

Bob

430.E2.2.7

A few words from  
U.2.

NO 14

ARGUS GROUP - 7 NOVEMBER 1986  
DR F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

Recently at a conference on South Africa in Bonn, West Germany, I experienced one of those moments when I think I understand what people mean when they say they are proud to come from their country. We had been talking for two days on what was happening, where we were going and what could be done in South Africa. Gathered together were academics, trade unionists, diplomats and politicians from inside and outside our country. As the conference drew to a close, the mood amongst the foreigners became progressively sombre and depressed. They had talked themselves into inconclusive circles about what "they" could do to "solve" our problems.

A young white South African, father of two small children and himself an active trade unionist, eventually intervened in the discussion and said with a certain measure of impatience.

"I cannot understand why you are all so depressed. Surely you people outside did not seriously believe you could change our country for us. We are going to change it ourselves. If you want to help us, you must begin to understand the dynamics of South Africa, then you can support positive forces for change. Otherwise you will simply be a nuisance. Of course our change is going to be difficult; of course terrible things are happening now. People in the UK where I have been working for the last four weeks asked me : How can you think of bringing up children in a country like that ? And I said to them "Don't be bloody ridiculous ! I would rather let them suffer the painful birth of a new society than linger on in the decay of a dying one. I can't wait to get back to South Africa, not only because I long to see my children, but because it is exciting to be part of the birth of a new country."

Pain usually accompanies birth or death. The pain of birth is comforted by the promise of the future, death's pain is so often made senseless by the absence of the future. Does the pain of the present cause us anxiety because the old South Africa is dying or excitement because a new one is being born? This young father made me realise that it is the manner in which we answer this question which makes us feel useful or useless in coming to grips with the changes taking place in our country at the moment.

Expectation about the future is a very important factor in deciding how we behave in the present. I know it is not correct to think like that, but when one walks around in an old German village, or Montmartre in Paris one somehow feels as if "things" can go on like this forever. The future seems certain, stable, predictable. Every year will have its rituals at Christmas, Easter, autumn and spring and cathedral bells will ring as they have rung for centuries. The major preoccupation of the individual is not to make such a mess of the present that he/she cannot enjoy the certainty of the future. Of course, when one walks around there, it is easy to forget the war of forty years ago and the "nuclear crises" seems chicken feed compared to what is going on back home.

What is going on "back home?" For some the future is a black void which robs the present of all meaning. That is because they expect lift clubs, bridge parties, school re-unions and league fixtures to go on year after year and they sense it is not on. They are depressed by the decay of a dying old South Africa. Life is robbed of its predictability. But in Bonn, this young father was saying to all of us that because the certainty and stability of Apartheid South Africa was dying, we were going through the birth of a new country and very few things can be more absorbing and exciting than that. The future becomes an unexplored frontier and he felt it a great challenge to present to his children. For a moment there at that conference in Bonn, it felt good to say that one was going back to South Africa.