

THE BLACK SASH

NATIONAL CONFERENCE, MARCH 1992

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

*"I'm longing to sing and dance in the street,
but there is still a lot of lead in my feet."*

The theme for our National Conference this year is TRANSITION. Tonight I will try to review some of the events of the past year in order to set the scene for our deliberations for the next three days, when we will be examining the strategies and process of transition that South Africa is undergoing, discussing what impact we perceive this to be having "on the ground", and then deciding what part we can play in this transition.

It has always been appropriate for the Black Sash to focus our attention where we are most involved. In other words to focus on issues of immediate concern to do with the promotion, monitoring and violation of human rights in South Africa. We will continue to maintain that focus, but we are caught in a whirlwind of global, regional, national and organisational change that cannot be ignored because of the enormous impact that it is having on all of us. So, I would like to begin by looking briefly, and therefore of necessity superficially, at some of these global and regional changes.

GLOBAL CHANGES

In recent times the world we inhabit has undergone a global revolution. Our globe is changing, and changing very fast. Never before in history have events of such monumental proportions occurred in such rapid succession. There are a number of reasons for this revolution, not least of which have been the technological innovations in communication. Just think of the fax machine which allows you to send a document across the world in a matter of seconds. Or, the 3 million people per day who travel vast distances by air. Or, the ubiquitous, Orwellian CNN news which allows people around the world to sit in their homes and watch the missiles exploding "live" in the Persian Gulf; or, to witness the fifty-six hour attempted coup in the Kremlin. This ability to communicate instantly has made the world "shrink", which in turn has had a number of results such as the internationalisation of the world economy, the spread of global lifestyles and the development of complex global interdependencies, which defy old boundaries.

One of the most profound changes to our world order and one which has significant political ramifications for us in southern Africa, has been the ending of the Cold War. From the end of World War 2 until the collapse of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the world was locked into two ideologically disparate blocks: the USSR and its eastern allies, and the USA and its western allies. The Cold War, and the vying for global supremacy between the two super-powers and consequent build up of arms and the military was costly to all nations. The resources that were spent on the military were at the expense of other needs. In the United States, for instance, *"When President Reagan came to office in 1981, the federal government spent \$7 on defense for every \$1 on housing. When he left office in 1989, the ratio of dollars was 46 to one."* (APA Journal)

The Warsaw Pact has been dissolved and so, on 27 December, did the USSR and virtually all of the communist states of Eastern Europe have collapsed. Russia herself is undergoing fundamental, traumatic economic and political restructuring. Many of the previously socialist states are now singing mantras to democracy and the free market.

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The great global communist threat has subsided, and this has had important ramifications for us in the African sub-continent. No longer is South Africa able to use the notions of the "total onslaught" or "die rooi gevaar", to justify war against our own people or the destabilisation of our neighbours. Nor is the West able to sanction the support of undemocratic governments as bulwarks against communism, such as the United States' support of Mobutu Sese Seko's 26 year old dictatorship in Zaire. The Eastern block overstretched itself, was collapsing under the weight of its own internal problems, and was no longer able to afford to give aid to the socialist states of Africa.

Peace is at last returning to southern Africa. South Africa withdrew from Namibia and the Cuban expeditionary forces withdrew from Angola. Namibia will celebrate the second anniversary of her independence this month. Peace seems to be holding in Angola, where a Peace Accord between the MPLA and Unita (brokered by the Portuguese, the USA and the USSR) was signed in May, after 16 years of civil war. Mozambique remains at war, and Renamo banditry persists, despite intense negotiation efforts taking place under Vatican and Italian mediation.

Another phenomenon in the sub-continent is the emergence of multi-party democracies. The first multi-party elections in 17 years were held in Zambia in October; they saw the defeat of President Kenneth Kaunda, whose party had held power for 26 years. Angola is hoping to hold multi-party elections in 1992, and South Africa could well be the next nation to follow. I am starting to want to dance because I do believe passionately in multi-party democracies ... but ...

What is clear is that while the enemy from without has taken a back seat, the internal problems of many nations of the world have become the main obstacles to stability. We are told (by the scenario planning teams) that transition TO democracy has never taken place in poor economic conditions. The world-wide economic recession, and the economic decline if not total chaos of some southern African states does not bode well for the survival of any democratic order. South Africa cannot remain isolated from the economic problems of her neighbours. There is already a substantial migration into South Africa of war-ravaged hungry Mozambiquans. Much faith is being pinned on regional co-operation, and already trade is taking place between South Africa and her neighbours, despite the natural fears of our neighbours of being swallowed up by "big brother". Like the rest of the world, regional co-operation is being seen as a necessary tool for economic survival.

