

### **Hey! It's the 27<sup>th</sup> April. So What?**

People who will vote in the next General Election in 2009 were 3 years old when all South Africans could vote in a democratic General Election on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1994 irrespective of race or creed. Eighteen year olds who voted for the first time then, will be 33 years old at the next General Election. It would be an interesting survey to find out what either age cohort thinks about the significance of a non-racial vote and of democratic participation in the politics of our country.

The 27<sup>th</sup> April should be the most symbolically significant and strategically relevant public holiday on our annual calendar of public holidays. It was on that day in 1994 that legalized racial discrimination and oppression was voted out of our public life and policy. It should not only be a day of remembrance and rejoicing but of reflection and debate on the significance of adult suffrage and its role in democratic policy making. One feels a sense of dread that the survey mentioned might reveal a great deal of ignorance, even indifference about the significance of non-racial adult suffrage in the lives of the two age cohorts mentioned. Why?

In the first place the vote exercised every five years has become a ritual of affirmation of predetermined candidates appointed by Party Bosses. It is gesture of complete voter disempowerment. The average voter knows only which party he or she voted for but not the actual public representatives which they can call to account.

Secondly, the issue of accountability means that the voter can identify an individual or individuals coming from the area in which the voter lives and who, through being elected, is committed to interact with those voters and addressing their concerns. Attempts are now being made by the ANC for example, to allocate constituencies to MP's and urging them to look after them. However, the constituencies have no statutory relevance and are not electorally contestable. Consequently the party can do with them as they see fit without fear of voter recrimination

Thirdly, participatory democracy means exactly that voters be actively encouraged to participate in the governance of their constituency, provinces and parliament. In the

very real sense it should mean that "the people shall govern". Instead you have elected representatives who create self serving bureaucracies in which they dish out positions and privileges to one another. There is nothing wrong with such officials, from the President down holding regular imbizos to hear first hand from constituencies what their grievances are. But such imbizos do not guarantee delivery or subsequent accountability.

All of the above concerns mean that the current electoral system for national and provincial politics is hopelessly inadequate to promote serious democratic participation and accountability. The system is one of closed list Proportional Representation where the list is effectively drawn up by the party leaderships and presented to the voters as a fait accompli. This system was provisionally adopted by all parties to get us over the problems of a first non-racial democratic election. And it worked. It was uncomplicated and very easy to administer. But it was also agreed that the system was provisional and would be looked at at a later stage. This was done by the appointment of an Electoral Commission which investigated various electoral alternatives and had interviews with all the parties in parliament as well as the input of international and local experts. The recurring complaint with the exception of the governing party and official opposition, was lack of accountability and participation on the part of the voter.

The majority recommended that a system of multi – member constituency participation should be implemented, initially under a closed list proportional system but moving eventually to an open list. This system should apply to 300 candidates of the 400 in Parliament whereas the remaining 100 should cater for special interest lobbies such as women, the aged and disabled etc.

The multiple member constituency system is often confused with a first past the post constituency system such as Great Britain has and the old racist Parliament in South Africa had. Nothing can be more different. The multiple member constituency system, for example, means South Africa is divided into approx 70 constituencies. From each, no less than three and not more than seven candidates can be elected, from the Constituency (NB). Initially the list can be closed i.e. candidates being appointed by the party but eventually it should be open in the sense that a voter can

vote for candidate 1 from party A and candidate 3 from party C etc. Such a system will be immediately more accountable to get greater involvement from the voter.

We do not have any indication that there is a serious move in this direction from Government. But perhaps if the 27<sup>th</sup> April, is a public holiday during which ordinary voters are invited to participate in discussions and seminars on the significance of non-racial democratic participation, given the history of our country, then more and more of us can shout together: **"Hey? 27<sup>th</sup> April: Hurrah!"** More likely however parties will give each other tight lipped smiles and say: **"Happy, happy floor crossing comrades"**. This further dis-empowering the voter.

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