Beyond the State: A Corporate Shaping of South Africa's Political Imagination

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Abstract
This article tests the limits of strategic communications by applying Neville Bolt's definition to a corporate-led intervention: Anglo American's High Road/Low Road scenarios in late apartheid South Africa. Through an interpretivist case study methodology that maps the campaign's narratives, performances, and audiences to Bolt's criteria, this article shows that a private actor, like a business, can, under specific conditions, conduct strategic communications in a security-salient environment. Far from diluting the concept, recognising such nonstate agency—anchored in liberal democratic values—sharpens the field's paradigm for a networked era.

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Introduction

This study considers how far Neville Bolt's conception of strategic communications can travel—whether its logic of meaning-making, influence, and legitimacy can also illuminate the communicative practices of a business. By testing this boundary, the article seeks to clarify the relationship between strategy, narrative, and power in contexts where corporate communication acquires political consequence.

At its centre lies Anglo American's *High Road/Low Road* scenario exercise, developed in the mid 1980s as apartheid South Africa entered its terminal crisis. Though conceived as a management foresight initiative, these scenarios—deeply researched stories imagining how the future might play out in different ways—evolved, as argued here, into a form of strategic communications that significantly contributed to the shaping and shifting of discourses from apartheid to a liberal democracy.

In the foreword to *Defence Strategic Communications 6* (Spring 2019), Neville Bolt conceives strategic communications as a practice that 'entails the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies. [It] addresses the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects using words, images, actions and non-actions in the national interest or the interest of a political community.'[1]

This definition sets a demanding threshold for inclusion. It requires: (1) long-term, enduring impact; (2) the ability to shape or shift societal discourses—broad, entrenched systems of meaning; (3) engagement with foreign or security policy, a domain typically reserved for the state; and (4) alignment with the national interest or that of a wider political community.

In 2023, through the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group, Bolt and others have gone on

1 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications* 6 (Spring 2019): 4–5.

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to refine strategic communications even further, founding its architecture on a specific set of values. This refinement advances a normative project, affirming: the right to choose between competing ideas; the need for transparency; and the right of the individual to free speech.[2] Bolt frames this as a liberal project redux, effectively aligning strategic communications with liberal democratic values, marking its genesis in the preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty.[3]

This only raises the bar for who can legitimately claim to do strategic communications, and would appear to exclude most non-state entities, confining strategic communications to the remit of governments or multilateral institutions. Yet this may underestimate the communicative agency of powerful corporate actors whose influence extends beyond markets into the moral and political life of societies.[4] This article argues that a business—under certain historical and communicative conditions—can clear Bolt's high bar.

Measured against this definition, the Anglo American Corporation (AAC) contributed to the 'long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses' about South Africa's political and economic future by framing the country's end of apartheid as a strategic and moral choice between regression—the *low road*—and negotiated reform, the *high road*.

Through sustained engagement—both direct and indirect—with key political figures and institutions across the pro- and anti-apartheid divide, the company influenced security and governance policies by altering the attitudes and behaviours of targeted audiences, from policymakers and

2 Jente Althuis, Neville Bolt, Leonie Haiden, and Martha Stolze, *Understanding Strategic Communications*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Terminology Working Group Publication No. 3 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2023), p. 22.

3 Neville Bolt, 'The Future Is More Than What Happens Next', *Critique & Humanism* 62, Nº 1 (2025): 63.

4 It is important to distinguish here between possible strategic communications professionals (SCPs)—'private sector communicators contracted on behalf of states to work on international affairs and security issues'—as described by Nicholas Michelsen and Thomas Colley, and businesses that ordinarily are not in this field, such as the 'mining company' Anglo American, possibly performing or projecting strategic communications. This article refers to the latter. See Nicholas Michelsen and Thomas Colley, 'The Field of Strategic Communications Professionals: A New Research Agenda for International Security', *European Journal of International Security* 4, Nº 1 (2019): 62. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2018.9.

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business leaders to elements within the military, police, and liberation movements. The strategic effect was to encourage a controlled, progressive transition that would preserve national stability and, in turn, protect the conditions for economic continuity. In this sense, the High Road/Low Road exercise exemplified the projection of communicative power through words, images, actions, and non-actions—its roadshows, public presentations, videos, and printed materials—operating in the national interest and in pursuit of a broader political community's future coherence, around a core of liberal democratic values.

The article therefore advances the claim that the High Road/Low Road case meets the criteria of Bolt's definition while challenging conventional assumptions about legitimacy and agency within the field. If strategic communications is the art of shaping social discourse, then corporate actors—possessing narrative resources, material power, and reputational stakes—can also act as communicative agents in the political sphere at the highest level of long-term discourse formation. This could complicate the analytical boundaries of the discipline by extending the possible scope of who or what can *do* strategic communications, not as peripheral participants but as principal architects of societal narratives.[5]

Empirically, the study contributes a corporate case to a literature dominated by state and military analyses. Theoretically, it tests the elasticity of Bolt's definition, examining whether a corporation operating under both market and moral pressure can be said to engage in strategic communications. Normatively, it explores the paradox that liberal democratic discourse may emerge from illiberal contexts—that narratives of reform and inclusion can be authored within systems founded on exclusion.

The argument unfolds in five parts. After this brief introduction and detailing of the research methodology, Section 2 situates the historical and political context of South Africa in the 1980s and AAC's evolving

5 The question—who does and does not practise strategic communications—has been discussed since the first wider circulation of the concept in the early 2000s: Althuis et al., *Understanding Strategic Communications*, p. 22.

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corporate identity. Section 3 analyses the High Road/Low Road scenarios as strategic storytelling, examining how narrative foresight functioned communicatively in a contested political space. Section 4 traces the genealogy of scenario planning—from RAND's rationalist foundations to Shell's corporate turn and AAC's adaptation of the method. Section 5 re-engages Bolt's theoretical framework, evaluating its explanatory power and limits when applied to this corporate case. The conclusion considers the broader implications for both business and the field of strategic communications, illustrating how narrative foresight can act as a vehicle of political agency by shaping the imagination of the future, and how corporate authorship unsettles accepted norms about who may legitimately shape public meaning and moral authority.

Research Approach and Methodology

The study integrates three interrelated methods: discourse analysis, case study inquiry, and conceptual mapping. The discourse-analytic component identifies the narrative architecture of the High Road/Low Road scenarios, examining its framing devices, metaphors, and moral vocabularies. Particular attention is given to how the scenarios encoded simplicity and agency: two recurring themes that emerged from the interview stage of data collection.

Following the logic of instrumental case study design, the High Road/Low Road narrative is not treated as unique for its own sake, but as a prism through which to observe how strategic communications might operate from beyond state institutions. This method allows the study to remain contextually grounded in the particularities of South Africa's late apartheid economy while generating theoretical insights applicable to broader questions of corporate influence and political discourse.[6]

6 Daphne Halkias, Michael Neubert, Paul W. Thurman, and Nicholas Harkiolakis, *The Multiple Case Study Design: Methodology and Application for Management Education*, ed. Michael Neubert, Nicholas Harkiolakis, Daphne Halkias, and Paul W. Thurman, vol. 1 (Oxford: Routledge, 2022), p. 17. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003244936.

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The conceptual mapping element systematically tests the empirical material against Bolt's definitional components of strategic communications, especially the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses. Through this mapping, the study assesses how far AAC's communicative conduct aligns with, extends, or problematises an implicitly state-oriented strategic communications framework.

By adopting a constructivist lens, the research seeks to understand how AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios functioned as communicative artefacts—vehicles through which ideas, values, and political imagination were projected into, and received by, the public sphere. By situating the research within the constructivist tradition, it treats language, narrative, and discourse as constitutive of political reality.[7] The purpose of this approach is not to establish causal generalisations, which would be near impossible to track, but to illuminate how narrative foresight operated as a form of strategic communications within a particular historical moment.

