

ARTICLE FOR LEADERSHIP SOUTH AFRICADR. F. VAN ZYL SLABBERT"POLITICS AND RESOURCE UTILISATION"

"We all have an unscientific weakness for being always 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, this 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."

Sir Karl PopperINTRODUCTION

Throughout history it has been recognised that one of the major functions of the political system in any society, whether traditional or modern has been to create, allocate and use human and physical resources. The manner in which politics in a society is used to do this, gives one an idea of what the goals are that that society is trying to pursue, and enables us to compare and judge one society

against another. The more centralised political power is in a society, 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 performs a goal achievement function for society, i.e. it is the process whereby society pursues collective goals. The manner in which these goals are formulated and decided on as well as pursued has a direct bearing on the patterns of resource creation, allocation and use. Almost forty 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. And in its place he proposed piecemeal tinkering. This approach tried to avoid the mistakes of the past, rather than formulate grand goals for the future. It argued that one had to use one's experience of knowledge available at the time to improve the quality of life systematically and on a wide range of fronts in society, that room should be left for human ingenuity and creativity in looking for new ways and means of avoiding old mistakes, rather than giving all power to a small minority to force society in the direction of only one set of goals determined by that small group of powerful people.

Popper's opposition to "grand plan" Utopian politics was based on solid and irrefutable arguments. In the physical sciences it was, in any case, already extremely difficult to control all the variables that impinged on any particular experiment. How much more difficult would this be when one tried to experiment with a total society? Popper 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.

There were simply too many imponderables that one could not take into account. Therefore, 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 one failed in achieving that plan, (which was usually the case.) Popper argued in favour of the 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 "the New Era" was about to dawn in which all the old ills of society like poverty, unemployment, inequality, exploitation could be solved by pursuing "the grand plan". Even today, Eastern and Western Europe is still suffering from the consequences of such massive Utopian engineering.

AFRICA AND "GRAND PLAN" POLITICS

The process of decolonialisation, and in particular, the post-Colonial era saw Africa caught up in the whole 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 made way for large scale disillusionment and in many cases, a desperate struggle for pure, simple 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. Whatever the particular ideological predisposition of a foreign power may be with regard to Africa, one thing is becoming more and more clear, that is that 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 - TRYING TO TURN BEFORE THE POINT OF NO RETURN

South Africa is at present painfully and falteringly trying to disengage itself from its own experiment with Utopian engineering. This after thrity 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? The golden thread that runs through all the Government Commission Reports, from Erica Theron on the Coloureds, to Wiehahn on Labour, to Riekert on Population Migration, De Lange on Education, the

Scientific Report of the President's Council and the latest Economic Commission Report of the President's Council, is that we have mis-allocated our resources, abused them and in some cases destroyed them, not in spite of pursuing the policy of Separate Development/Apartheid, but precisely because of it. That if we are to survive physically and maintain a reasonable quality of life, we must undo the damage done as soon as possible.

Let me make it quite clear, apart from pursuing the collective goal of Separate Development or Apartheid, South Africa as part Third World Country, suffers from all the problems of resource creation, allocation and use that such countries have to endure. Comparatively speaking we have a better physical infra-structure than most other African countries, in the sense that we have rich mineral deposits which we have exploited very effectively, hence our much higher level of industrialisation, we have a reasonably favourable agricultural potential, although our soil is not of top quality and our rainfall is very unpredictable. But our demographic pattern resembles that of most other African countries, in that there is a very real danger that population growth will

outstrip economic growth and that there will be an over-supply of unproductive, unskilled labour and an increasing shortage of skilled labour. These are problems that can present great challenges to any political system in our society, but there is not the slightest doubt that these problems have been immensely aggravated as a result of the Utopian engineering of the last thirty years.

We have to be grateful that there are signs that those who govern wish to turn us around before we reach the point of no return. Thus, the idea of consolidating the homelands according to the old formula of buying out farms has been abandoned as being unproductive and wasteful. It is accepted that the homelands can never be economically viable and that it is fruitless to try and achieve this goal. The policy of regionalisation with its emphasis on deconcentration and decentralisation of industries is evidence of this. Ninety-nine year leasehold for Urban blacks is another concession to their permanence which is a contradiction of the old "grand plan." I say these are signs, they have not yet become trends. These are signs of a loss of ideological solidarity and confidence. They tell us that the "grand plan" is not being pursued with the vigour and resolution of the past, but there is still not enough sense of urgency in dismantling the infra-structure of the plan which has committed so much of our human and physical resources in

pursuit of a collective goal that was not realisable from the start.

