

ARTICLE FOR "SUNDAY TIMES" CONSTITUTIONAL FORUM BOOKLET

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Let us come to grips with some platitudes in this "great debate" :

Yes, the PFP is in favour of "a step in the right direction".

Yes, the PFP, from its inception, has pushed for reform and a move away from discrimination.

Yes, the PFP realizes that "everything cannot happen at once" and that reform is sometimes gradual and unequal.

But these platitudes, and that is what they are, simply beg the question as far as the Nationalist constitutional plan is concerned. How can they apply to this plan?

The only point that has consistently been put forward by those who wish to promote the plan, is that for the first time the Nationalist Government is allowing Coloureds and Asians to participate in a Parliament that was exclusively reserved for Whites. This would demonstrate the "goodwill", "courage", "bona fides", "sincerity", etc., of the Government. All these are, of course, very good sentiments and no doubt could have applied to some passengers who invited friends to be their guests on the Titanic. At least then they could have been excused for not knowing what the outcome of that fateful journey was going to be.

But in this case the roadsigns of the constitutional journey have been clearly marked beforehand. Yes, Coloureds and Asians will be allowed to participate through their own separate Coloured and Asian Houses, but with the clear understanding that -

- this happens on condition that Blacks are constitutionally excluded;
- that one Party in the White House will dominate over all other Parties in all the Houses in all the key areas of decision-making;
- Apartheid and discrimination are entrenched in the constitution and its structures; laws like the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act that are detested by Coloureds and Asians are not going to be removed but are the necessary instruments to make the new constitutional plan work. And so one can go on.

These are major sources of confrontation and conflict which are vital parts of the new plan. How can this point the way to reform? How is this a step in the right direction? How does this help South Africa move away from discrimination?

But let us, for argument's sake, say that these objections against the content of the plan can somehow be overlooked because there is such a general feeling of support for constitutional change, that people are prepared to settle for anything rather than nothing - a sort of "Let's give it a chance" attitude.

Are there many who think this way? Quite simply, on closer examination, the answer is "no". Take all the population groups involved, either directly or indirectly, in the implementation of the new constitution :

The Whites are now more divided amongst themselves than they were concerning the proposals of 1977. But even if 60% of the Whites are in favour of implementation, this is not of crucial significance for the effective working of the new constitution. Because the plan seeks to incorporate Coloureds and Indians, the extent of their support is even more important. So far it is minimal. Even the Labour Party which has declared itself willing to participate, has said it is going to do so in order to undermine the constitution. Indeed, the proposals have been responsible for mobilizing the largest group of people against a plan of the Government for the last 30 years. This is clear from the formation of the National Forum and the United Democratic Front. There is no doubt that, as far as these three groups - Whites, Coloureds and Asians - are concerned, the new plan already enjoys less legitimacy than the present constitution.

But, let us further assume that there was sufficient support from Whites, Coloureds and Asians. One prominent Black spokesman after another has signified his rejection of this plan in no uncertain terms. So it is clear that the cost of limited and inadequate and unenthusiastic participation of Coloureds and Asians is increased Black alienation and polarization. So what is the point? Once

Blacks have become more polarized and alienated, will negotiation be easier? Obviously not. From every reasonable point of view in terms of which to judge the adequacy of constitutional reform, the Nationalist plan fails. Even before it has been put into operation, the Nationalist plan has succeeded in angering the Blacks, mobilizing the opposition of the Coloureds and Indians and dividing the Whites. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of South Africans who will have to live under the authority of the South African constitution, reject the Nationalist plan. It is not going to help us get out of our difficulties. That is why the PFP believes it should not be implemented.

If a new and better constitutional plan is to have a chance to succeed, it must be able to generate more support than there is for the Nationalist plan. To do this there are certain minimum essentials :

- The first is that the leaders of all groups in our country must participate in the negotiation on the new constitutional plan.
- The second is that the new plan should be based on the consensus achieved through negotiation and not be imposed by one group on all others.
- The third is that the new plan must involve a commitment both to getting rid of discrimination and to the prevention of the domination of one group by another.

These minimum essentials are contained in the PFP's alternative.

They represent the basis of a new start - a step in the direction of racial co-operation and strong democratic government in our country.

The tragedy is that at the very time that the majority of South Africans are prepared to accept change, the Nationalist Government produces a bizarre constitutional scheme which, instead of changing South Africa for the better, will increase racial conflict and entrench apartheid and discrimination and reduce the prospect of democratic government in South Africa.

The PFP has repeatedly warned the Government against bulldozing its Constitutional Bill through Parliament and forcing it on the people of our country. It has repeatedly called on the Government to stop and to think again.

The PFP in Parliament and its select committee has examined the Constitutional Bill; it has debated the Bill; it has tried to improve the Bill. But in vain. The Government is determined to press ahead with a constitutional plan which, in the words of the Prime Minister, is "the National Party guidelines cast into legislative form".

The PFP, which has worked long and hard for proper constitutional reform in South Africa, is convinced that the Nationalist plan is

not only hopelessly inadequate but that, if implemented, would be a step in the wrong direction.

I believe that every voter who has the real interest of South Africa at heart should vote "NO" to the Nationalist plan.

A resounding "NO" will be a "no" to racial conflict and a "no" to dictatorship.

A resounding "NO" will be a message to the Government to think again.

What South Africa needs is a fresh and new start towards a constitution that will lead to racial co-operation and a democratic government in our country.

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