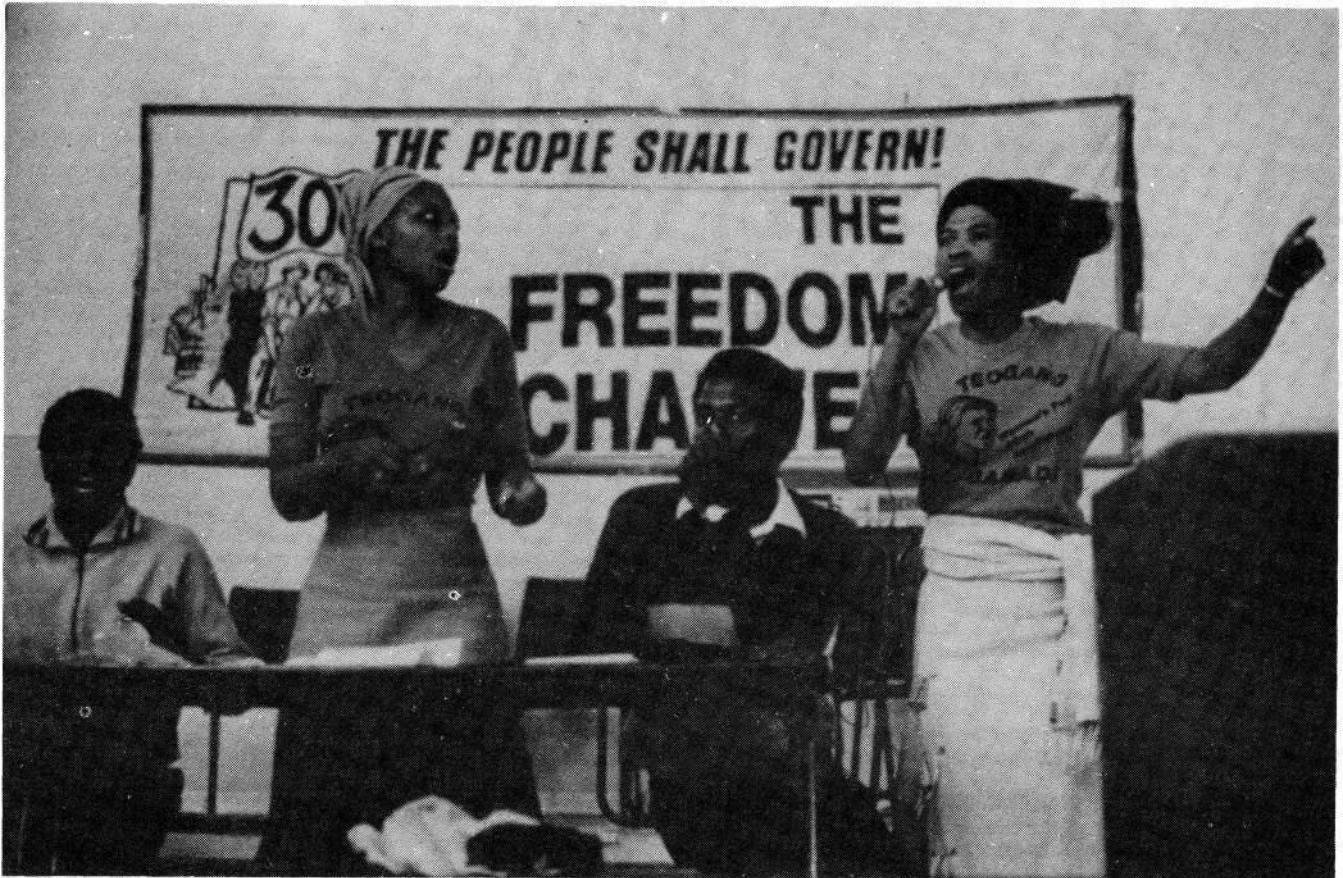


# Charterists and Democracy in South Africa



*The Alexandra Youth Congress celebrates the 30th anniversary of the Freedom Charter.*

When the Freedom Charter was adopted by the Congress of the People at Kliptown outside Johannesburg on 26th June 1955, it represented a concerted popular effort to forge principles for a just South Africa. The vision thus encapsulated marked a stark contrast – as was clearly intended – to the grand plan of apartheid then being enthusiastically carried out by its apostles, the National Party in Government. As a programme of action the Freedom Charter was virtually foredoomed. Successive Nationalist administrations crushed serious dissent ruthlessly in the following years and, consequently, the Freedom charter disappeared from tolerated public discourse. This past decade, however, has witnessed its remarkable revival.

