

THE TALKS THAT DESCEND INTO HELL

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The Negotiating Strategy

IT IS now three years since talks between the government of Mr de Klerk and the ANC/SACP leaders commenced officially. When they actually started has not been disclosed. Even before 2 February 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released from jail, there were reports of his meeting with President P W Botha. There were also reports of meetings in central and west Africa between representatives of the mines, big business, political parties and government agents, with the ANC leaders and anti-apartheid activists in exile.

It was also obvious, in the late 1980s, that Moscow and Washington were putting pressure on de Klerk and the ANC leadership to negotiate. Talks, or talks about talks, have therefore been around for many years now, filling people with expectations of great changes to come. Yet the continued talks, some public, most concealed, have not opened up new hope for the vast majority of South Africans. They are not a promise to a new future, but a means by which the hopes of millions are being frustrated.

Is it necessary to print a balance sheet for these three or more years? The government, directly, or through security apparatus it inherited, has assassinated leading members of the people's organisations; has overseen the death of countless activists in the hands of the police; has seemingly connived at the massacres at Boipatong and elsewhere; has done nothing to apprehend the murderers on the trains; has indemnified ruthless killers; and has watched silently as members of the extreme right-wing speak of murderous action against members of the ANC and SACP, as well as other organisations.

It is not possible to get an accurate picture of the crime rate in the country. Men and women are murdered, women are raped, and the number of muggings and crimes of violence are beyond count.

This violence against people is only one side of the balance sheet. There has been no improvement in the education of most of the population, the health service has worsened, housing continues in an appalling state with millions homeless or living in squatter camps. Every township home is vulnerable while wealthy whites live behind stockaded security walls in their selected suburbs. At the same time millions are unemployed, children have been reduced to beggary and prostitution, and the number left destitute and starving on the land is vast.

Of course the economy is in a mess, the official figure for inflation is 10 per cent or more (for the white consumers) but nearer 15 per cent for the black

population, the tax level has risen considerably since the imposition of Value Added Tax (VAT) on almost every product, firms have been going bankrupt, leading to dismissals of workers and the closing of subsidiary workshops, and all the time the level of corruption, theft and fraud among state servants and the upper-class, has mushroomed.

Behind this sits Mr de Klerk, his cabinet ministers and their secretaries. While the society falls apart they sit tight. Nobody ever resigns, nobody seems to care, nobody ever expresses regret. They use the talks as a shield to cover their activities and inactivities.

What then of those who are clamouring at the talks for their share of the scam? In speaking generally I do not wish to imply that everybody has been guilty of such misdeeds - but I am surprised by the failure of leading persons to stand up and denounce a situation of which they are fully aware.

The ANC has already squandered millions of pounds donated by western governments, the Soweto Congress Youth League lost half a million Rand through misappropriation, Winnie Mandela is said to have handed over thousands of Rand to her lover in the Department of Social Security, and being even-handed, has run up a vast debt on her phone bill, which Nelson Mandela has been forced to repudiate. There are apparently vast areas of land in Botswana, once bought by the ANC with money donated by foreign governments, but registered in private names. These farmlands have not been retrieved. To whom then does the land (and the money for the land) belong? The ANC has lost one (or is it two?) printing presses which it once owned in Europe, but which have just disappeared. Now, after raising millions of dollars (some through the begging bowl of Mr Mandela) across five continents, the ANC is short of money. Yet there are press reports of money being paid to hit-men and other disreputable persons, by ANC officials who wanted awkward persons removed. Despite the revelations in the press there has been little or no attempt to prosecute such people.

So, the ANC is short of money again. That is why 900 anti-apartheid activists have recently been summoned to a giant jamboree in South Africa, to press for further donations of \$43m from overseas sources, to cover the expenses of the forthcoming elections.

At the same time officials of the ANC have done well for themselves. Tambo and Mandela (and how many others?) live in sumptuous mansions, others take rooms in five star hotels. The number of BMW cars at the disposal of these men defies the counting frame. There has been no published account of their living expenses or of the savings they have been able to put aside. They know no shame at the money they squander while the people they are said to represent live in shacks and subsist on tiny handouts.

We can only guess that this must be one of the factors that attracted the (Coloured) Labour Party to switch its allegiance from The National Party to the ANC, and that will attract some of the others who were happy to support the government when there seemed to be no possibility of change.

