

# *Horwood the vindictive: an absurd fracas*

*by Dan Remenyi*

The mid-1960s was a grim time in South Africa for anyone who had any sense of social justice and who was not a supporter of the National Party (NP). The influence of apartheid was in the ascendant and the voices of those who perceived apartheid's basic injustice were being either marginalised or in some cases banned from public life under punitive legislation.<sup>1</sup> Having any views that suggested support for what we call today basic human rights was largely toxic. It was often said that anyone who showed any concern for the plight of any group other than the whites was motivated by communist sympathies and the Communist Party was one of the nation's greatest enemies. The Rivonia Trial, which ended in 1964, had seen the removal of most of the distinguished black leaders through long-term prison sentences and the first steps towards the farcical bantustan policy were gaining traction. When the NP government went to the polls in 1966, it once again extended its support in terms of votes cast and number of seats won. There was no relief from the onward march of apartheid on the horizon. Furthermore, in 1966 after the assassination of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in the House of Assembly, the country faced the premiership of the hardline John (B.J.) Vorster who had been the feared minister of police.<sup>2</sup>

On 1 January 1966, the Council of the University of Natal allowed Professor Owen Peter Faure Horwood to assume the office of principal and vice-chancellor. It was clear to many that he was not a suitable person and his appointment as principal and vice-chancellor was breathtakingly inept. It is way beyond the scope of this note to provide any detail of the appointment process leading to Horwood's selection, but it is worth pointing out that he received the support of only 25 of the 69 members of the university's Senate. On the occasion of Horwood's acceptance by Senate there had

been a large number of apologies for absence.<sup>3</sup> Another remarkable revelation in Bill Guest's history of the University of Natal is that E.G. Malherbe, the outgoing vice-chancellor, had been told by Walter Adams of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, where Horwood had worked previously, that he was

'selfish, crudely ambitious and on occasion, frankly, dishonest'. Prior to his taking this ultimate high office, Horwood had been professor of Economics at the University of Natal and Guest reports that there were expressions of relief from Horwood's former departmental colleagues at his departure as their head.<sup>4</sup>



For most purposes, the student body as a whole at this time could best be described as politically apathetic. There was very little political debate with most whites feeling comfortable with the prin-

ciple of segregation. The differences between the white political parties were focused on implementation of segregation. Some issues such as academic freedom inspired the university community to clearly express its disapproval of apartheid. Sometimes students turned out for protest marches, but these did not amount to much. The academic work required to obtain a degree was substantial and the time not devoted to studies most students focused on either sporting activities or socialising in one form or another. There were not many exceptions to this sporting/socialising orientation but one was the activities of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). One of the key objectives of NUSAS was to try to keep alive a spirit of goodwill towards all students in South Africa, black or white or others. In fact, NUSAS was not especially effective in achieving this objective, but it did clearly annoy the National Party government which was evidenced by their banning of the NUSAS President Ian Robertson. At that time in South Africa even relatively minor political activism was enough to have one branded as politically

left wing and maybe even extreme. In reality, many NUSAS members would have best been described as centre-left. As chairman of the local NUSAS committee I was also at one point an office bearer in a youth group of the Progressive Party (PP), which in international terms would have been seen as distinctly right-wing. For example, the PP called not for a one man one vote solution to South Africa's political quandary, but for a qualified franchise.

Only a small number of students took any interest in the operation and management of clubs and interest groups that lay behind the sporting and social affairs of the campus. The students who took an interest in these issues mostly constituted the Students Representative Council (SRC) that was elected annually by the whole student body. There were about fourteen places on the SRC and the general apathy frequently resulted in there being no more than sixteen or seventeen candidates in the election. There were several reasons why some individuals offered to serve on the SRC, one of which was to gain experience in the management of some of the aspects of student affairs. Being a member of the SRC also meant that one gained skills in committee procedures and presenting a case to one's peers and the student body in general. It was generally accepted that the SRC had a significant role to play in the daily life of the campus and that its views should be considered by the university administration. The SRC felt that in some instances it was actually in control, in a sense, of some aspects of the daily lives of students. I stood for election to the SRC in 1966 and 1967.

It is hard to know exactly how and when the trouble with Horwood started. The animosity between him and some of the students became obvious when a small cartoon appeared in a student literary publication. The small black and white line drawing, which was only about four inches by two inches in size was of a large man in a black academic gown. The gown was clearly that of an undergraduate. This image showed the man holding a scroll in one hand with BComm. written

on it.<sup>5</sup> The name of the character represented in the drawing was positioned under the drawing but written upside down. The image in the cartoon represented the face of Horwood reasonably well but there is little doubt that the effect of the drawing was not in any way flattering. The short academic gown jumps out of the drawing at the eye making the figure look ridiculous. It was also suspected that the principal was sensitive about his lightweight qualification, so the intention of the cartoon was to say the least hostile.

