*Keynote Address of the 2019 International Conference of the Consortium for
Comparative Research on Regional Integration and Social Cohesion (RISC),
Johannesburg, South Africa, 4 November 2019*

Barriers and borders
*Human mobility and
building inclusive societies*

Anthony Turton

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Good evening colleagues, delegates, and visitors to South Africa. I hope to share some insights that might be of assistance to your research endeavors. I am not a subject matter specialist on the topic of human mobility, but I know that you are, so I don't have to give intellectual critiques of your specific academic domain. But I will try to give it context. I do know a little bit about the need to build an inclusive society. I also know a fair amount about water, most notably around the issues that arise when it flows across a man-made boundary such as a jurisdictional border. I also know quite a bit about national security as a former intelligence officer. I am therefore going to present a narrative that weaves together several strands that I think are relevant to your work.

As a point of departure, let me say something about the need to build an inclusive society. I am a 12th generation African who was born into a highly unequal society. I had no choice in that process—I merely arrived into a space that had some unique characteristics. I was born into a white family in a country where race has always been an issue. I was born male, into a society where there were deeply entrenched rites of passage into manhood. I was born a decade after the Second World War—a Baby Boomer—to parents who were both veterans of that war. I was born into a cauldron of social upheaval that gave rise to what became known as the “Armed Struggle.” I never understood any of those things when I was a child, but I always had a sense that issues of great importance were taking

place around me. I became deeply inquisitive about them, even if I didn't understand them.

I recall as a small boy, driving with my father, through the streets of Johannesburg. My father was an interesting man. He was the son of what we call a "squatter" in this country. A white squatter. A man driven to that station in life because of the dispossession that occurred during the Second Anglo Boer War. My grandfather was just another one of the many so-called poor whites who lacked skills and capital, so he became a squatter on a farm in Swartdruggens, not far from the Limpopo River. Technically he was a tenant farmer, or a share-cropper, trading his labor for a possible meager share in a crop that might be successful. Most crops failed, for Swartdruggens is a very arid part of the country. My father was born into that abject poverty, and so his pathway through life was determined by forces greater than himself. I will not relate the whole story because of time limitations, but my grandfather was forced to become a migrant. The only work he could find was at a place called Hlabisa. That was located deep in the Zulu territory, and so my father grew up as a small boy in a family too poor to send their children to boarding school. He was home-schooled, and he integrated with the young Zulu boys of his own age cohort. There he learned to speak the language in the vernacular, almost as his mother tongue. He also learned the ways of the Zulu warrior. He was given a traditional name—*uMqangabhodwe*—and he fully understood what it meant to identify with a warrior culture (Turton, 2010). At a very young age, poorly educated and with limited job prospects, he volunteered for the army and found himself in the Western Desert fighting against Field Marshall Erwin Rommel's Panzer Army Africa. A veteran of every battle between the Allied and Axis forces in the North African Campaign, he evaded capture at Tobruk, and he escaped death at El Alamein. He was demobilized after Rommel was defeated, and he returned home a hardened veteran, in his early twenties, confused and unskilled.

The significance is that he was a tough guy, and from him I learned that no matter how tough you are, there are always forces over which you have no control. This is a small idea that I want to share today. Migration and social cohesion are driven by forces of enormous power exerted on people who mostly have limited means to resist.

So here I found myself in Johannesburg in early 1960, and around me were scenes of chaos. Green buses were rolling by and angry men were effervescing out of the windows smashed open in acts of obvious violence. They were singing songs in harmony, and I asked my father what they were saying. He told me they were singing songs of liberation from oppression, and he hastily bundled me into a motorcar and drove me off to safety. What I was witnessing was the rippling unrest that arose from

the Sharpeville Massacre (Tyler, 1995) and the splitting of the African National Congress—until then committed to a program of passive resistance (Liebenberg, 1994)—into the Pan Africanist Congress—committed to the use of violence to achieve its political objectives (Lodge, 1994).

