

New-speak for the 1990s

What exactly do politicians mean when they launch into the jargon of the transition process?

Are they all speaking the same language?

VAN ZYL SLABBERT offers an interpretation.

Change generates its own vocabulary; South Africa is no exception. We use different words to express more or less the same idea and more often than not the same word for different ideas.

On the political battleground, opponents stake out claims and stalk each other publicly with hidden agendas that everybody knows about and disguise obvious ideological preferences with verbal posturing, calculated to promote themselves as the most attractive partners in the process of negotiated transition.

The big point is not to appear ignorant or unconfident even if the vast majority of people have no idea what you are talking about, or exactly what is happening.

It would be comforting, even nice, if for example, the government in power and its opponents to the left and right, displayed some humility; confessed some ignorance and took the country into their confidence about the complexity of the process of change they have unleashed on us.

Instead, the PAC assures us that "the toiling masses demand a constituent assembly now!"; whilst the ANC claims that the same masses are prepared to move in stages from an "all party conference", to an "interim government" and then a constituent assembly election.

The government says it should be blindingly obvious to everyone that you cannot have constituent assembly elections or an interim government before there have been a number of multi-party conferences, and by then, neither of the other two may be necessary.

Right-wing organisations and parties proclaim that all this is a lot of cock and bull

in favour of this from left and right. There are fringe flanking elements who favour militancy and radicalism, but they are in the minority.

The third point is that despite this national consensus, there is a fundamental division on what to negotiate about. A minority of whites, who may be strategically located in the economy and the civil service, wish to negotiate a form of partition. The majority, (including the majority of whites) wish to negotiate some form of a non-racial democracy.

Within the minority who wish to negotiate partition one can distinguish between greedy partitionists and sacrificial partitionists.

Greedy partitionists wish to negotiate a substantial piece of South Africa which they believe is historically theirs, e.g. the AWB and the Boer republics. Or they want to reimpose old-style Verwoerdian separate development, e.g. Ferdie Hartzenberg and his supporters in the Conservative Party.

Sacrificial partitionists wish to negotiate either a small part of South Africa for the Afrikaner, e.g. Prof. Carl Roelfsema and the

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