

THE DAKAR CONFERENCE7 - 20 July 1987

(Extracts from a personal report by Leon Louw to a joint meeting of the Free Market Foundation and the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce and Industries on 9 September 1987.)

I went to Dakar to present the case for a negotiated solution on the basis of an "intensive" or "grassroots" democracy as described by Frances Kendall and me in our book, **South Africa: the Solution**. I wanted to establish the ANC's position on democratic checks and balances against the potential abuse of power in a post-apartheid South Africa and to engage the ANC and other delegates in an intensive dialogue on economic and political alternatives, and on alternative strategies for achieving real non-racial democracy. As ancillary objectives, I also wanted to get to know the ANC delegates and their views first-hand, and to find out more about the West African countries we visited.

Although I was disappointed by the lack of discussion on post-apartheid alternatives, I was satisfied that my attendance was, for me, worth while in other respects.

Unfortunately, most of the formal conference time was devoted to debating ANC and other strategies, especially violence, and the ANC's position on ethnicity and racialism. The two subjects of most interest to me, and the two on which there was, in my view, the greatest potential for some worthwhile dialogue, economic and political alternatives were scarcely the subject of discussion because we ran out of time.

It was originally intended that there would be four formal papers presented by members of the delegation from South Africa, to which there would be a formal response by an ANC delegate. I presented the paper on political alternatives and unfortunately there was no time left for formal debate after the response by Karder Ismail of the ANC. For some reason, Karder Ismail did not really respond to my paper but instead put the ANC's position, which is well known, against a race federation or consociation. The only clear points of disagreement between us were his preference for the total centralisation of power and a socialistic bill of rights. In both of these, his position was in conflict with what I understood the ANC's official position to be as stated by Oliver Tambo, and to which I had referred. Mr Tambo had said, in evidence to the British House of Commons, that the ANC accepts (non-racial)

decentralisation of power to regions and local governments, and accepts an institutional system, including a bill of rights based on the same principles as the American and French revolutions. I was unable to ask the ANC delegation to clarify its position.

Whilst all the ANC delegates seemed to be aware of **South Africa: the Solution**, there was much confusion about it and they seemed to presume that it recommended some form of consociation. If that were the case, it would necessarily be in conflict with established ANC policy. It seemed to me that only Mr Ismail had read **The Solution** or my paper, so that he would have been well placed to respond directly to them. Whilst he personally rejected the proposals for ideological reasons (which he made clear during lengthy private discussions between us), all the other delegates with whom I spoke appeared willing to give serious consideration to grassroots democracy.

It was generally true that the ANC delegates were guarded and chose their words carefully during the formal sessions so as not to part from established ANC policy - which was probably inevitable - whilst some delegates were much more flexible and open during private discussions. During private discussion, the differences between so-called hardliners and pragmatists were more apparent.

I learned more from the hours of private discussion that were held between the formal talks, and during the week that we travelled together in West Africa after the conference. In private discussion, there seemed to be a significant diversity within the ANC on most issues. The only true common thread appeared to be their opposition to apartheid and ANC strategies to end it. Their oft repeated and emphasised commitment to the Freedom Charter gave a misleading appearance of cohesion, since there were significant differences of interpretation amongst them. For instance, one delegate understood the provision calling for a redistribution of land "to those who work it" to mean that existing white farms would be sub-divided and distributed, without compensation, to the farm workers concerned. Another understood it to mean that white farmers, no matter how large their farms, would be free to keep them, provided they "work the land". Only "unused" land would be redistributed. He was adamant that the ANC would not expropriate or nationalise anything without compensation since that would drive out, not only much needed white expertise, but existing and potential foreign investors.

In my formal presentation, I suggested an alternative or perhaps additional strategy for the ANC to evaluate, an alternative to what might be called the "big bang" theory of revolution. As the ANC sees it, "victory is inevitable" and will be by way of a single, clear cut event amounting to an unconditional hand-over to "the people" represented by the ANC. They acknowledged that this might take decades to achieve but

rejected arguments put forward by other delegates to the effect that it was by no means inevitable. I argued that the pursuit of a genuine intensive democracy with effective checks and balances to prevent the future abuse of power by whoever governs, was achievable peacefully. Unfortunately, the ANC did not respond to these proposals, except some delegates who discussed them with me privately and expressed considerable interest in their potential.

At no time did ANC delegates put forward any specific political or economic alternative. There appeared to be a dichotomy in the ANC position regarding negotiation. On the one hand, they emphasised that the ANC desires a peaceful, negotiated solution. On the other, they do not appear to have any strategy by which this might be achieved and did not find my eminently achievable proposals immediately attractive.

