

NP hopes depend on alliance politics — but with whom?

By David Shandler

tutional system before the party could open its membership. A key drawback to open membership at this stage was the continued "emphasis on ethnicity in the social and constitutional set up". Instead the emphasis needed to go into forging alliances.

A different angle on the alliance idea has been put by Cape NP leader Dawie de Villiers. For him the opening up of party membership at this stage would create competition between groups who could otherwise be allies. In South Africa with its diversities, alliances would be of greater effect.

"In such alliances, leaders can through structures which already exist, act as a stronger force in South African politics," said De Villiers.

The continued presence of the National Party as an effective force within South African politics is seen by party leaders as best being ensured through engaging in an alliance.

But with whom is the National Party going to get together?

Constitution Minister Gerrit Viljoen has stated that alliances must be made on the basis of principle.

"If you share most or effectively all values," says Viljoen, "you should merge into one political organisation. If there are also issues over which you differ, then an alliance or co-operative relationship is preferable."

In terms of this principle, the field remains open.

One option being widely spoken about is an NP/ANC "grand coalition" government

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of some kind. Some hold that this is a very real current within government thinking. Hinting at this possibility, Deputy Minister Marais said: "The impression should not be created that the NP is only seeking allies against the ANC".

Observers reason that government thinking is primarily informed at this stage by the needs of the business community. Business requires a stable environment over a period of five to 10 years to facilitate economic growth of around five percent annually. Under such circumstances the general standard of living of the population would

be significantly raised. This would lessen the pressure for scarce resources and allow for the democratisation of the society without leading to a radical or socialist outcome.

In order to ensure such conditions, it is necessary to have a firm state which is co-optive

of the major elements of the opposition — in our case the ANC. Such a government would not necessarily be democratic but would be ensured of popular support, it is argued, due to the participation of the liberation movement leadership.

Some argue that the liberation movement would be susceptible to such a strategy as it is alleged not to have a democratic leadership style. They conclude that the ANC/MDM leadership is an elite with the self-serving interest of maintaining itself in power. Such an elite would be very susceptible to entering into the "grand coalition".

It is interesting that the ANC is talking about an interim government. While the exact form of this is not clear, it would no doubt imply a link-up between the NP and the ANC.

THE ANC can, however, never move without taking its base along with it. Its position of authority within the country is premised on its mass support. A coalition or an interim arrangement which does not have the support of the people in the townships and workers in the trade unions is destined to fail.

Despite this we may already be seeing the seeds of a government attempt at such an alliance through the joint working groups established to clear the way for constitutional negotiations. Government may perceive in these working groups the building blocks of a more comprehensive future coalition.

Another NP option is an alliance of moderates designed to engage in a straight fight with the ANC. This widely discussed idea entails the NP creating around itself an alliance similar to that of the DTA in Namibia. It could include various black moderate groups, the Democratic Party, and have the support of key sectors of the business community. It is claimed that in a straight fight with an ANC alliance, a coalition of moderates would stand a good chance of success.

The association of half of the homeland leaders with the ANC and the possibility of others linking up with it at a later point could make such a grouping still-born, or at best an arrangement between the NP, Inkatha and elements from the three Houses of Parliament. A coalition of such a nature is unlikely to have the popular credibility to upset the ANC's prominence.

At this stage the possibilities remain open with much depending on government's reading of events. What is clear is that it no longer sees itself as a single dominant force within politics. Its future depends very much on getting together with other groups. Just as this could be its strength, it could also be its major vulnerability.

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Now that the government and ANC have started formal talks the question of the National Party's intentions comes to the fore.

It is clear that in its policy prescriptions government is departing from apartheid to a system which plays down race. Even the need to protect white group rights, while still clearly stated, is increasingly being played down or rephrased to a vague point far removed from apartheid.

F W de Klerk's new designer-style administration is a far cry from the bull-in-a-china-shop adventures of the P W Botha regime.

A very interesting distinction in the approach of the two governments can be seen when comparing the handling of future plans. Under Botha, plans were stated in clear blueprints, albeit often quite unintelligible. With De Klerk a new moment of subtlety has entered the corridors of power. Now, the emphasis is placed on formulating broad principles, stating broad objectives which allow for multiple interpretations. It is clear that government is approaching the future with a great deal of flexibility. Keeping their cards close to their chests, De Klerk and his administration will watch the situation unfold and play the appropriate hand at the right time.

The difficulty of government watchers is that they can do little more than outline the major possibilities being considered by those in power.

Various government strategic options can be discerned. None are exclusive of each other; all are possible options depending on how things develop.

Government spokespeople have put forward a range of future constitutional options all incorporating the key aspect of minority protection. It is unlikely, however, that the De Klerk administration sees these as probable in the short to medium term.

Commenting on this point, the president told Parliament that it was his belief that the government was "called to build consensus on the basis of those fundamental points of departure and principles which we have in common, rather than now discussing the details of possible models".

Government's emphasis appears to be moving away from models to some form of interim solution built around an alliance of political forces. According to De Klerk, there is sufficient common ground to form alliances. "The National Party will actively pursue such a process and actively participate in it."

The decision to seek alliances comes out of an assessment by the National Party that it is in no position at this stage to transform itself into a leading non-racial political party capable of winning majority support. The second prize, then, would be to forge an alliance within which the party can remain a central force.

In an address to student members of the National Party, Deputy Minister of Education and Training Piet Marais said that there needed to be finality on a new consti-