The Kaplan Centre was established in 1980 under the terms of a gift to the University of Cape Town by the Kaplan Kushlick Foundation and is named in honour of the parents of Mendel and Robert Kaplan.

The Centre, the only one of its kind in South Africa, seeks to stimulate and promote the whole field of Jewish studies and research at the University with a special focus on the South African Jewish Community. The Centre is multi-disciplinary in scope and encourages the participation of scholars in a range of fields including history, political science, education, sociology, comparative literature and the broad spectrum of Hebrew and Judaic studies.

The Centre is engaged in both research and teaching and functions as a coordinating unit in the university. Its resources are used to invite distinguished scholars to teach Jewish-content courses within established University departments, to initiate and sponsor research projects, and to strengthen the university’s library holding of books, microfilms and archival sources. These research materials are made available to members of the University and to accredited visitors from the wider academic community.

The Centre awards a limited number of undergraduate and graduate scholarships as well as a limited number of research grants.

The Centre has a publications programme which brings out monographs and occasional papers. Lectures symposia and conferences are arranged under the auspices of the Centre. In some cases these are organised with the University’s Department of Adult Education and Extra Mural Studies, thereby serving the wider community.

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**New Survey on South African Jewry**

South African Jews, who number around 80 000, have much more confidence in their country than they did seven years ago, despite their concern about rising crime and corruption. This is the main finding of a 2005 survey conducted by the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research which was released this month. The survey follows the 1998 study by The Institute for Jewish Policy Research in London, in association with the Kaplan Centre, and an earlier survey in 1991. Summarising the main findings, centre director Milton Shain noted that “the most striking thing about Jews in the new South Africa is the ongoing cohesion within the community, the strength of its communal institutions, its attachment to Israel and its confidence in South Africa”.

He added: that the Jewish community “is also satisfied with their communal institutions and they appreciate the climate of religious tolerance and diversity within South Africa.”

Shirley Bruk conducted the survey, face-to-face interviews with a sample of 1 000 adults from Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria and Johannesburg, where ninety percent of the country’s Jews live. “The study shows the South African Jews maintain a strong Jewish identity in its varying forms. Religious observance is comparatively high, particularly among the youth,” she noted. Bruk said “Jews also have powerful bonds with South Africa. Very few Jews are planning to leave the country. This is a dramatic shift from what emerged in the 1998 survey.” However, the survey showed that respondents were concerned about the escalation of crime and corruption. Shain said the survey was important both for the Jewish and wider South African communities. “It serves both academic and practical purposes and helps the Jewish community plan for its future and tracks changes and tendencies over time. It’s also of interest to the government, which takes pride in the country’s cultural diversity and all it can for religious and cultural communities to flourish and feel comfortable.”

Key findings:
- South African Jews are clearly bound to their Jewish identity.
- Though they feel strongly Jewish, they also feel strong loyalty to South Africa. This sentiment has not changed noticeably in the past seven years.
- Most wanted to remain in South Africa, citing family bonds, emotional attachment to the country and financial and business careers as their main reasons.
- Crime and safety were still considered to be a problem. At least eight in every 10 respondents mentioned this factor.
- Only 8% of Jews had emigrated in the 24 years since 1982. Many had returned.
- Anti-Semitism was regarded as a minor problem, though 73% of the survey said it was a major problem “in the world generally”.
- Anti-Zionism was seen as more of a problem in South Africa (85% of respondents) than anti-Semitism and it is seen to be rising.

*Continued on following page*
In his widely praised albeit controversial book, Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC, William Mervin Gumede argues that opposition parties in South Africa ‘have been caught embarrassingly off guard’ due to the ANC’s ‘dramatic repositioning’. The African National Congress, he writes, ‘has become a party with more liberal values than the Democratic Alliance, even if that fact irks the DA and is fiercely contested by the ANC leadership.

Not so, according to the seasoned politicians, academics and political commentators … Reflecting on ‘Liberalism and its Challenges in South Africa’, Tony Leon, Hermann Giliomee, Lawrence Schlemmer, Helen Zille, Rhoda Kadahlie, Sipho Seepe and Frederik van Zyl Slabbert all to a greater or lesser extent questioned the ANC’s commitment to liberal democracy and identified important concerns for liberals in post-apartheid South Africa, among them the ANC’s centralisation of power and its intolerance of opposition.