The empirical foundation of this study draws on both primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the context, content, and effects of the scenario exercise. Two semi-structured interviews—combining distinctive narrative, biographical, and critical incident formats—provided first-hand testimony from two key participants directly involved in or influenced by the process: Clem Sunter and Roelf Meyer. The interviews with these critical figures form the foundational pillars of the case study exploration.[8]

Clem Sunter was the principal protagonist in the design, coordination, and communication of AAC's scenario-planning division, from setting up the function in 1981 until his tenure as chairman and CEO of AAC's gold and uranium division (1990–96). He was the secretary to the executive committee when Gavin Relly—then CEO of AAC—asked Sunter to help the company shift away from failing predictive forecasts to looking at the underlying drivers of change through imagining multiple

7 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 393. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.391.

8 The unreferenced quotations of both Sunter and Meyer in the article relate to these interviews.

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scenarios. This internal function within AAC produced a report detailing possible scenarios for the world and South Africa in the 1990s, which was first communicated publicly in June 1986. As will become clear in the case study, Sunter then made hundreds of presentations to key political figures and to the broader public over the following years, as well as authoring multiple books on the experience. His insights have provided a first-hand account of what these scenarios were designed to achieve initially, how that aim evolved over time, how the scenarios were disseminated more widely, and the reception they received.

Roelf Meyer was the second source of primary data from semi-structured interviews. He served as a Member of Parliament in South Africa from 1979 to 1997, and represented the National Party in the negotiations with the African National Congress (ANC) that enabled the democratic transition. Meyer's perspective was of crucial value in better understanding the effects of the High Road/Low Road scenarios in the minds of key personnel in government. He was closely involved with key state apparatus at the time, serving as deputy minister for law and order when the scenarios were first published, and oversaw the management of the various security departments dealing with the state of emergency declared by then president P.W. Botha.

Meyer went on to serve as minister of defence (1991–92), minister of constitutional affairs and communication (1992–94), and minister of constitutional development and provincial affairs (1994–96), and therefore could offer valuable insight into the longer-term effects of the scenarios years after they were originally published.

Supplementary evidence was then drawn from corporate statements and speeches by AAC executives, historical and journalistic accounts of South Africa's economic and political transition, published biographies, and the wider literature on scenario planning, strategic foresight, and strategic communications. This provided a textured evidentiary base from which to analyse the form and function of the scenarios contextually, as well

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as assess their role at the intersection of corporate strategic planning and strategic communications.

Through the triangulation of discourse analysis, case study inquiry, and conceptual mapping, this methodological design aimed to achieve both empirical robustness and theoretical congruence with the evolving field of strategic communications. It demonstrates how a corporate foresight exercise can serve as a form of communicative power and how, when examined through Bolt's framework, such power broadens our understanding of what constitutes strategic communications, and who can legitimately perform it.

Readers may ask legitimate questions of why one might choose the case of a mining company operating in apartheid South Africa to test whether businesses can perform strategic communications. Instead, why not explore more obvious examples as contenders, such as modern-day 'big tech' companies or leading media corporations, both of which play in the information and communication spaces?

The choice of AAC's High Road/Low Road scenario exercise as the case study for this inquiry was selected for a variety of reasons. It offers a historically bounded and analytically transparent episode in which a private corporation operated in a security-salient environment, yet outside the formal apparatus of the state. The late apartheid context provides the necessary temporal and political closure to trace how communicative actions shaped long-term discourse—needed to meet Bolt's criterion of enduring influence in ways that contemporary, fast-moving digital examples might struggle or fail. AAC's position at the intersection of business, politics, and moral crisis enables the testing of strategic communications theory in a setting where national stability and corporate survival were inseparable, thereby making the case unusually revealing for examining non-state communicative agency.

Equally important, this historical distance affords a measure of analytical detachment more difficult in ongoing cases such as that of big tech or

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contemporary media conglomerates. The South African context also exposes a deeper paradox: a liberal democratic narrative emerging from within an illiberal system, forcing reflection on the moral and political conditions under which communicative legitimacy can arise. Studying AAC therefore extends the lineage of strategic communications beyond the digital present, illustrating that the corporate shaping of political meaning is not a recent phenomenon but part of a longer continuum of narrative power. This case study places today's hybrid, networked communicators in a historical frame that clarifies both the continuities and the transformations of the discipline.

In applying this interpretive framework, the analysis now turns to the historical and political context in which AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios were conceived. Understanding the communicative function of these narratives requires situating them within the material and ideological conditions of 1980s South Africa—a period defined by economic crisis, international isolation, and mounting pressure for political reform. It was in this volatile environment that AAC, long a cornerstone of South Africa's economic establishment, sought to reimagine its own role and the country's trajectory through the language of foresight.

Context: South Africa in the 1980s

The events and repressions of apartheid South Africa have been extensively documented.[9] This section highlights the salient features of the 1980s to establish the backdrop to Anglo American's High Road/Low Road scenario exercise. The decade was marked by deep turbulence—political, economic, and moral—that destabilised the order on which apartheid

9 For an overview, see: Sampie Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2002); Bill Freund, *Twentieth-Century South Africa: A Developmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). For a look at how the apartheid government presented itself internationally, see Ron Nathaniel Nixon, *Selling Apartheid: South Africa's Global Propaganda War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

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had long rested. It was, above all, a period in which the future itself became contested terrain.

By the early 1980s the apartheid government was facing significant internal unrest. Township uprisings, student mobilisations, and organised labour strikes, led in part by the newly established Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985, challenged state authority on a national scale.[10] In response, successive states of emergency were declared, beginning in July 1985 and expanded nationwide in 1986, granting the security forces extraordinary powers of detention and censorship.[11]

The South African Police, unable to contain spiralling violence, called on the South African Defence Force (SADF) for assistance, thereby militarising domestic governance.[12] This fusion of police and military power revealed the fragility of the regime's control and exposed divisions in the ruling elite over whether repression or reform offered the more viable path forward. Figures such as P.W. Botha (president, 1984–89) and later F.W. de Klerk (president, 1989–94) embodied this tension between security conservatism and the reluctant recognition that structural change had become inevitable.[13]

According to data from the South African Institute of Race Relations, the number of politically related deaths rose by more than 400 per cent between the mid 1980s and the end of the decade.[14] This sharp escalation in violence reflected the cumulative effects of successive states of emergency and the intensifying confrontations between security forces, liberation movements, and township communities. By the late 1980s, South Africa had entered what some observers described as a state

10 Seekings and Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality*, pp. 112–15.

11 Hermann Giliomee, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012), pp. 288–90.

12 Jan-Ad Stemmet, 'Troops, Townships and Tribulations: Deployment of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in the Township Unrest of the 1980s', *Journal for Contemporary History* 31, Nº 2 (2006): 178–93 (p. 179).

13 Patti Waldmeir, Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 45.

14 Peter Berger, *A Future South Africa: Visions, Strategies, and Realities*, ed. Peter L Berger (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2019), p. 36.

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of low-intensity civil war[15]—an environment in which questions of legitimacy, governance, and national stability were being contested as much through force as through dialogue.

