

# CONSTRUCTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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In recent months many foreign observers have commented on the polarized nature of South African society, on the rigidity and intransigence of the white establishment and on the excessive inequality, injustice and oppression in my country. While I agree with the latter observations I find their diagnosis of polarization and intransigence to be inaccurate. In addition, I find that such interpretations lead either to despair and subsequent withdrawal or to violence.

Neither of these two responses appeal to me as a South African. Consequently, I would like to encourage people abroad to support our efforts to bring about change in a *constructive way*.

In my travels abroad as in South Africa I have encountered a growing sense of despair, hopelessness and cynicism. There is a feeling among liberals in South Africa and concerned people abroad that we are doomed to conflict, chaos and a bleak future. Positive steps such as the removal of discrimination, the improvement of working conditions, constitutional reform and the promotion of inter-racial contact are dismissed as 'too little too late'. This comment implies that there is a certain cut-off point in the process of change beyond which disaster will follow, that we have either already passed that point, or that it is now 'five minutes to midnight'. The consequence of this cynical attitude is a refusal to contribute anything in a positive or constructive spirit and to deride or even oppose such contributions.

While there are apparently insurmountable obstacles to an open and just society in South Africa, there are also important potentials for change, such as the political and socio-economic development of the black people, the climate of growing political awareness and rising expectations leading to protest. There is increased inter-racial contact, a re-orientation of white values and the erosion of the moral base of apartheid. Important structural changes resulting from urbanisation and modernisation have also made inroads on traditional behaviour patterns. And surely, there are voices pleading for moderation emerging from both sides of the conflict. When Bishop Desmond Tutu calls for full citizenship he *also* makes an equally strong plea for nonviolent change.

## Conscientious affirmation

Some people have become quite complacent since the government proclaimed its intention to move away from discrimination. There are people who actually believe that the government will willingly dismantle a system which it has built up over decades at tremendous cost and sacrifice. Although it is evident that from a white and Nationalist point of view we

are indeed moving away from traditional forms of racial discrimination, from a black point of view the process is terribly slow and very superficial.

During 1980 the Centre for Intergroup Studies published three books on racial discrimination and current developments in South Africa. Our research findings prove that while many concessions are being made, permits issued and regulations altered, the legal foundations of apartheid have not been disturbed. Our daily lives are controlled by a plethora of petty apartheid laws and regulations for which there is no moral justification. What is our personal responsibility in this regard?

When a system is as intransigent and laws remain as rigid as in our society, the public may resort to civil disobedience. But civil disobedience is by its very definition a negative act. My plea is for a more positive response which I would call conscientious affirmation. This does not necessarily require breaking any specific law; it requires affirmative demonstration of fellowship, love, tolerance and a commitment to peace and justice. There is ample scope for such affirmation within the law.

But for many of us that is not enough. There are too many archaic laws, some of which I find so morally objectionable that I cannot obey them with a clear conscience. A commitment to conscientious affirmation makes it impossible for me to apply for a permit (and then possibly be refused, as has happened in the past) to accommodate an African friend at my home.

Apartheid, as a policy of racial discrimination involving the violation of human rights, concerns people everywhere. Racial discrimination, in both legal and customary forms, degrades people in a particularly pernicious way by denying their equal humanity.

But apartheid is more than a moral issue of human rights, it is increasingly perceived as a case of socio-economic exploitation within a **system** or **structure** of inequality. It is also in this respect an international issue as apartheid in South Africa represents a microcosm of the world situation, reflecting the current North-South socio-economic contrasts. European and American countries are therefore involved both morally and structurally.

## A just and stable replacement for apartheid

In my travels abroad I have been struck by the powerful unifying *forces of opposition to the evils of racial discrimination*. But those of us concerned with the long term future of my

country must do more than just attack the present evils. We need to build the foundations for a stable future society. In this venture I hope it will be the *unifying forces of support for a just society* that will bind us together.

Political change in a society where there is so much injustice and inequality as in South Africa will not come easily or willingly. Significant pressures on the establishment will be required to bring about fundamental change. Since apartheid, as I defined it earlier, is an international issue, external pressures are inevitable. Yet external pressures pose a serious problem for the future political stability of our country. Should the government be brought to its knees primarily by external forces, it means the internal opposition, not having been strong enough to depose the ruling powers, will most likely be unable to form a stable replacement.

