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In the last issue of WIP, reviewer Jeremy Cronin slammed Frederik van Zyl Slabbert for displaying 'elite cynicism' and 'dismissing' broader forms of democracy. Here, Slabbert hits back.

Being challenged is part of the pleasure of political writing. So I really do not mind when others point out contradictions, faulty assumptions and, particularly, factual errors in what I write.

In the foreword to my book *The Quest for Democracy* (reviewed by Jeremy Cronin in WIP 84, September 1992) I pointed out that I expected this to be the case, given the circumstances in which the book was written.

However, what I do mind, and mind very much, is to be accused of things I did not write or even imply. Insult is added to injury when a reviewer insists that the central thrust of my analysis is something I did not write or even imply. Jeremy Cronin seems to have honed this polemical technique to a fine art in his review of my book.

Why does Cronin do this? He is an astute and perceptive analyst, so it cannot be a case of simply not understanding what I wrote. He even admits that my analysis is a "generally correct and sober assessment of the actual balance of forces in our country". But then he goes on: "As one proceeds through this book, Slabbert slides from effective sarcasm into elite cynicism." To substantiate this, he claims that:

- I am "dismissive of any broader ambitions of democracy", for instance "of self-empowerment by ordinary people in an ever wider sphere of their daily lives";
- I say "the greatest threat to democracy are the people themselves, they must be kept at arms length from it";
- "the entire thrust of (my) argument is to call for the demobilization of our one (sic)major strength, mass support and to vest a great deal of naïve trust in De Klerk";
- "Slabbert is telling us: De Klerk is a democrat... and I am warning you, you had better believe it because he is not about to meekly hand over power or collapse." (I have never written or uttered this sentence. In any case, it is a contradiction: a good democrat is supposed to hand over power, or is your slip showing, Jeremy?)

All this is of course, pure unadulterated balls! Time and space does not permit me to rewrite *The Quest for Democracy* in WIP to prove this; it is a short booklet. I can only appeal to readers to make up their own minds. (Enough sales talk.) So I ask again, why does Cronin accuse me in this manner?

Is it because he feels a political urge to trash me? To present me as a “dangerous diluter of the struggle”, a “class enemy”, a “useful idiot” for De Klerk? Is it because he wishes to use me to settle internal battles in the Alliance – to get at “the negotiators”, those who say “don’t rock the boat”? For example, Zuma is temporarily shafted, now for Thabo! (The revealing photo of Thabo Mbeki and Tertius Delport with the caption “Elite Convergence” did not go unnoticed. Is the editor in on the deal? In any case, what the hell has the photo got to do with my book?) Or does Cronin wish to promote SACP propaganda about ‘mass mobilization in relation to negotiation’. He is perfectly entitled to do all three in his quest for the perfect ‘revolutionary strategy’, but not at the expense of the integrity of what I have written. I cannot mobilize ‘the revolutionary anger of the masses’ at this intellectual deceit. I can only register my objection to be thus mauled by a party hack.

Talking of elites, elitism, leaders and personality cults; cults and elitism are not to be confused with elites and leaders. I have no problem substituting elites with leaders or representatives in a given context, (and I went to some length to explain the context in my book). The *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* defines “elite” as “the pick of the best troops or class”; “leader” is “a person followed by others”; and “representative” is “a person representing a constituency”.

Cronin is very much part of the elite of the SACP and ANC, which is why I am interested to know what he thinks “the masses” or “the people” think. I sense, however, that if I disagree with what he thinks “the masses” or “the people” think, I automatically become part of some bad, competing “anti-masses” elite. Claptrap! This is a rather arrogant logical error and lies at the very core of the “vanguardism” and “elitism” of communist parties in the former Eastern Europe and USSR. (A comprehensive account of this elitism and its devastating consequences for the social and economic life of “the masses” and “the people” is to be found in Janos Korvai’s *The Socialist System” the Political Economy of Communism.*)

Alex Callinicos, a British Marxist of the “militant, abstentionist-hang-em-and-burn-em” variety, published a series of interviews with South African Marxists and/or communists under the title *Between Apartheid and Capitalism*.

The similarity in ideological thrust, phraseology and rhetoric between Callinicos’ interviews and Korvai’s analyses is more than striking. Cronin is one of those interviewed. He declares a clear preference for a “socialist workers democracy” as opposed to a “democracy depending on parliamentary institutions and a passive, atomized electorate” (p.82). He does not see “multi-partyism as the be-all and end-all of democracy” (p.83), and on being asked whether he is not afraid that, when the SACP piggybacks into power on the ANC, the ANC will dump them, he feels fairly confident.

“All our leading party cadres were full-time ANC people, many of them at very strategic places inside the ANC, like Slovo” he says on p.85, and in any case, “if we do our work properly as a left force, the unions as well as the party, we can assure that the kind of ANC that is built is not one that easily turns and breaks us” (p.90). All of this, no doubt, with the complete and constant approval of all “the masses” who support the SACP, the ANC and COSATU.

It would be facile to present Cronin’s views as an unreflective extension of those of the defunct communist parties in the political graveyards of what was Eastern Europe and the USSR. Both he and Slovo concede the errors of our own SACP’s Stalinist past (though the troops down south are not happy with “Has Socialism Failed”, Joe!), although Cronin waters it down to “mild Stalinism” (like a little bit pregnant?). For Stalinism, read pure elitism and personality cult.

Therefore, I find it a trifle quaint, if not impertinent, that Cronin wishes to paint me as an elitist, given where he and his party come from. Elitism refers to unchallenged claims to leadership by an individual or group. I have not claimed or experienced this on behalf of anybody.

It is nice to know that Jeremy does not wish this to happen on behalf of “the masses” or “the people” – but please, spare and forgive me just a tiny bit of cynicism.