This was a profound moment for me intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, so let me dig deeper.

First, I witnessed large-scale social upheaval in a place that, until then, I believed to be naturally stable. This I now believe is an important lesson to scholars working on migration and social cohesion. A country that is apparently stable can quickly change into an unstable state, fueled by political discontent, and inflamed by charismatic leadership amping up the rhetoric and ideology of intolerance. This becomes a raging fire that produces its own oxygen and is ultimately impossible to control.

Second, I sensed in my father a deep angst, which perplexed me profoundly. After all, he was a warrior and a combat veteran, so why should he be fearful of anything? I couldn't answer that question, and it worried me greatly. I instinctively knew that when he told me "everything was going to be okay" he was not telling the truth. It was instinctive. I felt it in a visceral sense. I would even go so far as to say that this was the genesis of my awareness of issues that would go on to shape my life, and the lives of my generation. It was here that I first learned of the subjective nature of communication. Looking back, I can now say this was my first encounter with the notion of an "alternative fact" and the weaponization of information.

Third, the event that the world came to know as the Sharpeville Massacre saw my immediate family transition almost instantly, from grinding intergenerational poverty, underpinned by a lack of education and opportunity, to one of relative wealth and greater opportunity. Central to that was the flight of capital out of the country, which caused a real estate collapse. It was the bursting of that real estate bubble that enabled my father to buy a home of his own, for the first time in his life—and the first time in mine. From that moment onward, our life of grinding poverty changed. Here I learned that within chaos comes opportunity.

I believe there is a lesson in there when talking about migration and social cohesion and the change of fortune that occurs when one is given access to an asset that can be leveraged at a financial institution for capital.

What I was witnessing in 1960, was a paradigm of state security into which I would later be plunged, like a leaf tossed into a raging flood, without any viable means of propulsion, but with an internal compass that enabled me to sense the difference between right and wrong. If we fast forward a decade, I now found myself a teenager, living a relatively sta-

ble life, part of a newly emerged middle-class family that was enjoying the benefits of newfound stability. My education was infinitely better than that of my parents, and I found myself in a private school that was associated with a priory in which people like Desmond Tutu were honing their intellectual skills. My headmaster was also a war veteran (Joubert, 1998), but unlike my father who managed to escape when Tobruk fell, he was captured and force-marched through Italy. He later escaped and fought with the Partisans. A colorful life indeed. I was immersed in that vivid color and at times was overwhelmed by it because I began to ask, what I would do under such circumstances? Would I cope?

The 1960s were an era of obsession with communism. It was here that I learned about the power of ideology and the response by the state to anything threatening its existence. It was here that I started to learn about sovereignty, centered on notions of the state, and the perceptions of security relative to the state. The frontline security force structure at the time was the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) (Geldenhuys, 1984), and the Sunday newspapers were filled with stories about their activities.

Returning to the angst I spoke of during the birth of the Armed Struggle, I experienced a new dimension when BOSS suddenly fell apart in a series of high-profile scandals playing out in the media. Again, I felt instinctive fear without understanding the root cause. Here was an institution so powerful, yet so vulnerable, just like my father when he told me that “everything was going to be okay” in 1960. Here were “alternative facts” being peddled so skillfully to a gullible public, but suddenly they all fell apart and an ugly reality was laid bare for all to see.

The 1970s were formative for me, and I daresay for many South Africans. By virtue of my race and gender, I was obliged to register for the armed forces, and so I became a conscripted soldier. But in the 1970s there was no real war going on. The social upheaval was internal and being dealt with by the police, not the army. During my National Service year, the Caprivi Strip was the epicenter of external conflict, and the police were busy handing over to the army. I served in the armored corps, and we were not called on at that stage to give assistance, so my national service year was one of frustration and growing conflict within my own head. It was a waste of time, and I became an angry young man because I dislike wastefulness.

