

getting our act together

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The Black Sash's membership has long reflected many of the tensions and divisions that often immobilise opposition politics. So it was with a sense of deep relief that some of us heard Michael Evans, whose roots are firmly in the extra-parliamentary tradition, urge an inclusive approach, drawing together all those who are prepared to work for a non-racial democracy. This article is an edited version of his speech, one of the highlights of the recent Five Freedoms Forum conference in Johannesburg.

Examining the potential of political work aimed at transforming the perceptions of the white community in a changing South Africa is a difficult task. It is difficult, firstly, because any discussion of a strategy for the future throws one into the realms of the unknown and often into heated and intense debate. But it is also difficult because, at first impression, there would seem to be very little positive role for whites in a changing South Africa.

If we examine the way white South Africans have responded to the South African crisis of the 1980s we are left with a rather gloomy picture. There have been three predominant responses:

- growth of the extreme right-wing
- extensive support for the government
- a dramatic increase in emigration.

These are all very logical responses, consistent with the social and economic background of white South Africans, but they are responses which do not make the terrain any easier for those of us who are working to change perceptions within the white community.

Fortunately, these three responses do not present the complete picture. We also know that there are enough progressive white actors on the South African political stage to have a meaningful impact on South Africa's future.



Why, one might ask, this confident assertion? To answer this question, we must go back to the crisis and, more specifically, its effects. For, while the failure of the government's 'reform' process and the resort to naked force has elicited these negative responses from the white community, there have also been at least two positive effects.

Firstly, the crisis of the past decade has spurred a growing conviction that apartheid can and will be destroyed — an optimism that was absent through the 1960s and 1970s. Nor is it the euphoric optimism that has, at times in our past, led to bitter disillusionment. It is rather a measured optimism that does not underestimate the work that must still be done, that accepts the inevitable set-backs, but is nevertheless confident that the demise of apartheid is inevitable.

Secondly, and more importantly, the crisis has eroded confidence among white South Africans in the permanent survival of racist rule. This, in turn, has triggered off fragmentations, defections, in-fighting and other symptoms of the disintegration of a previously monolithic entity.

In short, there has been growing polarisation — and one side of that polarisation has witnessed growing numbers of whites becoming aware that, in the long run, defence of the status quo is not feasible and will lead to sharper and more violent conflict.

We need only look at organisations working primarily in the white community over the past five years to see the effects of that polarisation. When I left university, seven years ago, I was faced with very few organisational possibilities. There were essentially three major, nationally based anti-apartheid organisations in the white community: the Black Sash, NUSAS and the Progressive Federal Party. Now we have the End Conscription Campaign, the United Democratic Front affiliates, alliances such as the Five Freedoms Forum, professional bodies and, perhaps most significantly, the steady emergence of resistance to apartheid within the Afrikaans-speaking community. But while these organisations have offered a real and important home to many progressive-minded whites, there is still a far larger number who have been left without an organisational home — people for whom organisations such as the UDF or the End Conscription Campaign may appear too radical or too narrow in their focus, but for whom the possibility of working within parliamentary structures appears too sterile and cut off from the political momentum developing outside these structures.

There are a growing number of whites — both Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking — who are organisationally homeless, between the extra-parliamentary democratic movement on the one hand, and the parliamentary organisations on the other. Robin Carlisle of the PFP has pointed to research showing that an estimated 40 percent of whites accept the inevitability of a non-racial future. Many do not have any organisational base, or at most vote once every five years and do little in the interim to involve themselves in the processes that are

shaping their future.

Many of these whites, as Peter Gastrow has pointed out, accept that the major impetus for change is coming from organisations outside parliament and no longer feel committed to work tirelessly to oppose apartheid within the confines of a system that, in isolation, has lost the initiative.

This brings us to the question of how to take forward the obviously necessary broad-based work in the white community. And here, I believe, we must learn the lessons of the past. I suggest that if we examine the broad spectrum of anti-apartheid white organisation, there have been two broad approaches, each having made a fundamental error in its approach to political organisation:

The 'third way' approach

It has become fashionable among some academics and journalists to propound a 'third way' to South Africa's future. In summary, it goes as follows. The government and the ANC are at loggerheads. There is no way out of this deadlock, which will ultimately destroy us all if it is not resolved. South Africans must get together to find an alternative high-road formula. This approach has much to commend it:

- the assertion of a democratic future
- the recognition of the ANC as a real factor in South Africa's future
- most importantly, the belief in a negotiated resolution of our conflict.

