

Complexity of democracy in SA made clear for average reader

By PIETER VAN VEUREN

A DEMOCRATIC VISION FOR SOUTH AFRICA edited by Klaus Nürnberger, Encounter Publications, 1991. (624 pages).



fields: well-known experts on political theory, church history and Christian dogma. Careful editing has ensured that the book succeeds in being very informative on a wide range of topics connected with the main theme. Therefore, although it is not intended for an academic audience in the first place, it also has value in this context, for it gives the reader an overview of the complex

on the strength of a mandate given by the people: the mandate of the people can be withdrawn in regular elections by secret ballot, which are held on the basis of one vote per adult person: the vote is direct (as opposed to an electoral college), the voter has free choice among different parties, policies and candidates and the voter has access to full and free information on the parties, policies and candidates.

In short, the bottom line of a democratic system of government is that people who are eligible to vote must be able to get rid of the policies and the people, by which and by whom they are governed by a vote at regular intervals. It is correct, therefore, that Nürnberger emphasises that the main function of a democratic form of government is to control the abuse of power by those people who wield power.

In this connection he states that a liberal democratic form of government also has the following important features: the public accountability of those who wield power: a division of power between legislative, executive and judiciary branches of government: the rule of law, which excludes all arbitrary decision making; and finally a bill of rights which limits the power of the state to essential governmental functions.

The conditions mentioned above for a (liberal) democratic form of government only give an abstract picture of democracy. Nürnberger makes the valid point that such a form of government can only function effectively in a cultural and economic context which has certain features. The most important of these concerns the relation between people: they must believe in the equal dignity of all human beings, and they must have confidence in the general maturity and responsibility of their fellow citizens. Furthermore, people must have sufficient self-respect and self-confidence to take up public responsibility, and they must have a certain minimum standard of living which is not found in poorly developed communities.

With this statement the editor touches on one of the most intractable problems which is discussed in the book, ie the relation between democracy and economic development.

totality of the problem of democracy in South Africa.

It is a structured work consisting of 45 contributions and it is made accessible by an introduction which states the aims of the book and gives a short survey of the contents. The contents are arranged in a further eight parts, each preceded by a survey of its content and a clarification of the discussion. Among the themes are the meaning of the term democracy; the biblical foundation for the values of human dignity and self-determination; the record of the Christian church as regards democratic ideals and the legitimisation of authoritarian rule; the vicissitudes of democracy in post-colonial Africa; perceptions of democracy among political groupings in South Africa, and the prospects for democracy in our country.

'The main function of democratic government is to control the abuse of power by those who wield power'

Klaus Nürnberger draws an abstract picture of democracy in order to clarify the concept. Democracy literally means government of the people, by the people and for the people. In contrast to various forms of authoritarianism, a democratic system of government makes the people themselves responsible for decisions concerning their collective life. According to Nürnberger, Western liberal democracy provides the classical standard for democracy in modern history. According to this model of a democratic system of government the leaders rule only

When *A Democratic Vision for South Africa* is placed in the context of some of the latest writings on the subject of democracy in South Africa, a striking feature of this book becomes apparent: in a field where question marks abound in the titles of books and articles, this book sounds a positive note with the phrase "a democratic vision" and the absence of a question mark in the title.

The word "vision" implies that democracy is something which South Africa does not have, or does not have in an adequate form, but could acquire in the future. The word also sounds a religious note and this impression is confirmed by the sub-title of the book, "Political realism and Christian responsibility". It is the third reader published by the National Initiative for Reconciliation (a non-denominational Christian organisation) and is aimed primarily at an audience which has Christian religious affiliations, but also at the wider audience of all people who have a feeling of responsibility in the situation in which South Africa finds itself at present - ie at the crossroad between a free and just future, or endless strife, social turmoil and oppression.

The book is aimed at the average reader and it is not a collection of academic research essays on the subject of democracy in South Africa, but rather a compendium of short essays which aims to stimulate and facilitate fruitful and informed dialogue on the topic. In doing this, the editor hopes that the book will "empower people to make their contribution towards the attainment of a new democratic South Africa based on equal dignity, justice and co-operation in all spheres of life".

Some of the contributions originated as research papers, but most of these have been shortened and stylistically adapted for the book. The essays were written by people who are knowledgeable in their respective

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Essays by Nürnberger and Chipasula contain a devastating critique of the thesis that the one-party system constitutes an adequate framework for social and economic development in Africa. Both Chipasula and Nürnberger come to the conclusion that it has failed miserably because it has no checks on the abuse of power, it encourages blundering and inefficiency, exploitation of power and personality cult.

It is against this background that the call for the democratisation of government and a market-regulated economy in various African countries should be seen. This drive for democratisation in Africa has parallels in the political dynamics of some South American countries and in countries in eastern Europe. One common feature of the trend towards full democracy in these countries, and also in South Africa, is the expectation that a fully democratic form of government coupled with a market economy will enhance economic growth and social development. However, the South African situation is such that the underdevelopment of large portions of the population presents an obstacle to democracy and raises questions about the efficacy of a redistribution of wealth and opportunities by market forces alone.

