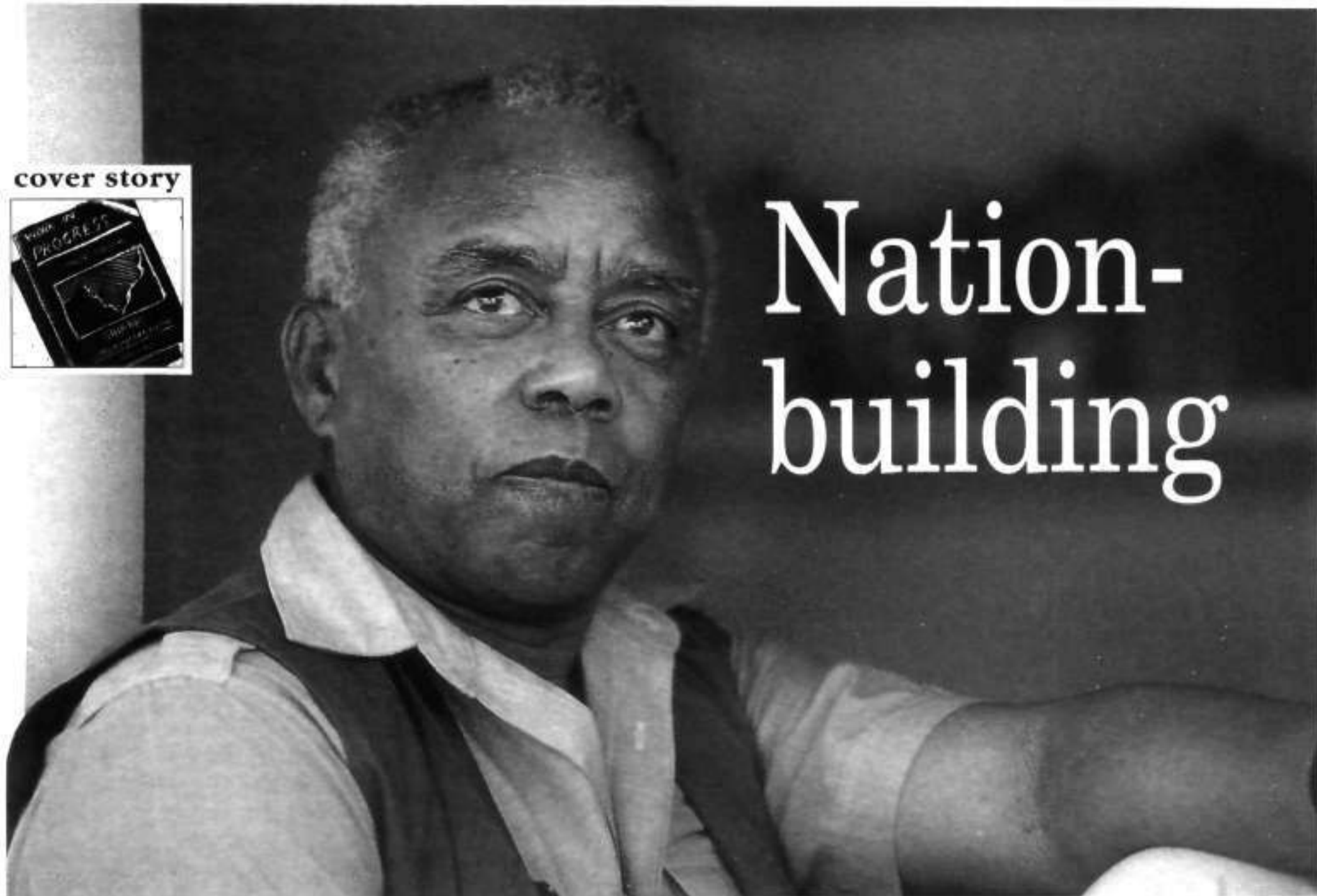


cover story



# Nation- building

## *An interview with Neville Alexander*

**MARAIS:** *The history of apartheid has been countered by a political resistance that, in many respects, has framed and defined itself in contrast to apartheid, as that which apartheid is not. So the idea of inclusion, of unifying and bringing together that which is now driven apart, has become a central element in the opposition's programme. Ideologically, then, the idea of the South African nation carries considerable force.*

*In addition, national unity is necessary for the achievement of equality, justice and development. There is a functional need for a nation ...*

**ALEXANDER:** One can take a number of approaches to what you're saying. One can say nations are the mode of existence of modern, industrial states. If you look across the world, that's generally the case.