Why so? Ironically, with hindsight one can detect how the South African government itself acted unwittingly as the catalyst. Wrestling with the mounting contradictory impulses of the apartheid order, the erstwhile Prime Minister, P.W. Botha, embarked on constitutional gymnastics throughout the later 1970s, culminating in the revamped parliamentary system foisted on South Africans in 1984. The protracted, bitterly contested process

which precipitated widespread resistance brought about the formation of the United Democratic Front, a vehicle designed primarily to thwart the Nationalists objective. The UDF embraced the Freedom Charter as its credo, whereupon the Charter reentered our political lexicon, stimulating considerable debate and thereby also gaining legions of adherents from younger generations of South Africans, those not privy to the mobilisation of the 1950s. Indeed, a further groundswell of support for the Freedom Charter is now assured given the African National Congress' and the Communist Party's permitted return to the domestic political fold this February. For it is the ANC nowadays, above all, which is seen as the Charter's standardbearer, notwithstanding the fact that the ANC's refurbished constitutional guidelines, unveiled virtually two years ago, differ in detail, albeit very modestly, from the original 1955 document.

By the Charterists, then, I mean all those individuals and organisations who subscribe largely to the vision of a just South African society as portrayed by the principles enshrined in the Freedom Charter. The exact size of this entire constituency is indeterminate, because it has

# THE FREEDOM CHARTER

as adopted at the Congress of the People on 26 June 1955

**PREAMBLE** We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know:

That South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people;

That our people have been robbed of their birthright to land, liberty and peace by a form of government founded on injustice and inequality;

That our country will never be prosperous or free until all our people live in brotherhood, enjoying equal rights and opportunities;

That only a democratic state, based on the will of the people can secure to all their birthright without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief;

And therefore, we the people of South Africa, black and white, together equals, countrymen and brothers adopt this FREEDOM CHARTER. And we pledge ourselves to strive together, sparing nothing of our strength and courage, until the democratic changes here set out have been won.

## THE PEOPLE SHALL GOVERN!

Every man and woman shall have the right to vote for and stand as a candidate for all bodies which make laws.

All the people shall be entitled to take part in the administration of the country.

The rights of the people shall be the same regardless of race, colour or sex.

All bodies of minority rule, advisory boards, councils and authorities shall be replaced by democratic organs of self-government.

## ALL NATIONAL GROUPS SHALL HAVE EQUAL RIGHTS!

There shall be equal status in the bodies of state, in the courts and in the schools for all national groups and races;

All national groups shall be protected by law against insults to their race and national pride;

All people shall have equal rights to use their own language and to develop their own folk culture and customs;

The preaching and practice of national, race or colour discrimination and contempt shall be a punishable crime;

All apartheid laws and practices shall be set aside.

## THE PEOPLE SHALL SHARE IN THE COUNTRY'S WEALTH!

The national wealth of our country, the heritage of all South Africans, shall be restored to the people;

The mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole;

All other industries and trade shall be controlled to assist the well-being of the people;

All people shall have equal rights to trade where they choose, to manufacture and to enter all trades, crafts and professions.

## THE LAND SHALL BE SHARED AMONG THOSE WHO WORK IT!

Restriction of land ownership on a racial basis shall be ended, and all the land re-divided amongst those who work it, to banish famine and land hunger;

The state shall help the peasants with implements, seed, tractors and dams to save the soil and assist the tillers;

Freedom of movement shall be guaranteed to all who work on the land;

All shall have the right to occupy land wherever they choose;

People shall not be robbed of their cattle, and forced labour and farm prisons shall be abolished.

