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STUDENT PROTEST AND THE WHITE PUBLIC IN DURBAN

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STUDENT PROTEST AND THE WHITE PUBLIC IN DURBAN

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A REPORT ON A BRIEF INVESTIGATION OF THE RESPONSES  
 OF WHITE CITIZENS IN DURBAN TO A PUBLIC PROTEST  
 ORGANIZED BY STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NATAL  
 IN JUNE, 1972.

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## INTRODUCTION

The past decade in South Africa has seen scores of public protests and demonstrations mounted mainly by white students at English language universities. These protests have been staged to publicise student opposition to various aspects of the policy of the present government, including alleged infringements of academic freedom by the government, restrictions placed on persons and organisations, detention without trial, and certain general aspects of government policy which the students have seen as discriminatory or unfair to black South Africans.

As is the case with criticisms of government policy in the English language press, these protests and demonstrations have appeared to many observers to have had very little effect on the attitudes and opinions of rank and file white citizens in the Republic, since vigorous public opposition to government policies among non-student whites does not appear to have increased as a result of student activity. This view is superficial and does not take account of the fact that the stand taken by the press and by students may have helped to maintain many political sentiments among those in opposition to the government; sentiments which might have otherwise become attenuated in the course of time. No systematic investigation of the effects of student protests has hitherto been undertaken, however, and the effectiveness and impact of student demonstrations is wide open to speculation and debate.

One not uncommon view of student protests is that the students, not only because of their style of protest, but also because of their casual dress and appearance, harm their own cause by alienating the majority of ordinary citizens. Another argument against student protests is that members of the public have become

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so accustomed to periodic outbursts of protest by students that the demonstrations fail to have much impact and are seen, in a sense, as part of the student way of life, like university Rag or intervarsity sporting events.

An accusation which has been levelled at student protesters, mainly by some politicians and other spokesmen sympathetic to government policies is that those English language university students who are politically active represent an extremist fringe, manipulated by outside political agitators. The assumption made in these accusations is that student protesters are a small minority, out of touch and sympathy with the vast majority of English-speaking students and especially with the public at large.

In order to examine some of these views in the light of empirical evidence, the first co-author of this report and a group of ten fellow students in the Faculty of Social Science approached the Institute for Social Research in June 1972 to seek advice on how to undertake a quick investigation of the effects of a student protest which was in progress at the time. The nature of the protest, the methods adopted for the study, and the results of the investigation are outlined in the report which follows.

THE STUDENT PROTESTS IN DURBAN OF JUNE 1972 AND THE EVENTS WHICH  
PRECEDED THE STUDENT ACTIVITY

In early May 1972, the President and Deputy President of the National Union of South African Students made a strongly worded call for unity amongst students to defend their rights against alleged threats from the government. Additionally, students at all English language campuses were asked to prepare for ten days of meetings, protests and pamphlet campaigns as a major part of a nationwide "Free Education" campaign. The campaign was to have the following issues as its major foci :

1. The temporary closing of the black University of the North (Turfloop) as a sequel to a highly challenging speech made by the student leader on the Campus, Abraham Tiro and demonstrations by students at the university in support of Mr. Tiro.
2. Recent action taken against individual student leaders throughout the country, involving the withdrawal of passports, and the expulsion from South Africa of a British editor of a student newspaper.
3. Inequalities in the educational facilities and opportunities for scholars and students of different races in South Africa.
4. The official "youth preparedness" programme which had shortly before been introduced into high schools, allegedly with the aim of, inter alia, encouraging loyalty to South Africa and support for South Africa's major traditional political policies and practices.

As a consequence of the events at Turfloop, student unrest developed at a number of black universities. White students at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand began demonstrating and holding debates and "teach in" sessions as part of the "Free Education" campaign. Fifty-one University of Cape Town students were arrested outside the Houses of Parliament while demonstrating in this connection.

On the 2nd June, a mass student meeting was held at the University of Cape Town followed by a stand by about 300 students on the steps of St. George's Cathedral. Fifty or more members of the South African Police baton-charged the student demonstrators after one student had been warned by the police about the use of a loud-hailer megaphone device. Some students were pursued into the Cathedral by members of the police force, others were reputedly injured by batons, and six students were arrested. On the 5th June about 5,000 students and up to 15,000 members of the public arrived outside the Cathedral for a further protest meeting. After various incidents involving police action and the banning of the meeting under the Riotous Assemblies Act, 68 people, including the Dean of the Cathedral, were arrested.