In the mid 1970s I found myself as a student in Chicago. For the first time I could see South Africa from outside. There I became aware of geological timescales when I took a short vacation to the Grand Canyon. I became fixated by timescales and linkages between international and sub-national issues. I was in Chicago immediately after the Soweto Riots,

in the aftermath of the Nixon impeachment, and I found myself somewhat naively accepting an invitation to speak on those matters in public. I say naive because I was still unaware of the different perceptions that exist over matters of a divisive nature. My foray into public speaking was thus a baptism of fire from which I was launched on a steep learning curve.

Then some profound things occurred, as they often do when a trajectory adjustment happens in one's life. I had an American girlfriend, and I was now confronted by the choice to emigrate to the United States or to return "home." I chose home, not because I was disenchanted with my girlfriend. The reason might be illuminating, so let me expand. While I had a deep respect for America, bordering on a newfound love for a country of opportunity built on a deep foundation of values, I never felt at home there. It was the texture of the landscape that attracted me with its great beauty, but it also felt alien to my African eye. One day I met an exile and we had a conversation. Here we were, in a neutral country, both on opposite sides of a political chasm. One white, one black, but both African, speaking of things important to Africans. I had served in the armed forces and still owed the army many years of active service should I return. Here he was, an exile in a foreign land, wanting desperately to go "home" but unable to. I could go "home" but didn't really want to.

It was that juxtaposition of plight that hit me like a bolt of lightning. For the first time I realized my identity as an African. You see, growing up under Apartheid, I was falsely told that I am a "European." But I never felt European, and I was never allowed to feel African either. I was a misfit. I now believe that this notion of being a misfit lies at the heart of many integration stories. These are the lubricants that find their way to cleavage lines and cause a breakdown in social cohesion. You are part of something, but not enough part of that something, so you are nudged out. I have spoken about this odd identity crisis with people I have met internationally, most notably Kurds, Palestinians, Sami, and the Sindhi people. We all have one thing in common: we have no clearly identifiable homeland that is indisputably ours, so we adapt to the place we find ourselves in, but never feel complete.

For me this is best captured in the lines of a beautiful poem written by Michelle Frost (2002):

Within my heart, within my mind
there lies a place I cannot find.
Home of my heart. Land of my birth.
Smoke-colored stone and flame-colored earth.
Electric skies. Shivering heat.
Blood-red clay beneath my feet.

This poem goes on to describe, “At night when finally alone / I close my eyes—and I am home,” but ends with the stark words, “Never complete. Never whole. White Skin and an African soul” (Frost, 2002)

You see, I am a migrant. An intergenerational one, but a migrant nonetheless. Fast forward to today. Even after a successfully negotiated transition to peace, it seems that intolerance is again driving white South Africans from the land of their birth. Despite our best efforts, we have failed to create an inclusive society, so we remain economically stunted and structurally fragile. We are a tribe of migrants, it seems, even if we stay in one place for a few generations—in my case, twelve.

So back to the 1970s. I decided to return to South Africa, but my heart had changed. I had greater clarity about issues of identity and matters of social justice. I owed the army a bunch of time as a conscript, so I started working off that commitment, but now it was somehow different. I found myself in a combat unit fighting a war against an enemy I never understood. I found myself, along with an age cohort exactly as my father’s generation did, in a foreign land fighting a war that somebody else had started (Turner, 1998). In Angola we were up against Cubans with Russian support, but also Namibians fighting for liberation, and a handful of South Africans, learning how to do the same thing.

Then an amazing thing happened to me on a forgotten battlefield in Africa surrounded by the detritus of war while witnessing the human misery associated with violent conflict. I realized that armed confrontation is no solution to our problem when I was then introduced to the thinking of a man under whom I later came to serve. His name is Dr. Niël Barnard, and he had been appointed to create a new intelligence structure in the wake of the collapse of BOSS (Barnard & Wiese, 2015). What blew me away about this man was his intellect. Here was a profound thinker asked to do a difficult job in a time of national crisis. What is it that we are securing? What is the existential threat against which security must be mounted? What is the referent object? These fundamental questions led to a startling conclusion. If we are asked to secure a government from its own people, then that government is surely illegitimate. That approach is a state security model, and it is inherently flawed. What we need is a national security paradigm in which we secure a nation from an external threat and we deal with the issue of legitimacy by constitutional reform—an internal political process—that will give universal suffrage to the previously disenfranchised.

