

Popular debate breaks new ground

By Bea Roberts

SOME 350 people flocked to a public meeting in East London on February 12 to hear a wide range of views on the implications of Mr F W de Klerk's opening of parliament speech.

Addressing the packed venue, the executive director of Idasa, Dr Alex Boraine, said every person present was doing "the crucial thing" - getting involved in the current political process. Presenting, and accepting, different points of view - of which there were many at the meeting - formed part of creating a culture of democracy, he said.

For those who attended, as well as for Idasa, the meeting broke new ground. Never before in East London had such a range of speakers appeared on one platform: the NP, DP, ANC, SACP and the PAC. (The CP had also agreed to attend, but cancelled due to a last-minute problem.)

In his remarks, Dr Boraine singled out the proposed changes in local government, saying that this emphasis pointed to a recognition that the political process should take place at grassroots level.

Dr Boraine also pointed out that the praise and adulation the State President had been receiving for his reforms was not his due alone - there should be no winners or losers, but all South Africans who had been fighting apartheid should share in the congratulations.

Mr Callé Badenhorst, National Party MP for East London North, said that the speech marked the second phase of the process which was started last year, namely the building of a unique South African nation.

WHEN questioned about the NP's true motive for change, he said that he did not want to justify the past, but that the government at that time believed that it was at war, and acted accordingly. However, that was history, and the government had sincerely committed itself to change after a process of soul-searching - he likened it to a "Road to Damascus" experience.

Mr André de Wet, a nominated Democratic Party MP, said that the NP manifesto embraced the principles the DP had always stood for, and that they were encouraged that Mr De Klerk "has the potential of becoming a true democrat".

He expressed caution about certain aspects of the speech: that the concept of "own community life" and "community rights" should not contain hidden agendas, that the support which is asked for the security forces cannot be a given, and that the effect of the "temporary transitional measures" on education, conscription and own affairs should be carefully considered.

The PAC representative, Mr Ezra Mtshontshi, agreed that it was now time for nation building, but made it clear that the PAC response to Mr De Klerk's speech was one of scepticism: about apartheid being truly and irreversibly on its way out, about whether the "abolition" of acts would have any tangible effect, and at the ability of one party, namely the NP, to plan the future of the country.

He rejected the idea of a multi-party conference, saying that it would be like a "jumble of stew that no-one would want to eat in the end."

Dr Chippy Olver, assistant general secretary of the Border ANC regional executive, said that certain sectors of the community regarded the ANC as a bit of a "kill-joy" because it would respond with a "but" every time the government made a concession. Referring to the latest call for sanctions after the parliamentary address, he pointed out that the ANC had to maintain international and internal pressure, as there were no guarantees as yet that the process which had started would continue. He said that the ANC took cognisance of the economic crisis, but also of the political crisis. A stable future was firstly dependent on a stable, well-founded political dispensation, and for this reason, and

Suspicious about white control

By Paul Graham

THE opening of parliament brought together an historic panel in Durban.

With the closing words of the State President's speech ringing in the ears of an audience invited by Idasa and consisting of organisational representatives and political observers, panellists from the PAC, ANC, SA Communist Party, Cosatu and Inkatha Freedom Party provided immediate reaction to the speech on February 1.

Poet, ex-prisoner and SACP member, Ben Dikobe Martin, set the scene when he expressed his disappointment that there was no timetable for the ending of the present parliament.

Cautious acceptance of the decision to scrap apartheid laws was mixed with a catalogue of areas where panellists felt the State President had not gone far enough.

Cosatu secretary Thami Mhlomi pointed out that, despite communication on the role of the police, there had been no recognition of their role in restricting the development of the country towards democracy and peace. Both he and PAC central committee member, Dr Selva Saman, focused on the failure to repeal the Internal Security Act - a condition of the Harare Declaration on negotiations.

Posing the question, "is the government a principal or an equal partner in the negotiating process?" panellists focused on what seemed likely to become the main points of disagreement in the future - an interim government and a constituent assembly.

Dr Ndlovu, a political scientist from the University of Zululand, raised questions about the multi-party conference route to negotiations which both the ANC and now the State President were espousing. He pointed to the difficulty of consensus politics and the necessity of dissent in a culture of democracy. Even within the existing parliament, consensus was not possible, he said, citing the walk-out as an immediate example.

Apart from the omission of the Internal Security Act, three other omissions were seen as central to the future debate: these were the release of prisoners and the return of exiles; the dismantling of the homelands; and changes in the electoral acts.

Mr Musa Zondi of the IFP identified the uneasiness of other panellists by asking what enabling legislation would replace those laws which were to go. It was too early to be too euphoric, he suggested.

Speaking off the cuff, and in some cases hampered by an inability to understand some of the more technical sections of the Afrikaans sections of the speech, panellists were understandably reticent and suspicious. National Party leadership and those in the white community who have been heartened by the speech will, however, need to come to terms with this suspicion and the feeling that, even now, the white parliament is trying to maintain control.

