



# WHERE IS ORGANISED BUSINESS?

**W**hen I was a young radical, I held the view common to my peers that capital was a highly organised force that dominated society and its institutions. Capital owned and controlled the media, thereby exerting overwhelming influence over public opinion. It was able to dictate to government. In short, capital was a mighty force which had to be overthrown.

More sophisticated intellects, such as Ralph Miliband, showed that the lines between capital and the rest of society were less stark. The state, for instance, in its function of maintaining social stability, could perform certain welfare functions that did not directly serve the interests of capital. It was able to assert a degree of “relative autonomy” and was obliged to regulate and even discipline capital in some instances, even while protecting the overriding interests of capital.

Is this relevant to South Africa today? Are the people of this country faced by the organised might of monopoly capital, which is the “class enemy”? If so, where is the evidence? On the face of it, not in the activities of business organisations.

The Chamber of Mines was a powerful force in the early years of our industrialisation. There is clear evidence that Prime Minister Jan Smuts acted in the interests of the mining companies in the 1920s. In later years, the National Party government directly served the interests of Afrikaner capital.

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**[The state] was able to assert a degree of “relative autonomy” and was obliged to regulate and even discipline capital in some instances, even while protecting the overriding interests of capital. Are the people of this country faced by the organised might of monopoly capital, which is the “class enemy”? If so, where is the evidence? On the face of it, not in the activities of business organisations.**

Today, no similar pattern is evident.

The Chamber of Mines is a shadow of its former glory. Business Leadership South Africa represents the top 80 corporations in South Africa, but is seldom seen or heard. Business Unity

South Africa (BUSAs) bumbles along, struggling to maintain a degree of unity and contain its disgruntled black members. The Black Management Forum is sometimes articulate in defence of its members but hardly makes a ripple in public discourse. Other black business associations seem to be in permanent battles over leadership and finances.

The Association for Savings and Investment (ASISA), the giant association of insurance companies and asset managers, never enters the public realm. Occasionally, some business personality will make derogatory remarks about the government and then lapse into silence. And so on. It may be that business is timid because it relies on government procurement, licences and services – but the government seems unaware of the extent of its powers. There is an impasse.

Should we regret the absence of a united force from business? I think not, if that might tip the scales against the further transformation of our country. Nevertheless, the programme to develop the economy does require their full participation. All sectors of business currently appear tired and apathetic.

Isn't it time for a group of serious business people to act in the national interest in partnership with government (which itself has to get its act together), so that clear and decisive economic decisions can be taken to get the economy moving again? [NA](#)

By Ben Turok