From Hubris to Chaos: the makings of the Dompas and the end of documentary government.*

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On the 10th of March, 1952, A J Turton, the Senior Urban Areas Commissioner of the Department of Native Affairs, received a very urgent telegram from W. W. M. Eiselen, the Departmental Secretary, instructing him to take the next train to Cape Town. After completing the 18 hour journey from Pretoria, Turton was met by a government driver at the Cape Town station and taken to meet H F Verwoerd, the new Minister of Native Affairs, future Prime Minister, and the architect of Apartheid. In meetings with Verwoerd, Eiselen and the state's legal advisers over the next few days Turton set down the Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Passes Act. This famous law laid down the regulatory basis for a new form of personal identification and the bureaucratic mechanism to enforce the nationwide registration of all Africans, their names, locale, fingerprints, tax status and their officially prescribed "rights" to live and work in the towns and cities of South Africa.

The document issued to all Africans in the course of the 1950s and 1960s was called, in English, the Reference Book. All the details of the book, and any changes to the status of its bearer, were to be recorded and managed from a single government office, the Central Reference Bureau in Pretoria. The political, and emotional, investment that the bureaucrats made in this development is better captured by the Afrikaans terms, Bewysboek and Bewysburo—the book and bureau of proof. Africans had another name for the Bewysboek. They called it the Dompas—the stupid pass—and that name captures it best. For the Dompas, more than anything else defined the essence of life in Apartheid South Africa. It was intended to sweep away the unreliable documentary order that dominated South Africa in the years from 1900. In this it succeeded. As we will see, the new 'Book' erased the politics of writing associated with the archival state of the early twentieth century. It was 'dom' in both senses of the Afrikaans word—dumb, in that it curtailed writing, and stupid—because it was broken. In nearly almost every respect, as we shall see here, the Dompas was a complete failure, but the form of its failure defined the character of the Apartheid state, and much of its democratic successor.[1]

The Blueprint for the Dompas

A J Turton was a veteran English-speaking bureaucrat, with little in common with the Nationalist Party newcomers, Eiselen and Verwoerd. He had worked his way up through the ranks of the Native Affairs Department after joining in 1928. <Check Izitshozi materials and other NTS documents> He had been summoned to Cape Town because of a memorandum he had drawn up on October 17, 1950--just two days after Verwoerd had replaced E G Jansen as Minister of Native Affairs. This document gave detailed substance to the old ideal of the universal, centralised registration and control of all African adults. This panoptic fantasy had a long life, dating back to the formation of the Union of South Africa. Turton's specific plan for the Central Reference Bureau and the radical simplification of the regulations governing influx control had been developing within Native Affairs since the end of the 1930s, as we have seen from the previous chapter. It was an old plan, designed to reconfigure the contested governance of the

* My thanks to Bernard Dubbeld, Julian Brown, Riashnee Pather, Barbara Wahlberg and Prinisha Badassy who completed the data processing for this project in record time, and under difficult circumstances.

[1] CAD NTS 9791 1004/400, Secretary of Native Affairs to U S Admin, Telegram TC 276/278, 10 March 1952.

previous decades, and to support a set of new Apartheid mechanisms, in particular the Labour Bureaus and the Group Areas Act. As Turton put it, the passing of the Population Registration Act, no. 30 of 1950, marked "a great opportunity to do some thinking on entirely new lines and to break away as completely as possible from the outworn portion of our existing pass laws, tax and other procedures."

Turton proposed to sweep away all the old contracts, tax receipts and paper passes, and to replace them with just two official documents, an identity card and something he called a "personal file." This booklet was to contain the "personal history and movements" of every African worker, and a long list of official permissions which, up to that date, had been granted on separate pieces of paper. These included, official permission to enter an urban area, permission to seek work, records of required medical examinations and any particular medical history, the names and addresses of employers, and, most importantly, receipts for tax payments. Appealing to the new Minister's preoccupation with utilitarian cost-saving, Turton proposed to distil the entire interaction between Africans and the state into a single "personal file," massively reducing the opportunities for impersonation, and the cost to the state in a single step.[2] "A great saving of staff would be made," he pointed out, "as two million identity documents and tax receipts are issued every year; which each succeeding document becoming less a proof of identity and more a scrap of useless paper." In the process he proposed the simplification of all other tax and pass legislation, replacing local, and provincial regulations with a single focus on all towns and cities regulated by the Labour Bureaus, and hinging permission to seek work on the record of tax payments.

