

FOYSA AWARDS - 1986
DR F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

I would like to begin by adding my congratulations to the winners of this years FOYSA Awards.

One of the great thinkers of the 20th Century is Sir Karl Popper. He always manages to inspire me with the simplicity and clarity of his thought. It is remarkable how great intellects have the ability to convey complex and complicated thoughts in a simple manner. He said of politics for example : "We all have an unscientific weakness for always being in the right. And this weakness seems to be particularly common among professional and amateur politicians, but the only way to apply something like scientific method in politics is to proceed on the assumption that there can be no political move which has no drawbacks, no undesirable consequences. To look out for these mistakes, to find them, to bring them into the open, to analyse them and to learn from them, which is what a scientific politician as well as a political scientist must do. Scientific method in politics means that the great art of convincing ourselves that we have not made any mistakes, of ignoring them, or hiding them and of blaming others for them, is replaced by the greater art of accepting the responsibility for them, or trying to learn from them, and of applying this knowledge so that we may avoid them in the future."

One of the ~~major~~ functions of the political system in any society is to create, allocate and use human and physical resources. The manner in which politics is used to do this gives an idea of the goals of that society, and enables us to compare and judge one society against another. The more centralised political power in a society is the less flexible will be the system of resource

creation, allocation and use, and the smaller will be the degree of individual freedom in participating in this process. When we distinguish between democratic, centralised, dictatorial, totalitarian and oligarchic societies we are also talking about the differences that exist in patterns of resource creation allocation and use in that society.

By definition, politics is the process whereby society pursues collective goals. The manner in which these goals are formulated, decided on and pursued has a direct bearing on the patterns of resource creation, allocation and use. Almost 40 years ago, Sir Karl Popper drew the distinction between Utopian engineering and piecemeal engineering in politics. In motivating this distinction, Popper made some observations which are, I believe, of crucial importance in present day South Africa. Utopian engineering has to do with mobilising society's resources in pursuit of the "Grand Plan". This plan is usually nothing else but the vision of a very powerful and small interest group in society that uses its position of power to control the lives and resources of society in pursuit of this plan.

The plan becomes the only goal that is to be pursued to the exclusion of all others. Popper was vigorously opposed to such Grand Plan politics. He argued that it was impossible for any government to have complete control over the minds and creativity of all individuals or to have enough control over all the variables that played a role in the pursuit of a grand social experiment.

It was better to formulate limited and achievable objectives and control for possible errors, rather than commit the whole society to only one plan that could have very costly repercussions if it failed.

He favoured this piecemeal approach at a time when grand Utopian politics was very fashionable. Indeed it was in the high period of Nazism, Fascism, Socialism and Communism ; there was a romantic confidence in the societies of Europe that a new era was about to dawn in which all the old ills of society like poverty, unemployment, inequality and exploitation could be solved. Even today, Eastern and Western Europe is still suffering from the consequences of such massive Utopian engineering.

The process of decolonialization and in particular the post-Colonial era saw Africa caught up in the politics of Utopian engineering. The heady days of "Uhuru optimism", of experiments with African Socialism and pursuing the goal of "Africa for the Africans", have given way to large scale disillusionment and in many cases, a desperate struggle for simply physical survival. The same disillusionment is also evident among the super powers who initially competed for the control and favours of Africa.

There is a sober re-assessment taking place of the optimistic theories on how to export capitalism or socialism to African countries. There is a desperate need to restore some kind of functional balance between the resources in that society and the people who have to rely on them for their survival. In some cases, the struggle has been given up and it has been accepted that the people in some of these countries are either going to starve in large numbers, or will be almost permanently dependant on aid.

South Africa is at present painfully and falteringly trying to disengage itself from its own experiment with Utopian engineering - after 30 years of collective self-delusion in pursuit of separate development/apartheid.

There is a process of political stock-taking going on in which the over-riding question appears to be - If the Grand Plan in fact is a threat to our survival, how else must we use our resources ?

It does not take any great intellect to realize that the quality, extent and duration of external isolation is going to have a direct bearing on the availability and use of human and natural resources in South Africa.

Sanctions are upon us and South Africa is entering an entirely new phase in its existence. Even under normal circumstances without Apartheid and without sanctions, we face enormous challenges in using our human and natural resources in such a manner that the quality of life for all our people can be improved and sustained. One can argue that Apartheid squanders human and natural resources, whereas sanctions diminishes them. To squander and diminish resources at a time when our population increases at a rate of 3% per annum, would appear to any normal person to be an act of insane self destruction.

Yet this is precisely the complication in the challenge that faces us. One thing I almost welcome as a consequence of sanctions : it will put to rest all the conflicting and contradictory theories about what it will or will not achieve. Thank heavens the time for posturing, pontificating and prophesying is fast coming to an end.

We now will have to learn to live with the reality of sanctions. I believe this reality is going to force some fundamental options on all South Africans :

Do we choose to look after sectional group interests or do we seek to improve the resources for everybody?

Do we succumb to greed and selfish individualism, or do we learn to share and co-operate ?

-5-

Do we pool our resources in meeting challenges, or do we fragment them ?

Do we go for short-term reactionary policies of spite and retribution at the cost of long-term policies of growth and development ?

Nothing is easier in a time of crisis to cut your nose to spite your face; nothing is more certain that if you do that at such a time, there is no second chance to restore the damage. South Africa is moving into an era where there will be no second chances. We simply have to look dispassionately at our human and natural resources, and decide how best to husband and use them.

Nowhere else is this going to be more urgent than in the political terrain. If only we can keep Popper's warning in mind : to confess our ignorance and not repeat our mistakes, we may stand a chance of finding a new beginning. If we do not, we will be condemned to repeat old mistakes in new ways under more difficult circumstances.

12 August 1986