

# Taming the tiger

**There is an urgent need for a new understanding of the right wing. Superficial political ridicule or moral indignation serve no purpose. So argues BRAAM VILJOEN, negotiator, concerned South African and twin brother to Freedom Front leader Constand Viljoen. It would be sheer folly to fail to accommodate the right in some way; the alternative could be disaster, he writes.**

**A**FTER the ringing defeat of the right wing in the March 1992 referendum, strategists thought they could comfortably ignore the leaderless, divided and spent force they took it to be. The negotiation process therefore went ahead without much effort to accommodate the right, which was too afflicted or too stubborn to participate of its own accord.

However, by May 1993 it was clear the right wing had regrouped around the four generals who formed the nucleus of the Afrikaner Volksfront (AV). To a large extent it was the advent of this calibre of leadership which transformed the mood of the right wing from doom to militant activism, and made it possible for the most diverse groups of Afrikaner dissidents to unite under the AV umbrella – something that was unthinkable a year earlier.

The subsequent formation of the Freedom Alliance, while not entirely without political dangers for the white right, introduced it to a much wider political context than it had been used to, including negotiation politics and alliance strategy.

It is important to give due weight to the fact that the right wing has had little time to adjust to an enormous change: from the isolation of the laager to active participation in the fast lane of contemporary South African politics. It is also important to remember that it is mainly the leadership that has been exposed to this new experience and that it will take some time for new insights to filter through to constituency level.

Be that as it may, it is clear that right-wing policy has shifted, in response to this new experience, from rigid adherence to the concept of partition to a more nuanced attempt to offer solutions for current problems that are perceived as marketable to stake holders. The best example has been a more serious and articulated presentation of the *volkstaat* idea, but community councils on the

Brussels model and a version of the Swiss canton system recently made it to the official right-wing agenda.

While this kind of exploration may seem to many to be belated and far-fetched, it nevertheless represents serious movement within right-wing thinking, which should be accorded recognition at least.

Equally in need of recognition has been a strong recent emphasis in certain right-wing quarters on the strategy of negotiation, as opposed to the idea of violent protest. I want to suggest that this willingness to negotiate

to develop. Hence the demand for a *volkstaat* – an enclave where the right can enjoy self-determination.

Dangerously brief though it is, this is the background I hope will afford an understanding of where the right wing is coming from – and of the crisis unfolding on this front.

What is the situation? It is this: the right wing, with considerable built-in conflict potential, is willing to negotiate (together with its allies in the Freedom Alliance) about conditions and concessions which would

enable it to participate in the transition process. At the same time it must be conceded that the right wing constitutes a minority and that it has arrived somewhat late at the negotiating table where other powerful parties have set the tone and determined the schedule.

The inevitable result is that the majority group in the transition process perceives the "obstinate" minority as spoilers. The tendency is to brush the "spoilers" aside and to rush on to meet deadlines. The

"spoilers", in the usage that is becoming standard, have "missed the train".

The right wing, on the other hand, perceives the majority group – and, indeed, the government – to be extremely arrogant and possessed of a euphoria and self-confidence which allow for only one option: to push on, regardless.

This leaves right-wingers with the dangerous perception that their backs are to the wall. It also leaves their more reasonable leaders, who have contained considerable pressure up to this point, vulnerable and without any results to support their preference for the strategy of negotiation.

I have been monitoring the mood within the right wing and I am afraid we have reached a critical stage where uncontrollable

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Braam Viljoen

should be taken seriously. It is a real willingness, despite the fact that the right felt it necessary to withdraw from the generally accepted structures of multi-party negotiations.

The right acknowledges the existence of shades of opinion in its ranks, but claims that most of its constituents are concerned first and foremost about the increase in violence, lawlessness and insecurity in South Africa over the last few years. This is understood on the right to constitute a revolutionary situation that will not facilitate a free and fair election and may continue to escalate in the future with disastrous effects on what is left of the economy and on personal and community security.

The right wing is not confident that any new government will be able to contain the situation that the present regime has allowed

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outbursts will escalate and where the leadership will lose control over certain elements. The leadership will also come under severe pressure to stop the process of negotiation which has not delivered balm to the right wing's sense of insecurity.

Over the past few months there have been repeated surges of hope that the right wing may, after all, be brought into the process. However, we are losing the race against the clock as majority powers prove to be preoccupied with electioneering, which leaves little room for the accommodation of political enemies by way of compromise or concession.

Sometimes I think the classic elements of tragedy so vividly captured in the timeless works of the ancient Greeks are constellating here: the past inescapably determining the future; heroism and valour combining strangely with utter foolishness to help bring about ultimate – and inevitable – disaster.

There is an urgent need for a new understanding of the right wing. Superficial political ridicule or liberalist moral indignation serves no purpose. It is my view that it would be sheer folly to fail to accommodate the right in some way. Arrogance, which often mars minds inclined to the left, must make way for tolerance if there is to be real communication between liberals and conservatives. The alternative could be disaster.

A number of misconceptions have had a serious impact on perceptions of the right wing, both in South Africa and abroad. In particular, far too much attention has been given to the lunatic fringe, particularly the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) and such unhinged individuals as mass murderer Barend Strydom. The whole of the right wing is then unfairly and confusingly identified with the extremists when in fact the majority are acutely embarrassed to be associated with the likes of Strydom and the AWB.

