

ARTICLE FOR THE SUNDAY EXPRESS

- Dr. F. Van Zyl Slabbert, M.P.

The referendum campaign is over and done with. Obviously I am disappointed in the result from the PFP's point of view. A significant section of our support voted "yes" because they hoped for and want reform despite the shortcomings of the constitution. Some of the most devastating attacks on the constitution came from people who voted "yes" and urged people to vote "yes". This points to a very important conclusion one can draw from the result : the majority of the White electorate want reform, almost any reform. The corollary of this conclusion is that there is no significant right-wing threat to prevent systematic and genuine reform. Unfortunately this constitution is going to be a very flawed and inadequate instrument to effect systematic reform. But whatever else happens, and despite the shortcomings of this constitution, I believe we have to keep the spirit and momentum for reform alive. The PFP has fought this constitution tooth and nail precisely because it believes that it will hamper genuine reform. I believe that it is our duty to fight for and support any initiatives for reform despite, and not because of, the new constitution.

There is no point in moping, or in waiting with gleeful anticipation for the new constitution to come unstuck. When the constitution is in difficulty, it is not only a political party that suffers, but

the whole country. Our country has enough difficulties as it is without wishing new ones on it.

Yes, I believe if the Government goes ahead with implementing the constitution, flawed as it is, unclear as the opposition parties role in it is going to be, we have to make the best of it. We have to test and explore this constitution as best we can in order to fight for genuine reform. To do otherwise is to abdicate all responsibility and hope for constitutional and therefore evolutionary reform. And, believe me, it is not going to be easy to bring this about in the new constitution. But we must at least give it a try.

However, it is going to be almost impossible to do so if the Government simply goes ahead with implementing this constitution without testing Coloured and Asian support for the constitution. I believe that a referendum such as the Whites have had would be the best way. Whichever way the Government goes about it, if it does not establish visible and viable support for the constitution amongst these communities, this constitution will flounder right at the outset. Whatever limited credibility it now enjoys will be completely destroyed. We must not forget that less than half of the White electorate has clearly indicated that they want this constitution to be implemented and for a variety of hopes and reasons. It has been a severely divisive issue so far. Therefore new steps must be taken to ensure more legitimacy for the constitution. Getting clear support from Coloured and Asians would be such a step.

Great and wonderful blessings were promised us in the event of a "yes" vote. We must keep the pressure up to see that at least some of them enjoy the attention promised. One of the first on the agenda we were told was going to be Black constitutional development, then the problems of urbanization as well as those of rural poverty. In the management of these problems future peace and stability will depend, and not so much on the workings of the new constitution. It is here where we will find out whether negotiation politics is still viable and alive in South Africa. Those of us who believe and fight for it must carry on no matter how difficult and frustrating it may look now. We live in a fascinating country with absorbing and challenging problems. To be bored and/or apathetic in such circumstances is almost a criminal act.

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