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ARTICLE FOR JEFF OPLAND - SOUTH AFRICAN FOUNDATION

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What does one make of the State President's guide-lines announced in his speech at the Opening of Parliament, 1985? How does one interpret his offer to Nelson Mandela which was subsequently extended to all other prisoners in the same category, as well as to banned organizations, such as the ANC and PAC. What has the Government got in mind? Are we facing some kind of paradigm shift in the sense that some fundamental assumptions of the old policy of Apartheid or Separate Development are being abandoned and a new set of political assumptions and points of departure are being formulated. It is early days to give any final answers to these questions. However, to make some sense of what has happened, I believe one has to try to understand the nature of the economic and constitutional pressures which are beginning to make themselves felt on the Government.

Economically we are in a difficult situation at the moment - and that is putting it mildly. So difficult in fact, that I believe that Government has to do a fundamental re-assessment of its own fiscal policy, that it has to re-arrange its own set of political priorities to prevent us from wasting money on projects and programmes that have no visible financial or political return. I believe a long, hard look has been forced on Government by expenditure on items such as Homeland Governments, Independent states, influx control, separate amenities, Namibia/South West Africa, etc. etc. Also, there appears to be a new sense of urgency about the need to increase and broaden our productive base. Which simply means that we have to increase the level of skills in the labour market, which means that we have to fundamentally reassess the educational and training facilities at our disposal.

All these economic pressures have a direct bearing on old political assumptions about how to maintain order and stability in South Africa. And when there is a re-arrangement of these fiscal obligations, then inevitably they have to reverberate on the formal constitutional and political sphere.

When we look at the constitutional level, there are clear signs of points of departure which differ from the old shiboleths of Separate Development or Apartheid. Let us go back to the new tri-cameral constitution itself. Apart from its many and obvious shortcomings, the one shift that it does represent is a shift towards co-opting minorities or groups other than White into the power centre. Previously, the policy had always been to co-opt other groups, Black, Coloured and Asian on to structures away from the centre, i.e. Homeland Governments, Coloured Representative Councils, Indian Councils, etc. This time, Indians and Coloureds have been co-opted into the centre, which is a shift away from orthodox Nationalist Party policy. This very shift, however, has highlighted a fundamental flaw and shortcoming of the tricameral constitution, namely that no such co-optive structures existed for Blacks, and immediately brought pressure for some kind of constitutional initiatives for Blacks in this field.

I believe it is against this background that we have to understand the State President's guidelines. The interesting point in those guidelines which indicates a clear shift away from old-style Separate Development or Apartheid orthodoxy as far as Blacks are concerned, are the following :-

The acknowledgement of Blacks outside the Homeland areas "as entities in their own right," whatever this might mean. One thing is clear, it certainly does not mean that they are seen as part of the ethnic or tribal roots of the rural areas. In other words, the old concept of "linkage" is being abandoned.

That is, linking urban Blacks to Homelands Blacks by some kind of ethnic membership.

Secondly, the acknowledgement that some kind of overall constitutional structure had to be created within which all the relevant groups in South Africa could interact with one another. This is a fundamental departure as, up to now the idea always had been that Blacks would be segregated out of a common constitutional set up. There is no clarity as to what the Government might have in mind as far as this overall constitutional structure is concerned, but the mention of it itself is enough indication of a departure from the fundamental principle.

Thirdly, the announcement of an informal forum, open-ended and non-racial on which a wide range of constitutional issues could be negotiated or discussed is a novel concept in Nationalist Party philosophy. Up until now, most of the constitutional issues have been decided unilaterally. This indicates at least a willingness to have more open-ended debate on constitutional possibilities.

Fourthly, the offer to Nelson Mandela and other prisoners of his kind as well as the offer to the ANC to talk, provided violence is rejected, is definitely a new posture, which differs from the old politics of confrontation and holds the promise of a venture into the politics of negotiation.

Whatever else these initiatives might mean, one thing is quite clear, they cannot be interpreted within the framework of old style Nationalist Party policy of Separate Development or Apartheid. They mean something new, and it is this something new which is creating a great deal of interest, ambiguity, confusion and even hope.

I believe that the Nationalist Party is going to find itself more having to discuss issues, like common citizenship, common constitutional structures, problems of discrimination, freedom of movement within the same country, and joint political decision-making between White and Black. It is impossible to not talk about these issues once you have abandoned all the old assumptions of Separate Development that I have mentioned.

A further consequence must inevitably be that the break between the Government and the right-wing has to be final and complete as a result of these new initiatives. More and more the Government is going to have to define and defend a new ideology against old style Nationalist Party orthodoxy which is going to be claimed by the right-wing Parties, such as the Conservatives and the HNP.

A third problem or consequence of these initiatives is going to be to nurture and create a new atmosphere of trust and co-operation with regard to Black political movements and Black political figures. To shift from the old style politics of confrontation to the politics of negotiation is not going to be easy. There is a legacy of suspicion, and mistrust which will have to be overcome. Initially I think many of the advances or many of the overtures are going to be rejected out of hand, and it is going to be up to the Government to demonstrate its bona fides in searching for new answers.

But equally, these new initiatives will be facing Black organizations and movements which have adopted traditional postures of confrontation and rejection, with new challenges and new opportunities. They, too, will have to innovate and try and resist old knee-jerk reactions to Government initiatives.

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Whatever else may be the outcome of all the economic and constitutional pressures, South Africa is definitely moving into a new ball game as far as White/Black co-existence is concerned.

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