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# A CALL FOR A NATIONAL CONVENTION FOR THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Over the past months the proposal has been made of holding a National Convention for the Republic of South Africa. By this we understand an assembly of leaders, spokesmen and thinkers who are fully representative of all classes of people, of each race and national group, of all walks of life and of major interest groups. Their task would be to examine the difficulties and hardships facing both the Republic as a whole and each individual section of the population, in order to propose a new basis for the common social, economic and political life of the Republic. In particular their main endeavour would be to tackle the issues provoking racial discrimination, unrest and conflict, and then to propose a policy where the conditions that provoke such racial antagonism would be minimised or absent.

## Reasons for a National Convention

The idea of calling a national convention is prompted by the steadily deteriorating situation in the country, which appears to be heading towards a total breakdown of civilized society. Symptoms of this include the following:

1. Although increasingly strict and extensive legislation has been enacted over the past years, giving both police and officials of the ministry of justice greater and greater powers, yet the personal safety of each individual is becoming increasingly threatened. The normal measures of social control undertaken by the police and the legal system are breaking down, so that they are becoming less and less effective in helping to bring about a society that is safe for all its inhabitants. For instance, many African towns have a very high incidence of violent crime, yet the legislation and powers of officials controlling the inhabitants are most extensive and detailed. What one cannot help thinking is that we have reached the contradictory situation where with every increase in legislation and power given to the police, there is a corresponding decrease in people's safety and freedom from the threat of violence.
2. Recent rioting has left hundreds dead, thousands injured and extensive disruption of normal social life, as well as extensive damage to property. Deep seated grievances and frustrations of people who have been powerless and often unable to secure their basic human rights could no longer be contained and have burst forth in rage and violence. Without reasonable hope, people have acted in desperation sometimes aggravating both their own situation and that of those who have opposed and denied

their rightful hopes and aspirations. As it is there are few channels for helping people to express their grievances, let alone for dealing with them effectively, so unless some change is made frustration is likely to build up again and again with all its tragic consequences

3. The country is in a precarious economic state, with many Africans (especially young people) out of work, a precarious balance of payments and continually rising prices. All this brings poverty and hardship. What makes this economic situation even worse is that many of the poorest people in the population receive little or no public assistance in times of sickness, old age or unemployment.
4. On the international level the existence of a society built upon racial discrimination continues to be a threat to world peace. The independent African nations feel that the political treatment of the African population of the Republic is an affront to the dignity of all Africans as human beings.

Furthermore, despite the opposition of the government to communism, its own internal policies and the support which it gives or has given to its neighbours has in fact given both a reason and an excuse to Russia and Cuba to intervene in Southern African affairs. For the present government to continue its own present internal policies would, as far as we can see, admirably suit the purposes of Russian expansion.

5. The personal anxiety and distress experienced by many of the population shows itself in high rates of suicide, crime, divorce and mental breakdown. The mental strain of not being allowed to live in a normal relationship with people of other race groups, and instead having to be on one's guard or suspicious of what people will say, increases personal insecurity and causes an over-reaction in times of difficulty.
6. People of all race groups increasingly feel that the present governmental procedures and methods of consultation, where they are present at all, do not allow the real issues or problems to be dealt with. This is less a reflection on the ability or integrity of individual persons in positions of responsibility, than a matter of everyone being stuck with and entrapped by inadequate political and administrative institutions. Some of these are even detrimental for promoting the well being of the population as a whole.

In listing these symptoms of how society is tending to break down, it should not be thought that such problems are peculiar to the Republic of South Africa. Some are common to any country in the throes of industrial and political advancement. But that is no ground for complacency, and here as elsewhere the root problems of society, rather than merely the symptoms, have to be tackled by all concerned.

#### **The Authority of a National Convention**

An extraordinary assembly, such as a national convention, does not gain its authority from any legal or constitutional statute, nor from the position, power or prestige of those convoking it. It will have authority from, and to the extent that, it is part of a joint search for truth and justice in the Republic of South Africa today.

Its authoritative role, however, goes beyond merely

enunciating abstract standards. It has rather to grasp in all their complexity and interrelationships the facts of the present South African situation, and then drawing upon that to present to the people of the country a truth for them to uphold and live by. The aim of a national convention should be to promulgate a new basis for the common social, economic and political life of the Republic. Its proceedings would need to be a joint search for an expression of truth and justice that is adequate for the contemporary South African situation.

In appealing to such a standard of truth and justice, a national convention is in no way undercutting or bypassing the real authority of the state. Both the legal enactments of the state and the authority exercised by its ministers and officials derive from their actions being, not arbitrary ones or merely motivated by self or group interest, but an expression as far as this is possible in the midst of trying and perplexing circumstances of the demands of truth and justice. At no time, however, can truth and justice be claimed as an exclusive property or prerogative of any single person or group of people. Everyone is in various ways called upon to live by and to give expression to what truth and justice demand in his way and walk of life. A national convention is an assembly of people convoked for the purpose of making this clearer and more sure through open discussion, reasoned argument and a critical examination of both the facts of the present situation and any proposed courses of action, thereby, let's hope, reaching some measure of consensus.

In pressing for a National Convention for the Republic a very considerable risk is being taken. It may fall a prey to purely sectional interests, or be intimidated by either economic power or sheer force of arms. Likewise it may be thwarted through interference from outside or ignored by those with the power to bring about peaceful change. By itself it is no guarantee of peace for South Africa, but then life does not come provided with guarantees. In view of the present situation, however, we can see no better way of endeavouring to make justice a truth of life for South Africa than through a national convention.

