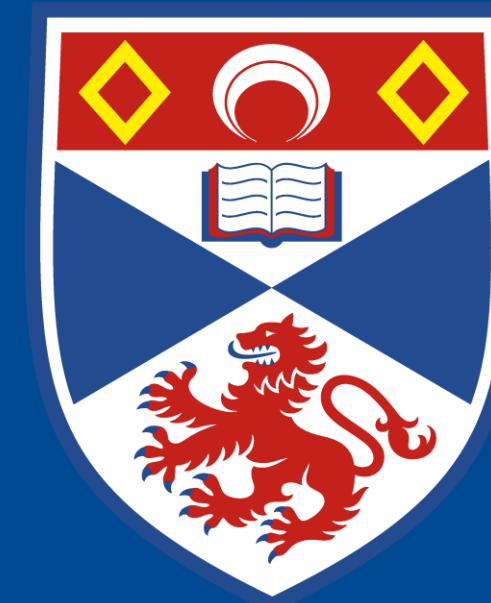


# Reconciling the Rainbow Nation

Amar Singh Bhandal



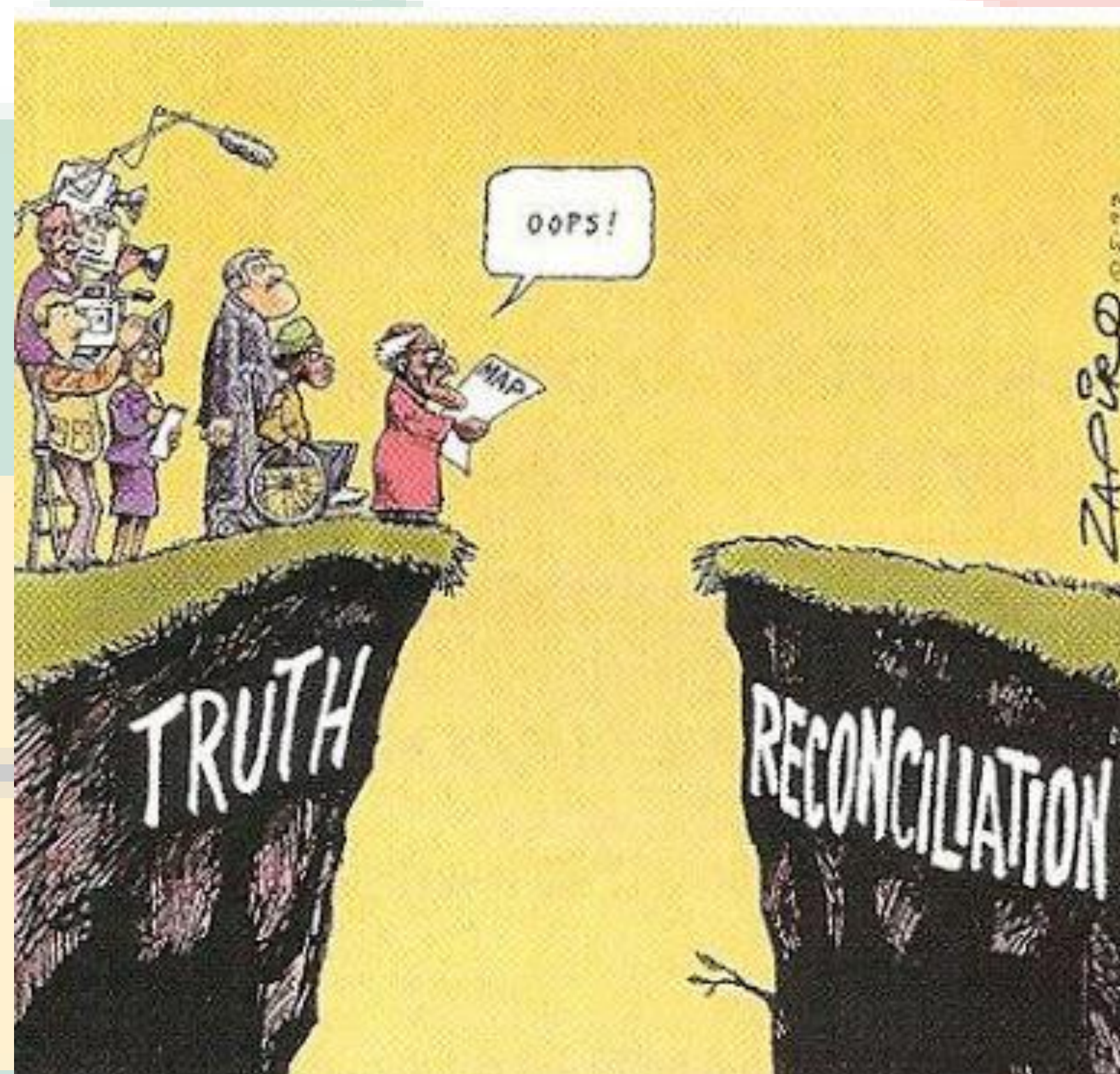
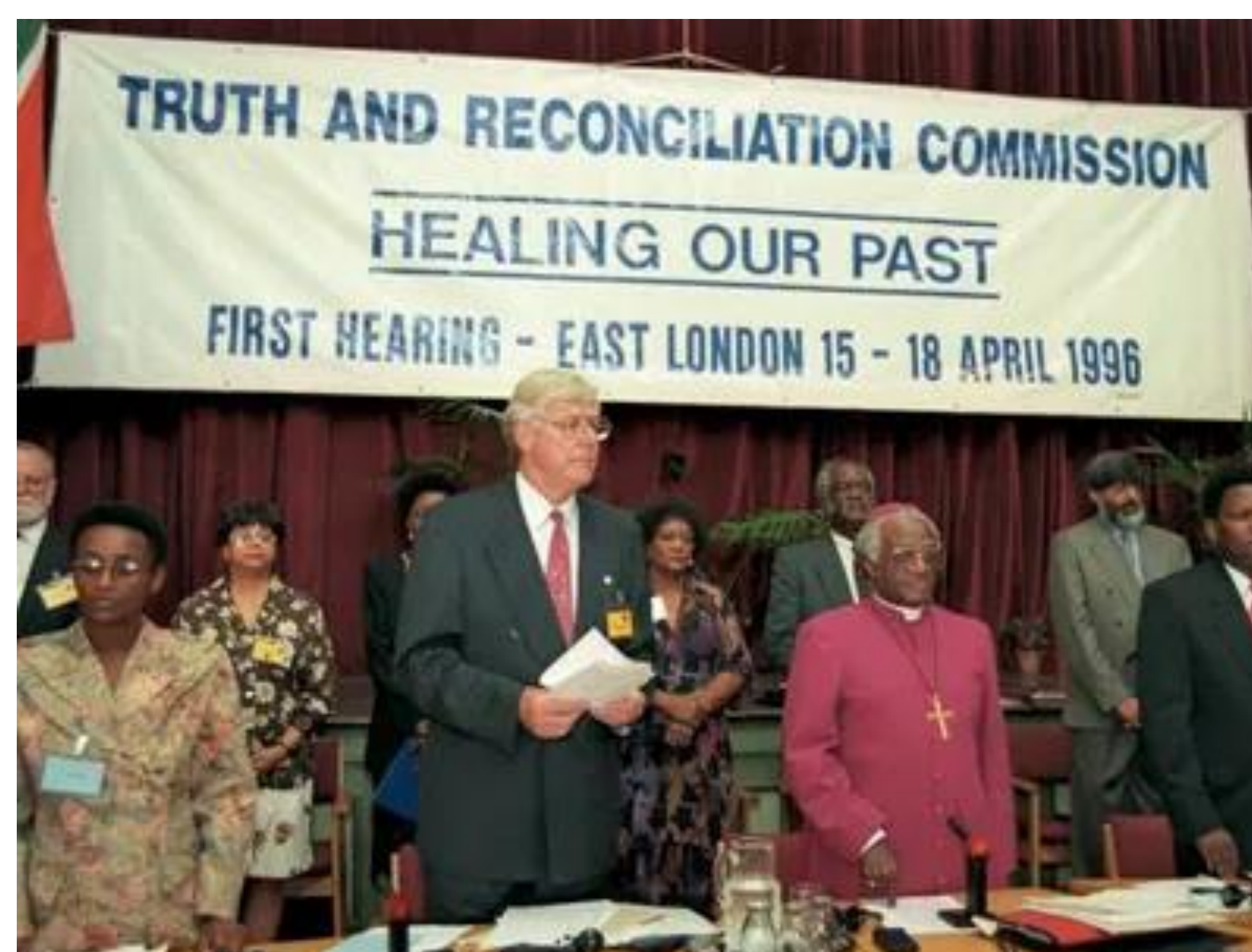
University of St Andrews