The difference between the old order and now, explains Tony Leon, ‘is that the new South Africa is governed by a liberal democratic constitution. Whereas liberals once tried to replace the system of government, its institutions and its laws, we now find ourselves trying to protect them.’ In Leon’s view, neither ‘the National Party nor the ANC – with their nationalist ideologies, authoritarian structures and race-group consciousness – had much patience for the liberal principles of constitutional democracy.’ Indeed the ANC argues Leon, has spent considerable time demeaning liberalism, and defining it as a means of protecting white privilege.

Such accusations have not been problematic for the liberation movement to accept. After all, liberalism as an ideology has been suspect among black intellectuals and activists for decades, notwithstanding liberal tenets finding a place under the broad umbrella of ANC thought and policies. Challenged from the left by Marxists and from the right by Africanists, liberalism as a creed in South Africa has weak foundations, despite a fine constitution that compares favourably with any in the democratic world. ‘Anti-liberal sentiments have been carried into the new dispensation,’ writes Sipho Seepe. He contends that the ‘triumph of the liberal ideal is an outcome of the multi-party negotiations. It is a result of the political compromise arising out of a “balance of forces”’ and its future prospects are hardly guaranteed. Frederik van Zyl Slabbert made a similar point at the time of transition from the old to the new South Africa and continues to hold this view. ‘It is useful to remember that neither of the main antagonists ie the ANC or NP were frustrated liberal democrats at heart,’ he notes.

Notwithstanding its questionable pedigree in South Africa, liberalism as exemplified in the new constitution became in Tony Leon’s apt phrase ‘the midwife of the new South Africa’. But liberalism’s weak roots present major obstacles to its survival, both structural and ideological. These are cogently identified and supported with an array of sociometric evidence by Lawrence Schlemmer within the paradigm of the ‘one-party dominant state.’ South Africa, writes Schlemmer, ‘has never had any period of liberal government that could begin to shape the underlying norms of governance or the political culture.’ His survey data offers little cause for optimism, at least insofar as the liberal opposition is concerned. The ‘wider circles in the new African middle class are far from ready to support the opposition party, and the liberal opposition least of all,’ explains Schlemmer. In Sipho Seepe’s assessment, ANC dominance frustrates the cause of liberalism. ‘It uses its dominance to ride roughshod over the opposition,’ Terms such as ‘non-racialism, non-sexism and non-discrimination’ – hallmarks of South Africa’s new discourse – are really the means towards ‘the advancement of sectional racial demands in coded language,’ is the cynical view in which Hermann Giliomee puts it.

Despite some cause for cynicism, it cannot be denied that major liberal gains have been made and that these advances need to be protected. Alerted to the vulnerability of democratic regimes in the developing world, and perhaps prompted by controversies surrounding state interference in the judiciary at the time these essays were written, the contributors call on civil society to maintain a healthy vigilance. The monopoly of power has to be counter balanced by what Ernest Gellner describes as ‘a set of non-governmental institutions’. A liberal constitution does not in itself ensure a democratic future. Even the much vaunted Chapter 9 institutions – specifically included in the constitution to prevent what Rhoda Kadahlie refers to as the tyranny of the majority – do not guarantee a democratic future. Schlemmer already recognises a new system of domination that ‘is far more sophisticated and subtle than before, and it draws mercilessly on the effects of apartheid as justification, thereby thoroughly confusing most well meaning international agencies.’

Van Zyl Slabbert is quite correct to warn that in our quest to maintain an open society, we need to guard against the co-opting of democracy and its supporting institutions. One has constantly to monitor ‘who and how someone is appointed to the Judicial Services Commission, the Bench, the National Prosecuting Authority, the SABC etc. Democracies find it “extremely irritating” to have the will of the executive “frustrated by the Constitutional or Supreme Court, a Bill of...
myself having to watch my terminology far more acutely today than I did in the high apartheid era," complains Lawrence Schlemmer. ‘Short of crossing the fairly demarcated line beyond which people were banned, house arrested or imprisoned, one felt fairly free to condemn and ridicule the apartheid government.’ In a race conscious and deeply unequal society, being critical of the new government for criticizing rampant corruption is at the very least awkward.

‘Whites who speak out against corruption, centralization of power, and government are labeled enemies of black people who cannot come to terms with the transformation of the country,’ notes Seepe. Nonetheless, liberals have to confront power and defend the freedoms gained after generations of struggle. Invoking Thomas Jefferson, Seepe reminds us that ‘the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.’

Even if parliament functioned as a place for Socratic dialogue and honest debate, the complexities of a multi-cultural reality and identity politics pose massive challenges, not least for liberals. Can liberalism, asks Helen Zille, ‘speak truth to power’, to quote Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel. Is there a role for both styles of leadership ‘as long as both consider themselves ultimately accountable to the community on whose behalf they claim to speak.’