Secondly, the colonial system created what people like to call artificial states, especially in Africa. But these states themselves created geographical,

In a country so fiercely wrenched apart, the idea of building a nation — a South African nation — seems even more remote than the prospect of peace. Are we tilting at windmills? Have 'nation-building' and 'non-racialism' been reduced to empty phrases, to hangovers from yesterday's idealism?

Hein Marais tests the scepticism on  
**NEVILLE ALEXANDER**

political, economic and social boundaries that forced people to interact with one another. Benedict Anderson says in *Imagined Communities* that these states created meaning as administrative units, they became meaningful for people. It's like when you try to redraw the boundaries of the regions in SA — people have difficulty dissociating themselves from the Cape Province,

Transvaal etcetera. These entities have created meaning, regardless of people's politics.

A third point: Identity is an inherent part of all ideology, and I'm talking about identity beyond yourself. If in SA we reject the nation-building project, we have to accept some sort of ethnic project — because identity is inescapable. If you're asked who or what are you, your answer will be "I am a Xhosa, a coloured, a Zulu, South African" — you cannot escape that. You identify with a particular group of people. The nation is one such identity, one of several identities.

The nation, at the political level, as an identity does not *per se* belong to this or that class. I want to stress this: In SA, unlike other parts of the world, the bourgeoisie has promoted the capitalist project by dividing people, by making the nation exclusive, a white nation, even an Afrikaner nation. And by way of counter-acting this the national liberation movements, including socialists, have insisted on uniting



## Race doesn't exist

'Race' as a biological entity doesn't exist — that's a vital theoretical foundation for any non-racial project. That doesn't mean racial beliefs and prejudices are not real. They are socially real, especially if they are linked to economic and other power interests, as happened in SA with apartheid. So I don't question the social reality of 'race'.

Religion is a good analogy. Many of us might reject the existence of God, but the belief in God is so real that globally huge structures rest on it — economic, material structures. Racism is of the same order of things.

But the mere ability to question the scientific basis of racism isn't enough. It becomes clear that 'race' is a type of social construct; that racialisation of nations has to do with economic and class struggles. It also becomes clear that it can change.

Once the discussion reaches that point, then we can talk about what we do about things like language ... I'm giving you the trajectory of my own development. You suddenly begin to realise that if people can communicate with one another then a lot of the barriers, beliefs and prejudices fall away. Beyond that you realise that if kids are educated together, if certain economic and social conditions are created, you can dampen the effects of racial prejudice.

It's a long-term struggle. We see from places like the US or India, where affirmative action and anti-caste policies have been introduced, that prejudice doesn't disappear overnight. We're talking about a centuries-long process.



PHOTO: SUE KRAMER (SOUTHLIGHT)

*nationalism and African nationalism. Which strikes me as another attempt to find a route around the nation-building imperative ...*

NA: In the sense that it takes *the nation* or nations as givens, as existing forever. Of course, both of them are historians and they *do* know that nations come into being and they go out of being. But somehow they freeze the moment and say these nations are there forever and must be accommodated. It's only when you step outside the stream of history that you can think like that.

When you do, then what Gilliom and company are saying is fundamentally false. Nation-building is an inescapable process in our context. Radicals have to put themselves behind it and define its content — we have to say, for instance, that being South African means you must know three languages in the future.

That's defining the content. But if you say that in SA you have two or more nations, each of them speaking a different language, you're operating in completely different parameters.

