

Whites scramble to keep up

By Hans Pienaar

SINCE February 2, political and sociological researchers at the Human Sciences Research Council have been encountering a new problem when they canvass people over the telephone - how to stop them talking.

Eagerness to discuss recent developments points to a lively new curiosity, says Dr Nic Rhoodie, head of the HSRC's Centre for Conflict Analysis and Management. But it is also caused by the perception amongst whites that they are under pressure and that they have to keep track of new developments in order to survive.

I spoke to him about the perceptions of the white electorate after the release of Mr Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the ANC. Unfortunately, due to the HSRC's privatisation policy, he could not provide any statistics from his research, as these belonged to "clients".

Dr Rhoodie and his researchers found an eagerness among white voters to learn more about current political developments that had not been there in the past. Generally this seems to be the result of a great deal of anxiety about new developments.

"There is a measure of ignorance amongst whites that is a bit bothering. This leads them to interpret the crisis situation wrongly, and the claims of the ANC, even the pronouncements of President FW de Klerk.

"People who are ignorant do not know what their options are," he adds. There seems to be much miscomprehension of the nature of a society in transition - that the radical restructuring of political, social and economic institutions will always be accompanied by disruption and conflict.

A complicating factor is the failure of the ANC to find a more tactful way of communicating certain key features of its policy for a new South Africa.

The obvious example is that of nationalisation. If the ANC means that society should be changed in such a way to allow equal opportunities for every South African, whites would see this as a logical and natural extension of the kind of society they already have.

But the perception exists of nationalisation as a confiscating type of measure, through which huge tracts of land and resources are to be disowned and distributed amongst blacks who are untrained and unprepared to manage them.

This perception almost shuts out all the positive pronouncements of the ANC, and

has also led to a greatly ambivalent assessment of Mr Nelson Mandela. On the one hand they acknowledge that the ANC displays flexibility in Mr Mandela's call for a return to schools by black scholars, his re-

pared to assist them and that, understandably, "a sort of umbilical chord" has developed.

"Afrikaners understand that, in their own history in times of frustration due to an unpopular war (World War II) and economic problems, many of their leaders - and at least one State President - developed strong Nazi sentiments."

But Dr Rhoodie does not believe that the general view of the ANC - as the last bastion of communism - and perceptions of chaos in the country will lead to a white backlash in the form of a great upsurge in support for the Conservative Party. In three or four years there will exist a corps of very well informed people in society.

But another check to such an eventuality is the fact that the CP has painted itself into a corner with its relatively extreme standpoints. Because its base is still very much an ethnic one, the CP will never be able to match the

flexibility of the NP due to the broadening of the latter's base through the years. He therefore does not share the "optimism about the phenomenal growth awaiting the CP".

"The National Party is not seen as a tribal party anymore. It has a high degree of viability. It can accommodate both younger disillusioned CP supporters as well as people from the Democratic Party."

Dr Rhoodie agrees that big business will throw their weight in en masse with the NP, and that in future businessmen will no longer keep a discreet silence on this support. This is due to De Klerk's image as the creator of a new and fresh management style, an image that owes much to developments in Eastern Europe.

The centre's research indicates that De Klerk enjoys significant support in all population groups, which would make him an excellent candidate for the presidency in a system similar to Nigerian federalism, generally regarded as one of the best systems for a country consisting of a number of minorities.

Nonetheless, De Klerk will have certain obligations. He will not be able to cut himself loose from the fact that he is an Afrikaner and a white. Although it is not explicitly said to him, his supporters certainly do demand that he ensures the protection of the Afrikaner and likewise the interests of whites in general.

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CP show of strength in Pretoria . . . a great upsurge in their support is not expected

jection of black domination over whites and his statement that the fears of whites should be addressed.

But on the other, many whites firmly believe that nationalisation entails that black troops will march down streets to seize possessions or that destitute blacks will be quartered in with white families.

This ambivalence and the inconsistencies

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accompanying it, is also demonstrated by the general view on links between the ANC and the Communist Party.

On the one hand, the person in the street to a fairly large extent still sees the ANC as communism in another guise. On the other, most sophisticated Afrikaners realise that the Mandelas and Sisulus are black nationalists and that they talk the same language as Afrikaner heroes like Christiaan de Wet, JBM Hertzog and the old Boer generals.

These Afrikaners accept that when things were difficult for the ANC, the communist countries were the only ones pre-