

Probing the mind of white SA



Whites voted overwhelmingly in favour of reform in the March referendum – but where do they really stand politically? How informed are they and what are their views on democracy and non-racialism? *Democracy in Action* put these questions to Stellenbosch political scientist JANNIE GAGIANO (left).

What would you say is the level of political education and awareness of the average white South African?

It is probably safe to say that the level of political awareness and knowledge is relatively low among whites.

Theoretically we talk of cognitive, affective and evaluative levels of political judgement. One is likely to find relative depth in the affective awareness of most whites – feelings of disapproval, acceptance, hate, rejection and commitment – loosely structured around the symbols, key concepts, ideologies and values of political parties. Mostly this is based on perceptions and feelings, but it is very poorly articulated. For example, people would not be able to tell you much about the ANC leaders or what their policies are, but they DO know that they don't like the ANC.

In a society like ours basic political feelings are usually well ingrained, but not necessarily based on rational grounds, especially with our strong history of in-group legitimisation and out-group delegitimisation. It is typical to be very circumspect, logical and rational in political exchanges with your kinfolk, but to abandon that style completely when dealing with non-members of the group. As soon as you move out of the in-group the values of civility are suspended.

Are we seeing signs that the political transition process is causing whites to become more involved, thinking and active, the big referendum poll being an example of this?

One could argue that the referendum was an extraordinary event and that it would therefore not accurately reflect the true level of

political mobilisation. The high poll was stimulated by the dramatic political choice and the very conscious communication campaign designed around it. If you argue in this way, then the poll was not a reflection of an independent transformation from passive to active.

However, one could say that the whole process of political transition is shifting beacons and giving people a greater awareness of political issues. Ordinary people can no longer depend on the conventional notions because the sources of those ideas are themselves busy changing their validation of those ideas.

The situation is now one of murkiness and confusion. This could stimulate people to become more available for alternative political values, objectives, plans and ideas that are being advocated by the most important agencies of political formulation.

In a sense the referendum caused a type of activism among English-speaking whites: for the first time they felt they could make a decision which could sway things. We saw people who were not citizens taking out citizenship. Symbolically this willingness to play a role in what is happening in the country is very important. It was more evident among English speakers who can now see that politics is no longer an Afrikaner in-group thing. It is this perception of a bigger role that motivated them to act.

What determines the political affiliation of the majority of whites at this stage?

Political affiliation in the sense of support for political parties is in flux at present because the party system itself is in flux. This is caused by the process of moving away from a political dispensation based on racial segregation to one which aims for the formation of a middle class coalition across racial lines,

but with whites well placed. The forces which will determine affiliation is the extent to which a political party can, on the one hand, abandon or redesign racial affiliation and, on the other hand, support middle class values and strategies for the state, society and the economy.

For that reason we find that the National Party and the Democratic Party can agree on certain issues, on a technocratic, first world, middle class-oriented type of economic dispensation. This could become an affiliation force which will attract most of the English-speaking community as well as the majority of Afrikaners.

One could also talk of a shift from racial to class solidarity. We will find that most whites will affiliate to a political party, across racial boundaries, that is anti-populist and anti-socialist and which protects the Western state, a capitalist economy, independent public administration and so on. In other words most whites will be attracted to the NP and elements of the DP.

The Conservative Party will still play on cultural integrity, which is a form of racial integrity in disguise, and it will still get its 30 per cent. But if this support for a middle class strategy is realised in a constitution, the CP could split because many of its supporters still belong to the party because of a false consciousness. They have not yet realised that what is at issue is not culture, but privilege and power. When they discover that their privilege and power will not be lost, they will switch. Success in establishing an anti-populist state will take most of the steam out of whites' fears.

What about a more egalitarian society?

The constitution will allow for equal rights for all people, but the realisation of this depends on the resources of the state. Formally we will have equal rights, espe-



Dr Zach de Beer and Mr FW de Klerk at a referendum meeting in the Cape Town City Hall.

cially first generation rights which protect accumulated privilege and sets civil society in a relatively autonomous position to the state. Second generation welfare rights? Where does the state get to give? I do not foresee a populist democratic state being established here because that really converts to the official capitulation of the white and corporate sectors which have been very well organised up till now.