I doubt if any student in that epoch understood academic qualifications and what might be necessary for appointment as the principal and vice-chancellor of a substantial university such as the University of Natal, but almost every student leader I encountered would admit that the then current incumbent was grossly underqualified, at least in an academic sense, for the post he now held.<sup>6</sup> In general the student leaders certainly had an extremely poor attitude towards the university principal and vice-chancellor. It was also said that a material number of the senior academic staff did not think highly of Horwood either.

Being a member of the SRC was an interesting experience. There was a wide range of opinion, a wide range of energy for the tasks involved, and a wide range of ability to argue a case and win an argument. There was no political allegiance or demarcation among members of the SRC, although it was obvious which members showed interest in supporting the objectives of NUSAS which were controversial on the UND campus. The SRC had an executive in the form of a president, a treasurer and a secretary etc. and it worked very closely with the editor of *Dome*, the student newspaper.

The deliberations of the SRC were sometimes long-winded and there was often not any great consensus. We were all individuals and we did not necessarily like each other or each other's views on many matters. Nonetheless, we functioned effectively enough.

During 1966 and into 1967 a number of incidents occurred that brought the SRC and the university administration into uncomfortable



dispute. I do not recall the nature or the topics of these incidents, but by 1967 the SRC had a list of about ten instances where it was believed the university administration had interfered unnecessarily in an SRC decision. The issues involved were minor and in retrospect amounted to nothing more than bickering about trivia. There was nothing that a little goodwill would not instantly have resolved. However, a consensus grew among some of the students that the problems were due to the direct intervention of the principal and that Horwood was undermining the traditional function of the SRC.

Meetings were held with the university administration, but no progress was made in resolving any of these issues. Guest points out that the students complained that their 'leaders were being treated like school prefects and student opinion [was] largely ignored'.<sup>7</sup> As a result, a number of us on the SRC began to feel that the purpose of that institution had been undermined by Horwood who wanted his direct authority stamped on every facet of university life and we therefore resolved to resign our positions on the SRC. From my point of view this was in effect our giving up and saying that Horwood had won and could do what he liked. However, we did not get the chance to resign. Without any warning, Horwood suspended the SRC, closed down *Dome*, and banned six members of the SCR, of which I was one, from coming onto the campus unless specifically to attend lectures. This was completely unexpected and had a chilling effect in a number of ways.

At the same time Horwood alleged that the trouble on the campus was the result of the actions of 'politically inspired troublemakers' and that they had 'the set purpose of inciting students to defy authority'. This false accusation was simply stunning. There was absolutely no truth in it whatsoever. By having these accusations published in the local newspaper, the *Natal Mercury*, Horwood was attempting to inflict maximum damage on the characters, reputations and good names of the six students he banned. The idea that we were 'politically inspired troublemakers' was picked up in several quarters and was on some occasions elaborated on and exaggerated to the extent that I heard one source say we were communist sympathisers. Besides potentially damaging careers, these accusations in the climate in South Africa at that time were actually dangerous to the six individuals involved.

For some reason, at that time I was not at all worried about these scurrilous lies, but I now think that I should have been much more concerned. I felt that the lies were

too preposterous to be taken seriously. However, my father was quite concerned that as I was a naturalised South African born in Ireland, I could be deported. Fortunately, this did not come to pass.

This precipitous action of Horwood's was in fact act one in a ludicrous farce engineered by the university administration that lasted several weeks. First, the administration felt that it needed to serve a banning order on each of the six of us individually and this job was delegated to an individual who clearly did not know or recognise us personally. He had the problem of walking around the campus trying to find us. After being alerted to this, I kept a look out for him and avoided his finding me for a week after which I decided that I had better avoid any accusation of trying to frustrate Horwood's intentions and gave myself up. I simply walked up to him and introduced myself. He was a pleasant enough individual who handed me an envelope and asked me to acknowledge receipt. For me, the ban amounted to the fact that I couldn't use the library or the refectory in the Student's Union for lunch.

