John Cartwright

THK role and use of Afrikaners at the University of Stellenbosch is currently being squeezed to the margins, for reasons that I find shallow, short-sighted and unconvincing. There is more at stake here than merely parochial interests. Here is my take on this matter of mother-tongue education.

I arrived at the University of Stellenbosch in January 1965 to take up my first academic post, as a lecturer in the Department of English.

I had become familiar with — and not infrequently engaged in — the very familiar atmosphere of UCT, my first alma mater, and was deliberately looking for a more challenging environment. As it happened, a vacancy had sudenly arisen at Stellenbosch, where a young lecturer from England had made the mistake of dealing, as a critical exercise, with explicitly political material as part of the "Engelskies" course. Upset students whitened to upset parents, who took their worries to the Rector, and

that was the end of the Engelsman.

What he had not realised was that you don't have to "talk politics" in order to cultivate critical thinking — Shakespeare, Jane Austen or Robert Frost will do just as well, if not better, because they are rooted in deep cultural awareness and they delight in the creative and subversive dance in which language performs.

I welcomed the opportunity to come to Stellenbosch (although a few compiament, supposedly liberal English-speaking of my acquaintance regarded this as perverse).

I had become familiar with — if not fluent in — Afrikaans through many hiking and mountain climbing trips in the platteland.

It had already been moved by Adam Small's Kinars my brus, and I soon bought Breyten Breytenbach's Die ysterboek. Eerstewet. There was a vigorous undercurrent of scepticism, even scorn, for the apparuchts of the National Party, the Broederbond and the church who were deliberately trying to promote and enforce a monopoly over Afrikaners and Afrikanerhood that was

BREYTEN BREYTENBACH

pressure to water down the presence of Afrikaners at Stellenbosch.

First, Afrikaans is singled out because of the irrational prejudice of guilt-by-association that still lurks in the minds of people who either were genuinely hurt under apartheid or who, while in some respects benefiting from apartheid, were happy to push the blame onto a convenient scapegoat.

The absurdity of this view, and the remarkable irony that English, the arch-colonial language of our times, is to be preferred, has been noted before in this debate, but I have little doubt that a lingering undercurrent of this alleged reparations stain is one element in the

confident cultural/linguistic vision that could have put plans in place that would balance fair access and quality of education. Instead, it has allowed "the market" to speak, as if that mythical entity is a panacea, to have unbridled de-

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