

AN IMPORTANT GATHERING

On the last weekend of September — just before the news began to be dominated by the disastrous Natal floods — there occurred a gathering which may perhaps prove momentous in South African political history. It was the Five Freedoms Forum National Conference, held at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The Five Freedoms Forum is a Johannesburg body, an alliance of organisations who strive for real social and political change. The organisers of the conference felt that the time was perhaps ripe to try to reinvigorate white opposition to apartheid. The hope was that as many as 400 people might attend; in fact more than twice that number turned up — mainly whites, but blacks too, from all over the country. At the opening and closing sessions there were well over 1 000 people.

How can one account for this enthusiasm? Well, clearly many opposition whites — from PFP supporters to UDF supporters, with many somewhere in between — felt the need for some sort of consolidation. Most people there had been depressed in varying degrees by the State of Emergency and by the implications of the May 6 election, but they had also been cheered by the example of Dakar. They probably all felt that real negotiation is the right and the inevitable future for South Africa, but that with an intransigent Government the middle term prospect might well be further delay, repression and civil war. People went to the conference, I think, because they wanted to be actors in an ongoing historical process, not merely victims of history.

They were attracted too, undoubtedly, by the distinction and the range of the main speakers: Dr van Zyl Slabbert, independent MPs Wynand Malan and Jan van Eck, PFP MPs Peter Gastrow and Robin Carlyle, Azhar Cachalia of the UDF National Executive, Sydney Mufamadi of Cosatu, Rev. Frank Chikane the General Secretary of the SACC, Bob Tucker the Managing Director of the SA Perm, prominent Afrikaners Professor Abram Viljoen, business consultant Christo Nel and Rev. Nico Smith.

These speakers — and others (academics, journalists, professional people) — all spoke very well. But did they have anything in common? Although there had been little or no prior consultation, a central theme began to emerge from the first: it was the need for all those who are genuinely opposed to the apartheid structure, but particularly whites, to underplay their differences and find ways of working together. As Van Zyl Slabbert said at the opening session: "We must ask ourselves: are the things which unite us more important to us than those which divide us?" That was a challenge to everyone present — for probably almost everyone, in opting for or preferring one form of opposition, activity or strategy, had been tempted to

despise or distrust those who opted for a different one. The main tension, needless to say was between those who believed in working through parliamentary structures and those who favoured extra-parliamentary methods.

The conference was not all a matter of plenary sessions. On the Saturday morning there were five simultaneous forums, at which a further set of speakers (one of whom was myself) introduced discussions on a variety of specific topics (economics, education, the media, militarisation, cultural and sporting boycotts); and on the Sunday there were 11 workshops, each devoted to a crucial current issue. A "monitoring committee" was appointed too, with representatives from all the main regions; this met between sessions in order to gauge and discuss the mood of the conference and the direction which it seemed to be taking.

The general movement towards mutual tolerance and co-operation was not a wholly smooth one: it would perhaps have been unnatural if it had been so. At the plenary sessions on Saturday afternoon one was conscious of some fairly bitter currents flowing between some of the extra-parliamentarians and some supporters of the PFP. But the slight moment of crisis passed, and was probably valuable, for from then onwards things seemed to gel. Several of the speakers at the final sessions put a powerful case for a broadly-based collaboration. Michael Evans, for example, a lawyer and former chairperson of the Western Cape End Conscription Campaign (who has been detained several times), stressed that extra-parliamentary groups had often, by their style and their preconditions, cut themselves off from most whites.

David Webster, a Wits academic and convenor of the monitoring committee, emphasised that every sector of the democratic opposition has a vital contribution to make to the cause — that for example the easy contact with blacks which many extra-parliamentary groups enjoy could be usefully combined with the easy contact with many whites enjoyed by the parliamentarian groups.

Several speakers expressed the view that many whites, perhaps particularly Afrikaners, were far more likely to be influenced by meeting and listening to blacks than by being harangued by white liberals of any sort. The point was made too that if the Americans and the Russians could work together to defeat Hitler, it ought surely to be possible for people of rather different persuasions and strategies to get together to end apartheid and usher in a non-racial democracy in South Africa.