The second act in the farce was the instruction issued to the six of us to attend a disciplinary hearing. The banned students were required to present themselves before what appeared to be an opportunity for Horwood to personally accuse them of various transgressions. We were called to a room adjacent to the Principal's Office and were introduced to a panel of three elderly professors that included Professor Elizabeth Snedden, known as an enthusiastic supporter of Horwood;<sup>8</sup> Professor Tom Kelly known to be conservative in his views; and one other whose name I do not recall. Each student was handled separately, one at a time. Only one of us had legal representation and on reflection I suspect that this lawyer may have saved all of us in the end by making it clear to the university that there would be legal consequences arising from our treatment. Horwood acted as a prosecutor. I don't remember the detail of the several accusations, but I do recall Horwood's continual declaration that I had 'brought the good name of the university into disrepute'. This was indeed a nonsense accusation. In fact, Horwood's behaviour towards the SRC, *Dome* and the six students was what had brought the good name of the university into disrepute. It was patently clear to me that Horwood wanted all of us to be expelled. For most of us these hearings did not last long. It took less than an hour to listen to the accusations and for us to defend ourselves. The three members of the disciplinary panel did not play much of a role in the proceedings. Horwood had them

there as showpieces, i.e. to show that he had support for his accusations against us. There was no substance to any of the accusations made by Horwood, but that fact was not necessarily going to protect us from being sent down. We finished that day with some concern for our future involvement with the university.

The third step in this saga was a gathering in the Council Chamber some weeks later. This meeting appeared to have been convened by Lawrence Robinson, the chairman of Council. My district impression was that clearly Horwood's case against us was so weak that he couldn't even get his friends to condemn us and send us down. So, he had to make peace with us. At this meeting we were told that the principal was prepared to be magnanimous and allow us to continue as students, provided we agreed that we would do nothing to 'bring the good name of the university into disrepute'. So the main accusation was still in place but now it was not serious enough to ban us or send us down. But from our point of view there was nothing more we could do and had to face the fact that we were not in a position to fight the university.

We were all relieved and in principle had no trouble in signing the documents presented. However, just before we actually signed it occurred to me that it was necessary to protect ourselves by having inserted in the text we were asked to sign that this declaration was not to be construed as admission of any guilt for anything that was alleged against us. We left the Council Chamber that day deflated, but pleased that this horrid episode was over.

But it wasn't entirely over for us and there was to be a Council committee of inquiry. In addition it was clear to me that Robinson, who was not an academic, but a friend of Horwood's and I wondered about his position on the Council. Quick reference to the university calendar revealed that he was a representative for Convocation.<sup>9</sup> A little more exploration uncovered the fact that his period in office was about to expire. I and a couple of others decided that he should have some competition for his seat on Council. Taking advice from some sympathetic members of staff we found a candidate to stand against Robinson and he lost his seat. This pleased us greatly. It was a blow to Horwood, while we saw the defeat of Robinson as a minor victory. Alas, Horwood co-opted Robinson back on to the Council where he continued to support the principal.

The committee of inquiry was chaired by Justice A.B. Harcourt. It was an extensive exercise that addressed many more issues than the fracas with Horwood and

it made a number of important recommendations with regard to several aspects of the functioning of the university. It reported to Council in June 1968. On the question of the Horwood versus students fracas, it found Horwood's abolition of the Durban SRC in 1967 was not legally competent. This term 'not legally competent' was legalese for the fact that Horwood did not have the authority to abolish the SRC nor the other actions he took against the students. It went on to say that the students whom he had suspended at that time were not in any way influenced by external political agitators and that they were by no means malicious in their intentions. Regrettably, Harcourt did not say that Horwood's remarks were on a number of occasions defamatory. It was too much to expect a Council inquiry to give the students an opportunity to claim some compensation.

It has been argued by some that the Harcourt report signalled to Horwood that his position at the University of Natal was not tenable in the long run. I am not convinced that this is correct, but I expect that the student fracas did demonstrate to him that his powers as vice-chancellor were not limitless and that this may have prompted him to look around for other opportunities. When he subsequently received a ministerial position from the National Party government the disgust of certain elements of the population to this appointment was clear in a commonly expressed jovial riddle. 'Who would follow a Trollip into the Cabinet?' and the reply was 'Only a Horwood!'<sup>10</sup>

What a storm in a teacup! But was it only that? Reflecting on the events described here it is easy to see it as a collision between relatively immature students and the ugly authoritarian personality of a man who was inappropriately offered the privilege of being the principal and vice-chancellor of an important university. There is little doubt that Horwood was fundamentally a reckless bully and a vindictive liar and that when he came across a group of people who were prepared to question his authority, he had no other response than to attempt to inflict maximum damage on them through a totally inappropriate response to the situation. In the event and through no fault of Horwood's, little or no lasting damage appears to have been done to any of the people at whom his invective was aimed.