Striking a balance between individual rights and the rights of minorities is clearly a battleground for liberals in the near term. This is the challenge in advanced multicultural democracies and it will certainly exercise the minds of South Africans, explains Schlemmer. ‘The rights of people to speak their own languages in South Africa, for example, are not matched by commensurate opportunities created or allowed by the state.’ He believes ‘the general recognition of eleven languages was in fact a decision taken in bad faith.’ Much thinking needs to be undertaken with regard to minorities. We must not allow ‘the elite within minorities’ to undermine real minority interests, urges Schlemmer.

Not surprisingly, the legacy of the past weighs heavily on South African society. The country remains deeply divided: in Thabo Mbeki’s terms (building on Disraeli), ‘two nations’. Within this context it is easy to accuse the white minority of trying to protect its historic privilege; liberals have to grapple with such accusations. Put simply, the moral defence of liberty necessitates an engagement with the past and its legacies. Millions of South Africans are jobless, squatter camps are springing up, and evident deficiencies are the result of the new government or criticising rampant shortages. Group mobilisation, argues Giliomee, will not disappear, notwithstanding Marxist or Liberal theory, which minimises the force of ethnicity or race. ‘Racial preferences do not die out once democracy is established.’

Giliomee is particularly perturbed at the way in which ethnic leaders have been co-opted. Looking at the case of Jews and Afrikaners, he observes that the leaders of these groups ‘do not represent the community at government but rather the government at the community’. Giliomee accepts that some leaders have to interact with government – so-called ‘flatters’, in the words the political scientist Geoff Densch – but others have to ‘speak truth to power’, to quote Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel. There is a role for both styles of leadership ‘as long as both consider themselves ultimately accountable to the community on whose behalf they claim to speak.’

Rights, a Human Rights Council, or movements in civil society. Rather than abolishing the Constitution or significantly amending it, the executive simply co-opts these institutions by appointing compliant or subservient members to join them. Democracy, Slabbert points out, ‘is about constraining tyranny and the abuse of power.’ This theme runs through many of the contributors. But debohting society and achieving balance is no simple task; apart from institutions, individuals are also easily co-opted, creating an interlocking leadership cohort determined at all costs to maintain domination. ‘The trapping of power accompanied by tangible material benefits replaced political idealism,’ writes Seepe of the former ANC minister. ‘Those who ingratiate themselves to the leadership are rewarded handsomely.’

While recognising the importance of civil society as a bastion against the perversion of South Africa’s young democracy, and while being cognisant of the potential of power to corrupt, all contributors nonetheless unequivocally acknowledge that South Africa is an infinitely better society than it was before. But they do identify disturbing trends within the ruling alliance, including the centralisation of power and, in the words of the ANC’s journal Umnabula, the extension of control ‘over all the levers of power: the army, the bureaucracy, intelligence structures, the judiciary, parastatals, and agencies such as regulatory bodies, the public broadcaster, the central bank and so on.’ ‘Transformation’ and ‘representivity’ – two central and defining political buzzwords – can easily be manipulated and each provides an on-going challenge for those wishing to limit power. ‘Representative’ electoral majorities mobilised by the promises of left-leaning leaders, cautions Schlemmer, ‘can and often do invade individual rights in the name of the “people” or of mass needs.’ Such concerns remain abiding fears for liberals.

Examining the role of parliamentary opposition, Rhoda Kadahl questions the viability of true democracy as long as the ANC enjoys its huge electoral majority. She is also critical of the buzzwords ‘constructive opposition’ and ‘one party democracy’. The ANC, argues Kadahl, fails to understand the idea of a loyal opposition. ‘Holding the ruling party accountable is seen as a subversive activity that should be reigned in.’ Free and open debate – meaning ‘cross examination, adversarial but civilized dissent and frank Socratic discourse’ – is being sacrificed at the altar of ‘nation building’. All too often, critics of the government are ‘labeled unpatriotic or even treasonous, aggressive, arrogant, combative or opportunistic,’ writes Kadahl. A range of scandals, including the Arms Deal, the contravention of parliamentary ethics by ANC notables and the ‘Travelgate’ saga, all ‘demonstrate that a parliament is not fulfilling its role as an institution building’. All too often, laws and regulations made by the ANC that are ‘the order of the day in parliament.’ In short, parliament is not fulfilling its role as a watchdog. ‘The culture of fear suffocates political discussion,’ laments Seepe. ‘We are witnessing what we might call “the closing of the South African mind”,’ writes Leon.