Perhaps it is considered necessary for the ANC, in order to maintain its legitimacy amongst its followers, and its international status, to sustain pressure on the South African government through violence, which means international isolation, mass mobilisation and their internal underground movement. If they support or adopt peaceful strategies, they might deligitimise themselves.

The ANC delegates gave no clue as to what they mean by "negotiate". It was not clear whether they mean merely a "negotiation" of the take-over at the time of "inevitable victory" or a "negotiation" in the normal sense of the word that implies some form of deal or compromise. If the latter, there was no indications as to what they regard as negotiable. This is understandable, since it is probably politically premature to offer clues as to where they might compromise. At this stage such clues might be perceived by their followers to be a sign of weakness.

The session on economic policy was, for me, as unsatisfactory as the political session. The formal presentation was done by Christo Nel and Albert Koopman in which they argued for free enterprise. In his reply, Pallo Jordan relied on the Freedom Charter. However, the Freedom Charter mentions mainly objectives but not policies or means by which they might be achieved. On questions of future policy, economic and political, the ANC's position was frequently that "the people will decide". The crucial question of how was not addressed due to lack of time. On certain questions of economic policy, such as the method and timing of nationalisation of the "commanding heights" of the South African economy, the ANC delegates said they are not themselves experts on the South African economy and would proceed only in consultation with experts and business leaders. Thus, whilst they were adamant about nationalisation and land redistribution, because they are specified in the Freedom Charter, they did not specify how, when or why these would occur.

I was surprised that the ANC delegates did not appear to want to take advantage of what must have been, for them, a unique opportunity to learn from various South African experts in various areas. There was none of the vigorous probing and questioning I would have expected given the reputation and calibre of the South African sociologists, historians, economists, politicians, businessmen, policy analysts, etc. They were concerned, in the formal sessions, almost exclusively with explaining and clarifying their already established positions. They did not seem keen to explore issues on which there is not yet an "official line".

The dichotomy between the ANC's attitude during the conference and subsequently, raises many interesting questions. During the conference, both in closed sessions and in press conferences, the ANC appeared to take the conference and the delegates seriously. Delegates from both sides had hours of intensive discussion, often late into the night. ANC spokesmen emphasised - perhaps over-emphasised - the historic importance of the event. Since the conference, however, spokesmen for the ANC have said or implied that they did not think much of some or most of the South African delegates or of the presentations. Amongst the possible explanations for this change are that the ANC has to reassure its followers that it did not compromise its revolutionary purity; that the ANC has changed its mind about the conference; that its positive attitude in Dakar was an act of courtesy towards delegates; that it has reacted negatively to some of the criticisms of the ANC by the South African delegates upon their return; that their expectations in terms of the delegates who attended and the progress they had hoped to make had not been fulfilled; etc.

Despite my disappointment that what I regarded as the most important objective of the conference - an intensive discussion on post-apartheid alternatives - did not take place, I am pleased that I attended and thankful to Idasa for inviting me. Although delegates on either side seemed to learn much that was new to them, and although no visible ground was conceded, I suspect that some important seeds might have been planted. Perhaps the effect of the conference might be a "maturing" of attitudes and perceptions on both sides.

The events that surrounded the conference and lengthy informal talks amongst delegates were, for me, all most interesting and instructive. In particular, the ideological somersault from socialism and communism to free enterprise in the three countries we visited, Senegal, Burkina Fasso and Ghana, must be of considerable historic significance. Unfortunately, the ANC appeared not to be influenced by, and even unaware of these developments.

Most astonishing of all was the discovery, whilst in Accra, that Ghana is about to adopt, in all but name, a canton system. There is so much in

common between the proposed Ghanaian constitution and what is proposed in **South Africa: the Solution** and what I proposed in my Dakar paper that it is uncanny. Despite the fact that many ANC delegates travel on Ghanaian passports and have close links with Ghana, they seemed to have been unaffected by and unaware of the extraordinary obvious relevance for South Africa of all this.

Whilst I have mentioned only the three countries we visited, there is a powerful wind of change blowing through most of black Africa as socialism, communism and centralisation of power are finally being acknowledged to have been a tragic error. African governments are increasingly privatising, deregulating and decentralising control. This ideological somersault is also occurring in Zambia where the ANC have their headquarters. This makes the apparent change of heart of the ANC since the conference, all the more disappointing.