This was profound. I was deeply impressed by these intellectual gymnastics, and I bought into the concept. I now found myself deeply embedded within the new security structure known as National Intelligence Service (NIS), where I was trained in special operations and posted to the

Chief Directorate Covert Operations (CDCO) (Turton, 2010). We were like fighter pilots being prepared for battle, with no expense spared in that preparation. Suddenly I found myself at the cutting edge of intelligence activities during the last phase of the Cold War.

Here we were, in a country deeply divided, teetering on the brink of civil war, and the NIS was steadfastly moving toward constitutional reform designed to expand the franchise and create security for a new nation. Just think about what that meant. Think about this in terms of what we now hear about “Deep State” conspiracy theories. Think about the oath taken by serving officers who swear loyalty, not to an individual or an ideology but to a national well-being and a constitution. Think about this from the perspective of men and women serving under dangerous conditions, often risking their lives, but doing this because they feel they were born to serve something bigger than themselves. A South African nation consisting of different ethnic groups but united under the rule of law and protected by a constitution. The genuine aspiration to build an inclusive society, conceived in a secret organ of state charged with the responsibility of national security.

Suddenly I found myself operating around some strategic-level issues playing out in our backyard. I didn’t know it at the time, but the last hot battle of the Cold War was fought in Angola, on the Lomba River, at a place called Cuito Cuanavale. Few people know of this battle, except the veterans who served, and some people who might have read newspapers and believe the myths that have emerged. The significance is that Operation Packer took place in May 1988 while the Soviet forces were withdrawing from Afghanistan. The Soviets had been beaten by the Mujahedeen, with the support of Stinger missiles supplied by the CIA, so now they relocated some of their heavy armor to a different theater of the Cold War. This became the largest artillery battle on the continent of Africa since El Alamein, but it also coincided with the demise of the USSR and the ending of the Cold War. It was literally the last hot battle of the Cold War.

As the Cold War grinded to a halt, all the intelligence services of the world became concerned. Careers had been built in the intelligence discipline, and suddenly there was a prospect of mass unemployment for tens of thousands of highly trained operators and analysts. This gave rise to a major initiative to map out the strategic security terrain in the post-Cold War era in order to reskill the various intelligence services of the world.

It was in that context that I first learned of migration as a national security risk. Before that I had witnessed “deslocados”—internally displaced people in war, dislocated, out of place—but I was still oblivious to the broader impact of migration. It was the result of liaison between intelligence services that these ideas were gaining traction. For the first time

non-state actors were being identified as future targets for surveillance. These targets were placed on a list that grew to include transnational flows of money, human trafficking, drug smuggling and cyber warfare. There were many more on the list, but this will suffice.

It was in that space, as a senior intelligence officer, that I started to cut my teeth on my eventual subject matter speciality—water as a national security risk. Within the space beneath that steep learning curve, I was exposed for the first time to deep thinking about the environment, global climate change and human migration as emerging issues of national security significance.

The models at the time began to show us that resource availability was linked to human migration, at least under certain conditions. When marginal communities, highly dependent on natural resources for survival, began losing access to those resources, this could be a precursor to a mass migration event. When resource access became constrained by resource capture, typically by more powerful elites, it could drive marginalization and ultimately trigger mass migration. More importantly, when resources became threatened by environmental changes, then a specific type of mass migration could result. Think Darfur in the context of the desiccation of Lake Chad.

