

CAN THE NP BE AN CONSTRUCTIVE OPPOSITION?

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The NP's withdrawal from the GNU opens an uncertain - and perhaps even dangerous - future for South Africa's new and still vulnerable democracy.

Deputy President FW de Klerk has given the assurance that the NP's role in opposition will be responsible and constructive. If the NP can prove to be a truly *constructive* opposition it will contribute enormously towards the political and economic progress of South Africa. Signs of complacency are creeping into the actions of some ANC ministers. Lack of experience and the almost bankrupt legacy inherited from the apartheid regime, are giving rise to mistakes and inefficiency.

Sometimes one also gets the impression that the ANC has become rather intolerant of criticism - even well intended criticism. On top of this the ANC economic policy is not on track due to its too close alliance with Cosatu and other trade unions. To counteract these tendencies we need a well-functioning multi-party system.

But can the NP be a *constructive* opposition? To live up to this promise the NP will have the severe task to conduct its role as the main opposition party in such a manner that it will not undermine the viability of our nascent democratic system, that it will not transform the political arena into a brutal political scene of mudslinging and character assassination, that it will not instigate new racial and/or class hostilities and that it will not undermine South Africa's international status and/or its economic credibility.

In short, to oppose in a *constructive* manner, will demand from the NP to have a clear vision of the *general interest* of the total population and to rise above the pursuit of sectorial and/or sectarian interests. Will it be possible for the NP to master the art of opposition politics and to be constructive in the terms described above?

Considering the track record of the NP over the last 50 years, we probably have several reasons to fear that the "art of constructive opposition" would be out of its reach. The NP was for decades notorious world-wide for maintaining immoral political and economic systems which

openly protect and promote the narrow sectarian and class interests of a small white minority, while neglecting and even exploiting the black majority. Although the NP has, over the last six years played an important - and in many aspects a constructive - role in dismantling the old systems, it is still not certain whether the NP has cleansed itself from its once deeply ingrained bourgeois preference for the racial and class interests of the white minority.

When Mr de Klerk relaunched the NP on 2 February 1996 in Pretoria, it became evident that the NP is still very much committed to promote and to protect the vested interests, the "standards" and the "values" of the (mainly white and coloured) property class in South Africa. It is therefore rather unlikely that the NP will be able to transform itself into an opposition party capable of articulating the *common* interest of *all* population groups in our highly divided society.

The sudden departure of the NP from the GNU immediately after the completion of the new Constitution, strengthens the suspicion that the NP's main consideration in the partaking of the GNU, was to secure the best possible deal for its (mainly white and coloured) property-owning middle class constituency. As soon as it was a *fait accompli* that it did not succeed to entrench its bourgeois constituency's vested interests to the degree of its liking, it walked out in bitterness and with "Schadenfreude" (gloatingly).

We have therefore reason to fear an open upsurge in the NP of its traditional inclination to be the champion of the interests of the (spoiled) middle class.

It will definitely not promote the viability of our newly attained democracy if the battle lines are again to be drawn on the stereotyped class and racial lines of yesteryear. This can easily polarise into a relentless powerstruggle between the middle class (that is controlling the capitalist sector) and the mainly working and not working lower class (that is controlling the political sector).

The NP should be forewarned not to conduct its opposition politics in a manner that will deepen the schism between the white and coloured "capitalistic minority" and the black "democratic majority". If this is to become the main battle field not only the economy, but also the middle class would be the main losers.

Any opposition strategy that is going to widen the chasm between the first and third world's in the South African society, will undermine all attempts towards nation-building and reconciliation. The NP can therefore only be constructive in its role in opposition, if it can pursue a positive strategy to bridge the two "worlds". Does the NP have the heart for this kind of "inclusivity"? I doubt it.

It is possible that the NP is leaving the GNU to be in a stronger position to oppose the investigations of the TRC. It will really be a pity if this is the case. The fact that Mr de Klerk repeatedly demanded that the book of the past should be closed and that we should start looking to the future, is a clear indication that he does not understand the true purpose of the TRC.

It is common knowledge that the "right-wing" within the NP is all but keen to acknowledge that an "apartheid guilt" has accumulated during the apartheid years. This group is also not susceptible to the idea that the whites have an obligation towards "restitution" or "regstellende optrede". If this group became dominant in the NP as opposition party, its strategy towards both the TRC and the RDP will certainly be destructive. As in the old days, the relative strength of the "verligtes" and "verkrampes" in the NP became a very important matter again.

While the NP is standing on the threshold of becoming the main opposition party, it may be illuminating to establish to what extent the NP behaved constructively in its relationship with opposition parties while it was in government. During its 46 years as government it showed little respect for the then opposition parties. Almost all these parties were either banned, destroyed or seriously curtailed by relentless - and often brutal - propaganda campaigns and other authoritarian actions.

The secret of how the NP succeeded to win 11 successive General Elections and three Referendums from 1948 until 1992, is in all probability locked up in its superb - but highly deplorable - strategy to play havoc among opposition parties by painting them as deadly perils to the survival of the Afrikaner and/or white civilisation in South Africa. We cannot afford a replay of the NP's petty party political rousing of suspicion.

How constructive the NP will be as an opposition party will become evident in the next few months. But if we take the kind of propaganda campaigns conducted against the ANC in some of

can be deleted if necessary

the NP-orientated newspapers as an indication of the NP's possible future strategy, we have reason to fear that we are heading for a dirty war.

Let me mention only two examples: An Afrikaans Sunday newspaper published, almost weekly, very degrading remarks about President Mandela on its editorial page. These remarks are often in such poor taste that we can regard them as an on-going vendetta against the personal integrity of the president. Is this kind of journalism really necessary?

Another Afrikaans daily newspaper is lately so anxious to blame the ANC-SACP Alliance for the sharp drop in the value of the Rand, that it gets close to the point of rejoicing in the manner in which the alleged discipline of "international markets" is giving the Alliance a well-deserved hiding!

On several occasions NP spokesmen have also made statements as if the "international markets" can be "co-opted" as a partner to stop the ANC in its alleged "dangerous track".

The international markets and/or global economy have certainly become a highly important phenomenon to be taken into account very carefully. But these markets are not rational and independent phenomena. They are an integral part of the economic power struggle between nation states and they are all but neutral in the tense relationships between first and third world countries. These markets can be manipulated and they are manipulated on a daily basis.

The NP and its media should be extremely careful not to mobilise the "international markets" as a partner in a *destructive* "Total Onslaught" against the ANC-government. The consequences of such an onslaught is truly to ghastly to contemplate.