ditching one-upmanship

*Hitting the nail on the head, **Frederick van Zyl Slabbert** poses five key questions that apartheid's opponents need to address if they wish to stop working against each other.*

During the last few years, since 1983, two opposing political goals have painfully crystallised for our country.

The first is a multi-racial autocracy based on racially/ethnically defined group participation and depending on patronage and coercion for stability. Its major proponent is the present government.

The second is the goal of a non-racial democracy based on individual participation and depending on consent and voluntary association, which is supported by a variety of opposition organisations.

The first option — multi-racial autocracy — is strong on organisation and weak on legitimacy.

The option of a non-racial democracy has high legitimacy but is weak on organisation.

Part of the reason for the organisational weakness of those of us who want to work for a non-racial democracy has to do with problems outside of our control — particularly the repressive and propagandist actions of the state. Part of it has to do with ourselves — our own diversity of strategies and resources to contribute in working towards a non-racial democracy.

There are times when we must take stock of ourselves and in particular consider whether it is possible to broaden and consolidate the base of a democratic opposition in South Africa. If this is to be so, I believe it is going to depend on how we respond to a few key questions:

1 Are the one or more goals we share in common more important than those on which we differ?

This question helps us to identify whether there is an objective of such transcending importance that we are prepared to tolerate differences among ourselves in pursuing it. Let me give an example of an approach that has failed to address this question. Imagine a politicised black activist saying to a second-year University of Pretoria student, 'OK, so you have abandoned apartheid and want a democratic solution for South Africa. You can become part of the democratic struggle if you join the people's war, support sanctions and boycott all participation in apartheid structures.' This youngster is going to suffer from third-degree political burns for quite a while before he knows what hit him.

An example of an equally counter-productive approach would be for a PFP member of parliament to say to a black activist, 'You can broaden the democratic struggle only if you are prepared to put up posters for us in the forthcoming tricameral elections.'

Both approaches have a lot in common: they express a concern with democracy but define it in strategically exclusive terms. We must ask ourselves whether it is possible to be more flexible on strategy and still strengthen our commitment to a common goal.

2 Are our differences debatable?

This question has to do with the whole issue of means and ends. Sometimes a dogmatic commitment to a particular agenda for change is transferred on to a particular strategy, elevating it to a principle on the grounds of which others are excommunicated from 'the struggle'. Statements like 'Nobody who is a true democrat and wants economic justice will oppose sanctions' or 'To fight against sanctions is the only way to save democracy for South Africa' both define commitment to democracy on an exclusive basis, providing yardsticks of excommunication.

But that does not mean that differences must be suppressed or ignored. To the extent that we refuse to come clean on our differences and/or debate them, we begin to treat each other as 'useful idiots' or as undisclosed issues on hidden agendas.

3 Is it possible to agree on interim strategic objectives?

Can we, despite our differences, be given our common commitment to non-racial democracy, set some common objectives which can mobilise our collective resources? Any organisation depending on public

support does this from time to time. This means many organisations co-operating with each other, pooling their resources and mobilising a large number of people. Ideas could be something like:

- Five million South Africans sign in support for democracy in one day.
- A thousand workshops in June to discuss the concept of a non-racial democracy.
- 'Operation Suburbia' to win support from white South Africans for a non-racial democracy.

Such strategic objectives deepen organisational experience, generate leadership, show up strengths and weaknesses and have many other spin-off effects. But this can be successful only if we have resolved the first *two questions.*

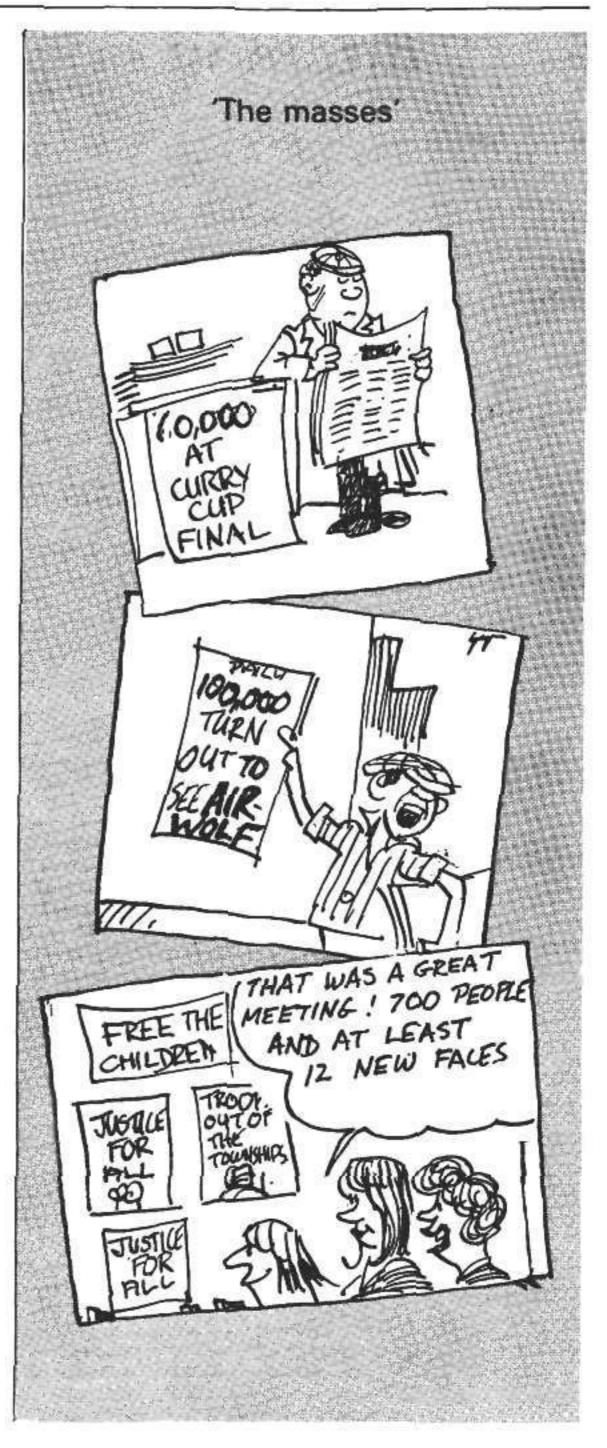## 4 Do we agree on or understand what we are up against?

We must not confuse loss of legitimacy with lack of control. The technology of domination has become highly sophisticated in this century, with telecommunications, media and propaganda, infiltration and disinformation reaching new levels of sophistication.

It is not only stupid to underestimate what you are up against — it is a waste of time and resources. A sense of moral revulsion and repugnance, however sincere, does not guarantee success or make you any stronger.

We have to understand the structure of the state's policy and the power of patronage. We have to understand the extent to which coercion is working.

5 Do we trust one another?

This is not a rhetorical question. We come from different histories, backgrounds and experiences. In a cleft society such as ours, *deep prejudices and suspicions are easily* formed and maintained. This leads to suspicion-mongering, backstabbing, mau-mauing, moral outbidding and one-upmanship. Sometimes enormous amounts of time and energy are spent in defining thresholds of commitment and purity without any progress being made towards the objectives.

I believe if we take these questions seriously, if we do not rush into 'quick fixes' but patiently build on our resources, we can become part of a much more organised and broad-based democratic movement. I sense that after a period of intense and massive mobilisation for democratic goals in which many have suffered and learnt, we are on the threshold of the next, perhaps more difficult stage: how practically to organise democratic structures in response to an increasingly undemocratic situation. □

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