Although the editor emphasises the close connection between economic growth and the prospects for democracy in South Africa, the book does not reflect adequately the importance of this issue which has a direct bearing on the future prospects of democracy in South Africa.

What if anything could sway the balance in favour of democracy in South Africa? Nürnberger does not subscribe to pessimism or cynicism as to the future of democracy in South Africa. He founds his "realism" (if not optimism) on an already existing reservoir of common assumptions and beliefs on which collective decisions can be based. According to Nürnberger, South Africa has a "dominant Christian tradition". The Christian church with its large membership, the educational and academic institutions and voluntary organisations (and one could add the trade unions) constitute a framework in which the praxis of democracy can be learnt and which can be mobilised to enhance the emergence of a democratic spirit in the broad population.

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Cold War warrior in a warmer world

By DAVID SCHMIDT

NO MORE MARTYRS NOW by Don Caldwell. Conrad Business Books 1992, 272 pages

Don Caldwell's "No More Martyrs Now" is the latest in a line of local libertarian literature stretching back to Louw and Kendall's "The Solution" that sells well in suburban bookstores from Sandton to Simonstown and will no doubt parade on the bestseller lists for some time. Sometimes witty, often provocative, never dry it is a clever and entertaining book. Probably the best of the genre.

Do not expect a book characterised by any depth of thought. Nor one that seeks to be balanced and fair. Caldwell goes for the jugular with copy that is polemical, direct and unambiguous, that is never above pandering to the prejudice of his public nor of doing a hatchet job on the wares of his competitors.

Caldwell, in short, is in the business of selling. He has, in his ideas, a product in which he fervently believes. He has a market. He has the gift of the hard sell.

The arguments are marshalled with great skill. A masala of unimpeachable logic built on well disguised, albeit sometimes shaky, assumptions liberally spiced with the quotable quote, the selective statistic and the absurd logical consequences of some statist policy that appears to prove the rule.

The task is further approached from many innovative and disparate angles. The 11 chapters stretch from the know-your-enemy type on "The ANC's authoritarian roots" or "Apartheid was socialism" to the perfect-answer variety of the sections entitled "The Recall (Election): Keeping government accountable" and "Maximum Democracy" that puts the case for the referendum as a solution to the flaws of regular representative democracy.

But through the twists and turns of the negative and positive ad bites, the same message repeated again and again is identifiable - the incompatibility of freedom and government, the virtues of the market uninhibited, the power of private property and an absolute antipathy to affirmative action and all ideas smacking of regulation, government intervention and the Left. We have thus at the heart of it the standard themes of the libertarian right or Caldwell, the true believer masquerading as the sceptical modern adman.

All that is bad from apartheid to state interventionism to communism to environmental degradation is lumped under the big bad generic term of socialism. Freedom, choice, democracy and the all the good words are conflated with capitalism. This is the old bi-polar world revisited. In the soul of Don Caldwell, the Cold War warrior lives on.

It is right to be sceptical of politicians and of government. But there is a need also to be sceptical of the market. It has its limitations too. Strong democratic government and a strong market economy are not incompatible. With a strong civil society, they are rather the three legs of a tripod which must all be solid if it is to stand. This is one of the tentative truths our times have taught us.

Governments do have a positive role to play in the economic and social life of society. The choice is not only between bad government and very limited government as the libertarians claim. There is also the choice of good government intimately involved in shaping economic policy and stimulating desirable industrial activity, creating the climate and legal framework for proper competition, seeing to the education and training needs of society and providing the social services that a caring democracy requires.

We live in a thankfully less ideological world now in which there are no easy solutions and where the answers are not to be found at the extremes of either the all-powerful centralised state or the minimal state of the radical free marketeers. The successful societies of our era all accord the state a significant role.

Caldwell, in fighting the old ideological battle, is blind to the nuances of the complex. It renders much of his argument superficial.

Take affirmative action. Caldwell savages it as being nothing but a new form of racial discrimination that tends to entrench the status of blacks as second class citizens and demeans the achievements of those black people who are successful.

It is true that the record of affirmative action programmes is a patchy one and that some programmes have had the negative consequences he asserts. But Caldwell is too glib in his attack and passes over too easily the vexing issue that gives rise to such programmes.

Where a systematic discrimination against

an ethnic or other community has taken place that has significantly disadvantaged this community in the economic, social and political life, what measures must society take to redress the injustice? Even in terms of the ultra free market approach adopted by Caldwell there is, at least theoretically, compensation to be paid.

We cannot wish history away. We cannot always simply leave it to the market to right the wrongs of the past in the course of time. There is a tremendous justifiable anger that demands justice and recompense.

Any affirmative action programme needs to avoid or minimise the pitfalls pointed out. It is possible, with an emphasis on training and on the creation of additional opportunities, within a prescribed framework, to retain merit as a fundamental criterion for promotion and appointment.