#### **The Members of a National Convention**

For a National Convention to have any credibility its membership has to be representative of all population groups, of special interest groups, and of people from every class and way of life. No minority can be simply passed over and left uninvited. The importance of having as complete a range of representatives as possible is that everyone has some stake in it and helps in finding a practical settlement. A well thought out and even immensely generous solution that derives solely from a minority group will be of little avail, since the people as a whole will not feel it is their's, but an alien imposition, and hence have no stake in upholding it.

It is likely that the membership of a National Convention would fall into two categories of people, viz. representatives of particular sections of the population, and others who by reason of learning or experience can understand and articulate the questions to be dealt with. Both categories are necessary since it will be necessary to know how people as a whole are thinking and feeling, yet it is also necessary for a more detached and farther sighted view to be given.

At this juncture a further suggestion can be made. In view of the likelihood that discussion will become bogged down and

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certain impasses reached, a chairman from outside the Republic could be invited. This chairman or panel of them, say three or five working as a team, drawn from such bodies as the International Court of Justice at the Hague could have an important part to play in pointing a way forward if a deadlock is reached. Also an enlightened outside presence at the Convention could provide a standard for delegates to measure up to. Instead of being solely concerned with one another in their arguments, delegates would also be challenged by and need to respond to a body of men representing the best traditions of reason, justice and law of Africa, Asia and Europe.

The question of who convokes a National Convention should not be of overriding importance. Once convoked such a body has to find its own methods and ways of procedure. Furthermore its own effectiveness and ultimate authority will be lessened if the conveners or any other pressure group hamper any section of the population or shade of opinion from presenting its case and so making its contribution in whatever form it sees fit.

#### **The Objectives of a National Convention**

Above all a National Convention has to see its own task to be that of making possible a new social, economic and political dispensation for the Republic of South Africa.

To this end, it would need to provide a bill of rights applicable not only to individual persons, but also to existing groups of persons and future voluntary associations.

Then it would be required to draw up a new constitution. This task would probably be better done by a smaller committee and then presented to Convention as a whole to ratify.

It would also need to carry out a thorough examination of the various spheres of life, e.g. economic organisation, education and its control, health and welfare, public order, cultural identity, military affairs and the question of local or sectional autonomy. Suitable guidelines would need to be provided in these sorts of areas so that they could be organised in accordance with and to promote the bill of rights mentioned above.

It would also be necessary to suggest procedures for implementing these improvements. Considerable care would have to be taken that the period of transition does not involve undue hardship, provoke unnecessary fears and hence reaction from any section of the population.

#### **Some Further Provisions**

It is of the utmost importance for the success of a National Convention that it should avoid any condemnation of persons, groups of persons or their actions in the past. It is not meant to be a court. Admittedly the lessons of the past have to be learnt and its mistakes avoided, but part of the whole purpose of the Convention would be to free the future from the past and so not continue its failings.

Instead of seeking a once for all solution a National Convention can only hope to open up a way for all parties concerned to start to tackle constructively and together the ever changing problems of a varying and growing society.

A National Convention is a place where conflicts will come out into the open. This can be all to the good so long as all parties concerned go on from there to seek a reconciliation through a settlement that is reasonably acceptable to all parties.

In view of the peculiar nature of South Africa, with its population sharing in often several strands of African, European

and Asian culture, it is easy for misunderstandings to arise between people. For this reason it is perhaps more important for a National Convention to isolate the central issues dealing with them as adequately and plainly as possible, and not be lost in over-defining peripheral issues. To attempt to work out matters in too much detail would both cause present misunderstandings and curtail freedom of action unnecessarily in the future.

Whatever any one person or party may think would be a suitable settlement for the problems facing South Africa, and no matter how excellent in principle such proposals may be, nothing worthwhile will be accomplished if that settlement is imposed upon others. Any suggestion has to be tested on its own merits as far as that is possible. In this way everyone through argument and subjecting their proposals to the critical examination of others can participate in working towards a settlement. People never have a stake in, nor feel called to stand by and uphold, any settlement unless they have had some part in working towards it beforehand.

#### **The Preparation for a National Convention.**

Apart from all the administrative work of actually bringing people together in a suitable venue, people have to be prepared in their thoughts and feelings for a National Convention. On one level delegates have to come to know who they represent and also try to understand the concerns of other parties and interest groups. On another level the general population have to be prepared for the changes that a National Convention could help bring about. To help on both levels the widest possible consultation and discussion will be necessary.

Furthermore, instead of delegates arriving with no experience of working together in tackling the current problems of South African society, they could already begin on a local level to work at some common problems. For example in the Pretoria area representatives of the city itself, of Atteridgeville, Mamelodi, Fersterus, Laudium, Mabopane, etc. could meet on an unofficial basis to begin with to work on problems that are within their competence. Besides dealing with the actual issue at stake, it could serve as a schooling for people in dialogic negotiation and reaching a satisfactory settlement.

Churches, businesses, local and cultural organisations also could help prepare for a National Convention by initiating an examination of their own way of life and how it impinges upon other groups within the country.

#### **Conclusion**

These thoughts and ideas have been offered by way of suggestion. Although much more could be said, they give an outline of what we consider a fruitful National Convention could be like. They are meant to be a starting point for discussion, and obviously as we have to admit reflecting our own particular views on what the current situation is and what should be done about it.

So long as a National Convention has something of the general outline and purpose outlined above, we feel that it should be wholeheartedly supported and urge others to do the same.

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