Externally, Pretoria's diplomatic and economic standing eroded rapidly. The global anti-apartheid movement gained traction, with sanctions, cultural boycotts, and corporate disinvestment campaigns striking at both the material and symbolic pillars of white South African power.[16] Under pressure from the US Congress, the International Monetary Fund refused to extend further loans to South Africa after 1983—a move that cut off the government's access to short-term financing and signalled mounting international condemnation.[17] Major multinational corporations began to withdraw their investments, and following the US Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, South Africa's international isolation was near total.[18] The bill embodied a moral-political stance in economic form, seeking to undermine apartheid and promote the establishment of a non-racial democracy through concrete measures such as banning imports of South African agricultural, iron, and steel products and terminating the US–South Africa tax treaty. In combining moral conviction with material pressure, it mirrored the internal dynamic of the period, as economic disruption, including widespread mining strikes, became a vehicle for demanding political liberalisation. This economic and moral quarantine eroded not only the regime's external legitimacy but also the confidence of its domestic supporters, who could no longer plausibly claim alignment with the liberal democratic order of the West.[19]

The country's economic decline mirrored its political unravelling. Dependence on primary commodities made South Africa acutely vulnerable to shifts in global markets. Gold, the cornerstone of its export

15 Stuart J. Kaufman, 'South Africa's Civil War, 1985–1995', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 24, Nº 4 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2017.1422012.

16 Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle against Apartheid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 165.

17 International Monetary Fund, 'History of Lending Commitments: South Africa', July 31, 2025, www.imf.org/external/np/fin/tad/extarr2.aspx?memberKey1=880&date1key=2025-07-31.

18 United States Congress, 'H.R.4868 - 99th Congress (1985–1986): Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986', 2 October 1986, www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/4868.

19 Terreblanche, *History of Inequality*, p. 364.

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economy, fell from highs around $700 per ounce in 1980 to near $300 by 1984. At the same time, its currency—the rand—weakened sharply, inflating the real value of foreign-denominated debt from $16.9 billion (approximately 20 per cent of GDP) in 1980 to $24.3 billion (46 per cent of GDP) by 1984.[20] By 1985 external debt had exceeded 50 per cent of GDP, well above the level economists typically regard as sustainable.[21]

For South Africa's business elite—particularly in AAC, the country's largest corporate conglomerate—this convergence of financial strain and moral crisis prompted deep introspection.[22] Profitability was no longer separable from questions of political legitimacy, and the prospect of long-term stability appeared increasingly dependent on a negotiated transformation of the social order.

Amid this turbulence, apartheid's ideological coherence disintegrated. Its justificatory discourse—grounded in the construction of 'separate development' and racial paternalism—lost credibility both internationally and in segments of the white population.[23] New and competing tropes emerged: revolution versus reform, nationalism versus reconciliation, security versus negotiation. The communicative architecture of the state—its ability to define meaning and project legitimacy—began to collapse.[24]

Against this backdrop, the 1980s may be read as a period in which legitimacy, identity, and meaning were in profound flux—a communicative battlespace in which competing actors sought to reframe the nation's moral and political trajectory. The apartheid state, liberation movements, the international community, and private business each attempted to

20 Xavier Carim, Audie Klotz, and Olivier Lebleu, 'The Political Economy of Financial Sanctions', in *How Sanctions Work: Lessons from South Africa*, ed. Neta C. Crawford and Audie Klotz (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 164.

21 Ibid.

22 M. Holman and P. Montagnon, 'Business Leaders Urge Pretoria to Open Political Talks', *Financial Times*, 30 August 1985.

23 Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 230–33.

24 James L. Gibson, 'The Legacy of Apartheid: Racial Differences in the Legitimacy of Democratic Institutions and Processes in the New South Africa', *Comparative Political Studies* 36, Nº 7 (2003): 772–800. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414003255104.

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construct narratives of credibility amid the uncertainty, of themselves and in relation to others.[25] In this environment, AAC's High Road/Low Road scenario exercise would function as a form of strategic communications: an attempt to influence the external operating environment through articulating a national story.

Anglo American Corporation and Its Position in Late Apartheid

By the late twentieth century, AAC had become the defining institution of South Africa's modern economy. Founded in 1917—with transatlantic financing that inspired its name—the company's transformation from a mining venture into a vast industrial and financial conglomerate mirrored the evolution of the state itself. Its influence was pervasive, shaping patterns of labour, capital, and infrastructure in ways that made its fortunes inseparable from those of the country. As South Africa entered the turbulent years of the 1980s, AAC stood not merely as a corporate actor but as a central fixture of the national landscape—an enterprise whose size, reach, and authority placed it at the very heart of South Africa's political economy.

It is difficult to overstate AAC's importance to the South African economy at the time of the High Road/Low Road scenario exercise. In 1986 AAC ranked only just behind the state in terms of total asset ownership in the country, and nearly double that of the third-largest asset owner, the Old Mutual Group.[26] AAC accounted for roughly 54 per cent of the value of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, with hundreds of subsidiaries within the group, spanning mining, manufacturing, construction, automotives, freight, and publishing—including ownership of the country's largest

25 See the discursive processes that underpin why an individual or group may be seen as a 'terrorist' versus a 'freedom fighter': Adam Hodges, 'Discursive Underpinnings of War and Terrorism', in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*, ed. Bernhard Forchtner (Routledge, 2018), p. 673.

26 David Pallister, Sarah Stewart and Ian Lepper, *South Africa Inc.: The Oppenheimer Empire* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 15.

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newspaper group.[27] Revenues from its core gold operations underwrote a substantial share of state taxation, foreign exchange, investor returns, and employment, furnishing the apartheid regime with a critical buffer against external pressure.[28]

This diversification strategy became increasingly important as AAC's mining base came under strain from escalating industrial unrest and sharp fluctuations in the gold price. During the late 1970s a series of oil shocks in the Middle East triggered widespread economic instability. The US and the UK experienced *stagflation*—a rare combination of stagnant growth, high unemployment, and rising inflation—which drove many investors to seek refuge in gold.[29] As a result, the gold price rose nearly sixfold between 1976 and 1980, before halving again by 1982.

The rise of organised labour, epitomised by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), reached a significant stress point in the 1987 strike—the largest in South African history at the time. Hundreds of thousands of workers demanded higher wages, but their protests also carried a clear anti-apartheid sentiment.[30] The blurred line between labour struggle and political resistance underscored how deeply industry and ideology had become intertwined.[31] Bobby Godsell—later a key architect of the High Road/Low Road scenarios—represented AAC in negotiations with Cyril Ramaphosa, president of the country today but then leading the NUM strike. It would foreshadow political negotiations

27 Duncan Innes, *Anglo American and the Rise of Modern South Africa* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1984).

28 Theresa Hammond, Christine Cooper, and Chris J. van Staden, 'Anglo American Corporation and the South African State', *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 30, Nº 6 (2017): 1400.

29 Michael G. Martin, 'The Changing Gold Market, 1978–80: A View of the Volatile, Mostly Upward Movements in the Real Price of Gold', *Finance & Development* 17, Nº 4 (1980): 40–43, www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/022/0017/004/article-A011-en.xml.

30 Two years before, 800,000 workers stayed off work in protest at the use of troops in black townships. A. Cowell, 'The Struggle: Power and Politics in South Africa's Black Trade Unions', *New York Times*, 15 June 1986, www.nytimes.com/1986/06/15/magazine/the-struggle-power-and-politics-in-south-africa-s-black-trade-unions.html.

31 Kate Philip, *Markets on the Margins: Mineworkers, Job Creation and Enterprise Development* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), pp. 17–23.

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later as Ramaphosa functioned as the ANC's chief negotiator through the democratic transition.[32]

AAC and other major conglomerates secured an institutionalised role in national policymaking through the Carlton (1979) and Good Hope (1981) conferences, which formalised consultations between business and the state. In *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002*, Sampie Terreblanche termed this the 'Anglo-Americanisation' of policy, describing how corporate influence became more overt.[33] As pressure mounted in the 1980s, the company faced a delicate balancing act: it sought to project a reformist image and anticipate the inevitability of change without blatantly confronting the state on which its prosperity still depended. To this end AAC invested in discursive platforms such as *Optima*—its in-house journal—to cultivate a liberal, quasi-academic audience and to frame reform as both pragmatic and patriotic.[34] It also aligned itself with voluntary initiatives like the Sullivan Principles, signalling a willingness to move incrementally towards racial equality in employment and social policy.[35]

This reformist impulse, however, provoked tension inside government circles. While some officials viewed AAC's liberal posturing with suspicion, the state's fiscal dependence on the company's revenues limited its ability to intervene. Roelf Meyer later recalled that relations between government and AAC were 'not always easy', particularly after Relly became CEO and steered the company in a more progressive direction.[36] Yet traces of this liberal orientation had been visible long before Relly's tenure. Corporate disclosures from 1917 to 1975 consistently articulated

32 His opposite number in those negotiations was Roelf Meyer (interviewed as part of this case study), and Ramaphosa would go on to be elected president of South Africa in 2018.

