

Apathy and blame fester in new democracies

“people start looking for someone to blame”. There was also the danger of misunderstanding – “that in a democracy you can do what

you like and that only the majority can be right.”

Commenting on the difficulties of trying to reconstruct Poland, she said it was always easier to be in opposition and to denounce things than to assume responsibility. “It is much easier to deconstruct what is happening than it is to create a new reality.”

Kuratowska said that education for democracy was necessary at “every level” of her society. People needed to understand what exactly was meant by civil society.

“The general feeling among people is that they have no influence on the decision-making process – even though we now have a democracy. We had a very unpleasant surprise in May 1990 during our first local elections when only 33 to 53 percent of people voted – it was a very apathetic turnout.”

However, she noted that despite her pessimism, there had also been many successes in Poland since 1989. It was ironic that the vote of no-confidence in the Polish parliament that had been passed so recently came after figures showed that for the first time, industrial productivity had increased during the first quarter of 1993. It was also the first time the unemployment rate had not risen.



Zofia Kuratowska, Polish medical professor, activist and politician.

asm and people flocked to the polls on election day.

However, once a government was in power and began to implement economic reforms, differences quickly emerged.

“We must remember, democracy is a difficult system: during the transition the expectations within society are very high. In Poland, people believed there would be prosperity and a better life. When this did not happen immediately it led to frustration, disappointment and apathy. The expectations are always greater than the real possibilities.”

Another danger, said Kuratowska, was that of extremism from the left and right –

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IN A sobering and moving address, at Idasa’s Education for Democracy conference, Polish senator and a member of the once-underground Solidarity movement, Professor Zofia Kuratowska, spoke of the harsh realities confronting a new government after years of repression.

Such was the state of Polish politics that the day before she spoke at the conference she heard that the Polish parliament had been dissolved. “So I am no longer a senator nor a member of any senate foreign or health policy committee,” she said with a smile.

Before proceeding with her talk, she said that while she could not feel responsible for the actions and behaviour of all Poles, she wanted to record how sorry she was that it had been a Polish national who was allegedly responsible for the assassination of Chris Hani.

Kuratowska reminded the conference that Poland had been the first central European country to succeed in changes without bloodshed in 1989, and despite the troubles it was experiencing now, Poland was still the most developed country in central and eastern Europe.

In June 1989 when democratic elections were held, there were practically no political parties, except for the weak Communist Party. A national civic committee and local civic committees were organised to prepare for elections amidst much popular enthusi-

Keeping an eye on the horizon

I THINK there is a central message in doing education for democracy: that is that we need to keep one eye on the horizon and one eye on what is right in front of us. That means living with the tension of what we have now and what we want to have.

It means building our education around the realities of people’s lives – violent lives, insecure lives, intolerant lives – so that we can work towards a non-violent society, a tolerant society, a more secure society.

The starting point of education is where people *are at now*, not where we as educators want them to be.

Right now, elections are uppermost in people’s minds. So if we go into a workshop or training course talking about democracy

Extracts from an address delivered at a Voter Education Fair in Johannesburg recently by ALISON CURRY of Idasa’s Training Centre for Democracy.

as an abstract concept without connecting it to people’s lives and without talking about the role of elections, people will simply switch off.

But, on the other hand, if we just talk about voter education – about how to make a cross – then we run the risk of another Angola, where after the crosses were made, no-one accepted the results and civil war erupted again. We simply cannot afford



another Angola when already there has been so much bloodshed and so many lives lost in the struggle to reach this stage of the transition process.

If we are working to build a democratic country, it is not some mystical magical product “out there” that we will finally attain after elections. If we are building democracy we need to be democratic *while we build*. We need to live democracy, not just talk about it. We need to give people the

Flushes of delusion

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held perception that the election is going to be a contest between the NP and the ANC, or rather, the NP and ANC alliances.

A dissection of the claims, propaganda and polls certainly suggests that by the first quarter of 1993 – that is before the murder of Chris Hani at Easter – the ANC alliance would garner over half the votes and the NP alliance 20 to 25 percent.

But, even if this was true then, it does not mean that some of the minority parties should be excluded from any analysis. It obviously benefits the larger alliances to pretend it is a two-horse race and it is certainly helpful for sloppy analysis by “experts”. It is also helpful for headline writers.