When thinking about human migration across international borders, I am automatically forced to draw a comparison with an area that I know a lot about—water. Here I argue that water and human migration both constitute a flow. In hydrology we define flow as a given volume over a specific period of time, so flow is both a number and a time span. But is this any different to the migration of people? Is a natural flood pulse in a large river basin, driven by a rainfall event in an upstream catchment, not the same as a migration flow across a border driven by some catastrophe in the upper catchment of that society? Is desiccation, caused by climate change, not the same as a new regime coming to power on the rhetoric of intolerance and tribal identity? All rivers have a natural flow regime, typically with a flood pulse, much like the heartbeat of nature through the arteries of Earth into the kidneys (wetlands) and lungs (forests) of the planet.

Which brings me to something that I now know about water. It will always flow, and nothing you ever put in its way will stop it *permanently*. Yes, you can build a dam, and if correctly engineered, that dam will hold back the flood. But the water will still flow irrespective of the obstacles in its way. Water goes under, through, or around an obstacle in its way, and a dam is no exception. I think of a dam as a control mechanism for a flow, in much the same way as an immigration policy is a control mechanism for a flow.

Which takes me to another story that I need to share. We know about states and sovereignty. We know that all states are said to be sovereign and that all sovereign states are said to be equal, at least in the eyes of international law. But we also know that this is a fiction at two basic levels. Firstly, sovereignty is not as absolute as we would like to believe it is, and secondly, the state, as a legal manifestation of a sovereign identity, can never have impervious borders. This is a lesson that I learned at an interesting time in our collective history.

I mentioned earlier that the USSR withdrew its forces from Afghanistan in May 1988. I also mentioned that at the same time Operation Packer was taking place in Angola. I said that this operation was the last hot battle of the Cold War. But what I failed to mention is that it was also a pivotal moment for South Africa because a small window of opportunity opened for a possible negotiated solution to the protracted conflict that had consumed our country for my entire lifetime.

The question here was whether the Russians would interfere, through the South African Communist Party (SACP), if the South African Government decided to negotiate a possible peaceful transition to democracy. This was consistent with my earlier reflection on national security versus state security. At that moment in time, I found myself deeply embedded inside a special operations unit of the CDCO—effectively an intelligence service within a service—and these questions were given to us to answer: Would the Russians come? If so, how and what could we do about it? Would Russian interference become a showstopper? Did it pose an existential threat to the embryonic notion of achieving national security by legitimizing the government through constitutional reform that expanded the franchise to all?

My unit was given this task, and I found myself being deployed into what was then known as the Soviet sphere of influence behind the Iron Curtain. The year was 1989, and things were happening in Poland and Hungary. Our mission was to determine if there was any evidence of Russian assistance to the embattled regimes of three countries—German Democratic Republic (GDR), Romania, and Czechoslovakia. Remember the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 when Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest? We established ourselves in a neutral country, consistent with standard operational procedures, and began operating in these three states.

Now I need to set the scene for the audience here, because in 1989 the Iron Curtain was impenetrable. Popular belief was that any attempt to cross was accompanied by grave danger, as the many documented cases of escape from East Germany showed us. It's safe to say that those front-line states had very hard borders. These were like massive concrete dams standing in a valley before a growing flood of an intensity that their de-

signer had never anticipated. The flood pulse of humanity was unleashed, initially fueled by the promise of reform coming from Poland. But that was not my target state. I was responsible for the GDR, and here we began to see cracks in the wall in September 1989 when people started defecting into Austria en masse via Hungary where the border fences were being removed. These cracks widened in October 1989 when the army and police were ordered to fire on East German citizens massing on the border with Hungary and they refused. To cut a long story short, the GDR government was unable to stem the flow of people across one of the most fortified portions of the Iron Curtain. Erich Honecker was swept from power in October 1989 without any Russian interference. They had internal problems of their own.

I recall walking in the streets of East Berlin, amazed by the energy of the people, as they attacked the wall with hammers. I write about this in my book *Shaking hands with Billy*, now available on Kindle via Amazon. I was truly shocked at just how soft the border was in the end, just as I was shocked in 1960 when in the aftermath of Sharpeville, a stable state suddenly became unstable, almost overnight.