POLITICAL EVENTS OF THE PAST YEAR IN SOUTH AFRICA

At home events have been no less significant. Amidst the turmoil of unprecedented levels of ongoing violence, we have witnessed a series of events which have constantly shifted the initiative and balance of political power between the government and the other political groupings. It has been the year of "real politique", which has sometimes left one wondering at some of the serious risks being taken in order to score political points, and thereby gain the upper hand.

In the earlier part of the year, negotiations were seen to be in jeopardy and it was the ANC who were criticised by the government and the mainline press for endangering the negotiation process. The ANC set out a seven point ultimatum to the government, which included demands for the release of political prisoners, the return of exiles; but most urgently demands to bring the violent conflict raging in the townships under control. They believed that national negotiations were meaningless until the slaughter was stopped.

By mid June we saw the last of the pillars of apartheid laws abolished with the repeal of the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act. President de Klerk declared that "apartheid belongs to the past". We know that this is not true, because the racial 1983 constitution is still in place today, and so are the multiplicity of "own affairs" departments. And we know that apartheid's legacy will be with us for many generations, but at least those pieces of statutory discrimination are gone. The government and President de Klerk in particular were winning the diplomatic battle,

and in the eyes of much of the international community could be entrusted with the process of transition. Sanctions were crumbling, trade was being re-established diplomatic relations were being established with a host of nations, and the President was being invited to visit countries around the world. (Usually only after Mr Mandela had paid his official visit.)

Many South Africans found this international credibility difficult to understand, let alone stomach. The perception of many people, especially those in violence-torn communities, was that the government was far from neutral and that their security forces were implicated in not only taking sides in the violence, but in actually fuelling it. It was only when the "Inkathagate" scandal broke and the Weekly Mail revealed how public money had been used to fund Inkatha, its union UWUSA, and other conservative front organisations that the bubble finally burst. It was now clear that the De Klerk government could not be expected to play the role of impartial referee during negotiations. The ANC, having emerged from their July congress confident and with a mandate to proceed with talks, seized the initiative. They put the demand for an interim government of national unity as the only way forward.

It is with a great sense of relief that we have at last begun the formal process of negotiating the principles for the transition to a new political order in the country at the multi-party Congress for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa). Despite the non-participation of right-wing groups such as the Conservative Party, and left-wing groups like the PAC and Azapo, Codesa includes representatives appointed by nineteen political parties. Apart from the issues being dealt with by the five working groups, a wide range of other issues, which seem to go far beyond negotiations on transitional processes, are being mooted for consideration by Codesa. What is more, Parliament is now sitting for three out of five days a week in order to allow Members of Parliament to participate fully in Codesa. These developments underscore what a powerful forum Codesa has become, and the overriding sovereign status it has assumed in the country's affairs. Parliament has essentially been relegated to second-tier status.

While understanding how crucial it is for the negotiations to proceed as speedily as possible, I must voice a growing concern about Codesa. It is easy but dangerous to put stability above democracy, but long-term problems often result from short-term stability. Firstly the speed at which it is proceeding is not allowing for any degree of reasonable consultation. The deadlines for submission to the working groups are ridiculously short, and almost make a nonsense of consultation. It also fuels and substantiates accusations that the ANC and the Nationalist Party have done a deal already. Secondly the lack of accountability of those taking part to the constituency they purport to represent, let alone to the broader population, is cause for concern. If Codesa is to expand its terms of reference and take on a wider range of issues, consultation and accountability become even more critical issues.

Now having said that, let me comment on the latest development, namely the white referendum. For those of us from the other side of the Hex, being somewhat distant from Potchefstroom and the baying of the Conservative Party, the calling of a whites-only referendum is an unacceptable step back into the apartheid structures that we thought South Africa was trying to abandon. We do not believe that whites alone should be determining South Africa's future, and resent being called upon to vote in what might appear to be support for President De Klerk himself and reform. I feel tricked again, but will go off reluctantly to vote "yes" for continued negotiations, especially now that the right wing has decided to join forces and work for a "no" vote. The referendum is a "slim" piece of political gamesmanship, which some believe could well have been premeditated – after all what tactician, however unskilled, would have allowed the announcement of the retrenchment of 4000 white teachers two days before the election.

