

Throw out the clichés

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The time may now be ripe to jettison some well-worn political clichés. Since Britain first created the prototype of democratic parliamentary government and the suffragette movement succeeded in extending the vote to women, making the franchise universal, this has been the model from which all democratic forms of government have evolved.

For people who value individual freedom this has been considered to be the best method of reconciling the order required to control a large industrial nation with the freedom of the individual.

Nor is there any reason to doubt that for a long time it worked. Nations grew and prospered in a relatively ordered and controlled fashion and their citizens enjoyed a large degree of personal freedom.

But today's world is a very different place. For instance, in Britain the enormous power vested in the hands of the trade unions is a denial of the efficacy of two-party parliamentary government and of universal suffrage. For trade unions can and have toppled governments and a trade union membership card wields more influence in the corridors of power than the vote.

On the other hand personal and company wealth have grown to a degree where they exercise a power out of all proportion to the number of individuals they represent — a power whose repercussions are felt not only nationally, but internationally.

The military-industrial complex of the United States is a classic example of this. Where the power of the munitions producers and the ripple-effect of a military orientation on the whole economy helped to keep the Korean and Vietnam wars going.

It took many years and much suffering before the power of each man's vote could make itself felt.

Britain and the United States have been the two great bastions of parliamentary democracy, together with France, which modified the two-party system to incorporate a plethora of parties, with a resultant instability.

The concept of one-man-one-vote, which has for so long been accepted as the very kernel of democratic government, has proved to be not nearly as fair or as equal as the principle implies, and this in countries whose very essence is based on the rights and freedoms of the individual.

The concept of majority rule is another which needs re-examination. Majority rule has worked in Britain, which is, or was, a homogeneous nation with parties divided only over political principle and administrative action.

Majority rule has worked because it has been fluid. The majority has not remained a majority in perpetuity. Public opinion could and did change and the ruling majority changed with it. There has been a built-in check and balance on power, and the will of the majority has prevailed.

Today, however, even in Britain, it is overruled by trade union action which may, indeed, represent the majority, but which is not seen to do so.

Much the same type of situation has prevailed in the United States, though the passing years have seen less and less political differentiation between the parties and more and more concentration on party personalities.

In France the majority has been a coalition of parties more sensitive to change than the two-party system; more directly representative of public opinion but less able to govern efficiently.

The concept of one-man-one-vote and majority rule, those very bastions of democracy, appear to have lost at least some of their validity even in the country of their origin. How much less validity might they have in countries facing totally different problems and with totally different population alignments.

Yet they may be questioned only in the face of righteous democratic indignation. They have for so long been accepted as fundamentals of the free world that there is no longer any awareness of their true implications.

An analogy may be drawn with the displacement of religious faith by ritual and dogma—the former being lost in the latter. For the

perceptive and sincere the faith is real, for the rest it is concealed in a welter of ceremony and becomes a rationalisation.

So it is with democracy — with government of the people, by the people, for the people. People pay lip-service to it, they even believe that it is right and good, but they fail to realise that those concepts which first made it workable, those concepts which were devised to make it a reality as it emerged from a feudal world of the divine right of kings or tyrants, may no longer be applicable or may have outlived their usefulness or may even be counter-productive.

The ideal of democracy is valid, but no particular form of government is necessarily so. The ideal form has yet to be devised. For a long time Britain seemed to have found it, but events are proving that it has not. There is a great deal of socialism and control in democratic Britain today — and it might be right that this should be so — but it has yet to be proved. Other recognised “isms”, such as communism, fascism or totalitarianism, are not acceptable to people who value their freedoms.

However there is still sufficient freedom in democratic countries for a re-evaluation of long-accepted concepts; an examination of how far they still fulfil their purpose and whether or not they ought to be reconsidered, particularly in view of different conditions prevailing in different countries.

Although democratic values may be shared by all, the manner of implementing them need and should not necessarily be identical.

For instance, the values implied by one-man-one-vote and majority rule apply as much in Southern Africa as they do in Europe, but the method of attaining those values must inevitably be different.