## ALL SHALL BE EQUAL BEFORE THE LAW!

No one shall be imprisoned, deported or restricted without fair trial;

No one shall be condemned by the order of any Government official;

The courts shall be representative of all the people;

Imprisonment shall be only for serious crimes against the people, and shall aim at re-education, not vengeance;

The police force and army shall be open to all on an equal basis and shall be the helpers and protectors of the people;

All laws which discriminate on the grounds of race, colour or belief shall be repealed.

## ALL SHALL ENJOY HUMAN RIGHTS!

The law shall guarantee to all their right to speak, to organise, to meet together, to publish, to preach, to worship and to educate their children;

The privacy of the house from police raids shall be protected by law;

All shall be free to travel without restriction from countryside to town, from province to province, and from South Africa abroad.

Pass laws, permits and all other laws restricting these freedoms shall be abolished.

## THERE SHALL BE WORK AND SECURITY!

All who work shall be free to form trade unions, to elect their officers and to make wage agreements with their employers;

The state shall recognise the right and duty of all to work, and to draw full unemployment benefits;

Men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work;

There shall be a forty-hour working week, a national minimum wage, paid annual leave, and sick leave for all workers, and maternity leave on full pay for all working mothers;

Miners, domestic workers, farm workers and civil servants shall have the same rights as all others who work;

Child labour, compound labour, the tot system and contract labour shall be abolished.

## THE DOORS OF LEARNING AND CULTURE SHALL BE OPENED!

The government shall discover, develop and encourage national talent for the enhancement of our cultural life;

All the cultural treasures of mankind shall be open to all, by free exchange of books, ideas and contact with other lands;

The aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace;

Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children;

Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit;

Adult illiteracy shall be ended by a mass state education plan;

Teachers shall have all the rights of other citizens;

The colour bar in cultural life, in sport and in education shall be abolished.

## THERE SHALL BE HOUSES, SECURITY AND COMFORT!

All people shall have the right to live where they choose, to be decently housed, and to bring up their families in comfort and security;

Unused housing space to be made available to the people;

Rent and prices shall be lowered, food plentiful and no one shall go hungry;

A preventive health scheme shall be run by the state;

Free medical care and hospitalisation shall be provided for all, with special care for mothers and young children;

Slums shall be demolished and new suburbs built where all shall have transport, roads, lighting, playing fields, creches and social centres;

The aged, the orphans, the disabled and the sick shall be cared for by the state;

Rest, leisure and recreation shall be the right of all;

Fenced locations and ghettos shall be abolished and laws which break up families shall be repealed.

## THERE SHALL BE PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP!

South Africa shall be a fully independent state, which respects the rights and sovereignty of all nations;

South Africa shall strive to maintain world peace and the settlement of all international disputes by negotiation not war;

Peace and friendship amongst all our people shall be secured by upholding the equal rights, opportunities and status of all;

the people of the protectorates Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland shall be free to decide for themselves their own future;

The right of all the peoples of Africa to independence and self-government shall be recognised, and shall be the basis of close cooperation.

Let all who love their people and their country now say, as we say here:  
THESE FREEDOMS WE WILL FIGHT FOR, SIDE BY SIDE, THROUGHOUT  
OUR LIVES UNTIL WE HAVE WON OUR LIBERTY.

# THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER

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never been put to any electoral test – until now no South African regime has countenanced as much – but surely there is no disputing its real significance, given, for starters, the combined allegiance of its main constituents, namely, the ANC, the UDF and the principal labour federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

### FUNDAMENTAL TENET

Immediately one is driven to ask, what exactly is this conception of a just South Africa that emanates from the Freedom Charter? The minutiae are open to dispute, as happens with any longstanding document that has almost attained the status of holy writ. Nevertheless, the fundamental tenet is incontrovertible, I maintain. Justice requires basic equality. Moreover, basic equality leads to democracy; and democratic rule, in turn, ensures that basic equality will be sustained as a matter of practice. Democracy, to put it differently, goes hand in glove with basic equality: they have a mutually reciprocal effect, with the latter wholly dependent on the former, and vice versa.