OBSTACLES TO TRANSITION

Now, while these high-level national negotiations are proceeding, what is happening on the ground? How in touch are the politicians with their constituencies? How possible is it to translate the compromises made and decisions taken into reality? What are the obstacles to transition? It is these obstacles that make my feet heavy, and stop me from dancing in the street. I would like to touch on a few of them because I believe that they will each influence the shape of the "new South Africa". I am conscious of omitting some important issues like the economic limitations to transition and our shrinking economy, but that is not where my or the Sash's expertise lies at present.

Violence and the "third force"

Clearly, the political conflict and violence which continues to bedevil parts of the Transvaal, Natal and the Western Cape, is not only causing untold suffering to the communities involved, but is undermining local and international confidence in South Africa's ability to peacefully resolve her problems. Despite the signing of the National Peace Accord by 20 organisations including the government, Inkatha and the ANC in September, violence continues unabated. (2 238 people died in unrest-related incidents in 1991, slightly down from 2 674 in 1990.) For some time, the patterns of violence have been repeating themselves; of attacks and counter-attacks, attempts at a peace settlement, then just as a settlement seems possible, another killing. It soon became clear that there were forces at work outside of the warring factions, who were determined to derail any peace initiatives and the national negotiating process. We all believed that the destabilising "third force" was part of state structures, and that they were supporting one side in the conflicts, with a view to undermining and destabilising the ANC and its supporters. This was borne out by our monitors in the field, who saw the police's overriding role as being one of omitting to do their job. The continuing revelations in the Weekly Mail of the involvement of the South African Defense Force's Military Intelligence in secret funding and training of Inkatha, and the funding of conservative front organisations, begin to substantiate what we have always believed.

Policing

Although the actual figures are in dispute, (Alistair Sparks estimates that between 80% and 95% of the police force, and 70% to 80% of the SADF) it is generally accepted that a large proportion of South Africa's security forces support the Conservative Party. It is also accepted that this element in the security forces could well be a real impediment to transition to a new order.

All countries need an honest, neutral peace-keeping force – violence increases where law and justice are inactive.

"Structures and activities which increase the accountability of security forces are essential. But these need to be created to enhance the police's ability to act professionally, rather than to sideline them. There is no alternative to the security forces – only they have the resources to police. Enabling them to become officers of the peace is the only way forward." (Paul Graham, Democracy in Action)

The Peace Accord is meant to do just that, but there are grave doubts about whether the Peace Accord will be able to hold the signatories to the principles to which they have committed themselves. I believe that monitoring compliance of the accord and exposing non-compliance is one way in which we can begin the process of building a civil society. Our monitors and those that they work with have already contributed to this process, which should be expanded and given more recognition by the establishment of formal teams of independent monitors with recognised authority. This is one mechanism that could begin to make the police, and all other arms of government for that matter, become accountable to the broader population.

Bureaucracy

When the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948, it adopted a policy which ensured that party members soon held most of the senior positions in the civil service. It was obviously important to the implementation and administration of their apartheid policies that the bureaucracy be loyal to the party. Today South Africa's bloated civil service (in 1990 about 750 000 people were employed by central and provincial government) is overwhelmingly white, with one third of South Africa's economically active whites in the public sector, and less than 10 out of the top 1 500 in the public service held by people of colour.

Clearly this existing bureaucracy could be a very real obstacle to change to a new order. The ANC is aware of this, and Mr Mandela has announced plans for the training in the United Kingdom of "nonracial democrats of all races" as a public servant corps. Those already in public service with specific training in implementing apartheid were not ideal for the needs of transforming society. He said it was essential to train public servants to lead administration to a democratic society. It is hoped that 600 of the top 3 000 civil service and local authority jobs will be occupied by blacks.

These plans have drawn sharp reaction, and are causing great anxiety amongst civil servants about their future in the "so-called new South Africa". They warn "not to provoke this neutral, expert and loyal giant ... which if needs must, is capable of unprecedented counter-reaction". Two days ago President De Klerk reassured civil servants that their jobs and pensions would be secure in a new dispensation.