I recall watching as Nicolae Ceaușescu was captured and put on trial. My intrigue derived from the popular uprising against the Securitate, the secret police, whose mandate it was to ruthlessly suppress any dissent. Remember the lesson I had learned about the rapidity of change from a stable to an unstable state? Here it was playing out again. I recall one image of a Securitate officer overwhelmed in the street with an angry citizen urinating on his body. But even as Ceaușescu defiantly challenged the legitimacy of the military tribunal set to try him, the Russians didn't come. Ceaușescu was executed, and the world moved on.

I recall watching with considerable interest as Vaclav Havel chose a different route. It was his route—the Velvet Revolution—that we started to learn from because we sought to emulate it in our planned negotiated solution, which was nothing more than an idea at that stage.

My take-home message from that tumultuous time, from my vantage point up close and personal, was that with the movement of people, when they are unrestrained or driven by a powerful force, not even the most secure border can remain impervious.

The most sophisticated dam can at best attenuate a flood pulse but can never hope to hold back a force of nature so powerful that it is responsible for sculpting the very continents on which we have the audacity to claim our sovereign states as impermeable constructs of the human mind. The most hardened border walls, reinforced with steel, covered by the interlocking arcs of fire from heavy caliber machine guns, and patrolled by the

most vicious of dogs (and their handlers), are incapable of holding back the torrent of human migration once it begins.

The other take-home message is just how rapidly a country can shift from being stable and tolerant of different views and fueled by different ideas to being unstable, fearful, and intolerant of “the other.” Think of contemporary America, now at war with itself, fueled by a toxic ideology of intolerance, the party of Lincoln now reduced to a cult of personality, all information to the masses of loyal supporters being controlled by the vilification of media outlets. There is no longer a values-based foundation to the United States as allies are abandoned to their gruesome fate on the battlefield and former friends are attacked and ridiculed on Twitter. To summarize:

1. Migration is a growing phenomenon with the potential to become a national security risk. Democracy might not be robust enough to deal with rapid change when social media is weaponized and cleavage lines are actively lubricated by hostile actors operating covertly with the intention of weakening their perceived foes from within.
2. The vilification of the security force structures can undermine their effectiveness, so when rapid change happens, they just might not be able to assist in retaining social stability.
3. People, like water and ideas, cannot be stopped in perpetuity.
4. Policy making and implementation are like dams controlling the flow of a river.
5. Communication is critical in policy making and implementation.
6. Honesty in the policy making process is important because “alternate facts” are just propaganda and never stand the test of time.
7. Stable states can rapidly become unstable, even in countries apparently with hardened borders and high levels of internal surveillance on citizens.
8. When “alternative facts” are revealed for the hubris they really are, public opinion can change rapidly, and this is a driver of the transition from a stable to an unstable state when the security forces have been hollowed out and weakened through vitriolic attacks launched on social media.
9. The transgenerational nature of forces driving migration are enduring.

This is my humble contribution to your deliberations. I hope that I have provided something of usefulness beyond mere curiosity. I thank you for listening, and I wish you well in your deliberations.

ANTHONY TURTON is the co-author to two chapters of the World Water Assessment Program 2012. He was appointed as an advisor to the executive management of Mintails (Ltd), responsible for developing appropriate strategies for dealing with AMD and other environmental issues arising from the safe reprocessing of tailings dumps after more than a century of gold mining. Appointed as an advisor to the CEO of Coal of Africa (Ltd), responsible for developing appropriate policy and strategy for the mitigation of non-mining risk. His stated objective is to facilitate a process that enables the design of a future mine to be determined by a negotiated, viable, and uncontested closure strategy. Awarded the Habitat Council Award on October 10 2009, in recognition of the work done on raising public awareness on water security. Vice president of the International Water Resource Association (IWRA) to serve for the period 2010–2012, having served on the previous board as an executive director. Professor in the Centre for Environmental Management at the University of Free State. Editor for the journal *Water International of the International Water Resource Association* (IWRA). E-mail: tony@anthonyturton.com

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