

AARDKLOP 2003

THE SOL PLAATJE MEMORIAL LECTURE

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THE FUTURE IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The theme of this year's Sol Plaatje Discourse – generously sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation – is to speculate plausibly about what is likely to happen in South Africa over the next 10 years, rather than to do stocktaking, or give an overview, of the last 10 years. However, if one reflects on what happened over the last 10 years and the trends, personalities and events that brought it about, it is appropriate to keep Paul Verlaine's memorable phrase in mind: "The future is not what it used to be".
- 1.2 One could approach the future methodologically, in exactly the same way as one approaches the past. One could look at it from the perspective of dominant individuals and their actions – this is called the "great man theory" and is usually attacked for erring on the side of voluntarism, i.e. as if individuals have the capacity to act irrespective of the historical circumstances in which they find themselves. Or one could simply ignore individuals and focus on trends and circumstances, and this approach is usually attacked for being "deterministic". The alternative to both excessive voluntarism or determinism is to look at the past, present or future as being the result of the interaction between the efforts of individuals and/or groups, and the impact of the social and historical circumstances in which they acted. This approach inevitably challenges predictive certainty and imposes a sense of intellectual humility. Therefore, I

am not here to tell you why I am right, but to invite you to a discourse – not to a prophecy or to stargazing.

2 South Africa: A Special Case of Transition

2.1 Much research has been done on countries moving from undemocratic to democratic outcomes. During the 70's and 80's, Latin America enjoyed a great deal of attention, but since the collapse of organized communism in government, this attention has shifted to Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Bloc, the Middle East and of course Africa. South Africa, I maintain, presents a special, almost unique, case of transition to democracy. That is why it is not convincing to use the conventional stereotypes of authoritarian regression, populist revolt or military destabilisation when speculating about the future of South Africa. What makes us special? Let me mention a few factors.

2.2 In the first place South Africa was the first country to make the transition to democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of 1989. Why is this significant? For one, there was no longer an ideologically bipolar world where competing superpowers tried to extend their spheres of influence by recruiting new client states. The conventional decolonisation model, where a newly independent country was enticed either into the Western or the Soviet camp, simply did not apply. Secondly, the negotiating parties within South Africa were confronted with two dominant paradigms that became internationally established almost overnight. A liberal democracy for good political governance; and market-driven wealth creation for sound economic management. Both the ANC and the NP were unprepared for the political paradigm – and as for the economic paradigm, the ANC historically supported a Marxist approach while the NP had bullied the SA economy into an apartheid straitjacket.

- 2.3 Which brings me to the next reason I think we are special. There was no outside agent or Government that delivered, or intervened with, a framework for settlement. In other words there was no Lancaster House as in Zimbabwe, or Resolution 435 as in Namibia. We did it ourselves. Not because we loved and trusted each other. But because there was a mutual acceptance of a stalemate, and a recognition that a resumption of the spiral of repression and revolt would escalate the costs of suffering for all, enormously. So we bargained out a settlement which could enable as many parties as possible to buy into it. And it was not all plain sailing. Keep in mind that, four weeks before the April 1994 elections, the Inkhata Freedom Party and Freedom Front had not yet bought in. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that eventually we had the broadest based negotiated transition to democracy in the post-colonial era in Africa.
- 2.4 Another factor that differentiates South Africa, is that from the onset of transition, and as matter of deliberate policy, we decided to concurrently pursue a **liberal democracy** and a **market economy**. This may sound obvious but it is in fact quite exceptional. If one correlates democracy with economic growth, especially market-driven growth, the four possible outcomes are growth with democracy; no growth with democracy; growth with no democracy; and no growth with no democracy. Empirical examples exist to illustrate each case. Usually, growth and democracy can be found in so-called "mature" democracies such as the US, the UK, Canada, etc; whereas some Pacific Rim countries produced high growth with no democracy. By choosing to pursue both democracy and growth at the same time, South Africa, as a so-called "emerging" democracy and a developing economy, is continually caught up in the tension between the imperatives for a successful market economy and the promises of a liberal democracy.

