

Most people think of tribes as groups of pre-modern people. But what makes a tribe?

According to Wikipedia:

A **tribe**, viewed historically or developmentally, consists of a [social group](#) existing before the development of, or outside of,

[states](#)

tribal society

to refer to societies organized largely on the basis of

[kinship](#)

, especially corporate descent groups (see

[clan](#)

and

[kinship](#)

). ...

popular imagination, tribes reflect a way of life that predates, and is more "

[natural](#)

", than that in modern states. Tribes also privilege primordial social ties, are clearly bounded, homogeneous, parochial, and stable. Thus, many

[
[citation needed](#)

] believed that tribes organize links between families (including clans and lineages), and provide them with a social and ideological basis for solidarity that is in some way more limited than that of an "ethnic group" or of a "

[nation](#)

".
[Anthropological](#)

and

[ethnohistorical](#)

research has challenged all of these notions.

So 'tribe' seems not to refer to people who live in towns and cities, go to schools, vote and elect the people who govern them. But one does find manifestations of tribalism even in modern societies.

As a tribe appears to be a group of people held together by a common set of norms and values that 'provide them with a social and ideological basis for solidarity', we need only look around a city to see how tribalism manifests in modern times. It is the way in which institutions and businesses are organised. We hear of a corporate culture because business tribes are more clearly visible. Business corporations usually occupy expansive premises and all their employees understand and obey the rules that regulate their behaviour within that environment. Institutions and businesses are more formal organisations than traditional tribes, but they are as rigid in regulating behaviour. When you enter their premises, you instantly feel that intangible bureaucratic cordon that binds them together; that keeps you out.

Political parties are the most obvious manifestation of tribalism that we have in modern society. And it is the tribal nature of politics that creates problems. The main focus of political parties or tribes is on gaining power presumably because they believe they have the best plan for enhancing the society that they wish to govern. It is this pursuit of power that turns them into tribes. They are in competition with one another and because the competition is fierce, the pursuit of power becomes the primary goal. And pre-election promises, made to garner votes, remain just that, the means to garner votes and only become a minor reality just before the next election when a few poor people, the poor are in the majority, suddenly receive houses or geysers that provide the incentive for them and other poor people who did not get this time, to vote.

Under apartheid, South Africa was a tribal society and tribalism was so ingrained that after 1994, it gave rise to the multi-party system of government, which presumably was meant to allow the many tribes a voice in the running of the country. But small parties become minnows that swim with the shark.

I had assumed that with multi-party government, the tribes would disappear to allow parliamentarians to cast aside party loyalties in favour of the larger loyalty to the people of the country. I had assumed that party differences would lead to proper debate from which the best solution for the country would emerge. But tribalism is too strong. What may have seemed a good idea in 1994, has been reduced to tribal rivalries, cooption and corruption.

When I see parliamentary debates on TV, it makes no difference which country, I see tribes in action.