Even if Charterists are all in agreement thus far, as I think they would be, a real bone of contention now materialises. How is democracy to be construed? And what on earth is basic equality anyway? No decisive viewpoint can be extracted either from the Charter itself, or from statements and proposals put forward by Charterists more recently. Looming into range instead is an image of democracy, recognisable and identifiable, yet rarely articulated with any clarity, and never sustained by concerted argument. I went to take up the cudgels here and make a modest start. I shall attempt to do so on just two fronts. First of all, what I choose to see as the Charterist notion of basic equality needs explicating, especially because the political implications flowing logically from it are indeed profound. Hence we reach the second front, which is the image of democracy. My principal concern is to show why this image, with the best will imaginable, can only be realised imperfectly. Consequently, hard choices have to be made – and very soon in order to nullify disappointment, or perhaps despair.

The kind of reasoning I intend advancing is essential, I aver, if one is going to be at all serious about nurturing laudable principles in a way in which social practices do not come to undermine them, whether by design or unintentionally. Let me offer a highly pertinent illustration before launching into my argument proper.

One can fully appreciate the symbolic importance of The Freedom Charter and empathise with the emotional force it generates among those subscribing to it. But of course the Charter can only retain its coinage provided it is not treated as a dead letter, as an absolute, unyielding embodiment of truth: ironically, when this transpires, principles are sacrificed in the name of that self-same truth. Most doctrines have fallen prey to such a shortcoming at some point in their history. The ideology of apartheid is a perfect instance close at hand.

### CHANGES

Reflect on the social changes around us since that fateful day at Kliptown thirty-five years ago. Then the dogma that was apartheid led the faithful into raptures, convinced its apotheosis was nigh. Indeed not, as we have ascertained. As a system of social control, the apartheid order has long

eschewed purity and settled for virtually any mechanism that would ensure white minority rule with the National Party at the helm. Now, too, in maybe a terminal transitional phase, the priorities are no different, although circumstances have altered drastically over, say, the past five years, let alone three decades and more. What price the Freedom Charter's principles at this very moment? It's a crucial question, warranting a responsible reply. A purely formulaic response just will not suffice.

Ponder as well on how political forces have taken shape in the contemporary era. Even a cursory mental journey brings to light staggering transformations that have hardly left South Africa untouched. Far from it. Sub-Saharan Africa has shed colonialism; Stalinism apparently has played itself out, prompting renewed soul-searching about prospects for socialism; regional military and trade blocs have reconstituted the global map; economic dependency and strife have beset the Third World states often confront one another as political and economic adversaries when they pit themselves against the United States, the nascent European Community and Japan, with the prospect of a reunified Germany materialising too. The list is endless, but I dwell on these particular features because they have had a marked impact on the nature of democracy in nation-states throughout the world. And South Africa will be no exception, I'm sure. Therefore, one must take into account why democratic practices have taken novel forms when discussing the desirability or otherwise of the Charterist vision of democracy for the South Africa of tomorrow. With all this in mind, allow me to revert to the first key issue highlighted a little earlier – the idea of basic equality.

'South Africa', we learn from the preamble to the Freedom Charter, 'belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people'. Stirring sentiments. Yet they denote far more than a mere rhetorical flourish; they embody central interrelated principles. Taking each as it arises in the statement, principles pertaining to citizenship, to rights of citizenship, to legitimacy and to democracy can be discerned. Now what "South Africa" is and who the 'people' are merit explanation. Self-evident, you may well retort. One would be mistaken, though, to treat the issue dismissively. Looked at from a slightly adjusted perspective, the enquiry becomes basic equality **for whom?** The very membership of South African society is at stake here. And the right to citizenship underpins all rights of citizenship.

