

Financial
Mail

SANCTIONS

Troublesome priests

There are times when ANC President Nelson Mandela shows an unexpectedly subtle turn of mind. Last week, he offered an ostensibly absurd deal to SA businessmen: that in the face of worrying economic decline, they should curb further redundancies — in return for which Mandela would call for a lifting of the few remaining trade sanctions.

Such a deal is one which businessmen could easily reject. The removal of what trade sanctions are left would have no impact on business activity here whatsoever. It is three years at least since they were anything of an issue locally. On the other hand, the halting of redundancies in present circumstances would only weaken the fabric of many hard-hit businesses and would most likely be the death knell for others.

But what Mandela said was, nevertheless, important. His message to SA's existing trading partners was that despite the evident lack of progress on constitutional reform, the economic plight of the country is so great that all trade sanctions must go and whatever help that can be given would be gratefully received.

Our guess is that he well knows that these nations would be instantly aware of the absurdity of his proposition. But he has been able to communicate effectively his deep and (we assume) genuine concern for increasing hardship that a contracting economy is bringing, especially to the poor.

No doubt it is a theme that will be developed further at the annual Davos conference to be held shortly. It was at this conference last year that Mandela capitulated to the Gnomes of Zurich and forswore nationalisation in favour of free enterprise.

Last week, moreover, his message to business abroad was achieved without alienating his less sophisticated followers here. Simply put, he avoided leading his flock from too far in advance; a politician does so at his peril.

Trade sanctions have never been a real impediment to growth here. Nothing could have been more impeding than the National Party's own policies, in conjunction with the international banking boycott and subsequent US disinvestment. None of this had anything to do with the ANC. It reflected the foolishness of the Nats and the spontaneous response of the US owners of assets here who feared the risks of revolution. Both were entirely fortuitous.

What is needed today to regenerate this economy is a rising trend of

investment — and that is unlikely to come about until the various liberation leaders stop bickering and get together to make peace.

There was certainly no subtlety in the call by the SA Council of Churches' Frank Chikane for increased sanctions; Archbishop Desmond Tutu also finds it extremely difficult to let them go. Chikane's appeal to international banks once again not to roll over SA loans or agree to further rescheduling was hardly surprising. The council has already made quite clear its qualified support for violence in the interest of what it believes to be a just cause.

It is not difficult to understand Chikane's position. The council received R34,2m in donations in 1991, 96,6% from abroad. This is 37,5% more than it received the previous year. A grant of R452 150 went towards the house occupied by Chikane in Diepkloof Extension, Soweto, subsequently valued at R800 000.

Neither Chikane nor his council are directly exposed to the difficulties of the SA economy as are most of those who attend their member churches. Nor does the council depend on these humble folk to fund its activities.

What is distressing about the SACC is not its involvement in politics. No Christian enjoined by his faith to adhere to certain values can avoid applying those values to his everyday conduct. This council, however, embraces political policies and a brand of Marxism that have been shown in every country in which they have been applied to impoverish the poor — and through totalitarian means to bring increasing political harassment and oppression.

Is it too much to ask of the SACC that it attempts to understand the imperatives of a market economy before it opens its mouth and puts its foot in once again? We grant it a monopoly of moral fervour, so long as it leaves rational and utilitarian analysis to those who know what they are about.

The SACC may well represent the SA Communist Party at prayer. But, by doing so, it will not help the poor, nor

foster Christianity, nor be able any longer to bring pressure to bear on SA's bankers abroad. Chikane is clearly yesterday's man; Mandela, by contrast, has shown wisdom.

Perhaps it is now time for the ANC to think seriously of casting off the yoke of association with the SA Communist Party and getting down to serious economic discussion.

