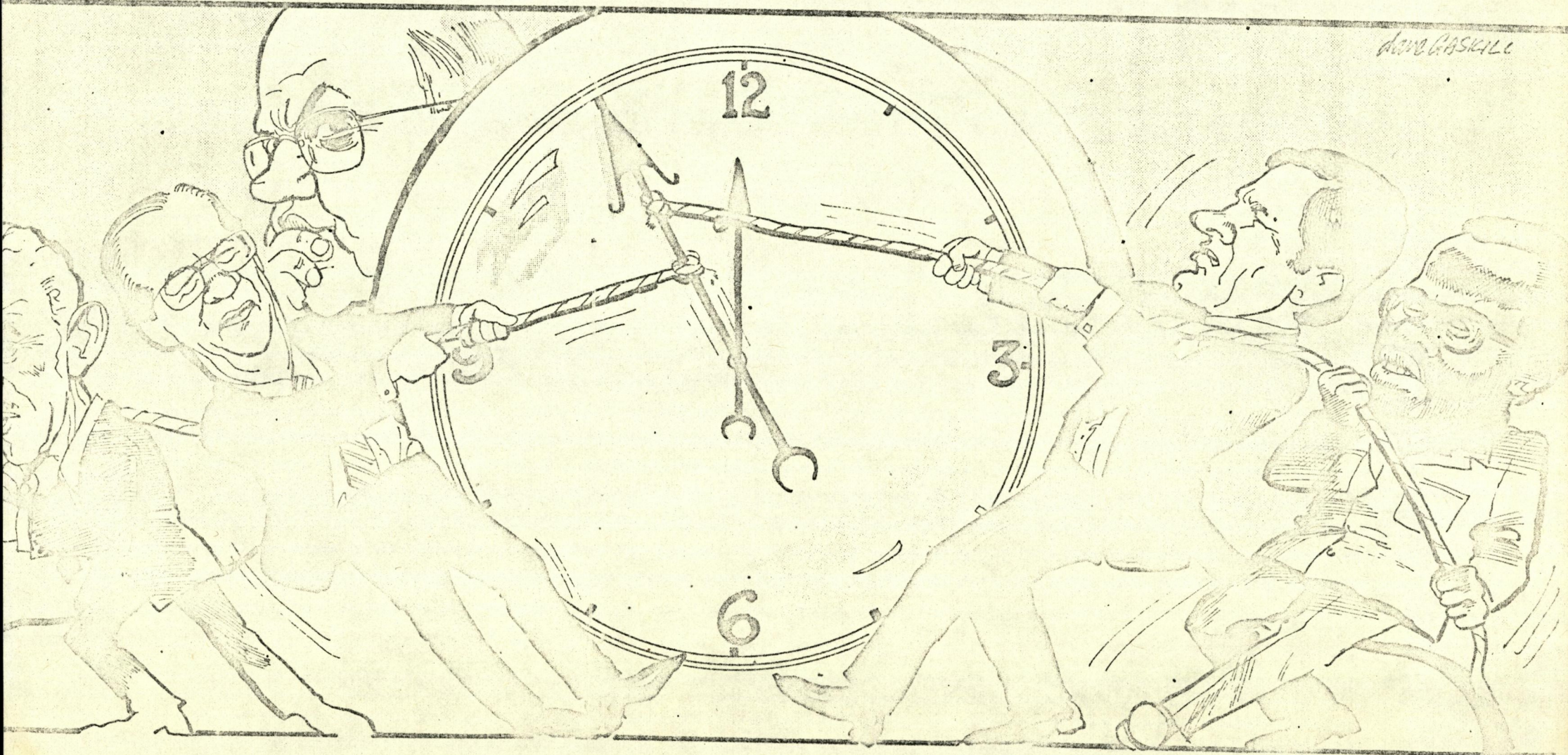


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David Gaskill



An historic day in South Africa's history

ON Wednesday, the countdown begins to a different political tomorrow in South Africa.

It will mark the beginning of a time of intense danger for the country's politicians: keeping pace with the countdown will be the ticking of a veritable timebomb for them all.

On Wednesday, the long-awaited constitutional proposals of the President's Council will be revealed and South Africa will be plunged into a period of political upheaval.

Depending on how the politicians respond to the new dangers and challenges — and, of course, on how well the President's Council members have done their work — the upheaval may generate not only a different, but a better, tomorrow.

As the Government makes its first effort at an inclusive, rather than exclusive, form of government for whites, coloureds and Asians, dilemmas and uncertainties abound for the country's politicians.

The period will demand from them creative and courageous statecraft.

There are certain inevitabilities.

It will be a messy, imperfect business; the options will be laden with unpalatable conditions; compromise will hang heavy in the air.

Thomas Pakenham, the celebrated author of "The Boer War", describes war as "a contest in blunders". Similarly, Napoleon declared that victory goes to the general that makes the fewest mistakes.

That is probably how it is going to be.

The skill of the politicians involved is going to lie not so much in pristine and glorious ideological paths, but in how to minimise the blunders and mistakes that inevitably will accompany the new process.

Politics in South Africa is about to undergo a test of its familiar definition as the art of the possible, or the "next best".

Prices have already been extracted. More are to come.

The Prime Minister, Mr P W Botha, made a sizeable downpayment this year when he embraced the concept of power sharing and suffered the traumatic split in the National Party that followed.

percent in 1977 to 43 percent in 1982.

Dr Andries Treurnicht's fledgling Conservative Party commands a tidy 18 percent and Dr F Van Zyl Slabbert's Progressive Federal Party 22 percent.