Clearly, many of the parties at the World Trade Centre negotiations are going to disappear into one or other alliance and it seems unlikely that the white right-wing alliance under the present leadership will be able to get the five percent which will probably be necessary for representation in the Interim Government of National Unity (Igenu).

But three minority parties could well play a role in the post-election government – the PAC, IFP and the DP.

In the past, it has been fashionable in government, ANC and academic circles to dismiss the PAC as an election threat. The PAC also has logistical, financial and organisational limitations, but there are indications that it is winning support from the ANC,

particularly amongst the youth and particularly as the negotiations drag on.

It also has been fashionable, particularly in liberation movement circles, to downplay and minimise the IFP. But whatever else the conflict in Natal and the Reef has shown, it has demonstrated that Inkatha does have a grassroots base that cannot be ignored.

With over three million voters in Natal/KwaZulu, much of it in remote areas, the IFP cannot be ignored, nor can the possibility of it being the majority party in a Natal regional government be dismissed.

It has been particularly fashionable to write off the DP, despite the fact that its once-ridiculed policies on a bill of rights, negotiations or a national convention, proportional representation and regional government are now accepted as almost self-evi-

and, with a clear swing away from the NP among “coloured” people, it may well be justified in its claims.

In any event, the Western Cape looks like being an interesting three-way fight.

The DP leadership says it could win between 15 and 18 percent of the total vote in an election, and three seats in a 20-person Igenu. That claim seems too high, but the DP will be a factor in the election.

If plans to hold national and regional elections on the same day are realised, this could aid the three smaller parties, particularly if they concentrate on specific regions, because the resources of the national alliances will be somewhat stretched.

With the huge number of nearly 7 000 polling stations which the Department of Home Affairs is planning to set up around the country, including all 10 homelands, only truly national movements will be able to maintain an effective presence throughout the country.

If, however, the negotiators agree on the election of 400 MPs, 100 senators and about 1 000 regional MPs (100 each for, say, 10 regions), the five major parties will be able to produce election slates of 1 500 people – perhaps enough to satisfy the ambitions, egos and commitment of their key activists.

It will also exacerbate the worst symptoms of election fever, which will undoubtedly get worse until about April 27. But the cure will stabilise and, for a while at least, put some of the “experts” in their place.

Barry Streek is on the political staff of the Cape Times.

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dent truth by most, and despite its facilitating role in the negotiations.

But the DP’s growth, particularly in the Western Cape, should be noticed. It had 14 active branches in the Western Cape at the beginning of 1991, but says there are now 65 in the region. The DP claims it will be the largest party in the region after the elections

booklet, an element which confronts and gently challenges people’s stereotypes?

Something which makes people look inward instead of outward, which makes people *hope* and not fear or feel overwhelmed. We need to ask ourselves how can we reach people’s *hearts* and not just their minds, because that is where real and profound change takes place.

Shifting people’s opinions or broadening people’s knowledge remains a cerebral exercise – albeit a valuable one. Getting people to the point where they want to do something about things – well, that is the real challenge. Because building democracy is not just about discussing or accepting or putting up with – it is about doing.

If we want to create a vibrant civil society in this country, we don’t need people just to be tolerant, we need people to do tolerance work. We don’t just need peaceful people,

we need people to do peace work.

This land has been deeply scarred. It needs active healing – not just the ointment of time. How can we share the larger vision for this country so that people will willingly trade in their dented, narrow, fearful vision? And then having done that, how can we empower them to feel driven to share their vision with others?

It is so easy to blame the system, the politicians and the past – but what are we doing to build, rather than to blame?

As educators we have a unique and privileged position – we can learn from one another, we can share with one another what “works”, we can exchange resources and not jealously guard our domain or our areas of expertise.

Our skills, our resources belong to the people, not to us. But what we do with them determines the future for all of us.

Eye on the horizon

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space, the skills and the confidence to practise democracy – to “do democracy”.

So even when we do voter education, we have to keep on looking at the horizon, at what kind of society we need – at tomorrow, at five years’ time, not just at April 29.

So what does this mean for us as educators? It means that every single time we plan a workshop or a training course or when we write material, we need to think very carefully about what we are doing. We need to ask ourselves – is this really “touching” people, are we talking about the things which matter to them?

And then at the same time, with one eye on the horizon, we need to ask ourselves how can we build, into this workshop or that