REDEFINING GOALS AND SCALING DOWN OUR OBJECTIVES

The Committee for Economic Affairs of the President's Council which was tabled less than a month ago, makes interesting reading. The request put to this Committee by the State President was to advise him on measures "that restrict the effective functioning of a free-market orientated economic system, with due allowance for the plural composition of the population of the Republic of South Africa." On reflecting on this request, the Committee came to the unanimous conclusion that ... "the establishment or promotion of a specific economic system is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end. The final objective is to maximise the communities welfare."

In pursuing this goal, the Committee felt that it was desirable to lay down the few general guidelines for evaluating the economic system. Firstly, it is important "that the welfare of the entire community be given priority and not that of a specific group or groups. The implication of this for the economic system is clear. Built in measures which favour one group at the expense of another must be avoided."

Ideally, institutionalised economic discrimination against any definable group is unacceptable and all individuals regardless of their group identity should, as far as possible, have equal opportunities to make a productive contribution to economic activities and thus a corresponding claim on the products produced."

Secondly, "the comparison of idealised systems must be avoided, for example, the comparison of perfect competition with comprehensive planning. In models of economic systems features are found which do not conform with reality. In the case of the market system, for example, rational consumerism produces the absence of externalities complete knowledge of which the future will bring and the absence of economies of scale are all assumed."

This is a far cry from the dogmatic confidence which pervaded the formulations of the goals of Separate Development and Apartheid. Economic and welfare considerations were of no consequence, all our society's resources had to be mobilised in pursuit of the political goal, which was to create a plurality of economically and politically independent nation states which could effectively accommodate the economic and political aspirations of their subjects. In its crudest form, the goal was to achieve political, social and economic partition between black and white in South Africa.

If one compares the cautious formulation of goals of the Committee for Economic Affairs of the President's Council with the initial goals of Separate Development or Apartheid, it is quite clear that they have fundamentally different consequences for resource creation, allocation and use in society and that they have a direct bearing on our ability to survive as a community and to maintain a certain quality of life.

The excitement that was generated by the Wiehahn Report, The Riekert Report and also very much by the de Lange Report on Education, can be attributed directly to the fact that their recommendations by implication assumed totally different collective goals for South Africa than those we had been pursuing up to then. I believe the hard realities of economic, social and political life of South Africa, Southern Africa and Africa in general, are forcing us to redefine our goals and to scale down our objectives. Such a period of redefinition is obviously painful for a society as it must affect vested interests and political reputations, and that is precisely why the words of Popper quoted at the outset are so apposite.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR RATIONAL RESOURCE CREATION AND ALLOCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The resources of a society are both physical and human. The physical resources refer to the land and what is in it or on it, the human resources, obviously refer to the population of a society, its composition, its cultural traditions which exist and which enable the people to exploit the physical resources to the best of their ability. Through science, through trial and error we now know more than we knew, say 10 or 20 or 30 years ago about the correct relationship between land and people, about conservation, about agricultural and food production, about improving the skills of the people when they enter the job market. This expertise was gained through experience, it is based upon knowledge that tells us what to avoid, rather than what to pursue without prior knowledge. It is based on the mistakes of the past, rather than on the promises of the future. This is the kind of knowledge we have to put to work when we consider the most effective ways of creating, allocating and using resources in our society. The guidelines we need for South Africa can be formulated in terms of very simple questions : Given the available knowledge, are we making the best use of our water resources ? - Do we have the correct ratio between land and population in our rural areas for the purposes of efficient agricultural food production ?

Are we using all the available techniques and knowledge to curb the population increase ? How do we go about increasing the productive skills of the individual who has to enter into the job market ? Are we removing or creating obstacles ? These questions refer to limited goals, limited objectives, they don't imply some grand plan which the whole society has to pursue, nor is there any suggestion that answers to these questions hold any extravagant promise for the future. These questions have to do with the basic underlying theme in any society. How can we improve the quality of life for the vast majority of people in that society and therefore for the country as a whole.

I am not going to bore everyone once again by repeating demographic projections to the year 2000 or 2050. We have heard and seen them time and again over the last two years. But keeping these questions that I have formulated in mind, consider the following harsh and startling facts about South Africa, facts which derive directly or indirectly from "grand plan politics" and the abuse, misallocation and even destruction of our society's resources.

1. The R804,000,000 so far spent on homeland consolidation could have been used to create urban jobs for over 80,000 people. The number

of people registered on December 31, 1983, as work seekers at Labour Bureaus around the country.