In the South African context, various options regarding citizenship have been implemented as policy this century and several others envisaged. From these a range of categorical choices for the future can be elicited. At the one extreme would be partition, with South Africa reduced to a territorial rump, leaving in its wake a host of sovereign states whose South African rights, as it were, vanish completely at the onset of independence. This is, in essence, the ultimate aim of the pure doctrine of apartheid, latterly eschewed by its creator, the National Party, which has slowly but unsurely passed the mantle of orthodoxy onto outraged successors, the Herstigte Nasionale Party, the Conservative Party, the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, the Boerestaat Party, and such like.

Slightly less radical would be a confederal creation embracing a consortium of states. In this case, partition is combined with cooperation between the sovereign states of the erstwhile South African territory. Commonality is pursued at the elevated level of the states alone; and the right to South African citizenship would apply only to those who legitimately belong to the South Africa that remains. Again, whilst this particular scenario has never been translated into practice in unadulterated form, Nationalist governments since about 1970 have tried to approximate it, especially with an eye on eventually cobbling together a constellation of southern African states drawn from the whole sub-continent. As established policy it endures until today. However, the de Klerk leadership in Pretoria has certainly not portrayed confederalism as the final domestic solution. The path thereafter is extraordinarily vague, as the administration tacitly acknowledges.

### UNIFIED STATE

At the other extreme, Charterists espouse a unified state, partly in order to reassemble what the apartheid order has cast asunder. Nominally independent territories, Transkei, Venda, Bophuthatswana and Ciskei, would be fully reincorporated into the South African fold, as would other areas presently in constitutional limbo – KwaZulu, for example. South African sovereignty would henceforth extend to the outer limits recognised in the immediate pre-apartheid era. And equal rights to citizenship would be related to South Africa's sphere of jurisdiction.

A unified South Africa according equal rights to citizenship gives the most plausible rendering to the off-heard slogan. One People, One Country. This needn't entail transcending cultural identities, or surrendering regional loyalties, or abrogating cultural practices. Still, a government may be sufficiently ambitious enough to strive for a novel South Africanness by obliterating existing social cleavages. Alternatively, the same result could stem from contrasting motives, perhaps from a ruthlessly intolerant administration, even from an elective body. Ideally, permissible interpretations of the notion 'One People, One Country' should be finalised by the citizenry; and this can only be carried out justly provided citizens already enjoy equal rights to citizenship. Thus, the fundamental right to be a South African in a unified South Africa, I would argue, is the cornerstone of the Charterist quest for a just society.

An attendant problem springs from the complexity of binding together the constituent parts destined to comprise South Africa. Should the TVBC areas be compelled to abandon their dubious sovereignty? On what grounds? That the majority of their residents never wanted to secede in the first place? Or should reincorporation be decided by referendum in the TVBC, as Brigadier-General Holomisa has recently suggested in Transkei's case? Even so, do not South Africans in general have some stake in calls for secession? Yes? Well then, what about the entire South African citizenry settling such crucial matters by democratic means? These questions are not easily resolved. Nonetheless, they cannot simply be evaded if concerted attempts are going to be made to spell out the Charterist position on rights to citizenship.

Just as all South Africans should be assured equal rights to citizenship, they should also be granted equal rights of

citizenship. In my estimation, only these principles expressed thus square with the ethos of the Freedom Charter. Equal rights of citizenship are indispensable, since they enshrine a commitment to basic equality. All South African citizens, as human beings, are entitled to be treated as equals, with identical rights, opportunities and obligations. Such is basic equality. Precisely this understanding of basic equality is the prime conviction behind the Freedom Charter. For a just South Africa to be feasible, there must be basic equality.

Furthermore, basic equality is protected by applied modes of equality; yet the latter rests on the prior existence of the former. In sum, a democratic society is called for. Without basic equality, democracy is impossible. Without democratic practices permeating society, basic equality cannot be guaranteed. Discerning why such links hold impels us to winkle out the meaning attached here to democracy. In other words, we have to trace the Charterist image of democracy.