## The question of reconciliation

After transitioning to democracy in 1994, South Africa had to address:

- 1) Decades of human rights abuses by the Apartheid police state, responsible for the mistreatment and murder of thousands of South Africans
- 2) The legacy of black-on-black violence between rival political groups, including assassinations, murders, and mob violence

To establish the details of these crimes, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was tasked with investigating and questioning victims and perpetrators. Amnesty would be granted to many perpetrators if they told the full truth about their involvement.



## Findings: A failed Commission

Despite its significant success in identifying victims and establishing the details of many crimes committed during the Apartheid era, the TRC was a failure due to 3 key factors:

- 1) It was rushed: There was insufficient time to evaluate all allegations and deal with all amnesty applications fully
- 2) It was too reluctant to refer perpetrators to criminal courts: Some of the most heinous offenders were not prosecuted, for fear of "shaking the apple cart" (Botha)
- 3) Most crucially, it was politically biased: The ANC was not treated with the same level of scrutiny as others, and the commission was used as a political tool that was unwilling to question ANC members sufficiently

While all interviewees recognised some successes of the TRC, many highlighted these failures as detrimental. The TRC, in the eyes of Naidoo and Botha, had the potential to prosecute some of the more serious crimes and would not have threatened the fragile peace by doing so. Even very-right-wing white South Africans were shocked by the details of the crimes committed and would not have seen it as a betrayal of their trust to prosecute these individuals.

Prince Buthelezi and Botha argued that the ANC thought they were above the commission and were treated with a special degree of deference by the TRC.

## Fieldwork interviews

To determine how successful the TRC was, I interviewed, among others, 5 individuals who were key activists and leaders in different political parties. Their insights helped me understand the consequences of Apartheid on South Africans' attitudes, and helped me to reach a judgement on the TRC...

"I was probably a deep racist ... that took a huge effort to understand and break down mentally" – Neeshan Balton (Executive Director- Ahmed Kathrada Foundation)

"Apartheid ideology and schooling and residential segregation shaped our consciousness. If we had grown up in a different society we might have had a very different consciousness." – Ismail Vadi (Former Member of Parliament – ANC)

"Don't go for the foot soldiers, go for the real thugs, the guys who gave the orders." – Andries Botha (Former Member of Parliament – DA)

"Particularly on the side of the Apartheid state, not everybody came out and gave a full disclosure. Some of them could've been charged and put into prison." – Prema Naidoo (ANC politician & political prisoner)

"The TRC had only limited success in promoting reconciliation for it was politically-biased... some simply said what they thought the commissioners wanted to hear, to secure amnesty." – HRH Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi (Zulu Prime Minister; Inkatha Founder; senior South African politician)

## Consequences for South Africa

As every interviewee outlined, corruption and violence are becoming ever more common in contemporary South Africa, with racialised politics and violence a key part of this. Reconciliation is as important now as ever.

It is critical that the TRC is understood as a flawed body, not a perfect model for conflict resolution so that its mistakes are not repeated.

By understanding how the TRC succeeded but also how it failed, South Africans can look for ways to continue the eternal journey of reconciliation and work for a more harmonious future.

## References

Tutu, Desmond. "Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa". Encyclopedia Britannica, 17 Aug. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Truth-and-Reconciliation-Commission-South-Africa>. Accessed 24 August 2023.

Apartheid Museum. "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission". <https://www.apartheidmuseum.org/exhibitions/the-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-trc>

New York Times. "F. W. De Klerk, South African President who ended Apartheid, dies." <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/11/world/africa/fw-de-kerk-dead.html>

Shapiro, Jonathan (Zapiro). "TRC Cliff." May 1997.

Many thanks to Lord Irvine Laidlaw, whose generous sponsorship of my project, through the Laidlaw Foundation, enabled me to travel to South Africa and conduct research.