In Durban, meanwhile, student protests had already commenced with pickets in the City Gardens and a mass pamphleteering campaign. A citizens' meeting in the Durban City Hall was attended by 2,000 students and members of the public. Then the government authorities imposed a ban on all outdoor meetings of a political or protesting nature. Sixteen students at the Pietermaritzburg Campus at the University of Natal were arrested while holding an illegal meeting at the gates of the University. This event was widely publicised in Durban and presumably most members of the general public were aware of the fact that the Pietermaritzburg Campus is part of the same university as the Durban Campus.

METHODS USED IN THE BRIEF STUDY

When the group of ten students approached the Institute for Social Research and expressed their desire to undertake an investigation of public attitudes towards the student protests it was realised that interviewing would have to commence immediately and be concluded within a few days while the protests were in progress.

There was no time to select a random sample. Therefore a "quota sample" of Durban whites was constructed on the basis of census data and information obtained from various surveys. The quota sample is given in Appendix I to this report. Details are given of the original quota sample and the results obtained.

On collaboration with the Institute for Social Research, the students hurriedly prepared a brief interview schedule which is presented in Appendix II along with the covering letter which was shown to people interviewed. The students, all of whom were Social Science students, were briefed on the application of the schedule, and each was assigned a "quota" of subjects to interview, with sex, age, home language and broad level of social status specified as criteria for selection.

The students were instructed to interview members of the public at a variety of pre-selected points, including a range of residential areas, central city commercial areas, office areas and industrial areas. In this way it was hoped that bias in selection would be minimised. The students were also thoroughly briefed (indeed harangued) on the need to avoid bias in selection.

The students introduced themselves as follows: "I am not a student protester - I am from the Institute for Social Research and we are conducting a serious study of the views of people about

the current student events". In this way it was hoped that the student interviewers could distance themselves sufficiently from the protesting students in order not to obtain answers biased in favour of or against the student cause.

The rate of refusal and non-response was below 10% of the total number of people approached. Altogether 113 people were interviewed, who, on the face of it, represent a good cross-section of members of the general public in Durban. Interviews were completed within ten days.

It is fully acknowledged that the rather hurried methods adopted and the non-random nature of the sample add up to serious shortcomings in the research. Under the circumstances, however, nothing more adequate could be undertaken, particularly since the study had to be carried out in great haste, with no funds whatsoever. The results discussed below, for these reasons, must be regarded as tentative. However, it is unlikely that bias and error would have been such as to reverse or invalidate the very broad and general conclusions reached in the final section. Throughout the analysis only very substantial differences between percentages were taken as indicating a trend and all conclusions have been drawn very cautiously.



I. STUDENT MOTIVES AND JUSTIFICATION FOR PROTEST AS SEEN BY THE  
WHITE PUBLIC.

A clear majority of 72% of members of the public interviewed perceived the motives of students broadly as the students themselves might have presented them. Those interviewed had the impression that the student protesters were concerned about either racial equality in education, racial equality in regard to political rights, aspects of the government's policy considered to be discriminatory or inimical to the freedom of individuals, or about the police action on the Cathedral steps in Cape Town; the latter being a view held by some 20% of people approached. Of this latter group, roughly one-half saw the original cause as being connected with educational rights for blacks.