HM: *Let's separate the building blocks of a nation-building project. It's been suggested that it has two central elements: consciousness-building and institution-building. The former would revolve principally around the idea of non-racialism; the latter around institutions of the state and civil society that are widely regarded as legitimate. Are these sufficient elements?*

NA: That reduces nation-building to a set of sociological propositions. We need to start from the fact that a radical perspective of nation-building cannot be divorced from class interests. The leading class should determine the parameters — Marx makes the point in the Communist Manifesto that the proletariat must become the leading class in the nation before we can build socialism. Or to shift into a Gramscian metaphor, the working class must become hegemonic; it is that hegemonic class which will set the terms on which the nation is built.

Of course, the discourse of nationhood is non-class, it doesn't belong to the working class or the bourgeoisie or any other class. But at the same time, the way in which that consciousness is

the people — not just at the geographical and juridical level, but also at the cultural and political level.

Therefore, in SA that project is a progressive one, though it's not necessarily anti-capitalist. In fact, capital is now swinging around to promote the nation-building project.

So it is important that its definition be given class content. And that is where all those things that constitute the content of a nation-building programme (like language policy) need to be informed by a class perspective.

HM: *[The political philosopher] Johan Degenaar says the priority is not to build a nation but to build a just society ... to build democracy. He counterposes democracy-building and nation-building. Do you find that a false tension?*

NA: Completely false. Now that the Broederbond project of separate nationhood has obviously failed, a lot of people are becoming afraid of nation-building — quite correctly, in the sense of "once bitten, twice shy"; they don't want to be involved in another chauvinistic and nationalistic project. And, clearly, if nation-building goes with national chauvinism, then it is something everybody must reject.

But it doesn't have to be chauvinistic. If we look at the history of nationalism worldwide, it is only under quite clearly definable conditions that nationalism — let's rather speak of nation-building — becomes nationalistic and chauvinistic. It's not at all inevitable.

The second point is that, in so far as the nation-building project is going to go hand-in-hand with a redistribution of wealth and rights, people who have been privileged by the bourgeois project in SA are scared. They are trying to pre-empt a development that might reduce to equality people who have enjoyed privilege up to now. So a radical nation-building project is, in fact, a threat to the "haves" in SA.

What Degenaar and co. are saying is that if you don't go for the nation-building project, then we must go for the ethnic project, the Inkathas and the Volkstasters and the rest.

HM: *Others like Herman Giliomee and Lawrence Schlemmer try to couch the South African reality as a bi-nationalist one, a struggle between Afrikaner*



moulded is influenced by the hegemonic class in a particular society.

I believe that if the working class project becomes hegemonic within the shaping of national consciousness, then more and more cooperative elements will enter it.

*HM: You've been heard to say that "a non-racial capitalism is impossible in SA ..."*

*NA: I'm not saying it's theoretically impossible; I'm saying it's historically impossible. Race and class have overlapped with one another to such an extent that unless you have a class revolution against capitalism, your mode of production reproduces racial inequality. Not just class inequality, but racial inequality. And that is why people's consciousness will in the first place be racial consciousness, because "the white man oppresses us", he exploits us, we work for white people, etcetera.*

People won't notice immediately that more and more blacks filter into that ruling class — our children's children's children might notice it, and at that stage we might talk about a non-racial capitalism. But long before we reach that point there won't be any capitalist system ... [laughs heartily]

*HM: A lot of people are saying, look, non-racialism has been an integral, emotional part of the struggle but it simply does not stand up to the test of reality ...*

*NA: We are living in a situation marked by racial oppression and inequalities based on racial beliefs; it's difficult for us to conceive of change, that's why people*

