

1996

THE REFERENDUM SHOULD NOT HARM THE UNFOLDING DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Sampie Terreblanche

On 17 March the white electorate will vote in its third Referenda since 1960.

The Referendum of 5 October 1960 was about the desirability of becoming a Republic. In terms of legislation the direct issue at stake boiled down to changing the status of the Governor General to that of a ceremonial State President. But the main issue was whether South Africa could afford losing its membership of the Commonwealth.

On reflection we should have realised in 1960 that an apartheid-based state was far too vulnerable in the international arena to claim the luxury of becoming a Republic outside of the Commonwealth. The suspension of our Commonwealth membership in 1961 was the beginning of three decades of very damaging international isolation - something even the NP government now desperately wants to end.

During the 1960 campaign, the NP took a very indifferent attitude towards the possibility of being isolated internationally. Even as late as February 1988 Mr Pik Botha instructed our representative at the UN to tell the world to do its damndest. Today the NP acknowledges that we cannot go it alone. Today those that are in favour of a No-vote are defiant about international relationships. Ironically enough, the NP cannot be too critical about the CP's defiant attitude - it set the bad example for almost 30 years!

The Referendum on 2 November 1983 was about the desirability of introducing the Tricameral Parliament to giving "second class" parliamentary representation to the Coloured and Asian population groups. The real controversial issues at stake were firstly, the desirability of concentrating additional

to be omitted

powers into the hands of an executive State President, and secondly, the continuous exclusion of the majority black population from parliamentary representation.

On reflection it was a mistake to create an "Imperial State President's office" and an even bigger mistake to exclude blacks. Codesa represents a belated attempt to negotiate a constitution that will create proper parliamentary representation for all South Africans. Hopefully the future constitution will also replace the present potentially "dictatorial" presidency with a more democratic one. The powers of the State President should be curtailed by the needed checks and balances to ensure accountability and to prevent personality cults. Being an African country - with a poorly-developed democratic tradition - South Africa should be overtly beware of strongmen State Presidents!

The Referendum of 1992 is a Referendum only for whites but about two wider issues - the future constitutional relationship between all South Africans, and South Africa's future economic relationship with the rest of the world.

The stakes during the Referendum are exceptionally high. If things go astray - and the No-vote gets a majority - it will not only jeopardize intergroup relations in a very serious manner, but it will also do irreparable harm to Codesa, to the South African economy and to our indispensable relationships with the rest of the world. It stands above dispute that we cannot afford a No-majority.

With the benefit of hindsight we can today make a case that No-majorities during the 1960 and 1983 Referenda would have been very much to the advantage of South Africa. It is highly unlikely that this will in due course also be the case with this Referendum. But it would be rather naive to think that a Yes-majority will be unproblematic and will only have positive results. Even if we are strongly in favour of a Yes-vote, we should be fully aware of the following potentially detrimental spin-off effects.

Firstly, we have reason to believe that one of the hidden purposes of the Referendum is to strengthen Pres. F W de Klerk's political position and to enhance his presidential status and grandeur to enable him to take a stronger stand at Codesa. It will be a pity if the Referendum is turned into an American-like presidential election to beef-up the "executive" powers of the already too powerful presidency.

We should realise that an either too small or a too big Yes-vote can have a negative effect on Codesa and can cause a delay in reaching an agreement about an interim government. If the Yes-vote should be less than 55 per cent, it will do little to enhance the self-confidence of Mr de Klerk, but it will strengthen his bargaining position at Codesa. He will then be in a position to claim that the small Yes-majority makes it difficult to make concessions.

If the Yes-vote should be above 60 per cent (or even above 65 per cent), it will enhance the self-confidence of Mr de Klerk, but it will deprive him of the argument that he cannot make concessions. The Yes-majority should therefore not be too small, but also not too big! This rather contradictory situation creates the discomforting suspicion that whatever the size of the Yes-majority, the NP will be inclined - given its sectionalistic track record - to misuse it for personal and for party political purposes.

Due to the dangers involved should a No-majority be attained, the high risks to which the country is exposed by calling the Referendum can only be justified if a firm prospect exists that a Yes-majority will not delay, but will indeed speed-up agreement on an interim government. An agreement on an interim government is highly desirable from an economic point of view. The negative effect on the economy of a continuation of the ANC's stand on disinvestment, has become almost unbearable. Everything possible should therefore be done to reach agreement on the interim government as soon as possible (but not later than the end of 1992) to enable the ANC to call for a lifting of the remaining sanctions.

Judging the Referendum against the background of our serious economic predicament, it would be inexcusable if the government is indeed putting the country through the high risks involved, but without the intention of speeding-up agreement on the highly needed interim government. If the government's main purpose with the Referendum is to regain the ground it has lost to the Liberals since the middle of last year, it is undoubtedly playing a too dangerous game.

Secondly, the Referendum can easily be conducted in a way that can seriously harm attempts to build democratic values. The NP-propaganda machine is already trying to divide whites in Yes-men and No-men, in good guys and bad guys. The NP tries to reduce the issue to a simple white-black choice. After the Referendum the NP will in all probability expect all those that voted Yes to support its stand at Codesa. The political situation in South Africa is far too complicated to be reduced to a simple dichotomy.

During our long "undemocratic" years - when only the white minority could vote in parliamentary elections - it became commonplace to accuse those who were against the "system" as being unpatriotic. This time around those that are only prepared to vote Yes conditionally, run the danger of being accused of a lack of patriotism.

We should not underestimate the potential of the Referendum to harm democratic values. Those who want to nurture these values should be unyielding in their endeavours to take an independent and articulate stand on whatever controversial issue arises. They owe it to South Africa.

Thirdly, the question that will be put to the electorate of 17 March is vague and susceptible for all kinds of interpretations during the period following the Referendum. It will not be difficult for the NP to interpret a Yes-majority in ways that can either delay or harm that reform process. Until now the process initiated by Mr de Klerk on 2 February 1990 left lots to be desired. He is keen on negotiation to reach consensus

on "power-sharing" but not on (what he calls) the transition of power to a majority party. This is not good enough. This is not negotiations about a genuine democratization. The question that should have been put to the electorate ought to have been more concrete and more specific and ought to have addressed substantial reform issues.

Finally, we should not underestimate the potential of the Referendum of aggravating the already hostile attitudes in the white community between those in favour of reform and those in opposition to it. The sharp division in white circles on matters pertaining to the rights blacks should enjoy in a future South Africa, is a very unfortunate and potentially dangerous one. The animosity already existing between the two groups have attained an emotional and irrational character and the Referendum can easily bring rude hate between white and white to the surface.

The division is perhaps the price we inevitably have to pay to move from a racist to a non-racist society. We must, nonetheless, be careful not to be unnecessarily insensitive and harsh towards the No-vote people. New wounds opened by the Referendum can take decades to heal.

A real danger exists that the already sharp "divide" in white circles can become much sharper and can lead to white-on-white violence - both during the Referendum and afterwards. Such violence can seriously disrupt future economic and constitutional developments. In so far as the Referendum is going to stir up violence that could have been prevented, it may in due time be judged as having been a game not worth the candle.

By calling the Referendum, the State President took awesome responsibilities on his shoulders. If it causes uncontrollable violence, or results in a No-majority, or fails to speed-up the reform process, he will have to account for it. In such an eventuality, history's judgement will be relentless.