Co-ordinating all of this required the establishment of a new Central Identity Bureau, which would be responsible for maintaining the integrity of the Identity Cards, and, Turton casually added, collecting "reports of desertions, tax payments and even perhaps the District where the Native is employed." By framing his proposal around the cost-efficiency of a central registration system, Turton put together a devastatingly persuasive argument for a panoptic mechanism of identification, taxation and policing. Buried deep in the bowels of his proposal was the suggestion that the central bureau would provide a mechanism for the complete control of the African population. Requests from the police, tax and municipal authorities for "the tracing of offenders, tax defaulters, and honest people whose whereabouts are urgently sought" would not only be handled by the central bureau, but so efficiently that it would, once again appealing to the parsimony of the new minister, "cut down the cost of administration in those respects by a startling percentage."

In two key respects Turton's project marked an abrupt ideological and administrative break with the earlier practices. First, the new system of registration, which left no space for African workers, or even their employers, to write on the "personal file," meant the death knell of the ideology of the mutually agreed, signed, and witnessed, contract which, as we have seen, had underwritten both the role of the Native Affairs Department and the labour law before Apartheid. Remarking that abuses of written contracts of service were "so rare as not to justify the further continuance of an outmoded and costly system," Turton blithely dismissed the ideological mantra of the early twentieth century officials. And he naively ignored the realities of employment and policing throughout the country, suggesting that an abusive employer would simply "lose all his servants."

In the second area, Turton ushered into being, almost by accident, the project of universal fingerprinting that had been proposed, and rejected, in every previous decade. The scepticism of those responsible for the large fingerprint collections in the years of Union was all but erased by the allure of the cost-cutting efficiency of centralised registration. Turton presented fingerprinting as a means to the end of extraordinary efficiency not, as had been the case in earlier arguments, a tool for policing. "Finger prints will have to be taken when issuing identity cards," Turton noted in the last paragraph of his proposal, "otherwise as soon as his card

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[2] For more on Verwoerd's administrative preoccupations see Ivan Evans. *Bureaucracy and Race: Native administration in South Africa*. (Berkeley: California University Press, 1997) 62-73.

or personal file become inconvenient a native could destroy them and obtain a new identity card with a new serial number and so defeat the whole purpose of the identity card system." That the entire apparatus hinged on the efficacy of the finger printing systems went unnoticed in the early phases of the Dompas campaign.[3]

Implementing the Plan

Well before Verwoerd's appointment as Minister, the Department had been looking for ways to simplify the old tax and pass regulations, and implement the new Apartheid policies. These measures were particularly focused on the racially-defined Group Areas and the Labour Bureaus. In October, 1951, Verwoerd convened a committee of members of the Departments of Justice, Police, Census and Native Affairs to devise a mechanism to integrate the pass system and the Population Registration Act, to find a way to simplify the pass regulations and to reduce the 28 different documents and forms African were required to complete and carry. Turton's plan provided exactly what the committee, and Verwoerd was looking for. It was, unsurprisingly, accepted as a catch-all solution to the problems that the state faced in all these areas—with just one prerequisite improvement to Turton's plan. A mechanism, the Inter-Departmental Committee resolved, needed to be found that would allow for the lamination of the identity card, physically preventing any possibility of forgery.