33 Terreblanche, *History of Inequality*, p. 74.

34 Hammond et al., 'Anglo American Corporation', p. 1416.

35 The Sullivan Principles were a voluntary code of corporate conduct for US companies operating in apartheid South Africa, promoting workplace desegregation, equal employment and pay, advancement and training for black employees, and broader social and legal reform towards racial equality. See: Zeb Larson, 'The Sullivan Principles: South Africa, Apartheid, and Globalization', *Diplomatic History* 44, Nº 3 (June 2020): 479–503. https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhaa002.

36 Relly opened up a dialogue with the banned ANC in 1985, while many of its key members were in exile in Zambia, keen to impress upon them that AAC would be indispensable to the future economic growth of the country. See Pallister et al., *South Africa Inc.,* p. 101.

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subtle commitments to fairness and inclusion, although scholars have since argued that these declarations functioned as somewhat hollow moral statements—expressions of a corporate diplomacy that still relied on, and simultaneously reinforced, the coercive authority of the state.[37]

To some extent AAC operated as a quasi-state actor—not formally part of the government, nor owned by it, but due to its immense size, power, and reach. Physically, it extracted the minerals that lay beneath the state's soil, transforming the geological foundations of the nation into the material basis and commanding heights of its industrial economy;[38] economically, it accounted for a significant amount of value of the national stock exchange and stood among the state's largest taxpayers; socially, it was the country's single largest employer; and politically, its founding and controlling leadership was historically rooted in governance—its founder Ernest Oppenheimer served as Member of Parliament for Kimberley (1924–38) and his son Harry followed suit between 1948 and 1957. This intricate web of interdependence made AAC both a beneficiary of apartheid's industrial order and, paradoxically, a potential agent of its reform.

By the 1980s the company's reach was so extensive that its fortunes were virtually indistinguishable from those of South Africa itself. To understand AAC during this period is therefore to understand the architecture of the apartheid economy: an economy sustained by exploitation yet increasingly confronted by the moral and political demands of transformation. It is from this unique and conflicted position that the High Road/Low Road scenario exercise emerged—a corporate attempt to imagine, and perhaps influence, South Africa's possible futures.

37 Hammond et al., 'Anglo American Corporation', p. 1416.

38 See: Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

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The Creation, Dissemination, and Influence of Anglo American's High Road/Low Road Scenarios

Although AAC had evolved into a vast conglomerate by the 1980s, with subsidiaries spanning multiple industries, mining remained the company's core identity and economic foundation. For any mining enterprise, understanding the value of the resources still embedded in the ground is paramount: commodity prices serve as the crucial measure for assessing potential returns on the enormous investments of capital, time, and labour required for extraction. Put simply, the expected price of a mineral determines whether it is worth mining at all. Anticipating whether the prices will rise, fall, or remain stable, therefore, becomes a matter of fundamental strategic importance. For a corporation of AAC's scale and influence in South Africa at the time, this forecasting was not merely a technical exercise but a key assumption in its strategic decision-making.

By the late 1970s, AAC's executives had lost faith in conventional forecasting models. 'The metal price forecasts', Clem Sunter recalled, 'were rotten … and got everything wrong.' In search of a more adaptive methodology for thinking about the future, the company turned to the work of Pierre Wack and the Royal Dutch Shell scenario team, whose anticipatory analyses had helped Shell navigate the oil shocks of the 1970s.[39] Before Wack's intervention, Royal Dutch Shell relied on its Unified Planning Machinery (UPM)—a global model that projected operations on the assumption of continuity, reasonable in an era when oil prices had remained steady between one and three dollars a barrel for sixty years. Influenced by the work of Herman Kahn and the RAND Corporation on a potential thermonuclear war, Wack introduced scenario planning, distinguishing between predetermined trends and critical uncertainties, and exploring how their interplay could reshape the future. Crucially, he involved managers directly in constructing the scenarios, arguing that the latter 'help managers structure uncertainty when they are based on a sound analysis of reality, and when they change the

39 Pierre Wack, 'Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids', *Harvard Business Review*, November 1985.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

decision makers' assumptions about how the world works and compel them to reorganize their mental model of reality'.[40] The exercise enabled Shell to reconfigure expectations across its upstream and downstream divisions—those responsible for exploration, production, refining, and transport—alerting them to the potential for extreme price volatility and a shift towards a lower-growth world.

Wack was invited to address the AAC board in Johannesburg, and, Sunter said, 'his maxim, "better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong"', struck a chord' with the leadership at the time, reflecting a philosophical shift away from technocratic prediction towards better understanding the drivers of change. Sunter, then secretary to the executive team, was tasked by CEO Relly to lead an adaptation of this new methodology. Sunter assembled cross-disciplinary teams in London and Johannesburg to map both *global* and *South African* trajectories. Within this process Michael O'Dowd (head of AAC's Chairman's Fund) and Bobby Godsell (group consultant in industrial relations and public affairs) were key in articulating what would become AAC's High Road and Low Road scenarios for South Africa—replacing technical terminology with vivid moral narrative.[41] This linguistic shift, as Sunter observed, was pivotal: it transformed a planning exercise into a national story. The binary choice between two paths gave every listener the role of protagonist—*'to go this way or that way'*—making the scenarios accessible to diverse audiences while cutting through political and economic complexity.

Before examining how the High Road/Low Road scenarios circulated and gained influence across South African society, it is first necessary to understand what they were and how they were constructed. Their initial purpose was diagnostic rather than persuasive: to explore plausible futures for South Africa in light of intensifying political unrest, international isolation, and economic volatility. Understanding the logic and structure

40 Pierre Wack, 'Scenarios: Uncharted Waters Ahead', *Harvard Business Review*, September 1985.

41 Clem Sunter, interview by Maya Fisher-French, 'The Fox Who Helped Shape SA's Future: Clem Sunter's Legacy of Scenario Planning', *News24 Business*, 10 August 2022, www.news24.com/multimedia/podcasts/listen-the-fox-who-helped-shape-sas-future-clem-sunters-legacy-of-scenario-planning-20250810-0599.

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of the scenarios—the assumptions, narrative form, and intended audiences—is crucial, since the communicative power lay as much in the way the scenarios framed moral and strategic choices as in the way they were later shared.

The High Road/Low Road Scenarios

The High Road/Low Road scenario framework was built on two foundational elements. The first sought to define what Sunter called the 'rules of the game'—relative certainties he and the research team could count on as persistent factors that would endure (Table 1).

The second looked at 'key uncertainties'—unpredictable phenomena that could have a significant impact. These latter 'key uncertainties' would establish the need, and provide the framework, for the scenarios themselves, given their inherent unpredictability.