2.5 Finally, I would suggest that in the post-Soviet era South Africa went into democratic transition with the most mature and sophisticated commercial, banking and economic infrastructure to be found anywhere. With an urban-based population of +/- 56% out of 45 million people, South Africa is an industrial society grappling with the problems of an industrial economy.

3 The Futility of Benchmarking SA

3.1 One of the current buzzwords in comparative analysis is "benchmarking", the assumption being that one can compare the future of one country by looking at the past or present of another country. Thus Latin American, South-East Asian or African countries are benchmarked with one another. For all the reasons mentioned above, I believe that it is misleading or even self-defeating to benchmark South Africa with another country.

3.2 And yet it is the most popular pastime of pub-talk politics or anxious dinner parties. The most common example is of course, Zimbabwe: "We are going to become just like it". The analytical poverty displayed by such an opinion is hardly fathomable. Zimbabwe's population is 77% rural, if you call Harare and Bulawayo cities – and if you wish to do so, be my guest. Its economy at full flourish was smaller than Durban's and is overwhelmingly agrarian, which is reflected in its land-use patterns. "Never mind," the argument goes, "we are from Africa and we are going the same way." If this is anyone's attitude in speculating about the future, then I am afraid the Sol Plaatje Discourse is not for you.

3.3 I do not wish to be misunderstood on the issue of benchmarking. Obviously a great many useful insights can be gathered by the comparative analysis of countries undergoing transition. I certainly make use of them in speculating about the future of South Africa. What I do object to, is the benchmarking of South Africa's

economic, political or social future against the experience of a particular country or set of countries and the prediction of an outcome based on that. As Popper pointed out long ago, man has the extraordinary ability to respond to the inevitability of his own predictions and change the course of history. If this were not so, South Africa would not be such a special country.

4 Looking At The Future In Terms Of The Goals We Have Set Ourselves

4.1 So, if I am not going to benchmark or hypothetically thumb-suck endless possibilities, how do I look at South Africa's future? I believe the best way to do so, is to measure our progress or lack of progress against the goals that have emerged from our negotiated transition. After all, these goals mobilise, demobilise, motivate or de-motivate the people of this country as they go about their daily business. Broadly speaking, I identify three goals: **politically** – the pursuit of a **liberal democracy**; **economically** – the pursuit of a **market economy**; and **socially** – the pursuit of an **open society**. These goals have been unpacked and made specific in a Constitution, Parliament, laws, economic directives, educational, health and security policies – and these structure the lives of the vast majority of people in this country. We can refer to ourselves as a South African society simply because our daily lives are shaped and influenced by how these goals are pursued and implemented. Let us peek at the future in terms of these goals.

4.2 The Future Of A Liberal Democracy In South Africa

4.2.1 The common, intuitive view of democracy is that it is like three wolves and a goat voting on what is up for lunch. A liberal democracy is a very specific kind of democracy. In it the goat has rights; the right to live, for example, or to vote, freely express its views, and move freely in terms of the law. In such a democracy, whatever the size of the majority, there are

constraints on the use of its power. For example, the moment power is abused to undermine human rights or to nullify a constitution, this is no longer a democracy.

4.2.2 What are the chances that South Africa will still be trying to be a liberal democracy in 10 years' time? Possible threats would include the collapse of the separation of powers between the Executive, Legislative and Judicial arms of Government, the suspension of the Rule of Law or refusal of the incumbent government to accept an electoral defeat at the polls. The most testing time for a young democracy is not the outcome of the founding election, but when the governing party who won it, refuses to accept defeat at a subsequent election. The same holds true for a succession of leadership.

4.2.3 A constant source of instability in emerging or young democracies, is military adventurism. There has been no indication in the previous, or the current, regime that the South African military has any political ambitions. They have repeatedly declared their loyalty to and acceptance of civil government. If one placed South Africa on a continuum of stability ranging from repressive at the one end to democratic at the other, I think it is fair to say we predominantly enjoy democratic stability.