Yet this approach has one major failing: its attitude to the extra-parliamentary democratic movement. For its starting point is not only that the government and the ANC are at loggerheads, but that both are equally to blame for South Africa's crisis. It thus tends to ignore, or at least to de-emphasise, the fact that it is the government and not the ANC that is refusing to negotiate a democratic future. As has been stressed again and again in the course of this conference, conflict cannot be looked at in an ahistorical and uncontextualised way.

The aloofness of this 'third way' approach and its failure properly to engage the broad extra-parliamentary democratic movement will remain a crucial stumbling block.

The extra-parliamentary approach

Many extra-parliamentary organisations have, I believe, been bedevilled by a self-imposed stumbling block in the path of broad-based work. This stumbling block has been the issue of pre-conditions, especially the pre-condition of non-participation in party politics.

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'... the issues should not form the basis of exclusion.'

If we are honest, we must admit that white extra-parliamentary organisations are still extraordinarily small and, with a few exceptions, are not really accessible to the majority of white South Africans.

The question we must ask ourselves is this: are we so small because there is something inherently wrong with our community, or does the problem lie with our style of organisation? My own organisation, the ECC, is a good example. It is with shame and embarrassment that I record that in a number of ECC regions the question of PFP youth affiliation was a hotly-debated issue a few years back. This should not have been an issue for debate at all. As a group opposed to conscription into the SADF, they should have been accepted unconditionally.

It is important for us to keep coming back to Van Zyl Slabbert's key question at the start of this conference: are the one or more goals we share more important than those on which we differ?

In this regard we perhaps have something to learn from the French Independence Movement, where right-wing Gaullists and communists united to confront the immediate enemy of fascism. Or the USA and USSR alliance to oppose Nazism during the Second World War. These were both situations where the shared objectives outweighed any differences between the opposing parties.

These then are the two major stumbling blocks to effective work:

- the failure on the part of the parliamentary and other more liberal organisations effectively to reach out to the broad democratic movement
- the establishment by the extra-parliamentary movement of pre-conditions to joint work.

But this conference, I believe, has effectively challenged these stumbling blocks — perhaps not removed them altogether — but at least effectively chiselled at them.

The main theme that has arisen in the course of this conference, and that has assisted in providing some direction for the future, is the need for a broad-based initiative directed primarily at the white community, to enable them to become part of the transition to a democratic society. It was a consistent theme, addressed in all the major speeches.

I believe that consensus has been reached on the single pre-condition for participation in the movement: opposition to apartheid and a commitment to a non-racial democratic future. If this is accepted as the only factor that defines inclusion or exclusion, then all else can and must be debated within the four walls of this initiative. Debate must occur:

- on the question of the rights of individuals and their legislative protection

- on the question of the post-apartheid economic structure
- on the question of the precise shape of the democratic institutions which will replace the apartheid tyranny
- on the question of the need to safeguard the diverse cultural and linguistic heritages which make up our nation
- on the question of the tactic of violence
- on the question of whether to use parliament as a vehicle for change.

These issues must be debated and individuals must be challenged, but the issues should not form the basis of exclusion. As Robin Carlisle so rightly said: 'We must stop quibbling about strategies and elevating strategies to the level of principle ... but that does not mean we have to give up the specific principles we believe in.'

I believe that there has been a measure of consensus on the goal of the initiative: to work towards a negotiated solution to South Africa's problems.

Virtually every struggle in the post-war period has reached its climax at the negotiating table. Ours will be no exception. And the task of our initiative will be to hasten the process of negotiation. As Azhar Cachalia, national treasurer of the UDF said: 'If we can convince whites not to turn to their rifles, the path to negotiation will be shorter.'

The government is not yet weak enough to negotiate; it believes it can still dictate the terms to us all. Our task is to make the politics of negotiation a reality by convincing enough whites that this alone can draw us closer to a resolution of our conflict.

These then, are the points of consensus. Other issues must now be debated:

- What structure will best serve the overall goal?
- Will individual rather than organisational participation best assist the achievement of the goals?
- What sort of relationship should there be to other organisations?

Most importantly, we need to examine creatively the ways in which we can advance our goals. All of us carry the responsibility of examining ways in which we can oppose apartheid, for example, through our participation in professional groups, business organisations or student organisations.

A fluidity exists in white politics which allows opportunities for us never before available in South Africa's history. It is our historical duty — not only to ourselves but to non-racialism and to the millions of blacks who suffer under the yoke of apartheid — not to let a single opportunity slip to make use of this climate. □