2. For the 407,343 Rand it cost the Prisons Department to jail 62,000 Pass Law offenders in Johannesburg last year, nearly 300 Black children could have had a years education equal to that of white children.

3. It takes 7000 years to form a layer of soil as deep as a sheet of foolscap paper. So, if we let the soil wash away faster than it is forming, we destroy trees, plants, animal and eventually human life. In places like Tugela Ferry, KwaZulu bare bed rock already lies exposed to the sun. The firewood crisis has stripped the land of trees. Each man, woman and child needs 1 ton of firewood each year to survive.

4. Cold statistics provided by the Science Committee of the President's Council show that South Africa has only 16 years to bring the population growth rate under control. Urbanisation is an important factor in bringing down the birth rate.

People in town can't afford to have large families, because of the cost involved in raising children, putting them through school and finding housing.

"Allowing free movement to the urban areas would be a major way in which the population could be limited," said Professor John Grindley of the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Cape Town. "That is why it is a pity we have such strong controls over urbanisation for blacks."

5. Professor Brian Walker, Director of the Centre for Resource Ecology at the University of the Witwatersrand, said South Africa's increasing population would find the supply of food and water the most pressing problems. He said that while the water problem was being well handled, the Government's land use policy was not rational. Homelands were overcrowded and devastated while large tracts of white farm lands were unoccupied.

Professor John Hanks of the Institute of Natural Resources at the University of Natal also warned that the most pressing population problem lay in black rural areas where extreme poverty led to high birth rates.

In these areas over-grazing, soil erosion and defforestation were critical problems that were already threatening people's lives. (See Sunday Express of 25/3/1984 for elaboration of Points 1 - 5).

These critical problems mentioned above have been aggravated rather than relieved through political decision making over the last thirty years. These are problems relating to our physical infrastructure and the relationship between that and our human population. When we start looking at the whole problem of increasing and improving our human resources we run up against almost the same kind of difficulty.

For example, it is a well known fact that for growth to take place in a free enterprise society, it is very important to cultivate the entrepreneurial talents of such a society. In other words, people who are prepared to take the risk in pursuing economic goals in new and innovative ways. It has been calculated that in a free enterprise society, of the kind that we have in West Germany, a minimum of 6% of the economically active labour force have to belong in the entrepreneurial class in order to maintain the minimum growth rate for that society's needs. In South Africa, according to the statistics provided by the Commitee for Economic Affairs of the President's Council, the economically active section of

the population that could be classified as entrepreneurs constituted 3.9%. The de Lange commission Report on Education came forward with far reaching recommendations on how to improve the country's ability to provide for the skilled labour market. Many of the key recommendations were rejected by the Government because of ideological and "grand plan" considerations. When the Economic Affairs Committee of the President's Council asked itself the question, what were the obstacles to blacks fully participating in the free enterprise economy and therefore at least potentially becoming available in greater numbers for entrepreneurial activity, they identified a number of legal and statutory restrictions of which the following are some of the more familiar :-

The Blacks (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act, 1945, Act 25 of 1945), Black Labour Regulations G & R 1892 of 1965, Black Labour Act 1972 (Act 29 of 1972), Development Trust and Land Act 1936 (Act 18 of 1936), Black Administration Act 1927 (Act 38 of 1927), Group Areas Act 1966 (Act 36 of 1966), Liquor Act 1977 (Act 87 of 1977) and so on and so on.

The majority of these measures can only be justified in terms of the "grand plan", which we are all now agreed has to be abandoned.

IN CONCLUSION

When considering the relationship between politics and resources in South Africa, it is quite clear that our situation is very serious indeed, but it is not hopeless. One of the hopeful signs is precisely that "grand plan" politics is gaining in disrepute also in South Africa. One can only hope that the explosion of information and knowledge from the various fields of expertise in our society will have a humbling effect on the arrogance of politicians who so easily think it is their right to manipulate the precious lives and resources of our society in the pursuit of some half-baked Utopian political experiments. For the foreseeable future, we are going to measure progress in South Africa by the rate at which we abandon Utopian engineering.

We have much going for us in the way of human resources, level of industrialisation and physical infra-structure. It is not beyond our ingenuity to improve the quality of life for all and to find a far more rational and efficient way to create, allocate and use our scarce resources, but then we will have to learn the lesson that Popper has so eloquently formulated for us, and that is to be willing to learn from our mistakes, rather than to insist on living in our dreams.