Rather than 'periodic fits of morality' we need a deep commitment to moral values such as justice, peace, freedom, etc. While I share the concern of many activists about the lack of moral commitment in some churches, I am equally concerned about an excessive commitment to *strategy* observable in some church circles.

By strategic commitment I mean commitment to a certain strategy (or method or means) in order to obtain a certain objective. Strategic commitment is an essential element to ensure success in any action programme and is not to be rejected, but there are major differences in emphasis and orientation between strategic and moral commitment.

The need for action forces us to formulate a more specific goal than the universalistic goals of justice and conciliation. Specific goals such as 'Black Majority Rule' or 'End Apartheid' require the necessary action programme or strategy designed to achieve those goals. Given a specific goal to be achieved in as short a time as possible the emphasis naturally shifts towards the means. In other words, strategy becomes important at the expense of principle. The focus on strategy rather than on ends often leads to a tendency to argue or assume that the ends justify the means, including (in the final resort) violence as in the case of a 'just' war or rebellion.

### Negative short-term goals are not enough

Because of the need to economize and to muster all forces, campaigners will focus on one rather than a range of means or options. This leads to excessive efforts to gain credibility or support for that specific strategy and unfortunately, accompanying efforts not only to reject but even to *discredit* other approaches and strategies.

Strategic commitment tends to oversimplify the issue, to narrow our scope of operation and to increase intolerance, and moral indignation helps to shape a negative short-term goal—that of destroying the object of our indignation.

On reading the booklet produced by the British Council of Churches in 1979 entitled *Political Change in South Africa: Britain's Responsibility* I was struck both by their formulation of a goal which I would describe as negative and short-term, and by the evidence of excessive strategic commitment.

The objective is described as 'the end of the apartheid system'. In a footnote and elsewhere in the text there is reference to the more long-term future but that issue is more or less avoided and shelved.

Being committed to such a **specific goal**, it follows naturally that the discussion of the means or options (see Section 5 of the booklet) is characteristic of what I described above as

excessive strategic commitment. While six options are listed, four are discussed in a fairly derisive way, a fifth, 'armed struggle' is reserved as a last resort, and only *one*, 'disengagement', is pursued.

Would it not make more sense to acknowledge and especially in church circles to encourage those who make their contributions according to their own insights, and perhaps even more long-term goals, laying the foundations for a stable future society to replace the present evil system?

I am not arguing against the politicization of religion or of the churches. Rather I am asking that the churches remain more goal-oriented, more open, more tolerant, more constructive than political pressure groups, without denying the latter their characteristic and vital roles.

### The South African establishment

The South African government or establishment is often described as racist and seen as a unitary force, united on all issues, especially on maintaining white superiority and white rule. This is an oversimplification which leads to the unrealistic, ineffective and largely destructive approaches which we find in the broad anti-apartheid movement.

Some years ago I interviewed a number of eminent Afrikaner Nationalist leaders whom I suspect of harbouring 'revolutionary' views. I was not surprised when they admitted that they believed in concepts which in those days were taboo in Nationalist politics — such as sharing power with blacks, the return of coloured people to the common roll, etc. These people were committed to fundamental reform but believed it could be achieved from within the Nationalist approach. They were not only conscious of the tremendous scope for reform within the law, but were also conscious of the very great flexibility in Nationalist policy and ambivalence among their colleagues, unknown to outside commentators. Since then I have been anticipating a political development similar to what has become known in Rhodesia as an 'internal settlement'.

While there is bound to be an increase of violence in South Africa before any meaningful change takes place, I do not believe we will go through a civil or race war before we arrive at an internal settlement (an interim measure) with a mixed cabinet and black prime minister.

If David Smith, the former deputy of Ian Smith in Rhodesia, could first co-operate with Bishop Muzorewa and then serve in the cabinet of Robert Mugabe, I am sure that a few of Pieter Botha's pragmatist cabinet members will not be found unwilling to make their contributions in similar fashion.

### The Challenge

There is a real danger that by accepting minor reforms and concessions by the present government we give credibility to the total system under which it operates, that we extend the regime and that potential opponents become complacent. The challenge to us is not to become obsessed with short-term negative goals, but to give credit where credit is due, and to be steadfast in pursuing the ultimate goals of justice and conciliation which cannot be achieved in a white-dominated South Africa. The danger is that the tremendous injustice in my country may arouse in us such moral indignation and negative reaction that we not only destroy the object of our indignation but may also destroy our future. □