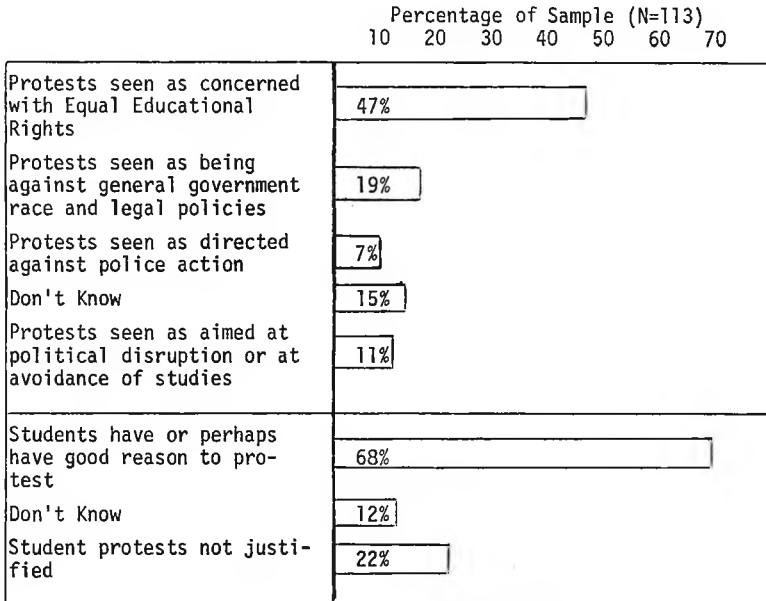
Only roughly 11% held negative views in regard to the motives of students; accusing the students of either attempting to cause trouble or political disruption, using protest as a means of avoiding studies or of not knowing why they were protesting. The remaining 17% of those interviewed claimed not to know why students were protesting.

When subjects were asked whether or not they thought students had good reason to protest, 56% replied that the student protests were justified. A further 12% were more cautiously positive in their appraisal of protests saying that students "perhaps" did have good reason to protest. On the other hand, 22% of people interviewed felt that the protests were not justified and a further 12% claimed not to know whether the protests were justified or not.

Here again, therefore, only a minority, albeit a substantial one, appears to see students protests in negative terms. The responses

just discussed are summarised in Figure I below.

FIGURE I



Younger people interviewed tended to be more likely than others to see the student protests in a positive light. The proportions of subjects stating that students definitely had good reason to protest declined with increasing age from 72% among the under 24 year olds to 43% among those 50 years and over. However, the highest proportion of people seeing the protest as completely unjustified was not in the very oldest group but in the age group 35 to 49 years.

When the influence of occupational status is considered, we find that the proportion of subjects seeing the protests as completely justified increases with ascending occupational status. At below

average levels of occupational status the proportion was 24%; among those with "average" occupations the proportion was 39%, while 64% of those with professional or managerial status saw the protests as fully justified. The same trend pertains when results are related to educational level. Among those with post-matriculation qualifications, 71% considered the protests fully justified compared with 53% among matriculants and 43% among those with less than Std. 10 qualifications. On the other hand and quite surprisingly, however, the proportion of subjects who regarded the protests as completely unjustified was highest not among those with the lowest education but among matriculants; 31% of whom saw the protests in purely negative terms.

## II. SOME POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF STUDENT PROTEST

Two questions were asked concerning the subjects' reactions to the police action on the steps of St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town and the subsequent wave of student protests. Firstly, the people interviewed were asked how they thought that their feelings in regard to students had changed since these events. Some 11% of respondents claimed that they had become more favourably disposed to students over the period or more aware of the unfavourable nature of the political situation. Only one or two people claimed to have become less favourably disposed to students.

When asked about any changes in their views concerning the police, as many as roughly 30% claimed to have lost sympathy for the police or for the system in South Africa, since the events in Cape Town. While 11% of respondents affirmed their support for the police action, the majority of these subjects had not necessarily changed views in favour of the police since the events referred to.

On the whole, the replies from our sample suggest that the

action of the police and subsequent protests by students had gained sympathy for the students rather than alienating the public. These results should be viewed with particular caution, however, since people's own perceptions of changes in their attitudes are not always reliable.

