

ON RACISTS, TERRORISTS AND PEACEMAKERS

The apparently amiable beginning to negotiations over South Africa's future presents yet more dangerous and intricate new puzzles to solve.

BY HERIBERT ADAM

THE EXTRAORDINARY SPECTACLE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT and the African National Congress (ANC) amicably socializing and bantering with each other for the first time, needs to be decoded for its psychological implications. Politics is about the manipulation of symbols as a precondition for the exercise of real power. Not only was the ground laid for irreversible negotiations and compromises between two deadly enemies during the three days of talks at the foot of Table Mountain, they discovered, in the words of ANC foreign affairs spokesman, Thabo Mbeki, that to their mutual amazement they "had no horns." Members of the dreaded Security Police who guarded the ANC delegation became buddies with their enemies and were soon on first-name terms. While white and black South Africa wondered about respectable "terrorists" being invited into the official residence of South Africa prime ministers, a correspondent observed, flabbergasted: "But when he [Mbeki] began to crack jokes, accompanied by some boyish elbow-tugging with General Basie Smit, the chief of the Security Police, the unusual appeared to become elevated to the sublime."

The National Party-ANC instant love affair replicates an experience many South African exiles from different political backgrounds have encountered when they meet abroad. Free of the *apartheid* framework, and as a minority in a foreign society, they discover their common South Africanness. A psychological explanation of the cordial relations between former arch enemies would point to the rediscovery of bonds of origin, of a repressed kinship – children of the same soil.

The welcome back of estranged exiles by family in control of the estate, extends beyond the mere rational calculation that the outside world's acceptance is contingent on ANC endorsement. ANC forgiveness means renewed legitimacy for the beleaguered regime. The state president now can travel through the front door of the world. South African bankers can again collect long-term loans. Celebrated as peacemakers with strategic foresight, the same former *apartheid* engineers occupy a new moral high ground.

This constellation also explains the remarkable cohesion which the National Party displayed during the process of change. Most seasoned observers expected defections to the right, if the leadership were "to go so far." Yet the party caucus endorsed the cabinet's moves unanimously and issued encouragement and congratulations. Such support was particularly surprising because the caucus was left in the dark about the precise contents of the president's 2 February speech. The crucial last-minute input and consultation was not with his own constituency but with the opponent in prison. The potential coalition and government of national unity was born at this moment. As a result, a sense of relief, even euphoria, swept the land. One of the most frequent utterances quoted on both sides stressed the foolishness of not having undergone the exercise of reconciliation years ago.

The more remarkable feature of the process lies in the forgiveness by the victims. Without bitterness about decades of suffering, or expressions of revenge for horrendous crimes, Mandela publicly declares "let bygones be bygones." With this attitude, Mandela in fact manufactures a new myth, that the past no longer matters. However, the past may be

forgiven but cannot be forgotten. By legitimating the perpetrators of past apartheid crimes in the interest of future peace, conversion without repentance is condoned. Not without reason does the religious practice of cleansing from past sins insist on confession and restitution as a symbolic demonstration of the sincerity of conversion. However, neither an apology nor an offer of compensation has so far been heard from the official powerholders. The National Party has yet to apologize for the misery inflicted: so far there is only the cynical admission that *apartheid* has failed. To declare *apartheid* unworkable is not the same as denouncing it as criminal.

BY FORGIVING WITHOUT INSISTING ON SOME KIND OF MORAL REHABILITATION, Mandela may indeed compromise his credibility among his radical constituency. It is not enough to demand compensation in the form of nationalization. But even on this issue, the ANC has compromised after a howl of protest by the market and monopolies. Now nationalization will be considered only if the experts who are to study it find it feasible. This feasible socialism may make economic sense but will not be understood by a deprived constituency that demands tangible benefits now. Instead, it is fed with the imagery of a dual presidency.

De Klerk and Mandela assure each other of their mutual respect at a joint press conference. Stephen Gray, a Johannesburg writer, accurately describes De Klerk and Mandela on TV as "two propped-up grandfathers, both smiling awkwardly at the camera." The country's largest paper, on the other hand, editorializes glowingly: "The youngish, imperterbably calm and sure-footed State President, and the tall, dignified and articulate black leader sitting side by side, making history together." The chairman of the South African Communist (SACP) Marxist-Leninist vanguard party joins the celebrations of harmony at the back of the polished Mercedes and at the bar of the luxury Lord Charles hotel. The papers dwell in infinite detail on the refined menu, not failing to notice the visitors' preference for the carvery.

In the meantime, fifteen miles down the road from Somerset West in Khayelitsha and the infamous Crossroads, thousands of shack dwellers freeze in the cold winter rain in cardboard shelters. The occupants of the vehicles in the ANC convoy, with police in front and behind, and a helicopter overhead, drive quickly past the misery behind the sand dunes on the N2 highway. Their air-conditioned comfort spares them the stench of overcrowding and poor sanitation. Thabo Mbeki addresses the well-heeled members of the press club over lunch at the Cape Sun Hotel and a packed hall with an enthusiastic audience at the elite, white-washed Stellenbosch University in the midst of charming vineyards. The occupants of the Cape Flats hear about the ANC being in town, but, apart from a poorly attended rally at Mitchells Plain, don't see their liberators. Langa, the oldest African township, is rumoured to have already become a stronghold of the rival Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), a hard-line movement which rejects negotiation as appeasement. Adventurous journalists in search of evidence report graffiti: "one settler, one bullet!"