If there are no such pay-offs for the smaller organizations it is only because the ANC cornered the market. The PAC, Azapo, Unity Movement and other small organizations have not been able to secure the money they would like because foreign powers see little profit from the groups they regard as have-beens. The corruption in some of these groups is small-scale, precisely because the pork-barrel is too small, but the scam that does exist enriches the few who know where to put their hands. That is one of the factors, no doubt, that determines their decisions to participate in these talks. The exceptions are those who gained their position by playing the Homelands game. They have state coffers, with big contributions for the South African government, or in some cases from casinos and prostitution that was not allowed to flourish in the area that is called South Africa. And they also have the trappings of power: armed forces, police, a bureaucracy, a 'state' university and patronage. The sums of money that have disappeared into the pockets of some officials, the extent of fraudulent dealing, and the sums paid out to sympathetic whites who assisted them, is vast. But the total sum is concealed, no doubt, in creative accounting: in other words, through fraud.

Do I have to continue. Must I talk of the failure of the ANC and other movements to build branches, or of the indiscipline of members who act as hoodlums in the name of the organizations to which they belong? Must we mention the armed clashes and ambushes in which people are murdered because of their ethnicity or membership of rival organizations? Is it necessary to talk of taxi owners who hire (or organize) thugs to shoot up their rivals? Must it be said once again that the carrying of so-called 'traditional weapons' is a recipe for murder? And must we all ask: How long must the people endure the war-cries of Inkatha, of the Homeland's bosses, or of the Natal regional ANC, or of the shoot-by-night Apla warriors (PAC 'army')?

In the last three years, since the ban on organizations was lifted the extent of movement building has been pathetic. This is not a new phenomena. There was precious little attempt at building branches of the ANC or PAC before the ban on these organizations in 1960. The movements at that time depended on their ability to call out support for rallies, demonstrations or stay at homes. Sometimes the rally-call worked, at other times there were awful flops. We are now back at square-one, except that the ANC does command support from the main trade union federation. Consequently, the organised workers are used as the battering ram to advance ANC fortunes. When VAT was imposed, even on basic foods, in 1991, the ANC called for a mass stay-at-home. The trade union movement Cosatu obligingly called on its members to stop work, and the ANC could shout victory. With a hollow voice the Cosatu officials also yelled victory. They all raised their hands in clenched salute, repeated the slogans of the day and . . . they all went back to work again. It is true that a few of the items on which VAT was levied have been taken off the list, but there is no doubt that the people are worse off now, precisely because the severest price rises are on the staple products that everybody must buy. Ultimately the episode turned out to be, as in so many

other cases, only a means to strengthen the ANC at the negotiating table. Except for such stunts (and if we want to be honest we must label them as stunts), the trade union movement is kept on the back burner. The unions are only to appear when Mandela (or Ramaphosa) calls them, they are to take no formal part in the talks, they are not to mobilize their members, and they are to remain passive during these months of talks. I will return to this below.

Where Does the Struggle Lie?

All parties to the talks have naturally endeavoured to place their own demands at the head of the agenda. The ANC called, at least originally, for a one-person, one-vote assembly, in a unitary state, with some radical economic changes. On the other hand Buthelezi's demand has been for a federal state, with Natal falling under his control. Mr de Klerk's position has been clear from the outset. He wants to secure at least partial control of government in order to preserve as many of the privileges as possible for the white population. But above all he is intent on maintaining the capitalist system through the so-called 'free market'. To make his point clear, de Klerk called a whites-only referendum to secure a mandate for himself and the National Party. Central to his appeal was the preservation of white privileges and the retention of the capitalist system. Among those who urged the whites to vote 'Yes' were the ANC leaders. Their white followers were among the most enthusiastic persons who went to the polls. Mr de Klerk got the majority vote he wanted.

This was the final abdication of the ANC/SACP on the economic front. When the vote is extended to all and there are free elections, whatever the result and whoever leads the government, the economic framework under which the new government will operate will be that which is determined by de Klerk's cronies, in association with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. That is, the country will be controlled by the same mechanisms as determine the fate of all debt-ridden capitalist states.

The consequence of this for the majority of the population is disastrous. There can be no radical changes in the country's institutions, in the pattern of land holding, in the facilities offered for health and education, or in housing. Despite the plans that are being discussed for housing, education, health, or in economic Forums, there will be little or no money to alter the framework of the society. Only in some areas will blacks be able to enter the current white schools or be tended in current white hospitals, provided that they can pay for such services. This is a charter for the emerging black middle class and the political cabal. In fact the 'new South Africa' will be run by the existing civil service, controlled by the existing police force and army.