Early in January 1952, the South African Bureau of Standards was given the task of establishing whether a government document could be manufactured that would preclude further written modification. They evaluated two of the new post-war plastic materials—Jewellex Adhesive Cement and Durex Self Adhesive tape—against the most popular methods for altering official documents. In the SABS tests the materials withstood submersion in boiling water, heat treatments and steaming. And when subjected to a variety of chemical solvents, the paper and its bonded plastic cover dissolved together. So for the first time the state could look forward to the possibility that the documents it issued would be protected from any further writing.[4]

Immediately after the successful lamination report was submitted, Verwoerd called Turton to Cape Town to begin drafting the Native (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Bill. The new law swept away the old forms of paper-based personal identification drawn from tax receipts, and service contract numbers, each of which, as we've seen, through duplication or impersonation, led to "endless confusion" in the Labour Bureaus and Revenue offices of the NAD. In its place the law inscribed the reference book number as the key index of personal identification for black people. (It is worth noting that this was not, yet, the ID number South Africans are familiar with today. That innovation emerged only later after a campaign waged by officials in the Reference Bureau around the slogan, "een naturel, een nommer.") Highlighting the conflicting, and draconian pass requirements from the colonial period, the law abolished legislation that had applied to the individual provinces and cities, leaving in its place a radically simplified requirement based on the Labour Bureau system set up by the Native Laws Amendment Act passed in 1949 and amended in the same year. Under these regulations Africans from the countryside required permission from their local Magistrate or Native Commissioner to travel to any urban area, and once there they required permission to work from the local Labour Bureau. No employer was permitted to offer work to any African who had failed to register or secure work permission from the Labour Bureau. And the primary task of the Labour Bureau was to limit and, eventually, reduce the number of Africans present in the cities.[5]

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[3] CAD NTS 9791 1004/400, Turton, A. J. Senior Urban Areas Commissioner to Secretary of Native Affairs, "Identity Cards: Alteration of Pass Laws; Registration and Permit System", 17 October 1950.

[4] This is not a subject that our historiography speaks about within any real certainty, but there seems some likelihood that this laminated identity document was the first of its kind internationally. Tupper launched his range of appalling plastic storage products in the same year.

[5] CAD NTS 9794 1031/400 Discussions between Senior Officers Head Office 1951-4.

All of these administrative procedures were to be recorded in the new Reference Books, and the books were to be harnessed to a laminated identity card that every adult, regardless of race, was required to carry.

Issuing the Books

The process of issuing the Reference Books began in earnest in March 1953. Using a production line technique that they called the "factory system," mobile teams of NAD officials visited the large government and industrial employers around Pretoria, the Witwatersrand and the Vaal Triangle over the next six months. The Chamber of Mines initially refused to allow workers to be registered at individual mines or as they arrived at the WNLA's Mzilikazi Compound on Eloff Street Extension; they were determined to wait until registration had begun in the Transkei before allowing the Reference Books, and the potential protests they might precipitate, into the compounds. Other employers were not as squeamish. "Die reaksie van die sakeondernemings was werklik 'n ontnugtering," Eiselen reported to Verwoerd from his observations of the registration process around Pretoria, "Geen besware en die volste samewerking is ondervind." (The reaction of the businesses was really sobering. No objections and the fullest cooperation were experienced.) In some cases businesses paid the fees charged for photographs. At the Olifantsfontein <?> factory, Lady Cullinan herself arrived to be photographed along with the workers.[6]

By the end of October, the mobile teams had completed the work of issuing books in the mid-sized industrial towns of Springs, Benoni, Boksburg, Germiston, Brakpan, Kempton Park, Alberton and Brits. Teams were still at work in Johannesburg, Roodepoort, Randfondtein, Witbank and Heidelberg. In July, 1953, the twelve teams in the field registered 80,000 workers, a figure that represented the apex of the registration process. a month. The heart of the non-mining industrial proletariat, some 400,000 workers, had been successfully issued with "bewysboekies" by the end of October.[7]

One success followed another. The Police loved the new system because it freed them of having to understand and investigate the many different forms of written authorisation that had characterised the old documentary system. And, more importantly, it gave them a mechanism that allowed for policing without the requirement for conversation. "The investigation of the Natives does not waste time because of the presentation of the wrong documents," L J Lemmer, Chief Clerk of the Bewysburo explained, "and the [need for a] series of questions also falls away. The police official just asks for the bewysboek and simply looks through it." **<Panopticism--include plan from SAP docs for co-ordination between SACB and CRB>**

