



The rural vote (Namibia, 1989): Opinion surveys in South Africa seldom poll the rural areas.

JOHN LIEBERBERG, Southlight.

Beware the hot flushes of delusion

South Africa's first democratic election could very well turn out not to be the two-horse race predicted by the larger alliances, sloppy "experts" and headline writers.

By BARRY STREEK

their cause and leadership and who are working long hours for victory, frequently cannot see or face reality. They are genuinely convinced they know what will happen on polling day, but they are wrong.

Political parties also lie and make propaganda to promote their campaign. Politicians never admit to telling lies, but they do deliberately disguise facts or withhold the truth or knowingly misrepresent a situation to promote their party's campaign.

For instance, in the 1989 election campaign, the National Party broke copyright to publish an advertisement. Containing a picture of a Democratic Party leader (Wynand Malan) talking to the then SA Communist Party secretary-general, Joe Slovo, the advert was a blatant attempt to reinforce NP claims that the

DP was "soft" on communism.

This was all forgotten when Slovo became involved in discussions with the NP a year later, but at the time it suited the collective wisdom of the NP strategists to promote the lie that the DP was soft on

communism.

Some parties are – and will be – more blatant about this than others, but they all do it. This is then fed into society, particularly to the "experts" and to journalists, in order to influence the eventual result.

It is, in the end, part of the democratic process. The lies cannot be too obvious or too wrong, because that affects credibility, as the NP experienced when the then Minister of Health, Dr Lapa Munnik, claimed towards the end of the 1981 election campaign that pensioners could live on R20 a month for food, then emphatically denied that he had made such a statement but was proved, by tape, to be wrong.

Misrepresentation, half-truths and credibility are part of that process. And South Africa is proving to be no exception.

One of the consequences is the widely-

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THE FIRST symptoms of election fever have emerged in South Africa – resulting in often wild speculation about what will happen when some 22 million do eventually go to the polls in the country's first democratic election.

But it should always be remembered that election fever is a disease that induces hot flushes of serious delusion, particularly by self-proclaimed "experts", party hacks, pollsters and journalists, and its major ailment is that it causes lies, opinions and claims to be expressed as truth or fact.

And its cure, brought about by the vote on election day, is instantaneous: previous statements are immediately forgotten, even though some of the "experts" sometimes do try to explain why they were wrong.

In South Africa, where most people have never voted before and a significant portion of the electorate live in areas which opinion surveys never poll, the potential for delusion and distortion is substantial during the campaign.

The major source of the fever is, in the end, the political parties and it is often not deliberate. Party activists, who believe in

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held perception that the election is going to be a contest between the NP and the ANC, or rather, the NP and ANC alliances.

A dissection of the claims, propaganda and polls certainly suggests that by the first quarter of 1993 – that is before the murder of Chris Hani at Easter – the ANC alliance would garner over half the votes and the NP alliance 20 to 25 percent.

But, even if this was true then, it does not mean that some of the minority parties should be excluded from any analysis. It obviously benefits the larger alliances to pretend it is a two-horse race and it is certainly helpful for sloppy analysis by “experts”. It is also helpful for headline writers.

Clearly, many of the parties at the World Trade Centre negotiations are going to disappear into one or other alliance and it seems unlikely that the white right-wing alliance under the present leadership will be able to get the five percent which will probably be necessary for representation in the Interim Government of National Unity (Ignu).

But three minority parties could well play a role in the post-election government – the PAC, IFP and the DP.

In the past, it has been fashionable in government, ANC and academic circles to dismiss the PAC as an election threat. The PAC also has logistical, financial and organisational limitations, but there are indications that it is winning support from the ANC,

particularly amongst the youth and particularly as the negotiations drag on.

It also has been fashionable, particularly in liberation movement circles, to downplay and minimise the IFP. But whatever else the conflict in Natal and the Reef has shown, it has demonstrated that Inkatha does have a grassroots base that cannot be ignored.

With over three million voters in Natal/KwaZulu, much of it in remote areas, the IFP cannot be ignored, nor can the possibility of it being the majority party in a Natal regional government be dismissed.

It has been particularly fashionable to write off the DP, despite the fact that its once-ridiculed policies on a bill of rights, negotiations or a national convention, proportional representation and regional government are now accepted as almost self-evi-

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dent truth by most, and despite its facilitating role in the negotiations.

But the DP’s growth, particularly in the Western Cape, should be noticed. It had 14 active branches in the Western Cape at the beginning of 1991, but says there are now 65 in the region. The DP claims it will be the largest party in the region after the elections

and, with a clear swing away from the NP among “coloured” people, it may well be justified in its claims.

In any event, the Western Cape looks like being an interesting three-way fight.

The DP leadership says it could win between 15 and 18 percent of the total vote in an election, and three seats in a 20-person Ignu. That claim seems too high, but the DP will be a factor in the election.

If plans to hold national and regional elections on the same day are realised, this could aid the three smaller parties, particularly if they concentrate on specific regions, because the resources of the national alliances will be somewhat stretched.

With the huge number of nearly 7 000 polling stations which the Department of Home Affairs is planning to set up around the country, including all 10 homelands, only truly national movements will be able to maintain an effective presence throughout the country.

If, however, the negotiators agree on the election of 400 MPs, 100 senators and about 1 000 regional MPs (100 each for, say, 10 regions), the five major parties will be able to produce election slates of 1 500 people – perhaps enough to satisfy the ambitions, egos and commitment of their key activists.

It will also exacerbate the worst symptoms of election fever, which will undoubtedly get worse until about April 27. But the cure will stabilise and, for a while at least, put some of the “experts” in their place.

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Eye on the horizon

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space, the skills and the confidence to practise democracy – to “do democracy”.

So even when we do voter education, we have to keep on looking at the horizon, at what kind of society we need – at tomorrow, at five years’ time, not just at April 29.

So what does this mean for us as educators? It means that every single time we plan a workshop or a training course or when we write material, we need to think very carefully about what we are doing. We need to ask ourselves – is this really “touching” people, are we talking about the things which matter to them?

And then at the same time, with one eye on the horizon, we need to ask ourselves how can we build, into this workshop or that

booklet, an element which confronts and gently challenges people’s stereotypes?

Something which makes people look inward instead of outward, which makes people *hope* and not fear or feel overwhelmed. We need to ask ourselves how can we reach people’s *hearts* and not just their minds, because that is where real and profound change takes place.

Shifting people’s opinions or broadening people’s knowledge remains a cerebral exercise – albeit a valuable one. Getting people to the point where they want to do something about things – well, that is the real challenge. Because building democracy is not just about discussing or accepting or putting up with – it is about doing.

If we want to create a vibrant civil society in this country, we don’t need people just to be tolerant, we need people to do tolerance work. We don’t just need peaceful people,

we need people to do peace work.

This land has been deeply scarred. It needs active healing – not just the ointment of time. How can we share the larger vision for this country so that people will willingly trade in their dented, narrow, fearful vision? And then having done that, how can we empower them to feel driven to share their vision with others?

It is so easy to blame the system, the politicians and the past – but what are we doing to build, rather than to blame?

As educators we have a unique and privileged position – we can learn from one another, we can share with one another what “works”, we can exchange resources and not jealously guard our domain or our areas of expertise.

Our skills, our resources belong to the people, not to us. But what we do with them determines the future for all of us.