There are many useful and thought-provoking insights in "No More Martyrs Now". The manner in which the concepts of market and private property can be more environmentally friendly than state regulation. Methods for making government more accountable and democratic such as the recall election, the devolution of power and restrictions of the power of officials to tax without the approval of the citizenry. The importance of a diverse and vibrant civil society. All of these are argued in a fresh, compelling manner. There are many useful arguments for the democrat to buy into.

In the end however, Don Caldwell like all ideologues from left to right, defines a universe in simple terms of black and white, good and bad, right and wrong. You are with us or against us. Like the washing powder advertiser, he does not like grey. He does not admit dilemmas.

In the real world, it is in exploring the grey areas of trade-off and compromise, of no easy solutions, of balancing the private and public, of giving civil society, free market and state their proper weight that democracy and enduring human peace are to be found. It is the black and white worlds of the fanatics and ideologues that create martyrs.

Yet "No More Martyrs Now" makes a contribution to the debate. It is the voice on the periphery reminding us of the importance of the individual, cautioning us about the dangers of the state in stark passionate terms.

We need more intelligent polemic of this nature from all perspectives that outline the alternatives in strong and clear colours as beacons to help us navigate our way through the dull grey mist of the brave new world.

David Schmidt is Idasa's regional director in Cape Town.

Compassion and time

I am a boerseun gone east (New Zealand) many years ago and I am writing to you from Russia which I regularly visit on business.

The parallels between the change required from the Afrikaner and Soviet people are uncannily similar: the process is the same as well as the amount of will and energy - and the ideological shifts - needed to make it work.

Both societies must be dragged into the 20th century, the scars are and will be deep, some won't go away or be healed easily. Only time and compassion for each other will help the process.

Things in Russia have not changed for the better. The people, although still smiling and now savouring the precious moments of happiness of a summer season, are expected to shoulder the larger share of the difficulties this society faces in its pursuit of a market driven economy.

At the moment I am on the banks of the Amur River, it is quite a lovely sight with the people out in full force - no one can inhibit these Russians enjoying their brief summer. Winter is not far away and with it comes shortages of all descriptions which must be endured.

The political changes have left a chasm so deep one wonders how they will ever escape the ravages of forthcoming legislation heralding the start of a market economy. No one in the highest echelons of government and industry has come to grips with the new Western financial jargon. The most simple of terms is not understood and with the appointment by Yeltsin of more technocrats to senior level in provincial and central government (straight from the lecture theatre) to run the economy, the immediate future looks bleak. What they need is about 700 000 managers to implant Western economic principles and managerial techniques to convert their vast economic wealth into profit yielding revenue to underwrite the capital required now to modernise a very antiquated industrial colossus for the future benefit of all.

Inflation, now running at 150 percent, has left its mark. Most basic commodities have risen in price by about 10 000 percent in the last three years.

A sad fact too is the graft and open fraud. Some believe it to be their right to the spoils of industry. They moan and complain but generally they do not care to

help the process of reconstruction. They believe someone else will fix the problem in time. Well I suppose that if I was living here with absolutely no hope of affecting or influencing any change, even though I now have the vote, I would also go fishing.

Michael Scholtz
Auckland, New Zealand

Geskiedenis wys pad vorentoe

Soos gewoonlik was ook die jongste uitgawe van *Democracy in Action* baie leerzaam en thought-provoking, en ek wens graag die redaksie te bedank vir die werk wat gedoen word om op 'n stylvolle en professionele wyse nuusberigte asook indiepte artikels oor ons land en sy toekoms onder 'n breër gehoor se aandag te bring.

Vanuit 'n historiese oogpunt gesien was veral prof Wilmot James se artikel "Rattle dem bones!" baie insiggewend, en ek hoop van harte dat 'n wye verskeidenheid persone en belangegroepes daarvan kennis geneem het. Die beter toekoms sal ons bly ontwyk indien ons 'n streep deur die verlede probeer trek - so asof die letsels wat gelaat is deur die ideologiese vergrype van die verlede deur die swaai van 'n (ander ideologiese?) "towerstaf" sal verdwyn.

Die sinikus sal sê dat wat mense uit die geskiedenis leer is dat mense nie uit die geskiedenis leer nie. Ek deel nie noodwendig dié sienswyse nie, maar indien dit ongelukkig waar is dat mense baie keer inderdaad nie uit die foute van die verlede leer nie, dan is dit dalk omdat hulle nie die verlede behoorlik bestudeer nie, dalk te veel deur 'n bevooroordeelde en ideologies-gekleurde bril na die verlede kyk.

Die veelbewoë geskiedenis van hierdie land sal inderdaad deurlopend bestudeer moet word indien ons - en toekomstige geslagte - werklik wil begryp waarom ons land en sy mense op hierdie bepaalde wyse ontwikkel het. En in dié proses sal by méér mense hopelik beter begrip ontwikkel vir ons situasie, en sal ons beter kan beplan vir 'n rooskleuriger toekoms. Meer sal dan dalk ook besef hoeveel mense in hierdie land inderdaad in gemeen het, en die kompleksiteit van ons geskiedenis sal ons daarvan weerhou om vingers te wys.

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(brief verkort)