As a direct consequence of the issuing of the Dompas, the amount of tax collected from individual workers began to increase dramatically. Workers could not complete their registration (and hence secure their continued right to work) without first paying up their outstanding taxes. In the districts where the books had been issued the amount collected in the months from March to October, 1943, was some £300,000 greater than the sum collected in the previous year. A collection of the senior officers of the NAD marvelled at the presentation of the workings of the Bewysburo in October, 1953, with Eiselen concluding that "the cost of the whole operation has already been more than recovered by the additional tax received, and in addition to the fact that we have achieved our primary goal with the operation, there is a bumper harvest of associated benefits, so that we are getting a good and sound mechanism without any cost."

"Instelling van persoonbewyse vir die Bantoe," no date and Van Heerden "Bespreking oor Arbeidsburos," 21 October 1952.

[6] CAD NTS 9793, 1027/400(9) Matters referred to U/S (E.A.) Central Reference Bureau. Eiselen to Verwoerd, 6 February 1954.

[7] CAD NTS 9794, 1031/400 Discussions between Senior Officers Head Office. 1951-4. Lemmer, L. J. "Naturelle (Afskaffing van Passe em Koordineering van Dokumente) Wet, 1952, 26 October 1953, and "Samespreking tussen Senior Aptenare", 26 Oktober 1953.

Even at this early stage there were some pertinent objections, of course, but they are significant primarily for the manner in which they were dismissed. The liberal Durban city Native Affairs Manager, Eric Havemann, characteristically queried the sudden death of the written contract, arguing in the precise terms used by his predecessors that it was essential for the "protection of the natives' interests." Unlike Turton, and the others in Pretoria, Havemann had a close understanding of the persistent conflict between African workers and their employers, and of the utility of the written contract in resolving these conflicts. "This office deals with between 200 and 300 complaints per month from Natives alleging breach of contract on the part of their employers," he wrote to his local Commissioner in July 1953, "a task rendered straightforward by the fact that all contracts of service are registered only if the Native agrees with the terms thereof."[8] Under the new system there was no possibility of any official sanction of the verbal contracts entered into between white employers and their African servants, and not even the pretence that consent on the part of African workers was of any consequence. In his response on Turton's behalf, Lemmer made clear the newly diminished status of contract in the technocracy of Apartheid. The key ideological function of the contract—that it gave Africans the (illusionary) choice of the terms of their labour and allowed the state to act as the arbiter of this consent —was "outweighed by the benefits such as the saving in man hours of labour, the saving of inconvenience to employers and employees, and the reduction in the number of documents to be carried by the Native." Lemmer supplemented this bureaucratic justification, with another, as manifestly dishonest as the former was crudely pragmatic. "The exclusion of the particulars of service contracts from reference books was the result of the desire expressed by the Natives consulted in the Chief Native Commissioners' areas throughout the union," he lied, "that such particulars should not be included as their inclusion would diminish the Native's bargaining powers in regard to wages." Turton's original proposal, you will remember, had included a conscious dismissal of the continuing significance of the contract. And his rejection of the legal cornerstone of the segregationist period was, undoubtedly, one of the reasons why his plan was so attractive to Verwoerd.[9]

What were the implications of the new regime for African workers? This is a question that hangs over this entire discussion, and it is not easy to answer briefly. There were some immediate effects. The buildings that combined the offices of the Labour Bureau and Influx Control officials in all towns became the pivot of working life in the Apartheid period. It was to these offices, usually the Arbeidburo, that all workers, including women for the first time after 1958, had to report on entering an urban area, and it was in here that workers received permission to seek work (or not). It was in the ArbeidBuro that workers encountered the medical regulations and humiliating inspections required by particular local regulations. And it was the ArbeidBuro that served as the pivot for the registration of work. Regardless of the specific political interventions of individual managers, the general force of the law, and policing, placed all workers at a massive new disadvantage in relation to their employers. In most respects it was not the working effects of the Bewysburo that mattered most for individual workers. The most appalling consequences, and the full answer to this question, require us to examine the effects of its failure.