Charterist democracy in South Africa is driven by a participatory ethic: 'the People shall Govern'. The image is of direct democracy. This is where the **demos**, all citizens, govern collectively, debating, reaching joint decisions, and subsequently implementing them as a single body. The citizenry behaves as a sovereign entity, with each and every member granted identical rights, and no-one alienating any of his or her public powers. All participate as absolute equals, enjoying exactly the same basic equalities and also exercising uniform applied equalities.

The image of direct democracy, pristine and appealing, impeccably just, can never be brought fully into focus in societies nowadays. The size factor is the primary obstacle. Can you imagine every South African adult gathered together to deliberate on affairs of state? And, moreover, performing as a single governmental unit too? It's inconceivable.

### APPROXIMATION

Recognising this, an approximation of direct democracy is the best societies can realistically expect. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of democracies have plumped for indirect mechanisms of representation and control. This, too, is what emerges from the Charterist camp. With indirect democracy, the citizenry is subdivided into the rulers and the ruled. The challenge for the Charterists is how to retain the vitality of the participatory ethic under these conditions. Consider the amplified version of the slogan cited a while ago: 'One People, One Country, One Person, One Vote'.

The demand for political equality is quite apparent. Still, ambiguity remains. Can we dispel it? Let's see.

'One Person, One Vote' carries two implications. First, the **demos** should be as inclusive as possible. Every South African citizen, barring at most minors and the mentally incapacitated, should have an identical right to participate fully in the political process. Secondly, in determining who governs, each person's opinion conveyed formally through the electoral process should count no differently to any other's. That is to say, there must be equivalence in voting arrangements. Following this, a third implication may well follow too. For strict political equality to be observed, the choice of **government** should be calculated by calculating the final outcome in



such a way that each and every vote is weighted exactly the same. Schemes, for instance, aimed at guaranteeing representation for minorities (however depicted) in government would fall foul of this requirement, thereby eroding absolute political equality. Again, the political ramifications emerging from ruthlessly logical deduction warrant careful study.

Political equality enacted by participatory means is a highly important form of applied political equality. In so participating, individuals are availing themselves of significant rights of citizenship. Yet democracy in the Charterist image entails rather more than merely assisting periodically in selecting the government of the day; and even goes beyond the act of standing personally for political office. A democratically elected government, both representative and responsible, is a necessary condition for a democratic society. But not a sufficient condition. Without political equality, central to applied equality recall, there cannot be full democracy, that is, democratic society *per se*. And in the absence of democratic society, basic equality will not prevail. And without basic equality, a truly just South Africa cannot be realised. What price, then, political equality? If set up, will the democratic political system envisaged by the Charterists, operate in a manner conducive to promoting political equality? In the end, under democratic rule, can citizens participate in the political process on equal terms? To me, herein lies the rub. This is the ultimate test of how worthy the Charterist image of a just South Africa actually is. When examined closely, I feel the image lacks lustre, although not for factors peculiar to South Africa, but factors, nonetheless, which cannot be wished away.

'Why does democratic governance militate against political equality?' you enquire sceptically. Putting words in the Charterist mouth, the reply would be that citizens can only participate effectively as political equals provided their rights of citizenship are buttressed by equally distributed opportunities, endowments and resources. Disparities in knowledge, expertise, wealth and time available foster political inequality. Members of society concerned to preserve democracy could act collectively to regulate these sources of inequality, thus limiting their damage in the political arena. Some may regard this as a pious hope, since the record among democracies worldwide reveals that the prospects for success in managing such a daunting task are unremittingly bleak.

There is an added intractable hindrance to political equality compounding the divergency just noted. The very processes of democratic governance in contemporary society are inimical to political equality. This transpires irrespective of how benign a particular government happens to be. Various causes can be adduced. In general, they can be traced back to the sheer scale and complexity of state business. Political rulers may act responsibly; leaders may be fully and willingly accountable; administrations may conduct affairs openly; yet still, despite strenuous efforts on their part – although this seldom occurs – citizens will be somewhat estranged from affairs of state, and somewhat politically disadvantaged when compared to those whose job is statecraft.

