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All political comment in this issue, except where otherwise stated, by G Webster, Khotso House, 42 De Villiers Street, Johannesburg 2001.

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Permanent Peace by Denis Beckett (Saga Press, 1985 — R15 plus GST).

Review by Philip Machanick

When it comes to solving political problems, everyone agrees that the underlying causes must be tackled — not just the symptoms. All too often, the analysis stops there. The problem is identified; the solution is for someone else to work on. Denis Beckett, editor of *Frontline*, has for some time been pushing his view of what the solution might be. This book puts together the arguments he has developed over the last few months, and is claimed to fill some of the gaps.

Beckett's central thesis is that countries which are perceived to work well are generally democracies. If democracy has solved their relatively trivial problems (by our standards), what should we learn from this? Beckett's reply? We need more democracy, not less.

His secondary argument is that the process by which democracy is introduced is crucial, because conservative and radical alike need to be accommodated, if a conflagration is to be avoided. Indeed, this position is already becoming optimistic: the conflagration is already upon us in some respects. Beckett compromises his arguments somewhat by going all-out to prove the unlikely-sounding premise that the right can be led to believe that democracy is the solution — without addressing the left as well. In any case, in putting a political position forward as the starting point for other solutions — including economic structures — he would have difficulty addressing the left. It is interesting that he and AZAPO could have concluded from vastly different starting points that racial discrimination will become less of an issue once the structures which emphasize it have gone. Of course, AZAPO sees economics as the key factor behind racism.

The process Beckett proposes is that the government must commit itself to full democracy, without artificial racially-

based privileges. So far, so good. Where his approach is novel is in the form that democracy would take. There is as much decentralization as possible. A political unit may be a small town, even a suburb. Then, there is another level of government above this. And another. And so on. Up to national level. At each level of government, anything can be legislated, but not all things are practical to administer. For instance, a small town will need to cooperate with its neighbours on issues like water supply.

Different units of 'government' are free to experiment with their own systems. Those which satisfy their communities will survive, those which don't won't. A kind of free market democracy. Although Beckett is somewhat scathing about socialism ('... socialists do tend to have a habit of knowing what people want better than people know themselves' — this is unfair; everyone does this to some extent), he is not advocating an economic system, but sees 'intensive' democracy as allowing a diversification of competing economic systems at various levels of government.

The introduction of the system starts at the bottom level. People may at first have racial prejudices, etc, but these are counteracted by the dynamics of the system, which requires cooperation at the next-higher level of government. The reason the approach is put forward as being more likely to succeed than 'evolutionary' reform as the end goal of full democracy is clearly specified. Beckett's arguments about why the government's present approach is increasing conflict are interesting in themselves.

This book will not pass as great literature (the first grammatical error is on the first page). But the author has managed to put his ideas across well enough to add them to the debate. Will this all work? This is not the issue. At a time of almost universal despair, it is a relief to be able to read a political polemic which talks solutions, and not problems. The next step is to take the debate forward on these terms — rather than to take the whole thing apart.