Problems

The first signs of trouble in the co-ordination of the Bewysburo came just weeks into the program of delivery. In the first document to lay out the manpower requirements of the fingerprinting scheme, L J Lemmer presented some basic arithmetic to his superiors in June

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[8] CAD NTS 1027/400 Naturelle Sake. Bewysburo (b), Havemann, E. to Native Commissioner, Durban, "Department of Native Affairs: Consolidated Standing Circular Instructions re Population Registrations of Natives," 27 July 1953.

[9] CAD NTS 1027/400 Naturelle Sake. Bewysburo (b), Lemmer, L. J. for Director, Central Reference Bureau to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietermaritzburg. "Native Affairs Code-Population Registration of Natives," 16 November 1953.

1952. Given the "recognised fact that no person can [reliably] complete more than 30 fingerprints per day," he estimated that the new Bewysburo would require 66 "finger print experts" just to keep up with the natural growth in the pool of 16 sixteen year olds. An additional group of at least ten experts would be required for "court evidence, the investigation of deserters, false documents, and impersonation." Aside from mentioning that there would be a two-year lag between the registration and the processing of finger prints, and offering some ominous warnings about the rate of processing currently underway at the Native Affairs Finger Impressions Record Department, Lemmer was remarkably silent about the most important task ahead of them, the processing of the fingerprints of the 2,500,000 million adult African men (and a similar number of women) who were to be issued Reference Books. Nor do his superiors—Turton, Eiselen and Verwoerd—seem to have paid any attention to the arithmetic implications of Lemmer's report.[10] Nor did they consider the particular staffing problems associated with finding, and retaining, finger print experts.

One of the startling ironies of the early Apartheid period is that the massive reawakening of the state's interest in Native Affairs actually weakened its ability to act. As the new policies began to orient much of South African municipal and industrial life around the complex set of laws and regulations, so the NAD had increasing difficulty finding and retaining suitable candidates for its burgeoning bureaucracy. [11] The new Bewysburo was plagued by staff shortages almost as soon as the registration campaign got underway. By the start of 1954 Turton had £500,000 in increased taxes to his credit as he started to lobby the Public Service Commission for five additional mobile teams to begin the task of distributing the books in Natal, and for twenty additional clerical workers to process the work of the new teams.[12] "I am desperate," he wrote to a friend in the Ministerial offices in March, "I have had wonderful co-operation from … Govt , Urban Areas, Brand, etc but what staff branch has [done] to this Bureau will make your hair stand on end." And he appealed for an opportunity to state his case in person to the Minister.[13] Having built a case for the Bewysburo on the basis of its parsimony, he now found himself in the impossible position of having constantly to defend his budgeted complement, and lobby for its expansion. As the staffing crisis continued Turton was to be hoist by his own cost-cutting petard.

On the first anniversary of the Dompas campaign, with well under a million books issued, the first signs of very serious trouble began to appear. Turton's immediate supervisor, the C A Heald (the Undersecretary for European Areas), paid a visit to the Bewysburo in May 1954 and discovered that the filing and processing of the records of tax payments and movements coming in from the regions had fallen behind by "at least a month." Without up-to-date records in these two areas the Bewysburo was incapable of its essential functions: calculating outstanding tax, issuing writs to tax defaulters, determining the current location of individual workers, and determining the status of individual African voters for the remaining Senate representatives (which were determined by tax payments). The lag in processing, Heald believed, was prompted by the failure to fill the posts of two "Women Supervisors" and eight Assistants, frozen by the Staff Branch of the NAD in April. He demanded that the posts be reinstated, but his effort had little effect. The processing of the tax and movement records of the Bewysburo was never again up-to-date. The great avalanche of records pouring in from the districts simply overwhelmed the clerical capacity of the Bureau in Pretoria.[14]

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[10] CAD NTS 1027/400 Naturelle Sake. Bewysburo (b). Lemmer, L. J. "Native Affairs Memo: Sentrale Vingerafdrukburo," 10 June 1952.

[11] Evans *Bureaucracy and Race* 73-89.