Rule of the game	**Description**	**Key uncertainty**	**Description**
Imbalance of military power	Imbalance of military power in favour of the people in power (vs opposition groups in the country)	*Strategies of power*	The strategies employed by those in power and those who are not
Equilibrium of violence	Despite imbalance of military power, equilibrium of violence will gradually rise through urban violence	*Economic strategies*	The evolution of the economic model employed in South Africa

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

Industrialised society	South Africa is an industrialised economy	*World/ South Africa dynamic*	The integration (how and to what extent), or lack thereof, between South Africa and the rest of the world
South Africa cannot fully satisfy world agenda	South Africa cannot satisfy call by several major countries for a quick and virtually unconditional surrender by the people in power		
Statutory apartheid will go	Statutory apartheid—institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination—is being overtaken by demands of increasingly integrated and complex economy		

Table 1. Overview of rules of the game and key uncertainties

These building blocks of the 'rules of the game' and 'key uncertainties' produced what Sunter and AAC pitched as two divergent pathways: the High Road, representing negotiated reform and national renewal, and the Low Road, representing isolation, authoritarianism, and decline. Each path embodied both an economic logic and a moral worldview (Table 2). The scenarios collectively served as a mirror of South Africa's strategic dilemma in the 1980s: to reform through inclusion or to perish through repression.

High Road	**Low Road**
Minimal sanctions	Increasing sanctions
Small government	Controlled economy
Decentralised power	Centralised government
Joint negotiation and synergy	Eventual confrontation and conflict
'Winning nation'	'Fortress South Africa' inevitably leading to further decline and a 'waste land' scenario

Table 2. Overview of High Road and Low Road scenario characteristics

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

The High Road envisaged a future in which South Africa moved through cooperation and dialogue towards a pluralist democracy and open economy. It anticipated minimal international sanctions, signalling confidence in reform, and proposed a smaller, decentralised government with authority distributed across regions and communities.[42] Progress depended on enabling a 'dual-logic' economy that valued both enterprise and equity, a 'servant government' accountable to citizens rather than being command-driven, and genuine transformation.[43] Success on this path would produce 'a result better than the separate parties could have achieved alone' and position South Africa as a cooperative, outward-looking, and economically competitive state.[44]

In contrast, the Low Road imagined a descent into isolation, economic contraction, and authoritarian drift. It projected escalating sanctions, a closed and protectionist economy, and the growth of a centralised state apparatus at precisely the moment when decentralisation was most needed.[45] The framing described a society moving from short-term co-option to inevitable confrontation, culminating in a cautionary endpoint the team termed 'Fortress South Africa'—a militarised, inward-looking state beset by declining growth and increasing instability.[46] Sustained over time, this trajectory risked producing a 'waste land', a metaphor for national self-destruction under the weight of repression, fear, and stagnation.

To transcend the paralysis of fear and division, the framework introduced a 'Common Vision' for all South Africans. It effectively represented the 'call to action' and is the only deliberately normative section. Even then, the wording and presentation is not confrontational, but rather places the reader in the position of decision-maker. In *The World and South Africa in the 1990s*, Sunter opened the account of this section with the following:

42 Clem Sunter, *The World and South Africa in the 1990s* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1987), pp. 104–5.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., pp. 105–6.

45 Ibid., pp. 106–7.

46 Ibid., p. 109.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

> You cannot persuade people to take the risk of the 'High Road' by just frightening them with the disastrous consequences of the 'Low Road'. We all talk of the fear of the unknown—never the hope of the unknown—and in the short term the 'Low Road' offers the known path (with comfortable co-option). To launch people into the unknown and make them display exceptional courage—for that is what the 'High Road' entails—requires a common vision. This is our attempt at constructing one.[47]

This vision included four interdependent commitments: to place the nation above sectional interest; to negotiate inclusively with all willing participants; to make South Africa a 'winning nation'; and to establish an income-per-head goal achievable only through cooperation.[48] The 'winning nation' concept fused political reform with global competitiveness, asserting that South Africa's survival depended on its ability to align with the 'rules of the game' of the world economy. Political pluralism and economic liberalisation were presented as two dimensions of the same transformational project.

The High Road, in this logic, was both an ethical and an economic imperative. It held out the possibility of growth rates comparable to the dynamic economies of the Pacific Rim—up to 10 per cent annually—anchored in decentralisation, entrepreneurship, and participation.[49] The Low Road, by contrast, might generate temporary momentum through import substitution, but would soon succumb to inefficiency, social unrest, and declining real income.

The contrast reinforced the moral polarity of the framework: cooperation was rational and progressive; isolation, self-defeating.

The scenarios concluded with a call to collective agency. The High Road was not conceived as a prediction but as an act of will—a future that

47 Ibid., p. 106.
48 Ibid., pp. 106–11.
49 Ibid., p. 109.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

could only be realised through deliberate moral and political choice. The analogy to the American Founding Fathers' deliberations two centuries earlier underscored this ethos: history, Sunter suggested, was shaped not by inevitability but by courage and imagination.[50] The High Road/Low Road framework thus simultaneously offered a moral allegory and a political instrument, providing symbolic language through which to understand the crisis and the possibility of its resolution (Figure 1).

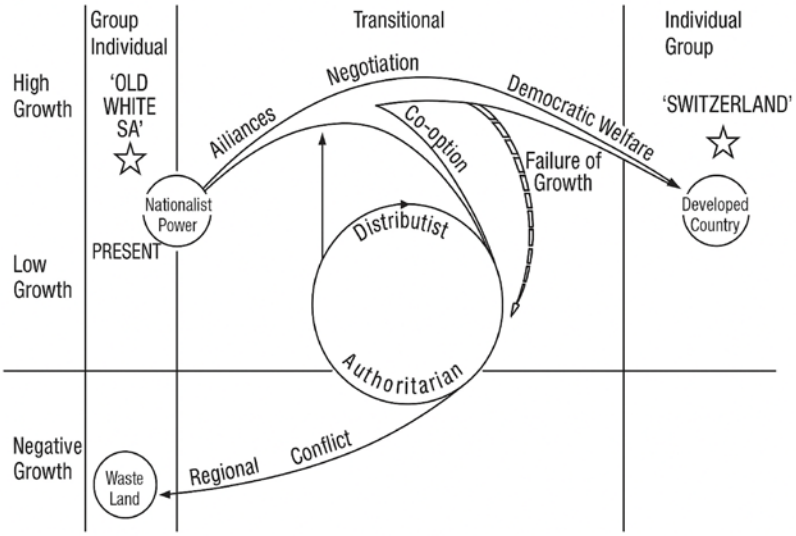

Figure 1. South Africa's possible political evolutionary paths. Source: C. Sunter, The World and South Africa in the 1990s (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1987), p. 101.

The Dissemination of the High Road/Low Road Scenarios

As noted, the scenarios began life as an internal exercise in strategic foresight; after creation, they were communicated internally following that same logic. Sunter was tasked with taking the scenarios across AAC's divisions and testing their resonance with various operating teams. Word of the exercise soon travelled beyond the firm. Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi—Zulu prince, founder of the Inkatha Freedom Party, and

50 Ibid., p. 111.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

chief minister of the KwaZulu homeland—invited Sunter to present at a Durban conference[51] he was hosting in June 1986. With Relly's consent, Sunter accepted.

The first external airing of the scenarios thus occurred not through a planned corporate campaign, but at the request of an influential political and community leader. 'The presentation went off like a bomb,' Sunter recalled; 'it was incredibly well received.' The next morning, more than twenty companies requested briefings. What followed was not a coordinated broadcast or push, but an organic pull across sectors—an emergent, bottom-up diffusion that reflected, in Sunter's words, 'a need in the air', most notably from businesses as they sought a pragmatic and perhaps less emotionally charged solution to the economic pressures to which they were subject. Therefore, the High Road/Low Road narrative did not so much launch, rather it was drawn into public circulation by constituencies seeking a shared language of possibility.

Four turning points punctuated this wider trajectory. First, in November 1986 Sunter briefed President P.W. Botha and his cabinet. At the close, Botha turned to cabinet member F.W. de Klerk and asked, 'Is this guy for real?' De Klerk reportedly replied: 'Yes—and he should go and talk to the police, the army, and the parliamentarians.'[52] The exchange is telling: the scenarios could function not merely as input to policy, but as internal storytelling in government, reframing entrenched institutional mindsets and legitimising new lines of reasoning about South Africa's future.