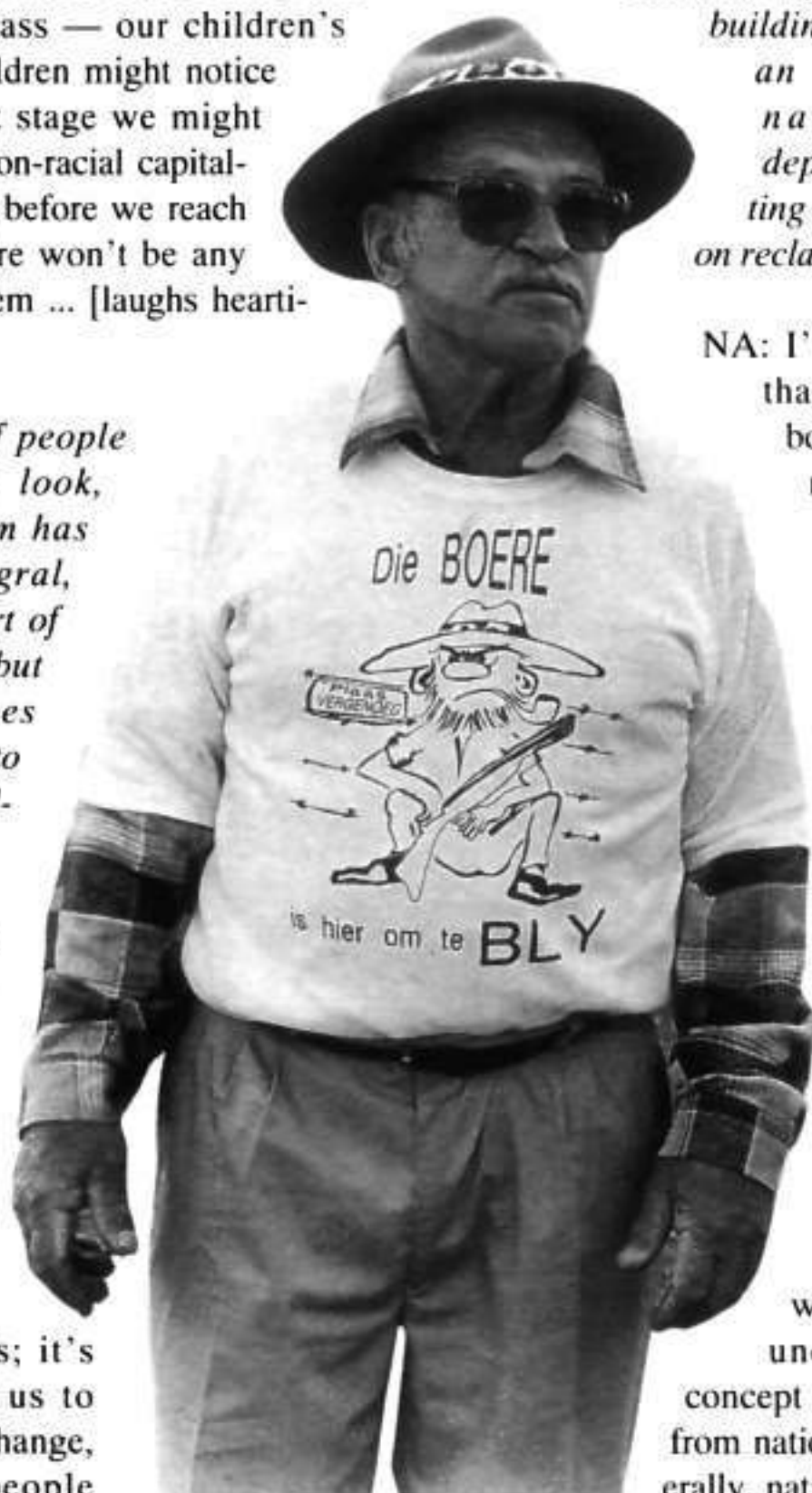
say non-racialism is simply an *idea*, it can't work, look at what the youngsters in the townships are doing, what these AWB types are doing, and so on. They forget there's a growing layer of people in SA for whom race really doesn't matter, who don't notice your colour. The ideal is that what we call racial characteristics become invisible in the way that your stature or the colour of your eyes generally is invisible.

The moment you take an historical perspective and look at the direction things can and probably will take, you realise you're talking about a centuries-long process. But that doesn't mean we don't start now. Our generation, maybe the next one too, is not going to solve the question of racial prejudice, it's gonna take ages. But we've got to start.