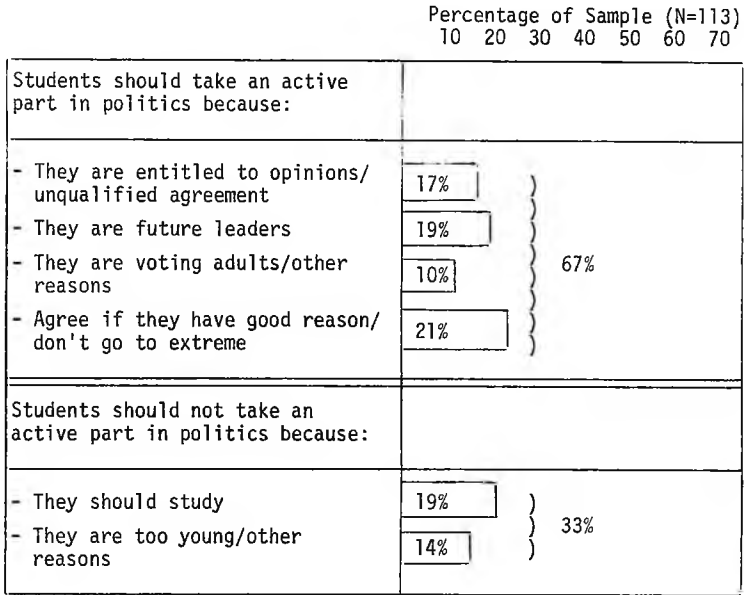
While it is extremely difficult to generalise, it can be said, tentatively, that those whose views had probably changed in favour of students tend to be English-speaking rather than Afrikaans-speaking, perhaps include more women than men, tend to be in the 25-34 year age group, tend to be in the middle to upper-middle occupational status groups and in the upper educational bracket.

### III. VIEWS IN REGARD TO STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AND ABOUT WHITE PARTICIPATION GENERALLY IN PROTESTS OVER THE TREATMENT OF BLACKS.

Two fairly general questions were asked in order to gauge public attitudes toward student participation in protests about broad political issues. The first question was whether or not students should be active in political matters. The second was whether or not whites should concern themselves with matters relating to black education.

A clear majority of 67% of people interviewed considered that students should take an active part in politics. Among 36% of people interviewed the endorsement of student participation in politics was unhesitating and unqualified. Some 33% of subjects felt that students should not be politically active. These responses are reflected in Figure 11 below

FIGURE II



In response to the second general question, an overwhelming majority of 76% of people interviewed felt that whites should voice protests about the education of blacks. Twenty-nine percent stated as reason the racial inequality in educational facilities and opportunity, and 21% said this because they felt that blacks were unable to voice their own protests. Among 11% the agreement was qualified by various cautionary statements about the form of protests. The remainder of the 76% agreed without qualification or major reason.

Some 22% of people interviewed felt that whites should not voice protests about black education, with somewhat less than one

half of these people claiming that blacks alone should concern themselves with problems in black education.

When the results in connection with student participation in politics are related to home language, we find that English-speakers tend to be far more favourably disposed towards student participation in politics than Afrikaans-speakers. While only 27% of English-speaking respondents felt that students should not participate in politics, the number among Afrikaans-speakers in the sample amounted to over 60%.

When these results are related to age we find the expected trend, except that the greatest opposition to student participation in politics is found in the 35-49 year age group, rather than among those older than 50 years.

There is a slight tendency for opposition to student participation in politics to be higher in the medium and lower categories of occupational status than in the professional and managerial category. Similarly we find greater opposition to student participation in politics among matriculants and those with less than Std. 10 than among the category of post-matriculants.

#### IV. SUMMING UP

Our results indicate fairly clearly that the majority of white adult citizens in Durban viewed the student poster and pamphlet campaign in a favourable light. Those who held positive views were most likely to be, but not exclusively, English-speaking younger adults with higher levels of education and occupational status. It is important to note that even among older members of the white public, very much fewer than five out of ten people saw the student

protests as unjustified or ill-natured. The same applies to the reactions of people of lower occupational and educational status. The overall impression is that only among Afrikaans-speaking citizens (of whom most are probably government supporters) is a majority opposed to student action of the type discussed.

Generally, it would seem that the events in Cape Town which we have described and the subsequent student protests had the effect of gaining sympathy for the student cause rather than alienating the white public. Here again, while those who appear to have changed opinions in favour of the students tended to be middle to upper-middle status English-speakers, there were many lower occupational status who responded favourably to the students' point of view.

In fact, other cross-tabulated results not presented suggest strongly that it is mainly those people who do not believe in protest by whites on behalf of blacks who were favourably disposed to the actions of the police and the authorities, or who became more favourably inclined towards the authorities in the course of the student protests. Similarly those whose views of students and their protests were negative or became more negative during the events were also generally the people who believed that whites should not concern themselves with the educational problems of blacks.