Dr Treurnicht's party, and the Herstigte Nasionale Party (three percent), will vigorously oppose the new dispensation; the PFP suddenly assumes a pivotal role in the scheme of things.

But the PFP has refused to countenance the President's Council route because it believes that, instead of reducing racial polarisation, the institution heightens it by excluding Africans, who make up more than 70 percent of the population.

Mr Botha's dilemma (in the white arena) is how to bring the bulk of PFP support on board.

If he meets their demand and includes Africans at this stage, he will suffer further disastrous losses from his own party.

But there might be another way.

The PFP, at the moment, operates in a distinctly imperfect world.

As a party committed to non-racialism, it makes its stand in a racial institution: a whites-only Parliament.

That paradox provides the clue.

If Mr Botha's new dispensation for coloureds and Asians offers them exactly the same political rights as whites, it would be extremely difficult for the PFP to argue against it.

So Dr Slabbert's party does not escape its share of dilemmas in the countdown that starts on Wednesday.

There are more. The Prime Minister's appeal to the white population to accept the new dispensation will be seductive.

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Signals

It will promise reform, a reduction of conflict and will assuage a measure of white guilt over the treatment of coloured people, fondly held by many to be "ons mense" or "our people".

In the nature of politics — give away as little as possible for the maximum possible gain — the proposals might well be vague, in which case Mr Botha will ask the country to "trust me", an appeal he has already made at National Party congresses.

One PFP dilemma is that most whites will be only too keen to be seduced.

If, in the PFP's view, the new dispensation does not point to a better to-

morrow, it will be bound to say so and discourage its followers from supporting it — reaping the unpopularity of a teetotaler at a booze-up.

That could cost them dearly in white electoral support, but Dr Slabbert remains adamant: "We have no intention of rushing headlong into an artificial white solidarity because of a rightwing threat to the government, or of bargaining away our support without clear and tangible signs of reform."

But Wednesday's dilemmas, unlike some park benches, are not reserved for whites.

For the coloured and Asian people, who are going to be invited to join with whites in what Mr Botha describes as a "form of healthy power sharing", tough decisions also loom.

The major political party in the coloured community is the Labour Party, which boycotted the President's Council — and suffered relegation to the political wilderness and important defections from its ranks as a result.

Like the PFP, it is committed to a nonracial society, but signals from the Labour Party camp recently have indicated a readiness to negotiate with the Government on a new dispensation.

Its national chairman, Mr David Curry, wrote

recently that the party was not prepared "to transform the tactic of boycott into an iron principle that makes it impossible to act politically".

But, he added, the party needed to be convinced that the envisaged reform was real and not sham.

Getting in on the President's Council act will not come cheaply for the Labour Party.

It might jeopardise its links with Chief Gatsha Buthelezi's Inkatha movement in the South African Black Alliance.

And it would probably cost much of what remains of its urban support.

Political observers note that, in the urban areas, it is more the trade unions and ratepayers' associations that hold sway among the coloured communities than party politicians.

And then there are the students, of course, most of whom would be expected to reject any deal with the Nationalist government.

If the Labour Party refuses to deal, there are other, albeit even less representative, political formations in the community that would: the Freedom Party of Mr Charles Julies and Mr Loft

Adams's Congress of the People.

The Indian community faces similar problems.

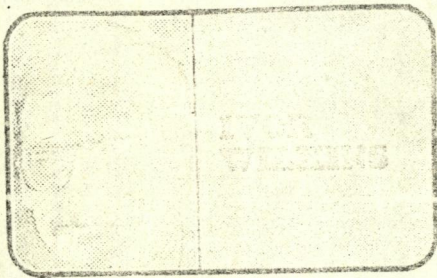
Most, if not all, of the members of the South African Indian Council, notably Mr A Rajbansi's ruling Federal People's Party, are likely to deal, according to observers.

But their claim to represent any constituency is tenuous: in the last shambling SAIC elections, only six percent of the Indian electorate participated.

Mr Yellan Chinsamy's Reform Party, which associated itself with the anti-SAIC lobby that was resoundingly successful in boycotting the council election, is less likely to deal.

Also a member of the Black Alliance, he has already said that anyone

Countdown to a different tomorrow



who makes constitutional deals to the exclusion of blacks must face the consequences.

The question that remains untested is what the majorities in both these communities would do, given the opportunity to share power in the terms — yet undefined — that Mr Botha has in mind.

Legislation currently before Parliament will enable that question to be

answered by way of referendums at the appropriate time.

The results of that test will be important to the Government, which has publicly declared that general acceptance of any constitutional dispensation is vital.

They will also be important tests of the influence of the current political leaders in the various communities.

In the countdown to

South Africa's altered tomorrow, an enormous amount rides on the personal leadership and decision-making of the Prime Minister.

Committed to the concept of constitutional reform, the question is whether or not his nerve will fail him in the transition from concept to reality.

Danger

His political actions leading to Wednesday's seminal event have already taken him beyond the point of no return.

Even if he wanted to retreat into apartheid orthodoxy, it is an already crowded market in which he would be trampled under foot.

To go forward seems to

be his only real option.

Should his first step prove too tentative, he faces the prospect of monumental rejection by the majority of coloureds and Indians; and a deeply, and possibly almost equally, divided white community.

To the prohibitive political cost of such a faltering step must be added the alienation of South Africa's African population that is assured, in any event, by its exclusion from the Government's white, coloured and Indian formula.

Danger abounds for all the politicians drawn into the events that will shape South Africa's tomorrow, but, for the Prime Minister in particular, the danger of excessive caution appears to override all others.

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