

United by need – on a mini Codesa-on-wheels

“**P**eople are dying here!” Not in the struggle, but in our bus, from sheer pressure for a toilet stop. This irresistible plea to our busdriver (a DRC minister), comes from a young civic member, egged on by a white township administrator. Our Idasa bus, a mini Codesa-on-wheels, has quickly developed interdependence skills – we are united indeed, by need.

Also by region. The fact that we are all Free Staters, is suddenly a source of pride. Also by consumption of liquor. In the play-off between the ANC and the farming fraternity I must presume that the result was a draw. After 5 500 kilometres of practise they were very evenly matched.

I journey through the minefield of my own prejudices and liberal preconceptions with rapidly diminishing certainty, while the rhythmic refrains of freedom songs and our passionate debates on mass action and intimidation, police brutality and violence, intermingle effortlessly with the rumblings of the bus, as it takes us through Zimbabwe and Zambia.

At one point it takes four hours to get through customs, unbearably bleak and dirty. Yet minutes later, vegetable patches dot the countryside and a spotless motel with glossy garden, confounds my simplistic judgement. Throughout our stay, we are addressed and met by cabinet ministers, newspaper editors, guides, erudite and cultivated ambassadors and businessmen, ANC officials, ex-President and present President, people of patent goodwill and common sense. Even the UN representative courts us – us, the polecats of the world! But the ANC grieves for lost comrades and lost support and the lost innocence of the liberation struggle.

“Zambia has buried socialism forever,” says the President with chilling finality. Yet the blight of corruption survives all change, pervasive as the drought and cunningly comfortable in any economic guise and country.

It is the problems of poverty and not of race, which we encounter. Much is discussed about development strategies: education for the masses is a first priority. Yet the heavy cost of social services has meant minimal expenditure on infrastructure. This is the balance we must negotiate.

We drive along pot-holed roads, half-completed buildings (including a gigantic United National Independence Party head office now in the process of being sold to a hotel group) and past people digging up the rocky foundations of the outskirts of Lusaka, crushing rock with hand tools, selling them per bagful to builders – unlicensed, but unstoppable. The message from city officials in Harare is clear: hawkers and squatters are not welcome. Shacks are demolished to improve the look of the city in foreign visitors’ eyes. Littering is noticeably curbed by on-the-spot fines. This impresses all of us. So does the famed friendliness of the locals.

The Land Expropriation Bill in Zimbabwe elicits great interest, neatly dividing the haves from the have-nots. I think back on the ending of slavery in 1830s. At stake was not the issue of

slavery but of just compensation for lost property. The same situation is replayed nearly 200 years later. If there is no fair market price for land, I see a new Great Trek stirring in the farmers’ veins. A new frontier has opened, a frost free, mild climated, sparsely populated land where the playing fields have not been levelled but annihilated. They’ll begin again.

In the rural Third World, women work up to 18 hours per day, sleep four, eat last and the least, and produce 60 to 70 percent of the food consumed. But where women’s work is not measured in economic terms, her value as a person is seriously underrated and her demand for equal status negated.

“Battering is love. That is our culture”.
“As long as women dislike polygamy there will be rape.” Quotes from Zimbabwean MPs in parliament. Although individuals rise to the top of their professions, and Zimbabwe,

Zambia and Botswana have more women in their cabinets than we here in South Africa, their potential role in local government and civics (an indigenous invention not present in the countries we visited) has hardly been recognised. Their empowerment is probably a critical factor to be considered in all regional development projects but as yet scarcely touched upon. At the same time, the IMF economic structural adjustment plans (ESAP) are negotiated with the male power hierarchy while the cost is borne by the women. No wonder they have substituted the acronym in the Mbare market: “The Extended Suffering of African People.”

Though economies have faltered and rumours of civil rights violations are given as the reason for new human rights movements forming (in Zimbabwe and Zambia) it is the miracle of reconciliation which impresses us. How poverty-stricken the white soul here in the south that it cannot confess and ask forgiveness when forgiveness is so readily at hand? When a solitary Zimbabwean academic talks with disdain of non-racialism, it is our comrade, seven years on Robben Island, who firmly chastises him. We listen with astonishment to an ex-chief justice, whose eloquent devotion to the defence of a independent judiciary throws a harsh light on our own unconcern for the rule of law.

We talk endlessly about democratisation and normalisation. I want maximum personal freedom and minimum government, but alongside my burgeoning hope that this is what everyone wants, looms the fatal attraction of unbridled power. “Politicians and governments are not in the business of advancing liberty.” “Democratic society does not eliminate conflict.” “Better to write a constitution for villains than for heroes.” Says the Barotse princess, now cabinet minister: “I have seen the whole of Africa come tumbling down.” Is there a way in which we can ensure that the jubilant triumph of our own liberation is converted into pragmatic government? I hope so.

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By Sandra Botha, one of a group of Free Staters who recently visited neighbouring states on an Idasa study tour.