That is looking at an optimistic scenario. The police force and the army will undoubtedly recruit former members of Umkhonto we Sizwe, Inkatha, and other private 'armies'. This will not make such bodies more friendly to

those who seek more radical change, or to the majority of the population. Their role, as elsewhere in Africa, will be to ensure the continuation of the existing regime, with more authority than the present armed forces.

What Went Wrong?

It is not possible to understand what is happening if it is not realized that talks began only after the decisive defeat of the popular upheavels of 1984–86. Although the National Party regime had to move out of Namibia and Angola, and needed to respond to pressures exerted by foreign powers, the townships of South Africa had been subdued. Far from making these areas ‘ungovernable’, the urban regions were occupied by troops and the rural areas were subdued. The delegates from government and opposition sat down together, but Mr de Klerk and his supporters were more equal than the leaders of the ANC/SACP. That was why, initially men like Beyers Naude were brought in to the talks – apparently to add weight to the opposition groupings.

At first there was bluster from the ANC leaders about their demands. There would be ‘nationalisation’, there would be a unitary state, the schools would be integrated, and so on. One by one these demands were whittled away and the ANC sounded increasingly like the National Party. Then, to break the deadlock, Joe Slovo, one-time Communist supremo, spoke of the ‘Sunset Scenario’. There would be power sharing for five years. The ANC/SACP would participate in a government which had representatives of the National Party and any other group that could win representation in the new assembly. There were protests. Leading figures disagreed with this plan, but after all the smoke had cleared away, almost everyone on the opposition side accepted this arrangement. When the new talks started at the beginning of April, 26 parties met together with only the tiny left wing groups standing aloof.

Let the reader note. There were no elections to seat delegates at the talks. There were no consultations. This was not to be a Constituent Assembly, but a public forum at which ideas would be debated. Ultimately the Leaders (with a capital L) would gather together to put their seal on the deliberations. Only then would an assembly be called, apparently to rubber-stamp the proceedings.

That is how the public has been allowed to see the arrangement. What is seldom mentioned is the complete hold up on any changes that might be meaningful for the vast majority of the people. For this it is necessary to read the internal documents of the ANC and the SACP. Not the hand-outs for the press, but those pieces of paper that lay down the policy of the ANC/SACP. These are obviously concealed and generally unavailable. However when such documents do emerge they reveal the reason for the static position.

In the document entitled ‘Local Government in South Africa’¹, the ANC Department of Local and Regional Government consider the lifting of apart-

heid regulations as they concern people in the townships. There is no easy solution to the problems involved in housing and in improving the lot of the urban population. Most recent attempts at securing change have failed. Therefore the body concludes that these negotiations must cease. 'Local apartheid was nationally imposed – it must be nationally removed'. The instruction is clear: local branches of the ANC are not to engage in talks with local government on conditions in the townships. In issuing these instructions the ANC removed the initiative from township residents, leaving matters in abeyance while talks foundered at the national level. Besides the fact that conditions in most townships have deteriorated over the years, this policy either immobilized local branches or removed one of the bases for building a strong local leadership.

This policy directive to local leaders can be understood at one level. The negotiations (if they are real) must concentrate on national issues, and they must take priority over local talks. The policy would be even more real if it was decided that the townships are an abomination and must be eradicated. However, these slum areas will not be removed overnight (particularly if market forces are to operate), and there must be massive house building and improvement of facilities. The one method of civic mobilization in which local political activists could have participated, and which could have led to some amelioration, would have been campaigning over rents, housing, electrification, road building, schooling and so on. This was not undertaken. It has even been vetoed by the top brass. This has left the urban population without local objectives, except for the most obvious: the formation of gangs, the trafficking in drugs, the meaningless violence that dominates these areas of deprivation.

The entire programme upon which the ANC/SACP has based itself has been false and for this, the people are suffering. Enough is enough. The people need new directions and it is time that the trade unions and community organisations began to represent the interests of their members independently of the ANC or the SACP, and it is the duty of socialists to assist them in this work.

There is a severe crisis of moral authority in South Africa that is not very different from that in large parts of eastern Europe and many of the former colonial territories. In these difficult and dangerous times, when the freedom to discuss and act is in danger, it is essential that socialists find common ground in providing a firm, courageous, just and vigorous leadership. If they should fail they will open the door to the extreme right and their military allies. There is little time left and silence or procrastination is unacceptable.

Note

1. This document, circulated under the general heading 'Proposals for the Transition', was produced by the ANC Department of Local and Regional Government in May 1992. To the best of our knowledge this has remained ANC policy.