In democracies, political power which one presumes is vested in legislative assemblies populated by citizens' representatives has devolved to the executive – the

government, properly speaking. The trend, dictated mainly by the ever burgeoning stringent demands of economic and foreign policy, apart from kindred welfare services, is universal among the democratic states of the northern hemisphere. It is readily detectable, too, in the ranks of advanced Third World states predisposed towards democracy; and South Africa should count among them, a good Charterist would urge. Whether one favours a minimalist or a maximalist state is immaterial here, for the odds are that whatever the ideological disposition of an incumbent regime, wealth, stability and well-being cannot be procured without extracting a price. The trade-off is a large and complex state apparatus that will invariably, and often unconsciously, hamper society in achieving political equality among the citizenry.

I have hinted at an overall conclusion to a very broad argument. My inference from this line of reasoning, which needs embellishing at length, I am the first to concede, is that the Charterist image of democracy will turn out in reality to be a highly distorted extrapolation of the principles encapsulated in the Charter itself. If one accepts as much, where do Charterists go hereafter? Is there any escaping the supposed vicious circle of political inequality eroding the chances of democracy, and democratic governmental practices militating against political equality among citizens. Several remedies can be devised, though they cannot break the circle once and for all. Their effect is largely palliative, but valuable nonetheless.

Five central remedies, in fact. I shall deal with them cursorily. **To begin with**, citizens could agree democratically to tackle the underlying causes of significant political inequality within the citizenry. The distribution of wealth, for instance, one such commonly regarded cause, could thenceforth be regulated appropriately. This solution would have to be applied to persons and organisations alike. Two provisos, though. Whatever goal is promulgated will surely be realised imperfectly, as I mentioned above. And whilst engineering patterns of wealth might eventually enhance the chances of political equality, it may reverse, say, optimal strategies for economic development. One must be aware, however, of how perilous an undertaking it is to evaluate comparative costs and benefits.

A **second** remedy would be to enhance political skills and knowledge in society to the potential equal advantage of all members. Two routes. The first option in this context would be to offer civic instruction at secondary school. Pupils could learn about the principles and practices of politics. Every pupil is a citizen in the making; surely, therefore, it is absurd not to encounter when growing up some formal instruction devised to inculcate civic rights and responsibilities. Instant enlightenment on an eighteenth birthday is a perverse substitute. The second route lies in vigorous instruments of public communication. Newspapers, radio, television – citizens' windows on the world. They are indispensable to democracy. Education, then, nurtures and bolsters political equality.

The **third** remedy, I suggest, comes from the shape of government itself. Regional and local governmental channels broaden the scope for participation, hence helping to equalise political opportunities. Once again, this is a large topic, deserving detailed scrutiny, much

more than is customarily given. Let me note in passing that the lesser organs of government are no panacea for shortcomings at the national level. First of all, there is a threshold below which subordinate layers of government fail to perform satisfactorily. A strong central government, which is what a democratic advanced Third World state inevitably relies on, normally undermines the functional powers of regional and local levels of administration, subsequently leading to these organs losing credibility among the intended beneficiaries, the community. In contrast, powerful regional governments – when they occur – tend to undercut authority wielded at the centre, with dangerous consequences, often precipitating disunity, civil strife and irregular economic development. Moreover, even where subordinate governments are moderately successful, their political executive structures dominate proceedings at the expense of the ordinary citizen, thus replicating the tendencies we saw entrenched in modes of national governance.

Coming to the **fourth** remedy: public forums beyond government, or so-called citizens' councils, could assist individuals by offering them additional opportunities to deliberate as citizens. The whole spectre of adult education hoves into view, and correctly at that. People may not turn out for such occasions in droves, but society should at least strive to utilise informal methods of civic education and participation. It's another weapon in the cause of political equality – and democracy.

**Finally**, the democratic ethos in society could extend beyond government at a stroke were participatory means instilled at the workplace. Yet a further massive topic, I know – where zealotry abounds. Workers' management or workers control is a marginal phenomenon in industrialised society, so one should be cautious about its feasibility on the South African scene. In theory, democratic practices pursued in the firm should dampen political inequality at large. There is inadequate evidence, however, either to substantiate or, indeed, to refute this indecently bald assertion. At issue, moreover, would be some evaluation of the consequent disadvantages. Would economic democracy impair business activities? And to what extent? An acceptable compromise or not?

