

## Of words that don't come easy

**T**HIS is a very *obvious* country, in terms of national truths and inevitable events. We get along in quaint jerky fashion, the weirdos and old-style revolutionaries among us are few and on a clear day one can almost see who will wind up with whom on the warm side of the hereafter. On ordinary days, which are in the majority, we avoid drawing attention to the politically obvious. It is better to gaze into the distance, pray quietly for a Codesa 3 and keep the fingers crossed for sanity – both personal and national.

Meanwhile, a beautiful revolution wastes away in the wings. In Brooklyn where I live, the white and black kids of the working class are playing together in the parks. They don't take their cues from the barbarians, it seems. Their parents are waiting though, the whites fearful, pessimistic and thoroughly *deurmekaar* about current politics and the future. They thought they had done their bit in the March referendum, they took the brave step advocated from above for a secure future. But six months down the line, the muddle continues. Clearly the fight was not called off, the future is not about to start.

In Brooklyn, Benoni and other ordinary South African places, which are in the majority, people are unable, or have little inclination, to keep up with the Cyril-Roelf show or the Pallo-Stoffel shuffle. Many of them have withdrawn again into the old thought patterns, their brief moment of liberation has been lost. And this can be very depressing to people who like to dream a little on the side, and have much goodwill in reserve.

A revolution surely must be made official at some stage; it needs shaping from above and below. Our own precious one, alas, desperately needs a creative team of managers to flesh out the content and, visibly and audibly, reinforce the *process* from above.

The content of the process has become so confused that nobody knows how a good New South African behaves. Somewhere along the line we will probably find out. Or maybe, when the time is ripe, the leaders will tell us where the interests of party politics end and the priorities of the new South Africa begin. In the meantime, we can all just hope that this jerky trek will lead us to the promised land.

A little while after the referendum, Laurens van der Post, now 85 years old, spoke with visionary common sense in *Rapport* about the key ingredients of the revolution this country needs. "Many people think that all that needs doing is to change the political system. And, I warn you, that won't work," he told the interviewer.

He mentioned the need for an inspired leadership communicating with the populace and the importance of spending time on thrashing out principles and values. What kind of country do we want and how will we get there. "Politics don't

determine values, values determine politics," he said.

"In this whole process people must choose their words well and use language that speaks to people's hearts. The word has power. In World War 2, what else but words did Churchill have to save his people from total ruin?"

When last were words of that calibre addressed to us as a nation? All we get is Nelson Mandela trying to placate or Pik Botha reminding us of the importance of prayer in these difficult times. The rest snipe, smile knowingly or are simply silent.

The rulers, sparse in spirit as they have become in their addiction to power, can't really afford to go public on their values at this

stage. It would be too embarrassing. In any event, their energies are committed in the battle to avoid, or at least delay, the politically obvious – a transfer of power to those elected by the majority of South Africans.

**T**HEY have little to offer to inspire their traditional following, in fact one senses that they expect black leaders to offer themselves as a source of inspiration to whites. Once inspired though, the whites must not become confused if the National Party grind those same black leaders into the ground. As a substitute for enduring signals of hope and reconciliation, they are flaunting their political charms in places where we know their hearts are not. Our current rulers are out to impress and to conquer, not to inspire and help create for the good of all.

The democratic alliance, on the other hand, insists on pursuing strategies that make little sense to most influential South Africans at this time. They are locked into show politics that are also impressive but do not have much power to inspire or produce more than progress of the stop-start variety we know so well.

A visiting American political specialist, whose name regrettably eludes me, reminded us recently that it is easy to initiate change but not so easy to sustain it. He termed the latter an "art form". To sustain change, one needs more than intuitive skills, he said. What is required is a national framework that combines action and talk, a kind of psychological formula for taking the country along with you over mountain and through dale.

Most South Africans are traversing the dreary landscape of informed pessimism at present. Things are not working out at any level. Van der Post's prescription of powerful words is probably the best we can hope for in the immediate future.

By RONEL SCHEFFER

Ronel Scheffer is production editor in Idasa's media department.