More disturbingly, government supporters are all too willing to play the race card. ‘I find
inequality are just as much a threat to “negative liberty” as they are to “positive liberty” liberalism must strive to maintain a balance or a creative tension between the two,’ contends Leon. Schlemmer puts the question of balance rather succinctly, ‘In a liberal democracy, government is at most able to manage and coordinate social and economic behaviour, but it will control it only at the margins of non-destructive behaviour.’ He advises liberals to ‘do a great deal of thinking, focused on the challenge of empowering the poor to achieve self-reliance and dignity.’ They ‘should position themselves as the champions of ordinary people in their myriad communities, accepting their untidy diversity.’

Despite acknowledging the need for wealth redistribution, the contributors hardly grapple with questions of privatisation, land and labour policies. But Leon does make it clear that in principle liberals support ‘the Washington Consensus’ and ‘the key elements of policies like GEAR (growth, employment and redistribution).’ Had the lectures in honour of Helen Suzman been delivered subsequent to Thabo Mbeki’s release of Jacob Zuma from the deputy presidency, and had they been delivered in the context of what now appears to be a major challenge to Mbeki’s centrist economic policies, it is probable that greater attention would have been given to economic policies. But it was hardly necessary at the time, especially given the narrow gap in economic policy between the ANC alliance and the liberal opposition.

If one theme had to be identified in the lectures, it was the need to ‘speak truth to power’. In this regard all contributors appreciated and praised Helen Suzman as a role model. It had been ‘an honour’ serving with her in parliament, writes Slabbert. ‘She did so with great distinction and courage and I treat contemporary attempts to airbrush her contribution out of our recent past with absolute contempt. We have just survived 40 years of invented Afrikaner Nationalist History and it would be a travesty beyond comprehension if we now have to be subjected to a prolonged period of ANC invented history.’

In the years ahead it will not only be South Africa’s past that is contested. The liberal vision in itself will be challenged and tested. Those carrying its message have a formidable task. Liberals have to ensure – through South Africa’s civil institutions – that ‘an open society endures and grows’, writes Slabbert. Liberals do not have to be ‘whiners, wingers, badmouthers, denouncers, sulkers or pontificators; they can be activists as well,’ he maintains. The battle is on going. Liberal opposition, as Schlemmer concludes, ‘is in for a long, long haul.’

Faculty Seminar:
Professor Bernard Susser (Bar Ilan University) Fools Step In: Israeli/Palestinian Politics After the ‘Big Bang’, Tuesday 21 February, Beit Midrash.

Prof Leopold Scholtz (University of Stellenbosch and Die Burger) Germany’s handling of its Nazi past, 3.00 pm Wednesday 15 March, Beit Midrash.

Tim Hughes (South African Institute for International Affairs) Israeli elections 2006 – Kadima, but forward to where? Monday 24 April, Beit Midrash.


Prof Bernard Wasserstein (University of Chicago) Collaboration and Resistance in WW2: A Revisionist View, 3pm Thurs 8 June, Beit Midrash.

Professor Benny Morris (Ben Gurion University) The Maturing of Israeli Historiography, the New versus the Old Historians, 3pm Wednesday 30 August, Beit Midrash.

John Roth (Edward J. Sexton Professor of Philosophy, Center for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights at Claremont McKenna College) Ethics During and After the Holocaust, 1pm Tuesday 5 September, Beit Midrash.

Public Lecture:
Prof Mahzarin Banaji (Richard Clarke Cabot, Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard and Carol K. Pforzheimer, Professor at Radcliffe) and, possibly, Elizabeth Spelke (Marshall L. Berkman Professor of Psychology, Harvard University) Mind Bugs: The Psychology of Ordinary Prejudice Lecture Theatre 1E, Lesley Social Science Building – UCT (basement) 4 July.

Rabbi Jane Kanarek (Hebrew College, Boston) God’s Mercy is on All: Judaism and Feminism, 8pm Wednesday 16 August, Auditorium, SAJM.

Professor Benny Morris (Ben Gurion University) The End of the Peace Process, Camp David, July 2000, 8pm Tuesday 29 August, Israel Abrahams Hall, Gardens.

Sydney Bloch (University of Melbourne) Freud: The Godless Jew, 8pm, Monday 4 September, Auditorium, SAJM.

Shalva Weil (Hebrew University) Reclaiming the History of the “Black” Cochin Jews of Kerala, India, 8pm, Thursday 30th November, Auditorium, SAJM.