But a new sign of hope was spotted in the State President's speech by Thami Mhlomi. For the first time he said he was hearing a white leader identify himself with Africa. Perhaps this identification will provide the common purpose which is needed to help ensure that a non-racial democracy is established in South Africa.

Paul Graham is Idasa's regional director in Natal.

Shades of schooling

By Paul Zondo

THE education crisis in South Africa is rife with statistics, but spare a thought for residents of Soshanguve, a township north-west of Pretoria, close to the notoriously impoverished Winterveldt area of Bophuthatswana.

The population in the township, established in 1975, is about 380 000 – 18 000 of whom are squatters. Persecution of Winterveldt residents by the Bophuthatswana regime (in June last year they were threatened with forced removal) have driven many to seek refuge across the "border" in Soshanguve.

Within the 39 Department of Education and Training (DET) schools in Soshanguve overcrowding is widespread.

An example of conditions: at Morula School lessons are conducted under the shade of four morula trees while they wait for their promised temporary structure from the DET. There are 1 600 pupils, but only seven teachers. There are no textbooks or blackboards and the spoken word is the only means of teaching.

The "staff room" is under a fifth morula tree where morning assembly and afternoon devotions are also held. There is no running water and no toilets. To combat heat and dehydration, teachers carry litres of water to the school.

At the start of the 1991 school year, Central State School had an intake of 889 students. Two weeks into term (and, arguably, in response to the NECC's "back to school" campaign), this figure had risen to 3 129.

Most recently, that school has been unilaterally closed down by the DET, because of "unruly" behaviour by students and "chaotic" conditions which made education impossible.

This action flies in the face of recommendations made by some 800 delegates to the Soshanguve Education Co-ordinating Committee's day-long conference on January 20. Also at the meeting were two DET circuit inspectors and two representatives from the NECC (National Education Co-ordinating Committee).

The conference resolved that since the DET's school management

councils had already disbanded, Parent-Teacher-Student Associations should be elected to help administer the schools.

An important task would be to assist in securing the finances for school administration and equipment which, in many cases, was paid for by school principals out of their own pockets.

Regarding the admission of students, it was decided that:

- students who failed the 1990 examinations should be allowed to repeat the year rather than being dismissed;
- only school principals, with the assistance of teachers, should act as admissions officers to schools. There would be no student participation;
- principals should discuss the redistribution of pupils where possible to avoid overcrowding in schools;
- registration of students should be completed by the end of January.

The Soshanguve Teachers' College of Education would be open not only to boarders, but to local, day students as well.

To assist in repairs to the many damaged schools in Soshanguve each family would be asked to contribute R2. The PTSAs would take responsibility for these funds. The DET would also be approached to subsidise repairs as well as to improve lighting to assist in safe-guarding school premises.

Caretakers would also be appointed and parents in the area of each school would be encouraged to help take precautionary measures to prevent further damage.

To accommodate the large numbers of students who had responded positively to the "back to school" campaign, temporary structures were urgently needed. Delays by the DET were noted with serious concern.

Teachers were also desperately needed. The conference was told of a thirst by students to learn, but of the handful of (often demoralised) teachers who still had a desire to teach. □

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Learning what they can where they can, pupils at a Soshanguve school.

Debate breaks new ground

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also to speed up the process of reform, the ANC would continue calling for sanctions and implementing programmes of mass action.

Dr Olver said the NP rejection of a constituent assembly was unacceptable. Negotiations should be a democratic process involving people on the ground rather than politicians behind closed doors.

According to Mr Mzwakhe Ndlela of the South African Communist Party, the expectation exists that Mr De Klerk should be thanked – however, he had not done the people of South Africa a favour. Thousands of people had died, and had been destabilised under apartheid legislation, and although the repeal of the acts in question was certainly welcome, the struggle

for national liberation was not yet over. Political and economic power was at this stage still in the hands of the white minority. Therefore the SACP would join the ANC in intensifying the struggle, and make their presence felt in the factories and the streets.

Certainly one of the most favourable aspects to come out of the meeting, and one which was reiterated by many who attended, was the good spirit that existed between the panellists and their respective support bases in the audience; and that considerable common ground was found.

Dr Boraine commented on this in his closing remarks, and said that the desire for a new, non-racial, democratic South Africa had been a persistent theme. However, one could not overlook the negative aspects: the fear, suspicion, and anger which still exist. He used the exam-

ple of a township youth, who suffered and is still suffering the consequences of our history; a lack of education, housing, health and transport facilities, unemployment, and violence. "How do you persuade that youngster that there is a new South Africa?" Dr Boraine asked. He stressed that, unless and until the desparation of the youth in the townships is addressed, there is no chance that the democracy we all hope for will be attained.

What is needed, Dr Boraine said, is a sense of reconciliation which must come from every possible level – from homes, businesses, schools, sportsfields. That is what the democratic process is all about – making it possible for all of us. □

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