4.2.4 There are danger signals to watch. A moribund and inflexible electoral system that favours party bosses; insufficient intra-party discipline and democracy; too little MP discipline and accountability; the ineffective accommodation of traditional authority; or growing apathy as a result of a one-dominant-party democracy. However, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that in 10 years' time South Africa will not still be trying to be a liberal-democratic state.

4.3 The Future Of A Market-based Economy In South Africa

4.3.1 Keep in mind, a country does not have to be a democracy to experience economic growth. One of the fastest growing economies in the world today is China, and nobody would call it a liberal democracy by any stretch of the imagination. There are some pessimistic analysts of South Africa who argue that the emerging economic bourgeoisie would seek common cause with the political elite and pursue wealth at the expense of the majority, i.e. the poor, homeless and jobless. This is certainly not reflected in the party-political election promises of Government or any opposition party.

4.3.2 Currently there seems to be a constant trade-off between, on the one hand, the pillars of macro-economic policy such as privatisation, the abolition of exchange controls, a flexible labour policy and a low Budget deficit, and, on the other hand, the political costs of their implementation. I am fairly confident that a market-driven economy will survive and even thrive over the next 10 years, but I hope it does not do so at the expense of democracy.

4.4 The Future Of An Open Society In South Africa

4.4.1 By open society, I mean quite simply the extent to which **civil society** is tolerated by the State, and the State's capacity to **deliver services** to its citizens. By civil society I mean the freedom that individuals or groups have to pursue voluntary collective goals independent of the interference of the State. By delivery, I mean the State's ability to empower its citizens to effectively pursue their goals, such as education, health, security, transport, defence, etc. etc.

4.4.2 By all accounts, South Africa has a vibrant and active civil society. Ask yourself: has any organization or party, any books or movies been banned over the past 10 years? Has anyone been detained without trial? Has Government been vociferously criticised and attacked in public? The answers to all of these questions are obvious. To the extent that Government intolerance is measured by the persecution of civil society, South Africa is, from this perspective, a very open society.

4.4.3 However, the picture changes quite alarmingly when one looks at the issue of delivery. Many of the problems of delivery are not caused by the State, e.g. the rapid rate of urbanisation, the population influx from neighbouring countries, inherited deficiencies in education, health, housing etc. But to the extent that the State is ultimately responsible for delivery, whatever the scope of the problems, it has to actively and with great dedication combat two major problems: wilful inefficiency and incompetence; and corruption. The State has many arms of delivery and these two problems occur in most of them. I wish to single out those which are of critical importance – health, education and security (by security I mean the administration of justice in its broadest sense, i.e. police, prisons and courts). It is fairly common practice that when a country in transition consistently fails in the delivery of these services, the wealthy minority privatise themselves into enclave communities and the poor majority wander around in a state of acute deprivation. In such a situation, it is not difficult for crime and vigilantism to enter into a combined vicious cycle. Eventually the threat to civil society will not come from an intolerant State, but from intolerant, alienated citizens.

4.4.4 When I look at the goals we have set ourselves, I think the greatest challenge we face is to make South Africa a sustainable open society. If we fail, the result will certainly have

a very negative impact on the kind of democracy and economy we will enjoy.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 What I have done, is to very briefly give you the barest outline of a model in terms of which we can look at the future. All model building is a process of selective abstraction. What one chooses to highlight, inevitably highlights also what one has ignored. This is where discourse becomes so important. There are many other issues which need reflection; e.g. globalisation, South Africa and Africa, the neighbourhood etc. As we reflect on them, they almost certainly will have a bearing on what I have talked about.
- 5.2 Whenever I return from abroad, I always experience a powerful sense of privilege. We live in an extraordinarily exciting and challenging time in our country. I see Aardklop and specifically the Sol Plaatje Discourse as a special response to this challenge. It is my pleasure to invite you to join in and explore its promises.