Roelf Meyer, then deputy minister of law and order, charged with coordinating the national state of emergency, corroborates this internal turn inside government and its apparatus. After hearing Sunter, senior figures from the security forces invited him to brief them. Meyer describes the effect as 'a powerful message' that 'helped tremendously to redirect the mindset of government'—not immediately, but cumulatively. What

51 Sometimes referred to as an indaba.

52 Sunter, interview by Fisher-French.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

made it effective, he suggests, was the combination of a 'very factual' diagnosis with a compelling narrative arc: the two-path framing appealed to 'one's senses', making plain that 'if we do the right things, look where we can go … out of this mess', whereas 'if we kept on doing the same thing, we would have stayed on the low road'. In short, the scenarios endowed officials with agency while gently steering them away from the 'total onslaught/total strategy' paradigm then dominant in the security establishment.[53]

Second, Sunter presented to the Afrikaner Broederbond, the influential secret society that had long underpinned the apartheid establishment.[54] 'I think they were open to hearing me because they didn't consider me a traitor—but I was an outsider,' he reflected. The messenger mattered as much as the message. As an English-speaking AAC executive, Sunter occupied a liminal position—credible enough to be heard, yet sufficiently detached to challenge orthodoxy.

Third, the scenarios' reach extended well beyond the white establishment. Tokyo Sexwale—a prominent anti-apartheid activist—later told Sunter that ANC leaders had watched a video recording of the presentation while in exile in Lusaka: 'They couldn't believe that a capitalist from Anglo American could give such a presentation of the different alternatives facing the country.'[55] The video, Sunter joked, 'had become so popular it had overtaken Michael Jackson's *Thriller* at the video shops'.[56] The publication of *The World and South Africa in the 1990s* amplified this effect, selling over 80,000 copies and widening access beyond Sunter's approximately 230 live presentations, which reached an estimated 25,000–30,000 people.[57]

53 Meyer describes this as the dominant government policy at the time: a sense of feeling a 'total onslaught' on white-minority rule from all directions, especially the threat of communism, and the need, therefore, for a proportionately comprehensive response—a 'total strategy'.

54 South African History Archive, 'Afrikaner Broederbond', *O'Malley Archives*, https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv02730/05lv03188/06lv03190.htm.

55 Sunter, interview by Fisher-French.

56 Ibid.

57 Clem Sunter, *The World and South Africa in the 1990s* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1987), p. 10.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

Fourth—and most symbolically—Sunter was asked to meet a prisoner who had read his work and viewed the presentation: Nelson Mandela, then at Drakenstein prison. Over lunch Mandela and Sunter discussed the scenarios, and Mandela highlighted Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic dictum 'I don't care whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice' as an apt encapsulation of the High Road ethos. That the scenarios reached Mandela in prison evidences their networked diffusion across ideological, institutional, and geographic boundaries, and their embrace by the figure who would most decisively shape the long-term discourse of reconciliation and democratic renewal.

Sunter has consistently maintained that the High Road/Low Road exercise did not 'trigger' the transition. Its contribution lay in providing a framework for conversation—a discursive scaffold through which politicians, business leaders, and citizens could imagine alternative futures. Meyer's testimony supports this: he characterises the scenarios as 'a persuasive tool, an influencing tool … of a general nature that steered the process in the right direction', and credits the scenarios as being one of the most important factors contributing to his own 'paradigm shift' and preparing the cognitive ground for change so that, when leadership shifted in 1989, decision-makers were 'already inclined to do the necessary'.

The diffusion of the High Road/Low Road scenarios was remarkable in both reach and resonance. The narrative circulated across South Africa's political and social spectrum—from the president and cabinet to the army, police, and security services, from business leaders to members of the ANC in exile, and to tens of thousands of citizens through Sunter's presentations, videos, and publications. Most notably, it reached Nelson Mandela himself while still imprisoned. Few communications initiatives at the time, corporate or otherwise, achieved such breadth: from the enforcers of apartheid to its opponents, all were, in some measure, engaged in a shared discourse about South Africa's possible futures.

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Storytelling Inherent in Scenario Building

If the preceding sections have examined what AAC's High Road/Low Road exercise was and how it circulated through South Africa's communicative landscape, the next considers what it achieved as a narrative act. Scenarios, by design, do more than forecast: they organise uncertainty into stories endowed with strategic, and sometimes moral, direction.[58] This mirrors what Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle argue is the function of narratives in politics and strategy—not merely representations but instruments of power: they define actors, order events, and render certain futures both intelligible and desirable.[59] Scenarios similarly invite audiences to inhabit imagined futures, to see themselves as participants in an unfolding story, and to align perception and behaviour around shared meaning. In this sense, scenario planning can be understood as a form of strategic storytelling, embodying an effort to impose narrative coherence amid systemic flux.

The following section explores this narrative dimension in greater depth, examining how the High Road/Low Road scenarios exemplified storytelling as strategy, and meaning-making as a mode of influence. To do this, it is important to first provide a brief genealogy of scenario planning, to clearly mark out how it was originally conceived, and its evolution leading up to, and through, the High Road/Low Road exercise.

Brief Genealogy of Scenarios: From RAND to Shell to Anglo American

The intellectual provenance behind the High Road/Low Road scenarios can be traced through three interrelated phases in the evolution of strategic foresight: the analytic rationalism of the RAND Corporation, the commercial turn at Royal Dutch Shell, and the moral-political

58 Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2004), p. 30.

59 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 4.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

adaptation undertaken by Anglo American during the mid 1980s. Each represents an expansion in scope—from the technical, to the corporate, to the civic—and a parallel transformation in the communicative purpose of scenarios themselves.

At RAND in the 1950s, scenario methods were conceived as tools of Cold War strategy: structured thought experiments designed to anticipate adversary behaviour and optimise deterrence.[60] Herman Kahn's nuclear war scenarios, famously detailed in *On Thermonuclear War*, typified this technocratic imagination.[61] Yet even these models revealed an implicit narrative dimension. To envisage 'World War III' or a 'limited nuclear exchange' was to tell a story about power, morality, and survival that extended beyond data into the moral imagination.

By the early 1970s this approach was reinterpreted by Pierre Wack, head of scenario planning at Royal Dutch Shell. Wack reframed scenarios as 'an art of reperceiving': a means of challenging entrenched mental models rather than predicting discrete outcomes.[62] Shell's 'oil-shock' scenarios demonstrated that storytelling could serve as an instrument of strategic perception, aimed at cultivating readiness in the minds of decision-makers rather than presenting them with statistical accuracy.[63] This shift—from analysis to meaning-making—established scenario planning as a cognitive tool over a predictive model, wherein storytelling became integral to sense-making.[64]

60 Mie Augier, Nicholas Dew, Thorbjørn Knudsen, and Nils Stieglitz, 'Organizational Persistence in the Use of War Gaming and Scenario Planning', *Long Range Planning* 51, Nº 4 (2018): 512. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2017.12.005.

61 Herman Kahn and Evan Jones, *On Thermonuclear War*, Transaction edn (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, 2007). https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315125701. For an excellent background to the brilliant and colourful character that was Herman Kahn, see: Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, *The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674037564.

62 Wack, 'Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids'.

63 Kees van der Heijden, *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* (Chichester: Wiley, 1996), p. 21.

64 Rafael Ramirez and Angela Wilkinson, *Strategic Reframing: The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 34–36.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

When AAC adopted the method in the 1980s under Clem Sunter, it introduced a third and distinctly moral-political dimension. Whereas RAND's scenarios had been designed for defence staff, and Shell's for executives, AAC's became—through Sunter—directed at an entire nation, with an adaptation that was inherently shaped on liberal democratic values. The binary of 'high' and 'low' simplified complexity into a didactic moral choice, and in so doing AAC transformed a managerial tool into a normative, communicative medium.

