

No 4

BUSINESS DAY - 15/8/86

DR F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

Talking to a visiting Harvard Professor in International Relations the other day who was here on one of his periodic visits, I asked him the inevitable : "What had changed since last time you were here."

He said instantly : "The level and extent of politicization." What this is supposed to mean in ordinary language is that (a) more people are much more aware of political issues, and that (b) many more issues of everyday life have become involved in politics. As the Professor said : "Whether one goes to school or church becomes a political issue; whether you participate in local community structures, go to work or stay away becomes a political issue." I suppose, if one tries to understand what has happened over the last three years it is that many people have been "mobilized" (another word for motivated) to question the right of Government to control their lives without their consent. At the same time, Government tries to carry on governing by administering townships, providing education, repressing dissent etc. People have increasingly begun to question the right of Government to control their lives in this way and Government has responded to this questioning by attempting to exert more control. And so things have become politicized.

In Black schools People's Education vs D.E.T. Education;
in churches - liberation theology vs conventional theology;
in townships People's Power vs State Power and so on.

If this were not so, how does one explain the FCI Charter which is a document predominant with politics ?

How does one account for the American Chamber of Commerce placing a full page advertisement in a Sunday newspaper condemning apartheid and detentions? Or Mobil company placing a full page ad in a weekly newspaper committing itself to a "non-racial democracy" and the complete eradication of apartheid? If business had nothing to do with politics or vice versa, why is this kind of thing happening?

Furthermore, what implications are there for the conducting and organization of business as a concern in this new politicized climate? "Industrial relations", "marketing", and "personnel management" certainly cannot just carry on as before. In fact, I am quite prepared to take odds that in any firm which has a large black labour force and where the MD is oblivious or indifferent to the degree of politicization that has taken place, his "industrial relations" department will either have a high turnover or high rate of heart attacks or nervous collapses. These people increasingly are going to have to deal with problems from their labour force which fall outside the scope of "normal industrial relations" and are regarded as "political".

I believe the manner in which business is going to respond to this new political climate is going to be crucial for the future of private enterprise in this country.

Already there are extravagant and/or deeply suspicious ideas about capitalism or free enterprise afoot in the townships; there are also justifiable criticisms about its performance in the past. In this new politicized environment business faces an opportunity and a challenge to lay to rest some misconceptions, eradicate past mistakes and strike new alliances for the future. But then it will have to recognize its own degree of politicization and begin to think strategically about the relationship between politics and business.