

Defining the limits of collaboration

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AT the meeting between the prime minister and the executive members of the Coloured Persons' Representative Council, Mr P W Botha used an interesting analogy. After the Anglo-Boer war, Mr Botha said, the vanquished Afrikaners were given not freedom but only representative rule. However, the Afrikaner leaders did not reject the machinery created for them. "They used the machinery that had been created for them and landed in executive posts in those organizations and within a few years had created such a situation that Union could take place."

Mr Botha admitted that the position of the Afrikaners after the war was not altogether analogous with that of the coloured people today. But, he continued, "the principle remains the same, that people are either prepared to work together (with those who rule them) for the sake of their people with the machinery that is there and to look for improved machinery, or they are not".

Historical analogy

Mr Botha's historical analogy opens up some intriguing issues. On a more abstract level there is the question about the utility of historical analogy to penetrate the particular relationships or policies of today. More concretely one may ask to what extent does Mr Botha's analogy help to understand the present political dilemma of South Africa. Quite simply: Is our history relevant to our present situation?

It was Arnold Toynbee, the magician of historical analogy, that sounded the most eloquent warning against the pitfalls of historical comparison. He observed that "however far we may succeed in going in our search for sets of identical examples on either side, we shall never be able to prove that there is not some non-identical factor that we have overlooked, and that this non-identical factor is not the decisive factor that accounts for the different outcomes in different cases of what has looked to us like an identical situation but may not have been this in truth".

The "non-identical factor" in Mr Botha's analogy is easy to spot. Indeed an analysis of Afrikaner politics in the Transvaal and the Free State just after war shows that a completely different strategy was followed than the one the prime minister suggested.

Leaders refused

The recognized leaders of the disfranchised Afrikaners in Transvaal and Free State at the beginning of the century flatly refused to collaborate with colonial rule until the British granted responsible government to the ex-republics. Finally the Liberal Party in December 1906 granted responsible government for the Transvaal which meant self-rule for the colony — and not only some degree of control over the communal affairs of the Afrikaners. Only now did the Het Volk party under Botha and

Smuts proceed to fight the election (which it won) and use the existing machinery to promote the cause of their people.

Thus the principle that was non-negotiable to Smuts and Botha was this: Do not get involved in any political order which does not provide for acquiring the substance of power.

What would Botha and Smuts have done had they been given the opportunity to occupy positions in the British-controlled administrative apparatus of the colony — to pay out pensions and nominally pass budgets? A year after the war Lord Milner approached them to serve on the Legislative Council of Transvaal, a body remarkably similar to the present Coloured Persons' Representative Council. Milner also invited some Joiners and Handsuppers among the Boers to serve on the council. (The first were Boer deserters who fought on the British side; the latter burghers who at an early stage of the war lay down their arms and then observed an oath of neutrality.)

Rejected offers

The *bittereinder* leaders all refused Milner's offers, thus ensuring that they did not become identified with British domination. Standing outside the apparatus of colonial rule, they could continue to criticize the government and mobilize support for their own cause.

Milner did find some Joiners and Handsuppers who accepted his offer. But, as A M Grundlingh points out in his superb study "Die Hendsoppers en Joiners", just published by HAUM, they had no real bargaining power or influence in the political order. General Smuts wrote at the time: "The Councillors as well as the public know that they are mere puppets in a play in which destiny is the real actor."

There is also another principle to be derived from the analogy of Afrikaner politics during the reconstruction of 1902-07. This can be put briefly as follows: The strategy of non-collaboration with the rulers must be complemented by ceaseless efforts to build up a mass organization if a group or class does not want to consign itself to political impotence.

Real genius

That he could succeed in doing this was the real genius of Botha. Such was the rancour between the *bittereinders* and joiners after the war that it was no foregone conclusion that the Afrikaners could be mobilized against imperial rule. In 1902 Boer society was almost fatally divided: Some 10 percent of the republican burghers, who could be called up for military service, had become joiners, 27 percent handsuppers, and only 31 percent laid down their arms as *bittereinders*.

Together with Smuts and De la Rey, Botha from 1902 worked tirelessly to heal the wounds of war and effect a reconciliation among the Afrikaners. If joiners showed remorse Botha urged forgiveness. To a National Scout he said simply: "I accept your regrets. The time is coming when I shall require your services." When Botha fought the election of 1907 all the joiners and handsuppers had been effectively integrated into his victorious Het Volk party.

However, any straight comparison with coloured politics today is problematical, for there is yet another "non-identical factor" involved. After the war the Transvaal Afrikaners comprised roughly half of the electorate — if they became unified power was in their grasp. The incentive for mobilization was too great to tolerate a simmering feud between collaborators and *bittereinders*.

Disfranchised

In contrast, the coloureds have been disfranchised by the apartheid onslaught and are without any hope to become an effective force in the political system. Thus historians will find it difficult to pass a moral or political judgment on the present leaders of the Labour Party. Perhaps the only way to start a mass organization to speak out against apartheid was to have seized control of the existing machinery. Perhaps the disfranchised are condemned to wage a continual war among themselves while there is not the prospect of power.

But however that may be the acrimonious discussion between Mr Botha and the Labour Party leaders has obviously tolled the funeral bell for old-style "coloured politics". The limits of collaboration have been reached. It is patently impossible for the Labour Party leaders to keep on playing the one card they have — that of non-collaboration within a framework of collaboration — and continue to accept the salaries and the frills of office. Mr Botha's cutting remarks caused as much glee among Afrikaner hardliners as among non-collaborating blacks.

For Mr Botha it is obviously the end of a chapter too. The style of consensus politics which he, unlike his predecessor, wants to adopt is irreconcilable with heaping scorn on the designated communal leaders of whom it is expected to sell decisions to their constituency. And among the present group of coloureds prepared to collaborate in the existing system there is clearly nobody who wield more influence than the present leaders of the Labour Party.

Sincere

Hopefully the discussion in Pretoria between Mr Botha and these leaders was the parting shots of a war. If that is so, the reconstruction has to begin without delay. Despite District Six, I believe Mr Botha is sincere in his privately expressed intention to heal the wounds of the past 30 years. Whether he would be prepared to do so at the cost of party unity remains to be seen.

But if there is any principle to be derived from the historical analogy he introduced it is this: People do not form a political community and become full partners in the politics of negotiation until they acquire all the rights and duties provided under a system of responsible government. And only then can there be a move towards Union.