

Ordinary people hold the key



NO EXHAUSTIVE surveys are needed to illustrate the despair which has gripped many South Africans. From the maelstrom of East Rand townships to the relatively tranquil white suburbs, the mood is sombre. From the growing lines of the unemployed, to the struggling businesses on the brink of bankruptcy, the prevailing attitude is one of fear and of growing desperation.

It is the daily struggle for survival – not the larger questions of political transition – which concerns most South Africans. Yet the two are inextricably joined. Perhaps that is why there is a prevailing view that political leaders have lost their way and apparently have no clear assurances for those who grow more troubled every day.

Ordinary South Africans look in vain for men and women of stature who are prepared to set aside their narrow political ambitions in order to offer a hopeful alternative to the present grim reality. It is almost as if leaders have become pygmies against the backdrop of gigantic demands.

Not unreasonable

Although the problems facing leaders at every level of society are complex and require intensive and far-reaching solutions, ordinary people have the right to expect something better from their leaders than they are getting. They are not being unreasonable when they demand that the security forces deal effectively with those who murder and plunder without let or hindrance. Is it inevitable that the daily body-count continues unabated? Who are the faceless people who go into houses and streets and kill and destroy?

Ordinary South Africans are not being simplistic when they express bewilderment at the see-sawing of events at the World Trade Centre. One day it's a breakthrough, the next it's a breakdown. Their confusion at the readiness of key leaders and parties to abandon the negotiation table in order to serve their own sectional interests is understandable.

Ordinary South Africans are at last growing angry at the prospect of their future being held hostage by trigger-happy thugs on the far left and the far right of the spectrum. They have a right to be increasingly impatient at the way Peter Mokaba on the one hand, and Terre'Blanche and Viljoen on the other, use inciting language and are then allowed to justify their reckless outbursts and calls to arms on national television.

Loss of faith

Nevertheless, although the despair, fear and loss of faith in political leaders is understandable, it is not enough to leave it there. Amongst the political leaders are those who share the concerns and the despair of those whom they seek to represent. However, they, on their own, cannot resolve the crisis.

South Africans cannot afford to entrust their future to a handful of leaders who are largely impotent in the face of violence and unreasonableness. Ordinary South Africans have themselves to seize the time of crisis and transform it into an

opportunity for creative and hopeful endeavour.

To dare to be hopeful is not to underestimate the gravity of the times in which we live. South Africa is perilously close to the edge. To be creative in a time of negativity is not mere whistling in the dark, a kind of wistful "It's not all that bad", or "I'm sure things are going to get better" attitude. It is a belief in the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

This deep and abiding belief in the human spirit is not based on mere sentiment, but rather on an understanding of history; a recognition and an awareness that individuals and people in every generation and in every situation have refused to be paralysed by events. It is not a passive attitude and a leaving it all to someone else. It is to accept that nothing remains solved in life – out of each victory and defeat come new challenges and new opportunities.

To dare to believe in peace and justice does not necessarily call for grand, dramatic gestures but it does mean quiet courage and a determination that the forces of division, the forces of mindless violence, will not have the last word.

It also means no sacrifice of our critical faculties, but a willingness to go beyond criticism to creative action.

Democracy is not only a political system. It also means having control over one's life. If South Africa is to succeed in the extremely difficult task of coming through a transition from authoritarianism, exclusiveness and injustice, to democracy and equal opportunity, it will take the efforts of all. Not only the technical experts, the political parties, and the business community, but ordinary South Africans must contribute in their own neighbourhoods and workplaces; must contact and interact with those from whom they have been separated for so long.

Antidote

Democracy also means more than blaming the newspapers and the media for the continual litany of bad news. It is to recognise that the situation is bad, is serious, and to try to do something about it.

It also means more than mere individual actions, although these are important. It means a recognition of the role of civil society – concerned men and women joining hands to make a difference.

There are any number of organisations who are "busting a gut" to counter the forces of violence, some of them in the field of voter education, others in monitoring, and many others in small and large ways reaching out to those less fortunate than themselves. There are others still who spend endless hours analysing and assessing in an attempt to keep political leaders honest as they make their own efforts to fashion a new South Africa.

The antidote for gloom and despair is to work creatively towards peace and justice.

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