIS) career to a London newspaper. Note also that Paul Sarbutt (standing, far left) had been a known intelligence agent who continually tabled anti-NUSAS resolutions at conferences and promoted the right-wing media campaign described in note 2 (above).

⁹NUSAS Vice-President in 1972, Curtis helped found the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau and the Industrial Aid Society, was detained in 1975 (in the round-up of white activists following the Okhela affair) and banned in 1976. She was working at SAIRR when she met Schoon.

¹⁰White ANC activists who entered Pretoria Central Prison shortly before Schoon was released.