

Nat reaction that spells conflict

IF the Sasol sabotage attacks were a serious sign of the times, then the Nationalist reaction to them is hardly less serious. Because that, too, indicates that we are entering a time of intensifying conflict.

The line taken by those Nationalists who generally reflect the Prime Minister's views is that a society which allows discrimination is asking for trouble. Therefore those people who can be won over to the Government's new constitutional dispensation must be persuaded to co-operate at all costs. But those who refuse to be persuaded must be crushed.

In other words, despite the lessons of Soweto 76 and all the tribulations of recent weeks, even the most verligte Nationalists continue to seek solutions to our problems from purely their own perspective. They seem unable to appreciate that black, coloured and Indian leaders with popular support will refuse to co-operate in the new constitution because it is merely a refinement of apartheid

which still denies them access to meaningful decision-making.

The only way a meaningful dialogue can be achieved is if the Government concedes that apartheid must be abandoned and agrees to negotiate a new deal with recognised black leaders; but it is unlikely to do that because then it would lose power. With its present approach the Government will obviously be able to secure the co-operation of certain people, but because they are likely to have only minority support it will be forced to resort increasingly to repressive means to contain majority demands.

Yet the more it does so, the more militant the majority will become. It is a scenario very much like the one we all saw unfold in Zimbabwe, where the rulers negotiated with the ruled only when they had no other alternative left after a long and bloody war — and then found they had to negotiate with the extremists from a position of weakness.

A costly spiral

THE much vaunted Browne Committee has turned out to be just another Government commission — much nothing about a big ado.

It set out to tackle one of South Africa's pressing problems, finding new ways to help major local authorities break out of a spiral of rising costs which has been preventing essential development for a decade. But its recommendations hardly make a start.

True, the Browne report points out that many local authorities waste money and that better overall planning can be achieved by drawing them into the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council. But the real issues which bring waste are not dealt with: like the duplication of services which the plural (or quadruple) South African system demands.

Instead of easing ratepayers' burdens by spreading the load carried by those people in the metropolitan areas who have financed

regional and national capital expenditure programmes, the committee has asked that these municipalities now also help finance adjacent Indian and coloured townships. Whites, too, are being asked to help inject millions into Soweto.

It is common cause that the committee, headed by the former Secretary for Finance, Mr Gerald Browne, had all the necessary expertise to advocate a bold programme for fiscal change. So what went wrong? In the end, the political system just did not allow normal disciplines to be applied. The way to make Soweto viable is to allow it to gather revenue through central business districts, industrial development programmes and full freehold rights — not through the pockets of national taxpayers.

The Browne Committee has achieved very little — and once again emphasised that South Africa simply cannot afford apartheid.

Freedom fights back

THE courts giveth and the Government taketh away. That is the story of the ding-dong battle for Press freedom in South Africa. It seems that whenever the Government is launching one of its periodic assaults on Press freedom, the newspapers are able to strike back with a victory for their cause in the courts.

It happened throughout the Information scandal. Now it has happened again. With the Police Amendment Bill looming over us, this newspaper has just won an important appeal in a test case. The judgment stipulates that there is no such thing as a *sub judice* rule as far as commissions of inquiry are concerned, and that even in court cases it is narrower than most people imagine. The basic principle, now more clearly enshrined in case law, is that public discussion of matters of public interest should not be stopped.

Overall, of course, the Press and the public are on the losing end of this ding-dong battle. But it is some small comfort to know that freedom is not going down without its moments of triumph.