What is important in a "new dispensation" however is that the notion of what it is to be a public servant, be thoroughly examined. In essence a public servant is just that : a servant of the people, and not a servant of the state, kept in place through party patronage. That notion needs not only to be written into the ethos of the bureaucracy, but the public must also accept that it has a crucial role to play in demanding "service" from their politicians and the bureaucracy. One way of achieving this is to ensure that all levels of government are open and directly accountable to the electorate. The prevailing system of political decision-making from local to central level, currently taken in closed meetings is not acceptable. Neither is the appointing of senior administrators (such as the Provincial Administrators) with wide powers and no direct public accountability.

Competing Claims and Vested Interest

There is no need to recount to you how very badly skewed the distribution of South Africa's resources are. Or that the bulk of the land, skills, jobs, money and material resources are in the hands of a very few, predominantly white people. While I believe that the majority of white people in South Africa are willing to share political power, they are much more reluctant to give up any of their privileges and material assets. At the same time, the majority of black people, denied the vote and access to these resources, are clear in their demands that political power without economic power and the redressing of past imbalances is meaningless. Some people believe that the contending claims in South Africa of the "haves" to retaining what they have, and the "have-nots" to claiming that which they have been denied are irreconcilable. I believe that these claims or claiming of rights are the very nub of negotiations. That negotiations are about compromise, and that means that neither side gets everything that they want. The Black Sash firmly believes that if principles of justice, fairness and equality are not met, and this must involve substantial redistribution of the country's resources, there is no chance of lasting peace.

Two of these contending claims will be the topic of discussion at one of our conference sessions. They are "affirmative action and "the right to shelter versus the right to private property".

Achieving Free and Fair Elections

As we hurtle through negotiations at CODESA, some form of all-inclusive election seems close at

hand. It will be a momentous occasion when ALL South Africans can vote together in democratic elections. But, if our elections are to be free and fair, preparations must begin NOW. There is a long process involved in preparing the population for the vote, which includes voter registration, education on voting procedures, helping voters to make an informed choice through wide exposure to all of the political parties point of view. Media, especially the electronic media and the radio in areas where illiteracy is high, has an important role to play in this regard. It is thus that it is important that the media should be placed under the control of an independent commission. This should happen long before the elections, in order to build up the credibility so sorely (and justifiably) missing in the SABC. There is also a crucial role to be played by independent, formally recognised monitors, whose role it is to ensure that a code of conduct for fair election procedures in all aspects of the election process, be adhered to. This will be especially important in South Africa where political intolerance has been, and is, part of our national psyche, and where intimidation is used as a method of persuasion.

During our conference we will be looking at what role the Black Sash should play in preparing for democratic elections and in trying to ensure that free and fair elections take place.

Marginalisation of Women

We all know that South Africa is a highly patriarchal society. Some political parties claim a commitment to a non-racial, non-sexist new South Africa. We do not see much evidence of this commitment being put into practice, and the lack of inclusion of women in Codesa is a prime example. Are claims of non-sexism merely expedient lip-service to win votes – after all women constitute 54% of the population? I find it difficult to believe that out of the nineteen political parties represented at Codesa, only three of the one hundred and eighty participants are women. Are there really no other women who have something to contribute to this process? Is it really not appropriate that Codesa more fairly reflect our South African society? It seems to me that we are replacing an all-white ruling patriarchy for a multi-coloured ruling patriarchy. Women are going to have to become more organised and more vocal, remembering that it is up to us to go out and claim our space.

CONCLUSION

For so long we have carried around the burden of national shame for a clearly unjust, degrading and brutalising system of government. The process that South Africa is currently engaged in is indeed remarkable, risky and challenging. We have an unusual opportunity to redefine what sort of nation we want to be. What is being forged in the next couple of years is something new and hopefully better. Real change must happen from the bottom up, and that is where we all have a role to play: in the promoting and securing of the sort of society we wish to see established in South Africa. We cannot, and should not, leave it all to the politicians. It is our civic duty that we all make a focused, creative contribution.

In the presidential address last year, I defined what I believed to be the task ahead; that of restructuring our entire society from the undemocratic, unaccountable, unjust, authoritarian, patriarchal, fragmented and racially-obsessed nation that it is now to a single nation, underpinned by legislation which guarantees civil rights and socio-economic justice, and built on principles of democracy, inclusiveness, accountability and openness.

I know that you, like me, are longing to sing and dance in the street at the emergence of a new nation that we feel part of and are proud to belong to. I believe that we have the necessary experience, humanity, humility, intelligence, humour, energy and focus. We need to commit ourselves to make that additional effort to ensure that what we know is right, does happen.

Jenny de Tolly

5 March 1992