



# Democracy for beginners: A guide to Consultative Conferences

*Based on interviews with participants in previous ANC conferences, Howard Barrell provides the following guidelines to delegates to the ANC consultative conference*

**D**on't be in awe of the occasion or of those personalities temporarily occupying leadership positions. Myths are only myths and in the ANC also usually

have two arms, two legs and only one brain. Problems need to be ironed out.

- Make absolutely certain that conference devises a procedure so that you yourself can deal with issues of policy and detail; otherwise, you will merely be voting fodder easily manipulated by personalities and rhetoric. This means all branches must get position and option papers plus resolutions at least three weeks before the conference starts to allow for *full* discussion by members. If the conference organising committee can't get that together after several months of preparation, the first question to ask is: Why not? And the second question is: Does this committee, or sections of the leadership, want a manipulable conference?

- Level criticism wherever and whenever you genuinely feel it is necessary. Don't get caught up in the ritual celebration of unity for unity's sake. Serious criticism

is an *act of loyalty*; appearances of unity built on brainless conformity are worthless, and they will not improve the ANC's ability to confront the enormous tasks before it. Talk straight.

- Don't imagine that someone somewhere has a master plan for the future sitting in some desk drawer or hidden behind their apparently confident smile. And don't believe them if they say or imply they have such a plan. You, as a delegate, will be at the conference precisely to help devise the way forward; that is your mandate from ANC members in your branch.

- If anyone tries to silence you on the basis that he/she has been in the ANC since 'before you were born', or because s/he was in exile, or because s/he pretends to be a 'massive intellectual', don't be intimidated. Continue to speak out and listen to others until you are satisfied. Note his/her arrogance, and ask yourself if s/he is suitable for any leadership position. The best leaders in the ANC are the best listeners.

- Deciding strategy and tactics for the next six months and beyond is the key task before the December conference. Prepare yourself thoroughly for this debate.

- At the Kabwe conference, about two hours was set aside to discuss strategy and tactics. This was ridiculous. The result was that a strategy and tactics document prepared by a conference commission could not be decided upon. The conference then appointed a committee to prepare a revised strategy and tactics document for adoption after the conference following consultations with membership. Five years later, that committee has still not reported. The crucial point is this: Immediately amend the agenda of the conference if not enough time has been set aside to discuss strategy and tactics; it is the *key issue* on which many other decisions will depend.

- This strategy must clearly spell out how the ANC would like the different elements of the alliance to relate to one another: the ANC, SACP, Cosatu, civics, professional organisations, and others.

- Only once you have decided on strategy and tactics can you decide on what structures you need to create to take forward your aims. So don't let anyone try to fool you into deciding structures and who should be on them before you know what your strategy and tactics are going to be.

- Although the December conference will not be electing a new National Ex-



**'Make sure the conference sets out clear tasks for people and structures'**

ecutive Committee, there will undoubtedly be changes to some structures. The ANC has suffered much in the past because some people have been elected or appointed to jobs largely as rewards for their past loyalty or because they were big names. Long-term loyalty is important, of course. But there are other equally important qualities. At this conference, make sure that those who are elected or appointed to bodies are people who can do the job, will have the time to do it, and indeed will do the job. So find out about people's actual capacity for hard work (not big talk) by talking to people who know them.

- The ANC is good at making fine-sounding statements of intention. These statements will be meaningless unless they are carried out. The state of the ANC's membership drive and internal organisation is thus a basic issue. Simple structures that can communicate easily with each other and actually work are crucial. Developing these requires the involvement of *organisers*, not big names. If necessary, demand that a suitable consultant on organisational structures be brought in from outside to advise on how the ANC should be restructured.

- Internal ANC organisation must be democratic. Every delegate will be aware that whoever is entrusted with leadership in the difficult negotiating process will have to be able to employ a certain degree of flexibility in dealings with the government and others. So the parame-

ters of their mandate and where they can be flexible must be *clearly spelt out*. Moreover, there must be functioning mechanisms by which they report back to branches and by which they can actually be held accountable for their actions.

- Make sure the conference sets out clear tasks for people and structures. The conference should not write blank cheques. Conference must also set up a body or procedure by which branches can ensure that decisions of the conference on what is to be done organisationally can be monitored and so that action can be taken if people don't perform the tasks they have been given.

- Home-based branches must ensure *now* that the leadership demands of the government and actually gets clearance from the government for a large, properly elected and properly representative delegation from Umkhonto we Sizwe, to attend the December conference. This is vital so that the December conference can get the benefit of their experience in the ANC, their knowledge of some personalities, and in order to assert a realistic basis for the unity of the ANC and the strategic road ahead.

- Use the conference to ensure the crucial decisions are taken for the next six months and more. But also use it as a dress rehearsal for the big one, the national conference in June.

- Keep your bullshit-detecting radar on full alert at all times. •



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**Everyone must  
enjoy  
human rights**

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