[12] CAD NTS 9794, 1027/400(13) Central Reference Bureau. Forging of Reference Books. Director, Central Reference Bureau to Secretary of Native Affairs. 18 January 1954

[13] CAD NTS 9793, 1027/400(9) Matters referred to U/S (E.A.) Central Reference Bureau. Turton to "Cecil." 10 March 1954

[14] CAD NTS 9793, 1027/400(9) Matters referred to U/S (E.A.) Central Reference Bureau. Under Secretary (European Areas) to Under Secretary (Staff and Administration), "Central Reference Bureau: Staff." c. May 1954

As the number of mobile teams working in the countryside increased from eight to twelve, and the total of registered workers crept towards the 1 million mark in the middle of 1954, an entirely unanticipated set of archival effects began to assert themselves in the Bewysburo. The number of population registration cards being returned from the district offices of the NAD on a monthly basis exceeded the number of books being issued. By July 1954, some 80,000 of these "C26" cards were arriving every month. The backlog of unprocessed cards duly grew to match the number of books being issued. Simply preparing the new C26 cards in anticipation of the issuing of the books required the labour of three clerks. And, as Turton had blithely proposed in his original plan, the Bureau had to take on the ask of providing the tax payment details on the Court writs that began to arrive en masse. (In three weeks in August, 1954, the Bureau had to process 17,000 of these writs.) The increased pool of registered bearers of the book resulted in one other unanticipated difficulty: applications for the issue of duplicated books to replace lost, stolen, or abandoned books began to demand an increased share of the clerical capacity of the Bureau. These duplicate applications, numbering around 3,000 per month by the middle of 1954, imposed a vastly more complex processing task because they had, first, to be checked against the original application. In addition to the 15 mobile teams in the field, Turton now requested the staff size of the Tax and Movement section be doubled from 35 to 67 clerks. His request said nothing about the prospects for the Finger Print section. Indeed, from the beginning of the year Turton had been attempting to prepare his supervisors for the claim that the Bureau was viable in the absence of an adequately functioning Finger Printing section. With less than a quarter of the total male population registered, and the pace of registrations slowing in the countryside, the Bureau that Eiselen had described as "a sound mechanism without any cost" was beginning to look berserk and expensive.[15]

[At this point Turton was transferred and Ramsay took over as Director of the Bureau]

On the highveld the opposite process was underway, as the individual Mobile Teams had to work harder and longer to register diminishing numbers of remaining workers. Once the registration of workers in the large industrial employers of the Witwatersrand was completed, teams were sent into the countryside of the Transvaal (and then Natal) to register workers on farms, the small towns and the reserves. The average monthly registrations had peak at 80,000 in July 1954. Thereafter, even as more and more teams were despatched to the field, the rate of registrations slowed. By the end of February 1955, with fourteen teams in the field, the average number of registrations had declined to 61,000 per month. Yet more troubling was the fact that two full years into the project, only the Transvaal, a few districts in Natal and one or two towns in the Free State had been covered. Just 1,3 million African men had been registered, but that seemed a strangely large proportion of the estimated 2,5 million African men that the NAD estimated lived throughout the country. The great scientific success of the factory registrations of 1953 had begun to dissolve into the chaos of registering the thinly scattered, mobile populations in the countryside.

I must, alas, stop here. I'll do my best to complete the story of the disintegration of the Bewysburo, and to provide some of the political and theoretical implications of the Dompas catastrophe, in the seminar.

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[15] CAD NTS 9793, 1027/400(9) Matters referred to U/S (E.A.) Central Reference Bureau. Brand, G. A. Hoofclerk, Bewysburo, to Director, Sentrale Bewysburo, 18 August 1954 and Director, Central Reference Bureau, Native Affairs Department to Heald, C. A. Undersecretary, European Areas, Department of Native Affairs. Central Reference Bureau – Staff, 31 August 1954. CAD NTS 9794, 1027/400(13) Central Reference Bureau. Forging of Reference Books. Director, Central Reference Bureau. "Mobile Teams for the issue of Reference Book", 18 January 1954