*HM: The French thinker Ernest Renan said more than a century ago that nationalism depends on "forgetting history", on "getting history wrong". I'm inclined to turn that statement on its head in the South African context, and say our nation-building project, as an inclusive nationalism, depends on getting history right, on reclaiming history.*

*NA: I'd agree with that. The denial both of the dignity and of the reality of African people's contribution to the making of SA has to be spotlit and given the dignity which it is not accorded at the moment.*

On the question of nationalism: I really think we should uncouple the concept of the nation from nationalism. Generally, nationalism is an



■ FLAG THEM DOWN: Nation-buildin

adversarial concept, it assumes antagonism towards other nations. I think we should be talking about *national consciousness*, as opposed to nationalism.

In the not-too-distant future, because of SA's dominance in the southern African region, the people of SA might well become amenable to a nationalist, chauvinist project. And we need to guard against that right now. That is, I think, where the idea of a working class project also comes in: while building a nation we've got to be internationalists. As Lenin said: to be an internationalist you first have to have nations. Internationalism presupposes the existence of nations. We have to build a nation at the same time as we bridge the boundaries between nations within southern Africa.

*HM: We've been talking about non-racialism as if it has only one meaning, which of course it doesn't. The PAC also talks of non-racialism, but gives it a specific content. The very meaning of non-racialism is also subject to contest*





PHOTO: ROY FRANCO (SOUTHLIGHT)

driven – it's not the kind of thing you can just allow to happen

*and struggle.*

NA: It does have different meanings. There is a non-racialism that is really multi-racialism, in other words where the existence of race, of this biological entity, is presupposed. A lot of liberals speak about "non-racialism" when they really are talking about multi-racialism.

Then there is the concept that rests on the idea that the ends don't determine the means. That's the PAC and Black Consciousness attitude. Black people, because they are the oppressed, know what it's all about, they must struggle and do away with the system — and *then*, lo and behold, one will be living in a non-racial society. They will *declare* the society "non-racial". In other words, the ends and the means are totally separated.

I believe the only worthwhile non-racial project is the one that uses non-racial means. Just like democracy: you can't bring about democracy by authoritarian means. For the very same reason I think one must accept that this strug-

gle is going to continue.

I think one of the big struggles in our country at the moment is between these two concepts.

The potential for chauvinist and black racist effects and spin-offs is very great, especially if those things can be linked to economic interests. That is why things like setting up companies where only blacks are allowed could become the thin edge of the wedge. One must start questioning that.

*HM: In what sense does the state become a central element of a nation-building project?*

NA: I think our tendency to find a central steering mechanism must be resisted. Any attempt to "legislate" people's consciousness is misconceived and counter-productive. There will always be people who object to it, and that's the beginning of resistance and therefore of divisions.

I don't think a *laissez faire* attitude is correct either, because then the

stronger force always wins and the stronger may be a very evil one in our society.

Enabling laws are vital to this process, but they should not become punitive. You shouldn't punish people for doing what they think is right and the state thinks is wrong when they are not really invading anybody else's rights. There's a difference between saying you can only get a job if you know Xhosa and saying that knowledge of Xhosa is a recommendation for this job. There the state will play a big role. But other institutions can do the same, without laws. If a trade union says that, to become an official, you've got to be able to speak the languages of the region (the same with the church), once people start taking those things for granted, it's going to make all the difference.

And yet there are areas where an element of compulsion will be needed. Things like revenue and redistribution of taxes and so on. But, again, because we live in a society in which the capitalist class is the ruling class there are very definite limits on that.

And that is where civil society comes in, where building from below comes in. I think — and here Degenaar and I are at one — the more radical the democratic project can be within the limits of capitalism (I don't respect those limits, but I think we must accept that for the next period those limits are going to be maintained), the more radical that can be, the better for us, the better for the nation-building and the socialist project. Because when we have a strong civil society where the working class gains hegemony, then clearly the very practices that come into being will eventually impact even on the policies of the capitalist state.

We need intersecting, competing vanguard groups, interest groups if you wish, which should enrich one another through discussion. But the point of departure must be this idea of a united people, a democratic country.

I think we are arriving at that. Constitutional concepts like federalism, confederalism and unitary state are really code words for class interests which are beginning to be played out. That is why, when we stick to a unitary state (without denying decentralisation of power), we are retaining a class perspective. ■