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ARTICLE FOR SUNDAY TIMESDR. F. VAN ZYL SLABBERT MP

9 MAY 1985

It is a matter of deep personal conviction for me that negotiation politics presents the only possible solution to our conflicts but we must be careful not to talk negotiation dead.

In negotiation politics one has to distinguish between up-front-public-politics and back-door-behind-the-scenes-politics. I fear that too much that should first be happening behind the scenes is being prematurely forced up-front. For example, I do not think it wise to make offers, create forums etc., without them having been thoroughly canvassed and cleared behind the scenes. This is so because public rejections and postures create additional obstacles for effective behind the scenes horse trading.

And when I say this I am not talking about "negotiations" between for example the Government and the PFP. This is not what the real negotiation is going to be about. Our decision to participate on an enlarged Cabinet Committee is to explore the possibilities of negotiation and to assist in promoting it as best we can.

The essential issue of negotiation revolves around White and Black participation in a future constitutional arrangement in South Africa. At the one pole of the negotiation spectrum is the Government, which is a White dominated government, at the other end of the pole are Black leaders and organizations with varying degrees of support from the Black majority. These organizations can be broadly divided between those who use violence as a means to achieve their aims and those who do not. This is an essential difference for example between the ANC and Inkatha.

In this context a few necessary points have to be made concerning the likelihood and desirability of successful negotiation politics in South Africa :-

- No negotiation will be effective if any of the parties define the conflict as winnable on their own terms. All successful negotiations arise out of the mutual acceptance of a no-win situation.
- No negotiated agreement will be durable if a significant party in the conflict is not a participant to that agreement. In other words, if one could choose one's customers the need for negotiation would not arise.
- Negotiation involves compromises on real differences, not an artificial consensus on mutually shared hidden agendas.

With these points in mind, I see the following dilemmas for negotiating politics getting off the ground in South Africa :-

- There is a climate of suspicion and mistrust brought by years of enforced Separate Development. This climate will have to be changed.
- Now that the Government is beginning to abandon some of the fundamental assumptions of old-style Apartheid it would be a mistake to see their willingness to consider negotiation as a sign of weakness or lack of will or ability to control.

- The Government should be very careful not to entrench new policy measures which themselves will inevitably be the subject for negotiations. For example, it is one thing to use racially structured institutions to negotiate a new non-racial and non-discriminatory constitution. It is an entirely different matter to use such institutions to negotiate a new but essentially racially structured constitution. In the latter case we can forget it.

It would be a very big mistake for either side to confuse public posturing and bluffing as a sufficient first step in a process of negotiation. Sometimes one can bluff or posture oneself into a corner from which you cannot negotiate.

- It would be an equally big mistake for any of the parties to think that it alone can choose the time, place and issue for negotiation.

What is a hopeful sign is that all the major parties to the conflict have, despite stated reservations, declared themselves willing to negotiate. This could herald the beginning of negotiation politics.

If the PFP has any role to play, and I believe it can play an important mediating role, it is to drive home these points on the tentative negotiating instruments the Government is beginning to forge.