However, there was found to be an interesting exception to this general trend in that some 30% of those who held negative views of students nonetheless considered that whites should voice protests about black education. This may mean that the students might not have communicated their motives adequately to a section of the population who might otherwise have been receptive to the protest.

In fact, other results also might underline the importance of

more effective communication. Of the people interviewed who felt that students did not have good reason to protest, as many as 24% claimed not to know what the protests were concerned with, and 80% did not know what the students' "main reasons" were for protesting. Admittedly, this group of respondents might include many people whose preconceived views caused them to reject new information which would contradict their existing attitudes and stereotypes. On the other hand, however, this might mean that more intensive attempts by students to communicate their motives could sway opinions in their favour. The latter possibility should not be overlooked.

More generally, it seems that a clear majority of Durban citizens appear to have a favourable view of active student participation in politics. While once again those who support student political activity tend mostly to be younger English-speaking upper-middle status citizens, there are clear majorities among all groups in support of the idea of student action in political affairs, except among Afrikaans-speakers.

The largest proportions of people who opposed the student protests and who are against student participation in politics are to be found among Afrikaans-speakers (as mentioned previously) and also among people 35-49 years of age and among matriculants (as opposed to those with higher or lower educational attainments). Yet even among 35-49 year olds and among matriculants, a majority of people support both the specific protests we have described and student political activity in general.

Finally, our study contained one enquiry into the forms of protest which members of the public consider most desirable. Subjects were asked, if they considered protests necessary, to name the type of action of which they would approve. Only roughly 10% of those interviewed emphasised that they considered no form of protest



desirable. Some 23% of people interviewed favoured peaceful demonstrations which include marches, stands, vigils, banners and pamphlets. Only slightly fewer (i.e. 20%) suggested communicating with the public by means of meetings, debates, press releases, and other forms of publicity. Roughly the same number (19%) suggested representations and delegations to authorities, M.P.'s etc. Six percent mentioned petitions, and a further 12% did not specify any particular means of protest but simply emphasised that protests should be within the law and be undertaken for good reason. We did not get the impression that those mentioning a particular form of protest intended to exclude other forms of peaceful protest. Generally, the people interviewed who favoured action of some kind seemed to accept almost all forms of non-violent protest, provided it is well-motivated.

If one compares this range of suggestions with the type of protests in which students have engaged over the past decade, it would certainly seem, if our results are correct, that students and the general public have more in common in their thinking on such issues than many would have suspected. It may very well be that student protests, among other forms of communication and protest, have been important in shoring up democratic sentiments among rank and file members of the public who are opposed to policies which might perpetrate racial inequality or undermine the freedom of the individual and of universities.

The apparent lack of any significant positive response to student protests among Afrikaners in Durban - a local minority but a majority in the country as a whole - is the key to understanding why student political action has had no apparent effect in changing the policies of the authorities. Cleavages in white politics in South Africa are still related closely to language group identification, and while this pattern persists, most supporters of the present government are not likely to respond positively to the protests of

English language university students who are often regarded by Afrikaners as being the bearers of values inimical to the cultural interests of Afrikaners as a group. Until the great language divide can be bridged, English language university students will continue to talk past the most important section of the white voting public in South Africa as a whole.

APPENDIX I  
DETAILS OF QUOTA SAMPLE

QUOTA SHEET : INSTRUCTIONS

Find respondents who meet the requirements given below. Any combinations are possible, but you must not leave certain categories uncompleted and find that you have to scrap interviews.

If people refuse you should try to persuade them to complete the questionnaire. If not, make a note of the refusal with as many details as possible. This is very important.

Do not interview two people in the same household. Their attitudes are usually similar.

Try to obtain as wide a geographic spread as possible. You may interview people at work or at home.