They are adamant that they will not capitulate to populism, but they are capitulating to international pressure. So what must they do now to satisfy the international community? They must desegregate society and the state. They are playing on public order based on a strong and well organised state administration and on economic growth. Both these have implications which confront populist democracies – nationalisation, socialism, rapid Africanisation of the civil service. Constitutional limits will be placed on the political occupation of representative points in the system.

Would it be correct to interpret the referendum results as whites having voted for a non-racial future? What do you think non-racialism means to most whites?

If a non-racial future means accepting that you cannot control and organise society along racial lines via the state, then I would say to a large degree whites have accepted that. But if it means that the white community is also comfortable with the political empowerment of black people then I would be very cautious.

That idea is actually a threat to non-racialism in the white mind. To whites, political equalisation with the implication of the succession of blacks to a position of domination in the political system is not an idea commensurate with non-racialism – although that sometimes is what gives non-racialism

its meaning to blacks.

When it comes to “social” non-racialism there is a residual belief among whites that this prospect is far off. They do not see blacks as a social threat, blacks will have to rely on their own resources to achieve social parity with whites. This is not perceived of as an immediate threat that will generate some form of status anxiety among whites. There is a certain degree of confidence that if the state is not exposed to black domination the social position of whites will be secure.

One will probably find that this proposition recedes in plausibility as one moves down the socio-economic ladder. Historically lower class whites have of course depended on the state to reproduce their status in society.

So what we have is an acceptance of non-racialism but not a commitment to the idea that the differences between races are not real or do not matter for whites any more. In a certain sense it is a supreme act of collective repression when whites talk of non-racialism. It remains a factor in our template of thought. Why would there suddenly have been a massive shift in that? That was how we were brought up.

What interpretation do most whites give to democracy?

They still have the idea that a political dispensation can only be thought of as democratic if it preserves a right to influence and an actual sphere of influence for white people.

The underlying rationale of consociationalism, which reflects an anti-majoritarian notion of democracy, would be the practical everyday sort of view you would find among opinion-makers (meaning those people who tell whites what democracy is and whom whites are prepared to believe).

The idea is anti-majoritarian. Everyone,

and in this case especially minorities, should have influence on government by the way the polity is organised.

Whites don't think of the composition of the political community in terms of equal citizenship where every person (not a racial or other type of group) aggregate on a majoritarian principle. The notion is that society originally consisted of elements, like language and culture groups, and that all those elements should be accommodated in one way or another – or the preferences, wishes and interests of those people must be considered when a public decision is made. An institutional dispensation must be created which obliges public representatives to consider their interests. So it is not non-majoritarian principle we are dealing with here, it is deliberately anti-majoritarian.

How does this compare with the ANC's position?

There are of course nuances in the ANC position as they have moved through the learning curve, but their basic principle has always been the majoritarian one of democracy, embedded of course in the typical Western type of constitution which equalises membership of the political community through the notion of citizenship. This does not allow for its particularisation vis a vis social class, culture, race or whatever, whereas the things that still seem salient beyond citizenship in South Africa are exactly those.

The ANC are not simple-minded majoritarians, their majoritarianism is ameliorated by constitutional limitations on majority momentum. But whether they are populist majoritarians or constitutional majoritarians will not materially affect the succession of black people to a position of actual domination of the political system.

The ANC of course downplays “black people” as the majority. But then the question arises whether white people perceive blacks as citizens as well, or whether citizenship is more salient, more primal to them than any other ideas of identity.

Citizenship is a legal status, an abstract notion of an individual's political identity considered more important than others. One finds citizenship realised under conditions where questions of national identity have already been resolved. But when the definition of citizenship is still subject to competing definitions associated with particularisms – race, language culture, etc – one must first resolve that problem. If you put the cart before the horse, then the fight over what is meant by citizenship is informed by different notions of identity.