“Majority rule” has become a catch phrase in Southern Africa, imposed upon it by Europe and America, but in the context of non-homogeneous countries it becomes an empty and meaningless cliché.

It is inevitably allied to race, or colour, or both, and as such becomes a permanent possession of the largest group of people. Majority rule — a term surely meant to imply a democratic concept with the wishes of the majority prevailing yet controllable by a change in public opinion — becomes, in terms of race or colour, a potential tyranny of one group over another without any checks or balances at all.

It is a permanent vesting of power in one section of a nation, and, as such, a total contradiction of those democratic principles it has been created to uphold.

When allied to “one-man-one-vote”, majority rule becomes a tool of racial tyranny and not of democracy. In countries which are non-homogeneous, and where there is an overriding preponderance of one colour group over another, allied to colour consciousness and race prejudice, the same rules cannot possibly apply.

However this does not mean that there cannot be democracy in Southern Africa — a democracy which would recognise the rights and freedoms of all people and give effect to them. But at first it must no longer be hamstrung by old and inherited clichés. It must devise new systems to meet its own special circumstances, and there are a number worthy of consideration.

All people are entitled to exercise some control over the manner in which they are governed, but all people are not equal. They are born with differing potentials, they exploit them differently, they make differing contributions to the societies of which they are a part.

There is one fundamental to which everyone is equally entitled, and that is equality of opportunity. Beyond that each individual is entitled to the benefits of his or her own efforts. To deny this is to deny the whole concept of personal freedom.

Thus it could be argued that although all people are entitled to the vote they are not all equally entitled to it. The system of the multiple vote, which could satisfy this contention, provides one basic vote for all and additional votes for those who have earned them. Naturally the opportunity must be created for all people to earn them should they so desire.

If, however, equality of voting power is found to be more acceptable, it might be possible to demand qualifications from candidates, to ensure that only those of integrity and intelligence shall be entrusted with the law-making which so directly affects every single member of society.

For if universal suffrage is to be allied to majority rule as it must be, and if people are going to vote with their skin-colour instead of their minds, there can be little hope of a democratic outcome.

A one-party state is another system of government not to be angrily discounted. Two-

party governments contain their own built-in restraints, as anyone who has attended a party caucus meeting will confirm.

Individual members are bound by party discipline to accept the will of the majority and sometimes to act against their principles or their better judgment on various issues.

In a one-party state people would be voting for individuals and not for party policy, and a one-party state which allowed individual freedom of conscience and principle, and which made provision for flexibility and change in its upper echelons, could provide a different type of democratic government from that to which the world has for so long been accustomed.

These are but three suggestions. There are doubtless many more potential concepts, combinations and ramifications. But what is important is that outworn clichés be shed so that the way is cleared for fresh and not habit-ridden thought, in order to find a path through the morass in which the whole world finds itself.

For Southern Africa the challenge is real and immediate, and calls for the application of intense and probing political thought combined with an abiding sincerity of purpose in order to discover a new way of life which will provide for the greatest possible freedom for all its people.

Southern Africa is a microcosm, containing within itself all the problems presently besetting the entire world — race prejudice, colour prejudice, discrimination, gross economic inequalities, clashes between management and labour, neighbouring states with conflicting interests, ideologies which do not meet the needs of today. None of these is easy to resolve.

Yet justice and fair dealing are surely the fundamental and essential ingredients of good inter-personal, inter-social, inter-state and inter-national relationships.

It should not be beyond the reach of human achievement for people of intelligence and integrity; people of principle who believe in justice and fair dealing; people who are representative of every shade of opinion, race and colour, to get together with open minds and honourable intentions to examine the realities and requirements of today's world and to thrash out acceptable solutions.

The shibboleths of the past no longer meet the needs of the present. It is time for change and Southern Africa should and could meet the challenge, acting as a pathfinder for the rest of the world and providing the axis for a turning point in history.

Human ability is readily available. All that is required is the motivation to use it in the interests of the present, the future, Southern Africa and the whole wide world.