In this genealogy the boundaries between scenario planning and strategic communications start to dissolve. Through its evolution, the value inherent in scenario planning evolved from preparing organisations for uncertainty to shaping the discursive frameworks through which uncertainty itself is understood. The High Road/Low Road initiative made this explicit: foresight became a performative act of communication by constructing meaning, evoking emotion, and framing possible choices.

The Cognitive Bridge from Scenarios to Strategic Communications

Ten years after South Africa's first universal, non-racial elections in 1994, former president F.W. de Klerk gave a speech to an association of pharmaceutical wholesalers in the picturesque Hemel en Aarde valley in the Western Cape. He opened the speech with the following:

> I do not know how many of you remember the High Road/Low Road future scenarios that Clem Sunter presented in the mid 'eighties. If you attended them—as I did—you may recall that they were the result of months of deliberation by a very talented multi-disciplinary group—the best and the brightest that Anglo-American could assemble at that time. The scenarios were fascinating—but revealed the many difficulties that we encounter when we try to predict

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> the future […] few people foresaw the dramatic changes that would take place in South Africa itself.[65]

He went on to list the remarkable—though once unimaginable—achievements of the previous decade: former adversaries jointly drafted a liberal, non-racial constitution; the country peacefully conducted its first free and universal elections; and a government of national unity, led by the ANC, embraced free-market economic policies and restored South Africa's integration with the global community.

Though fifteen years earlier these remarkable achievements—which de Klerk went on to refer to as a miracle—would have seemed unlikely, if not incredible, the High Road/Low Road scenarios sketched the possibility. The scenarios did not detail exactly what would happen, nor confer a step-by-step plan on how to get there, but rather painted possible futures with broad strokes. Three key ingredients supported their success, not as a predictive tool, but as a communicative tool of persuasion and influence: the scenarios were *simple*, embraced *metaphor*, and created *choice*.

Clem Sunter recognised that a scenario's power derives from its imaginative clarity—the ability to make uncertainty intelligible and to stimulate reflection on agency. Pierre Wack, reflecting on other, less successful scenarios, once said that they shouldn't have 'too much detail—like a photo' and should instead resemble 'a Picasso painting, with just a few key lines'.[66] This preference for selective abstraction illustrates how simplicity functioned as a communicative strategy rather than a limitation: it reduced complexity to its essential structure, making the argument accessible without loss of depth.

Metaphor provided the structure's emotional and cognitive frame. Roads suggest motion, direction, and agency; they imply that the future is

65 F.W. de Klerk, 'Speech by F W de Klerk to the National Association of Pharmaceutical Wholesalers, Arabella', 4 October 2004, available at: https://fwdeklerk.org/south-africas-second-decade-from-democratic-transformation-to-economic-and-social-transformation.

66 Thomas J. Chermack, *Foundations of Scenario Planning: The Story of Pierre Wack* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 149. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315641232.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

not predetermined but traversed. To imagine South Africa at a fork in the road was to reaffirm the possibility of change through collective choice. The High Road evoked progress and inclusion, while the Low Road signalled decline and isolation. In Lakoff and Johnson's terms, such spatial metaphors 'define reality' by aligning moral reasoning with orientation.[67] The image's simplicity enabled diverse publics to situate themselves within a shared storyline of possibility.

Choice formed the scenarios' interpretive core. Their binary design mirrored a universal storytelling logic: two paths diverge, and the protagonist must decide. As John Yorke observes, every story turns on whether change will be embraced or resisted.[68] In this respect the scenarios cast society itself as the decision-maker, converting a political impasse into a collective act of imagination. Roelf Meyer later reflected that Sunter's approach was not to 'tell government to stop its nonsense and do it differently', but to invite reflection: if South Africa embarked on the proposed trajectory, 'then all of us can benefit'. His strength, Meyer noted, lay in 'influencing thinking rather than prescribing'.

Through this triad of simplicity, metaphor, and choice, the High Road/Low Road exercise exemplified the communicative precision of strategic storytelling. It provided a shared vocabulary for moral reasoning in a context of uncertainty, transforming a foresight technique into a participatory narrative of national decision-making.

Theoretical Challenge: Broadening or Diluting the Definition

This section maps Neville Bolt's definition of strategic communications against the empirical case of AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios. Its purpose is to test both the strength and the elasticity of Bolt's

67 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 157.

68 John Yorke, *Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 101. See also: Will Storr, 'The Dramatic Question', in *Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better* (New York, NY: ABRAMS Books, 2020).

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

framework—probing where it holds firm and where it strains when applied beyond its original, implicitly state-centric design. By examining the definition's key components—the long-term shaping of discourse, the pursuit of strategic effects through words, images, actions, and non-actions, and the alignment with the national or political community's interest—this section assesses not only whether the case satisfies those conditions but also what this encounter reveals about the assumptions of agency, legitimacy, and intentionality embedded in Bolt's conception.

The Definitional Challenge

Applying this definition to a corporate actor immediately invites scepticism. At least three interrelated criticisms arise. The first is the *public-relations* objection: that the High Road/Low Road exercise was simply a form of reputation management or corporate social responsibility, falling short of Bolt's *security-salient threshold* and therefore reducible to a matter of image rather than influence.

The second is the *component* objection, which holds that what AAC undertook was merely strategic management communicated rather than strategic communications in its own right. In this view—the so-called *component theory*—each element of the initiative, from the scenario planning to the roadshows and publications, should be read as a discrete management tool rather than as parts of a coherent communicative act.

The third is the *definitional* objection, which concedes that the exercise may constitute a form of strategic communications, but only if one applies a looser and broader definition than Bolt's. Each of these objections probes the boundary between *communication about strategy and communication as strategy*—a distinction central both to Bolt's theory and to the AAC case itself.

Two friction points thread through these objections—questions of intentionality and instrumentality—which will be addressed in turn.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

Friction Point One: Intentionality

The first major point of tension concerns intentionality: whether the communicative power of the High Road/Low Road scenarios depended on deliberate strategic intent in line with its effect. The exercise began as an internal management project. AAC's leadership sought a foresight tool to navigate economic volatility, not a national communications campaign. It was, in its inception, designed for corporate management reflection rather than public persuasion.

Nevertheless, it evolved into a widely disseminated narrative that influenced the thinking of political leaders, business elites, and the broader public. Should its impact therefore be judged by its original purpose, or by its eventual effect? Intended or accidental outcome? The scenarios' transformation from internal foresight to public narrative was driven less by corporate design than by societal demand—the 'pull' of audiences searching for orientation amid crises. Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's invitation to present the scenarios at the Durban conference, followed by extensive requests from businesses, the cabinet, state security divisions, trade unions, and civic organisations, turned an inward-looking strategic exercise into an outward-facing communicative phenomenon. In economic terms, its diffusion was demand-pulled rather than supply-pushed: an emergent communications process whose effects were indistinguishable from those of a deliberately orchestrated campaign.

This evolution, however, cannot be separated from the structural pressures bearing down on AAC during the mid 1980s. The company stood at the epicentre of a political economy in turmoil. By 1987 it faced the largest strike in South African history, which paralysed AAC's gold-mining operations, and exposed the company to a crisis that was simultaneously economic, social, and moral. What began as an industrial dispute over wages and safety became a proxy for the broader struggle against apartheid. The strike revealed how business could no longer stand outside the political and security dynamics of the time: its actions—whether conciliatory or punitive—had communicative

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

consequences. AAC was no longer a passive observer of national unrest but a significant actor within it.

Roelf Meyer, who at the time represented Johannesburg West in Parliament, recalled in interview that business leaders 'were pushing … calling on government to affect the change that was necessary'. With sanctions tightening, capital flight accelerating, and domestic unrest mounting, the business community found itself under growing pressure to advocate for reform. For AAC in particular, the biggest business in the country at the time, economic survival had become bound to political transformation. The company's vested interest in a stable, reformed South African economy created both the incentive and the legitimacy for it to participate in the national conversation about the future.