<u>CONTROLS</u>	<u>ORIGINAL QUOTA</u>	<u>FINAL RESULTS OBTAINED</u>
Male	59 (49%)	55 (49%)
Female - Working - Non-Working	21 41 } 62 (51%)	58 (51%)
<u>TOTAL</u>	121 (100%)	113 (100%)
17-24 years	19 (16%)	18 (16%)
25-34 years	24 (20%)	19 (17%)
35-49 years	36 (30%)	41 (36%)
50 + years	42 (35%)	35 (31%)
<u>TOTAL</u>	121 (100%)	113 (100%)

<u>CONTROLS</u>	<u>ORIGINAL QUOTA</u>	<u>FINAL RESULTS OBTAINED</u>
English & Foreign	96 (79%)	90 (80%)
Afrikaans & Both	25 (21%)	19 (17%)
(Indeterminate)		4 (3%)
<hr/>		
TOTAL	121 (100%)	113 (100%)

Married	97 (80%)	90 (80%)
Unmarried	24 (20%)	23 (20%)
<hr/>		
TOTAL	121 (100%)	113 (100%)

A Upper-Middle Status	30 (25%)	28 (25%)
B Middle Status	56 (46%)	55 (49%)
C Lower/Lower-Middle Status	35 (30%)	30 (27%)
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TOTAL	121 (100%)	113 (100%)

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REPUBLIEK VAN SUID-AFRIKA

19.

TELEPHONE TELEFOON 35-9852

TELEGRAMS TELEGRAMME "UNIVERSITY"

OUR REFERENCE / ONS VERWYSING .....

YOUR REFERENCE / U VERWYSING .....

June, 1972

Dear Sir/Madam,

The bearer of this letter has been employed by the Institute for Social Research to assist in a study of attitudes of the public towards recent student activities.

The bearer is not a student demonstrator or pamphleteer.

Our study is a serious attempt to find out how members of the voting public view the recent student activities. For this we need interviews among a complete cross-section of White people in Durban.

If you are selected your views will represent those of many others like yourself. We sincerely hope that you will be willing to co-operate.

Your replies will be completely confidential - we do not wish to know your name.

Yours sincerely,

L. SCHLEMMER  
Acting Director.

APPENDIX II (b)  
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

ISR.16/72

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INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION ON STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS

- INTERVIEWER:
1. Stress that you are not a student pamphleteer but a research worker employed by the Institute for Social Research.
  2. Guarantee confidentiality - answers will all be combined in a computer.
  3. Ask for brief interview -  $\pm$  5-7 minutes.
  4. Purpose of interview - University is anxious to know how members of public feel about student protests and public demonstrations - will be most grateful for co-operation of public.
  5. Obtain interviews to complete your assigned quota of interviews. Explain need for a cross-section.

- RESPONDENT:
- |              |               |                 |
|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
|              | MALE .....    | FEMALE .....    |
| (17 years +) | ENGLISH ..... | AFRIKAANS ..... |
- A. (High Income/Professional, Executive/Good Area) .....
  - B. (Medium Income/Clerical, High Technical, Sales/  
Medium Area) .....
  - C. (Medium-Low Income/Blue Collar, Counter Sales,  
Routine/Poor Area) .....
- 17 - 24 years .....
- 25 - 34 years .....
- 35 - 49 years .....
- 50 years + .....

Thinking of the recent student activities:

1. We would like your impression of what the students have been concerned about.

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(If "POLICE ACTION" etc.) and before that.

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2. Do you feel that the students had good reason to protest?

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(If YES etc.) What would you see as their main reasons?

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3. What is your impression of what the students are trying to achieve?

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4. Since the events in Cape Town - the Police charge - and the student protests, how have your own feelings been changed or influenced?

(PROBE FOR OPINIONS OF STUDENTS AND AUTHORITIES).

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5. How do you feel about students taking an active interest in political issues?

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6. Do you or do you not feel that it is a good thing for White people to voice protests about the education of non-White children and students?

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7. If protests are necessary, how do you feel protests should be organised? What methods should be used?

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LASTLY - JUST A FEW DETAILS TO MAKE SURE WE HAVE A CROSS-SECTION OF PEOPLE:

8. I wonder if you could tell me what your standard of education is?

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9. And your occupation? (In the case of women, husband's or father's occupation/in the case of students, father's occupation. (Interviewer - detail please).
- 

10. Not your address, but just the suburb you live in?
-



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