Just as one can allude to features discernible in political life which come dangerously close to nullifying the prospects for political equality, thereby rendering democratic society less likely, so a host of remedies can be deployed as plausible counterfactuals. There are limits either way, I would argue; and it is crucial to map these out before thrusting a scheme for democratic government on society.

The Charterist image is morally compelling, no more so than in the fundamental tenet of basic equality. Yet it suffers from deficiencies, since at root its principles are not wholly consistent, and, more especially, precisely because the image is nothing more than that and bears disconcertingly little relation to how democracy really is practised in contemporary times. Consequently, the tension between the key factors, namely, basic equality, applied equality, political equality and democracy is palpable, as I have attempted to depict schematically.

What is to be done? Three alternatives suggest themselves should the Charterist image of democracy be projected further. And it should be to enable a transparent picture to be composed. The point is that most citizens merely want to know whether a form of political rule will work properly in prevailing circumstances. This is **the** compelling test. Fair enough. Proceeding in such a spirit, one alternative would be to formulate democratic practices faithfully redolent of the principles espoused in The Freedom Charter and the like. For reasons that should by now be patently evident. I believe such a simplistic attempt would result in unmitigated failure. A second alternative would be to fiddle with the principles themselves, so attuning principle and common practice. I suspect this option will prove remarkably seductive, at any rate to those who never have been enamoured with the Charterist position. Consociationalism, for instance, much touted several years back, would be just one outcome from this mode of reasoning. There is a third and intriguing possibility which has eluded proper attention. To grasp it, considerable intellectual dexterity has to be developed. Here, one adheres to the fundamental integrity of Charterist principles – basic equality is **sine qua non**. By articulating the Charterist principles in all their confused glory one then progresses experimentally in order to discover whether they can actually blend tolerably well with democratic patterns of governance that would most likely pertain in South Africa. These patterns can be uncovered by comparative analysis from the experience of societies worldwide. Approximations in principle would have to be brought in line simultaneously with approximations in practice, by affecting whatever adjustments are required on either side.

## EVALUATE

My belief is that the jury is still out on the question as to whether the Charterist interpretation of democracy holds out the best prospective hope for a just South Africa. It behoves us to evaluate it with all the rigour we can muster. And that goes for every other interpretation too. An isolated hunt at an illustration will disclose the enormity of the current void. Blithely we assume that the Westminster model of political rule will be highly inappropriate in South Africa. Yet it's taken as axiomatic. I defy you to unearth a decent argument resolutely exposing its deficiencies. Likewise, the case supporting it as just as flimsy. One could go on and on.

For all our constitution-mongering hereabouts, we South Africans are in truth far from being fully apprised of the distinct options before us when it comes to canvassing the likelihood of democracy in our midst. The great hope is that awareness of this has suddenly dawned. With the ideological blinkers loosened all round, these are stimulating days. Furthermore, debate alone helps nurture a democratic culture. Nevertheless, neither freedom nor democracy are by any means assured. Coming to terms with the bounds of possibility in our society is a major step forward, if we can achieve as much. In this light, Charterists have mounds of spadework to get through before bringing their image of a just South Africa to light, let alone life. And that goes for every other South African too. There is no easy walk to democracy, particularly when authoritarianism still abounds. □



**NOTE**

An earlier version of this piece, then entitled 'The Charterist Image of Democracy in the South African Context, was presented at the International Conference on Democracy in Post-Apartheid South Africa hosted by the University of Transkei at the beginning of September,

1990. I am grateful to Dr James Chipasula and his colleagues for inviting me to contribute, as well as to the universities of Transkei and Natal for ensuring my participation. Not least, I owe a great deal to all who made the entire venture so extraordinarily stimulating. Naturally, though, the perversities of my particular argument are mine alone.



*The Freedom Charter is proclaimed at the funeral of victims of the Uitenhage massacre, March 1985.*

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