These intertwined economic and moral pressures help explain why AAC's foresight exercise acquired a communicative dimension. The High Road/Low Road scenarios offered a language through which AAC could articulate, indirectly, the case for negotiated transition without directly confronting the state that still governed its licence to operate. As the boundaries between corporate risk management and political discourse blurred, scenario planning became a medium of cautious advocacy. While the company avoided explicit political statements, it tacitly endorsed dissemination once it became clear that the material resonated publicly. Clem Sunter later reflected that AAC 'never wavered in its moral and financial support' but gave him 'total discretion over the material'—a posture that amounted to endorsement without ownership. This arm's-length approach allowed the corporation to exert influence while maintaining plausible deniability in a highly polarised environment.

The question of intentionality therefore does not disqualify the case as strategic communications; rather, it illuminates the evolving nature of agency within it. AAC's influence emerged through a dynamic interplay between its own initiative and societal uptake. What began as a corporate foresight exercise became a communicative intervention because the conditions of crisis demanded it, thereby *legitimising* it.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

In this sense, AAC's experience anticipated what later scholarship terms the *network effect* in strategic communications: power that derives as much from social diffusion and collective resonance as from deliberate institutional design.[69]

Friction Point Two: Instrumentality

A second critique concerns instrumentality: whether AAC's motives were genuinely civic or primarily self-interested. On one level, the company's actions were unmistakably pragmatic. As Roelf Meyer recalled, AAC's strained relationship with the apartheid government, its vulnerability to the 1987 mineworkers' strike, and its exposure to international sanctions and capital flight created an imperative for reform. The logic was simple: stability was good business. Yet this pursuit of stability was inseparable from a moral claim, even if located in principally economic terms.[70]

If strategic communications is defined by its *effects* rather than professed motives, then self-interest does not automatically disqualify an actor's efforts. The complication arises from Bolt's final criterion: that such communications serve 'the national interest or the interest of a political community'. The critical question, therefore, is whether that alignment must be intentional, or whether communicative acts may serve the collective good as an *unintended consequence* of private rationality.

Insisting on pure motive would be analytically untenable. Most real-world instances of strategic communications operate in the grey zone where interests overlap. What matters strategically is not the origin of intent, but the *direction of effect*: whether an act of communication contributes to the stability and coherence, or some other important end, of the broader political community. Judged by that standard, AAC's High Road/Low Road initiative qualifies. Its scenarios helped legitimise the

69 Nicholas Michelsen and Neville Bolt, *Unmapping the 21st Century* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

70 Rogers M. Smith, 'The Role of Ethically Constitutive Stories', in *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 79.

DOI 10.30966/2018.RIGA.16.2

idea of negotiated reform, through requests to hear the scenarios from across the spectrum of invested actors—government implementing apartheid, activists fighting apartheid, and businesses and the wider public operating within it. By tempering radical expectations among both business and political elites, the scenarios reinforced a more open, shared discursive space in which South Africa's democratic transition could later unfold.

Instrumentality, then, should not be read as a moral disqualification but as an analytical insight. It exposes how liberal and corporate rationalities can converge under historical pressure, producing communicative acts that are simultaneously self-preserving and nation-building. This synthesis—where self-interest assumes the language of moral responsibility—was central to AAC's communicative power. The company's narrative projected a vision in which business survival and national redemption became two sides of the same story. In this sense the High Road/Low Road exercise not only exemplified strategic communications, but also revealed its defining paradox: that persuasion in the public interest often depends on actors pursuing their own.

Taken together, these friction points suggest that extending Bolt's framework beyond the state does not dilute its analytical power but rather broadens its relevance, even if one might object that Bolt's criterion—rooting strategic communications in liberal democratic values—presupposes a fundamentally political domain, relevant chiefly to states engaged in contests of legitimacy rather than to private actors pursuing commercial aims. AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios demonstrate these principles in practice, albeit in a paradoxical setting. The company's interventions during apartheid were not moral gestures alone but strategic acts to preserve both the state and the market system on which its survival depended. By framing South Africa's future as a moral and strategic choice between regression and reform, AAC fused the normative and the pragmatic, presenting liberal democratic values as both ethically preferable and practically necessary. As Martin Wolf notes in *Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, neither capitalism nor democracy can

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survive without the other, since both depend on an underlying equality of status.[71] South Africa's illiberal democracy proved this, as sanctions from around the world forced it into pariah status, economically as well as politically; economically *because* of the political.

Using Bolt's model, the case illustrates how strategic communications' moral orientation towards persuasion, legitimacy, and the 'common good' can extend beyond the state when a private actor's communicative legitimacy is socially conferred rather than institutionally derived. In this sense AAC's exercise exemplified how strategic communications can emerge under systemic stress as a means of shaping discourse, aligning meaning, and influencing collective behaviour, irrespective of whether the actor is political or corporate.

Conclusion

This study set out to test whether a business can meaningfully perform strategic communications in a security-salient environment. Measured against Neville Bolt's conception of strategic communications—the long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses—the case of AAC's High Road/Low Road scenarios suggests that it can, though in a distinctive and historically specific sense.

Developed in the mid 1980s during South Africa's deepening political and economic crisis, the scenarios were never intended as a public communications initiative. They began as an internal foresight exercise to help AAC navigate economic volatility and political uncertainty. Yet as instability escalated—amid the 1987 mineworkers' strike, intensifying sanctions, and widespread unrest—the exercise acquired a broader purpose. It provided a language through which the nation's future could be discussed and contested. Under these pressures, an internal planning tool evolved into a communicative act with civic and political

71 Martin Wolf, *Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London: Penguin Random House, 2023).

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implications. The tool evolved from helping management understand external uncertainty to something that helped shape it—still serving the same strategic ends, but through influence, not just foresight.

The High Road/Low Road scenarios demonstrated the capacity of corporate storytelling to influence collective imagination. Its effectiveness lay in its simplicity, the strength of the central metaphor, and the participatory logic of choice it invited. By framing South Africa's predicament as two moral and strategic pathways—one towards reform and cooperation, the other towards isolation and decline—the scenarios offered a structure of meaning that was intelligible across ideological boundaries. This clarity enabled diverse audiences—within government, the liberation movement, business, and the wider public—to engage with a shared framework for imagining change.

Rather than challenging Bolt's definition itself, the case interrogates one reading of it as implicitly state-centric: as though only governments or security institutions possess the legitimacy, scope, and endurance to meet its criteria. Through the contextual exploration of two friction points—intentionality and instrumentality—the analysis has shown how a private business could nonetheless fulfil those same conditions. AAC and Clem Sunter's communicative legitimacy was not institutional but circumstantial, conferred by the extraordinary context in which they operated. In a moment when the state's authority was eroding, and the boundary between economic survival and political reform had collapsed, their narrative found credibility precisely because it addressed both domains simultaneously.

The High Road/Low Road exercise thus suggests that strategic communications can emanate from actors whose legitimacy is situational rather than constitutional. What matters is not formal mandate, but the ability to shape discourse, influence expectations, and stabilise meaning across a fragmented public sphere. AAC's initiative achieved this by aligning its self-interest with a wider narrative of reform, transforming a corporate

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foresight exercise into a communicative intervention that resonated across political divides.

AAC did not determine South Africa's democratic transition, but it helped to frame how that transition was imagined. By providing a shared vocabulary at a time when official narratives had disintegrated, the company became an intermediary of meaning, linking economic reasoning with moral responsibility. Its experience demonstrates that strategic communications can extend beyond the state—not as a substitute for political authority, but as a parallel process through which societies articulate coherence in times of systemic uncertainty.

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