

ARTICLE FOR SOUTH - F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

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Political language used by the ruling establishment in South Africa suffers from a bad dose of verbal inflation. Words that are understood in a normal sense undergo a devaluation of meaning and very often people using the same words are talking in different languages even though they are speaking English. If one does not understand the code implicit in concepts such as : "broadening democracy", "negotiation", "consensus", "reform" etc., political reality in South Africa makes absolutely no sense at all.

"Broadening democracy" means the government identifies racial and ethnic groups, compels each individual to belong to one of them for political purposes and draws them into common political structures on the government's own terms. The more groups there are who become co-opted in this way, the "broader" democracy becomes. The 1983 Constitution "broadened in" some Coloured and Asian groups and now the hunt is on to find a constitutional instrument which can "broaden in" some black groups. The National Statutory Council is being polished and shined as a "broadening" instrument. Oh yes, within these compulsory groups individuals can exercise a vote if they wish to. It's not vital for the "broadening" process though.

"Negotiation" means that people within these government defined groups come and consult with the government on how they should fit into the "broadening process" on the road to "democracy". If some are willing to do so and accept the terms, they become "responsible leaders". If not, a whole range of pejorative labels can be attached to them : "radicals, activists, subversives, militants", etc.

"Consensus means that after responsible leaders have "negotiated" with the government on how they should be "broadened into democracy", everyone agrees with the government's point of view on the matter. Those who do not, simply do not wish to enter into "negotiations" with a view of "broadening democracy" in a "spirit of consensus."

"Reform" means getting rid of, and creating conditions, which could harm or help the "broadening of democracy" without threatening the government's position of overall control. The government has twigged to the fact that old style apartheid is not really necessary for overall control and that a good deal of reform is possible without it being

threatened. In fact, the government is convinced that if a sufficient degree of socio-economic reform is brought about enough "groups" could be induced to assist in "broadening democracy" so that the whole system can work.

It should be obvious that words like "democracy, negotiation, consensus, reform" are being used in this way to make the politics of co-option appear more attractive and credible than it actually is. Because this is what South Africa is going to experience with a vengeance from now on. The ruling establishment has decided that South Africa's conflicts can only be solved co-optimely and not democratically. But it needs and uses the rhetoric of democracy to give legitimacy to co-option.

Co-optimely politics will concentrate very strongly on two areas : security and constitutional change. In each one of them the government has already set up huge bureaucratic networks that reach into the most private aspects of our daily lives. The National Security Management System looks after security and this bureaucracy dovetails with the government's attempts at constitutional change which they hope will result in a huge multi-racial autocracy under government control and guidance.

Security and constitutional change are crucial ingredients of the government's "total strategy" to cope with the "total onslaught". Both of them define the extent to which the ruling establishment is prepared to "de-regulate" or "privatize" the economy and allow freedom of association in the social sphere. Any person, movement or organisation which is not prepared to co-operate with the government's action on security and constitutional development is automatically defined as part of the "total onslaught" whether they know it or not. If they are prepared to co-operate they automatically become part of the "total strategy" whether they know it or not.

The recent election has added another concept to the inflated lexicon of co-optimely politics : "extra-Parliamentary action". Normally, this means the lobbying and actions of special interest groups and voluntary associations which do not directly belong to Parliament, but wish to use their influence to bring pressure to bear on political decisions, e.g. labour, church, business, farmers, teachers etc. etc., even the Breoderbond. Again, normally speaking, no Parliamentary democracy can function properly without the involvement of extra-Parliamentary politics. But in South Africa, the "broadening of democracy" cannot make provision for extra-Parliamentary action. Why? Because it falls outside

the scope of co-optive design in the areas of security and constitutional change. Extra-Parliamentary therefore means : "sinister, unconventional, strange, radical, even unconstitutional, possibly subversive and probably revolutionary".

By coming down on "extra-Parliamentary actions" the ruling establishment is determined to criminalize all dissent outside its process of "broadening democracy." This may all sound silly, even funny. Believe me, it is not. Those who really cherish democratic ideals should take the politics of co-option deadly seriously. They should understand its dynamics and explore its contradictions. For, at its heart, no matter how subtly disguised with verbal inflation, lies totalitarianism. It is one of the many ironies of our blighted land that those who rule wish to save us from the totalitarianism of the left by imposing on us totalitarianism from the right. For most of us folks the difference is academic. We get "donnered" either way.