Beyond the ugly face of brutal racism is a much wider right-wing movement of respectable and mostly God-fearing people. Their attitudes, by and large, are the product

of ideological conditioning by both church and state over many decades. These people may be guilty of racism, but the mitigating circumstance is relentless brainwashing by the media of the apartheid state.

People came to think of the necessity of "population groups", for instance. Grand apartheid was sold in grand terms. *Deus vult* (God wants it), the motto of the medieval crusades, took in many a righteous right-winger. It took a long and bitter struggle to even begin to question the "biblical foundation" of the policy of apartheid.

When more and more brutal repression became necessary to enforce apartheid in the face of escalating popular resistance, the government renewed its propaganda and disinformation efforts around the ideology of "total onslaught". The right wing believed it. When F W de Klerk instituted the massive about-turn of 1990, with very little substantial explanation, the right wing was abandoned to the regime's discarded

demons. Little or no effort was made to re-educate the people.

Confession, it seems, was just too embarrassing. National Party leaders had future political prospects to consider; church leaders had to shore up a claim on divine authority and try – vainly, as it turned out – to prevent a schism in the church.

The result of this failure of courage is visible for all to see: a large number of hard-working, God-fearing people who are thoroughly confused but stubbornly holding on to the supports of the past.

Simply to accuse these people of racism and think of them as backward is to miss the point. They are the victims of the illusions and fallacies of the past and we have to keep that in mind when we consider what can be expected from them and decide on possible remedial action.

Currently, a sense of grievance is fuelling the ideological fixations of the right wing. They are aggrieved by the apparent relish with which elements in both the National Party and ANC insist the right wing entered into negotiations too late; that it is impossible to accommodate them; that the process of

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*MOMENT OF DEATH: Militant activism goes*

# Shift from laage

legislation cannot be changed to include their inputs. The right wing feels that the whole process happened with undue haste and that its representatives suffered unfairly from undue pressure as a result.

Slowly, the right-wing tiger is being cornered and its own perception is one of being cheated at the last moment. The right wing resents what it sees as an unwillingness on the part of its political adversaries to open the door to a movement that could rock the boat.

The point I am making here is that growing threats of violence and civil war are not coming from some innate disposition to fight and kill peculiar to the right, but from a normally civil nature that feels backed up



the AWB in Bophuthatswana.

COBUS BODENSTEIN

towards the end of 1993. However, after a sustained process of negotiation, the right succeeded in having certain amendments to the constitution agreed to and subsequently passed by a special session of Parliament early in 1994.

The crucial change, from the right-wing point of view, was the addition to the Constitutional Principles, which are binding on the Constitutional Assembly, of a thirty-fourth principle allowing for the possibility of self-determination for groups that feel strongly about it.

However, the right wing needs to acknowledge that its insistence on the right to self-determination does resonate disturbingly with some apartheid principles. It certainly needs to acknowledge that this insistence reveals an unwillingness on the part of certain parties and/or leaders with apartheid backgrounds to accept the logical consequences of the end of the apartheid era.

On the other hand, there is a need for other players to make the effort to understand that there can be a legitimate aspect to the concept of self-determination. It is not necessarily reactionary to insist that distinct communities should be allowed self-determination within the confines of the Bill of Rights and the general Constitutional Principles. Nor is it necessarily fascist to believe that giving space to ethnic allegiance may be a way to prevent the kind of conflict that has so ruinously engulfed Yugoslavia, for example.

It is clear that the protagonists of self-determination are the ones who may risk violence to force a hearing of their claims. The question therefore becomes: can right-wing demands be attended to in a way that will reduce, if not remove, the danger of violent disruption of the poll and national reconstruction which must follow?

I would argue that this can – and should – be attempted. The basic conditions for the success of such an attempt would include:

- tolerance about those convictions within the AV and FF that may be uncomfortable but are not blatant racism;
- acceptance of the sincerity of some right-wing leaders in their quest for a peaceful settlement;
- commitment from the right wing to respect for human rights, including freedom of political activity, and to the principle that self-determination should prevent conflict, rather than escalate it.

Braam Viljoen is a facilitator in the negotiating process which involves the right wing.

## to fast-lane politics

against a wall. The danger is that the cornered tiger will act suddenly from the feeling that it has no option but to die tearing its tormentors limb from limb.

It is true that the recent split in the ranks of the AV – over participation in the election – will have an effect on the ability of the right wing to stage a united programme of disruption before the election. But we should not fool ourselves into believing again that the right wing is disintegrating. Differences between factions are about means, not about the end. Right-wingers all still have one goal: self-determination in a *volkstaat*.

It has become clear from the position taken by AV spokespersons over the past

few months that the concept of self-determination is central and crucial to them. It has the same importance to the Freedom Front (FF), and enjoys the support of what remains of the Freedom Alliance (FA).

The attitude of other political actors to the concept, however, has been one of peculiar hostility. It was not that long ago, after all, that detained ANC cadres arguing in court for recognition of their right to prisoner-of-war status based their arguments on the right to self-determination enshrined in Protocol I of the Geneva Convention.

This hostility was among the reasons behind the exclusion of the concept of self-determination from the constitution finally approved by the multi-party process