But get together to do what, exactly? It was agreed by all that the Government will not negotiate until it is weakened, and a Government can be weakened by various kinds of erosion — by a complex campaign which would involve

bringing people together, opening up new perspectives, getting people to encounter new pressures and possibilities. Each opposition group would continue to do its own thing; but they would try to find ways of understanding one another and working together.

A final conference resolution — passed unanimously — included the agreement to meet again in six months time, to review progress. In the meantime participants from each of the major regions are to pursue the thrust of the Conference at their own local level.

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P.S. — This article was written shortly before the formation of the NDM (the National Democratic Movement).

In several centres mini-conferences, based on the Five Freedoms National Conference, will take place before long.□

Reviewed by Ralph Lawrence

THE LEGACY OF APARTHEID

Robin Cohen, **ENDGAME IN SOUTH AFRICA?**, London, James Currey and Paris, UNESCO Press, 1986, 108 pp. Price £4.95.

Robin Cohen is a former South African now living in Coventry, where he is Director of the Centre for Ethnic Relations and Professor of Sociology at Warwick University. He completed this slim volume on the character of apartheid in late 1985 when South Africa was rediscovering the experience of living under a formally declared state of emergency. His study is one of three evidently commissioned by UNESCO. In addition to Cohen's book, we can savour the prospect of seeing the South African state subjected to Harold Wolpe's scrutiny, and the role of Pretoria's military to Abdul Minty's.

Robin Cohen limited himself to considering the demographical and geographical manifestations of apartheid. Not again, you say to yourself. How many more trees have to be felled for paper before such a well-worn topic is finally laid to rest? Well, the modest sapling necessary for Cohen's cause is a worthwhile sacrifice. He set himself a fascinating exercise. First of all, what are the defining characteristics of apartheid in South African society? What, in other words, makes apartheid apartheid? Then, secondly, if South Africa's current rulers fell from grace somehow and were replaced by a regime determined to dismantle apartheid, how successfully could this be done? Would any vestiges of apartheid survive in a post-apartheid order? And, if so, which elements would prove intractable? In attempting to respond to the second set of questions at the moment, the social scientist is forced to indulge in speculation, as Cohen acknowledges. Still, speculation, if informed and prudent, can aid our understanding of the likely turn of events in a society's course. With that in mind, let's reflect on the argument advanced by Cohen.

A LEAP OF FAITH

We begin with a leap of faith. The scholarly weight of **Endgame in South Africa?** is founded on two telling assumptions. Reject either of them and the edifice they are upholding will collapse. The one assumption can be expressed simply: white minority rule will be replaced by black majority rule. The transformation is inevitable, but how and when it will come about are beyond our ken. It's quite an assumption, isn't it? I want to dwell on this a little, for I believe it is yet a further illustration of what I call "the rationalist fallacy", so prevalent among observers of the South African scene who would dearly love apartheid to end. The fallacy takes various forms. I cannot specify them all here; a few representative cases will have to suffice. The moral exemplar is the most frequently stated. Good will eventually triumph over evil: apartheid is inherently unjust, an affront to human dignity, an anathema to contemporary societies the world over; therefore its demise is assured. Alternatively, apartheid is viewed as irredeemably contradictory. By such reckoning, the economic imperatives and the political imperatives of apartheid are incompatible; thus apartheid contains the seeds of its own destruction. Lastly, apartheid is anomalous: a minority cannot hold out perpetually against the majority, especially when the very existence of a ruling racial elite runs counter to the trend whereby colonial governments, notably in Africa, have handed over the keys of state to their erstwhile subjects. Of course apartheid is immoral, illogical and anomalous. Yet any or all of these judgements, of themselves, cannot be regarded as infallible predictions of apartheid's fate. The fact is that South Africa's future is inevitably uncertain.