Did this episode do any damage to University of Natal? Maybe not. There are people who would argue that it was not appropriate for students to be critical of the university's principal. To this I would reply that it depends on what grounds the students are being critical. The original criticism of Horwood may have



been inappropriate but Horwood quickly showed his unfortunate colours. Also, there are people who argue that there is no reason that a person even with only a simple bachelor's degree could not be perfectly well qualified to be in charge of a university. This I agree with in principle, but in practice higher academic qualification are indeed necessary for this job. Guest's history of the university shows that there was a substantially less than professional approach to the recruitment and appointment of Horwood as principal and vice-chancellor and it can even be argued that the university should never have had him as a member of faculty. Unfortunately, recruitment and appointments to high office at South African universities were to run into a number of similar problems in subsequent years. Like many other institutions, universities do not appear to be good at learning from previous mistakes.

At another level these events can be seen as yet another example of frustration displayed in various parts of the world by students who were, by and large, not being given a good deal by universities and whose opinions were largely ignored or discounted. The early 1960s, with a young and glamorous president of the United States of America, seemed to suggest a better future that even South Africans might enjoy, but by the mid-1960s that short-lived hope had been largely extinguished. The fracas between Horwood and the students can be seen as amounting to some students in their own small way trying to face down a growing worldwide trend to autocratic authority.

The Harcourt report reflected this in its suggestions to bring students' interests into a variety of university planning, operational and administrative processes. At the end of the day the fracas offered a judgment on Horwood and although his actions were not condemned as such it pointed out that much of the principal's behaviour was highly unsatisfactory. It is indeed shameful that the University of Natal ever appointed this man at all, never mind to the highest office it had to offer. It can be seen as a reflection of how careless the university was at this time; and despite all its protestation concerning the erosion of academic freedom just how little concern it really had for good governance. It is too easy to blame the flawed personality of Horwood and the lack of care Malherbe and others had for the future of the institution can be seen through the events that followed.

It may be regarded as the University of Natal's good fortune that Horwood remained for only five years before moving on to take up a post in the apartheid government.<sup>11</sup> It is true that no man is an island; and it is equally true that inevitably it takes more than one man to make a big mistake. This is the best that can be said about Horwood's time as principal of the University of Natal.

## NOTES

- 1 Google's Gemini estimates that more than 2 000 people were banned between 1950 and 1990. A banning meant forced to live under stringent conditions that included house arrest and having very limited contact with any persons other than their immediate family. It came very close to imprisonment without any cost to the State. Furthermore, a banned person could not be quoted in any part of the media. There was no appeal to a banning order and after it expired it was often renewed for another five years.
- 2 B.J. Vorster was actually minister of justice and as such the South African Police fell under his control.
- 3 One wonders what number of Senate members were required to constitute a quorum. But for a matter as important as the appointment of a principal and vice chancellor at least 50% support of the Senate should have been mandatory. It appears that Horwood's appointment was rushed through.
- 4 Bill Guest, *Stella Aurorae: The History of a South African University: Volume 2, The University of Natal (1949–1976)* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017): 367–383.
- 5 Horwood's Bachelor of Commerce degree was from the University of Cape Town and should have been abbreviated as BCom.
- 6 In the 1960s universities would generally not accept anyone for any academic position, even that of a junior lecturer, without an honours degree. A lectureship would normally require at least a masters degree and a senior lectureship required an applicant to hold a doctorate. It was extraordinary (although not unique) that Horwood was appointed to a professorship with only a B.Com.
- 7 Guest, *Stella Aurorae: The History of a South African University: Volume 2*: 373.
- 8 *Dome* (9 May 1969) reported on an article Sneddon had published in the *Natal Mercury* (25 April 1969). She had likened the principal of a university to captain of a ship who was entitled to unswerving loyalty; and described the SRC as discredited for 'activities so insane' that they were 'wide open for corrupt practices'. Unnamed SRC members, she said, were 'power seekers and exhibitionists'.
- 9 Convocation at the University of Natal consisted of the body of alumni and their interests were represented on the university's Council.
- 10 Alfred Trollip was minister of immigration and Indian affairs in Vorster's government in 1968. It was often reported that the National Party government considered it a coup to attract eminent English-speaking South African into its ranks.
- 11 Horwood was appointed to the national Senate of South Africa in 1970 and served in government as minister of tourism and Indian affairs and then trade and industry. He was also leader of the NP in Natal. From 1975 until 1984 he was minister of finance. He died suddenly in 1998 at the age of 81.