

Business voice must be heard in politics

By Ronel Scheffer

The business community has a clear role to play in establishing a non-racial, democratic South Africa. But, as this community is not monolithic by nature, its achievements in the political arena will remain limited to some extent. This should, however, not deter businessmen from remaining active initiators and participants in the change process.

These important points on the role of business in a changing South Africa were made by the executive director of the American Chamber of Commerce, Mr Adrian Botha, at a Lusaka conference in July. The conference, attended by young South African businesspeople, academics and town councillors and members of the ANC, was the culmination of a two-week tour of Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia hosted by Idasa.

Mr Botha told the conference that business in South Africa could not historically deny its part in the development and maintenance of some of the key pillars of apartheid such as the migrant labour system. In past decades it was also, at best, neutral — and in many instances it was, in fact, supportive of the political status quo.

"However, the track record of local and international business in South Africa in the late 70s and 80s has been more encouraging," said Botha. "Business has generally responded positively and effectively to the sharing of power in its own backyard with the trade union movement," he added. It has increasingly also engaged itself in projects of community upliftment outside the factory gates, and in many instances it has shown a commitment towards a new order, clearly and unambiguously rejecting the essential principles of apartheid.

Nevertheless, an enormous amount still has to be done to establish a free and economically viable democratic country — and business action, the effects of which should neither be exaggerated or underestimated, could make a difference.

Dealing with the diverse character of the business community in the country, Mr Botha emphasised that "capital" had always been highly fragmented in South Africa. These fragments at times competed and at other times coalesced — in terms of economic activity as well as relationships with the government.

"For many decades persistent controversy has raged in South Africa about the nature of the relationship between capitalism and apartheid," said Botha. The different schools of thought on the issue all generally "make the mistake of using collective nouns to describe industry, business, big business and capital as if they were describing a single organised entity". Common popular references to the "business community" also imply the existence

Adrian Botha (right) with ANC executive member Ruth Mampoti and Hennie Strydom, of the University of the Free State law faculty.



Business as usual . . . in the Lusaka flea market, where Randburg businessman Roy Rudolph, a member of the Idasa tour group, clearly enjoyed himself.

of a co-ordinated community capable of acting together. But, in reality, "capital is a category rather than a community", said Botha.

He added that, if the term "capital" was to be used in South Africa, it would be more meaningful to speak of, for example, agricultural capital, commercial capital, industrial capital, English capital and Afrikaans capital.

Wanted: a transition process that limits loss of life, resources and motivation

The fragmented and competitive nature of business meant that a strategy such as, for example, withholding taxes to sanction government, would not have much chance of success. As any "change strategy" which depends on unified action for its success will not be viable, individual companies and smaller like-minded groups have to look at areas where they could possibly be effective.

But Botha underlines that there are other factors in addition to its fragmented nature which limit the political influence of the business community. These include business' dependence on the state and on a skilled white labour force with right wing views, and also the tradition of deliberate apolitical behaviour and thinking in business circles.

According to him, the key strategic question is how the business sector can continue to perform its essential function as an agency of productive economic development and simultaneously contribute significantly to the process of political change.

He suggested that one of the goals of enlightened businessmen, leaders and organisa-

tions should be to support a process of transition that limits the loss of life, of resources and of motivation. This process should, however, be as speedy as possible and it should strengthen existing trends and organisations that will help to ensure the realisation of the desired post-apartheid society.

While maintaining pressure on the government to change unjust laws, business can, in fact, succeed in breaking down apartheid within its own enterprises and should therefore make the workplace the first priority for action. In the workplace employees could, for example, be educated about the benefits of a non-racial society; effective training and management development programmes could lead to true black advancement; freedom of association could be encouraged; participatory management styles could be developed and employees could be assisted to overcome legal obstacles which restrict their freedom of choice in society (eg housing, health care and education).

Outside the workplace, business could become active in improving the quality of life of the community in the areas of education, health care and housing. In addition, in order to broaden the economic bases and distribute its fruits among all South Africans, business should channel effort into assisting black businessmen to overcome the many obstacles which they still face, including legal restrictions and financial constraints.

Botha said although business should continue to lobby government and provide support for progressive organisations that are actively involved in the change process, its role was not that of an alternative government or opposition party. "But as corporate citizens, businesses have the right and the obligation to formulate views on how political power should be structured and most constructively exercised in South Africa."

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