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New names

BEN Ngubani, chairman of the National Assembly's Names Committee, has given communities the option of choosing the names of their towns and cities: a decision taken in accordance with the principles of democracy and decentralisation, yet also fraught with danger. Imagine the effect in terms of expense, practicality and cultural shock if the majority of the country's place names were to be changed overnight as the result of thousands of separate decisions taken at grass roots level.

Like the old flag and anthem, existing place names are associated with the colonial past, but only a few of them have negative or offensive connotations while most have some degree of historical significance. Consider in context the ancillary question of removing statues and other structures that are associated, like some place names, with past injustice and oppression. Instead of pulling them all down, why not preserve some of them as historical symbols. This has even been done with powerful effect at Auschwitz in Poland, where parts of the notorious concentration camp serve as a haunting reminder of the tyranny that humanity commits and then overcomes.

Those place names that are especially offensive to the majority of the population should be changed immediately but, once these preliminary decisions have been taken, it would be wise to pause and reconsider before another round of changes is embarked on. Place names link the past with the present. Their erasure also removes a significant section of our history, not to mention the hurt to sensibilities that the wholesale destruction of symbols is bound to inflict in a heterogeneous society. The responsibility for making changes has been passed to local authorities, but central government should retain the last word and exercise a wise restraint in approving whatever names are proposed.

The first six weeks

AFTER the first working session of the new Parliament and the first six weeks of the Government of National Unity, there is no doubt that the new order has worked remarkably well considering the enormity of the transition. To transform from apartheid structures to the new non-racial, untested system was a considerable task. But the committees of Parliament got up and running and dealt successfully with their first legislation. The National Assembly and the Senate debated and approved legislation.

The rules that govern these institutions did not even exist two months ago. The relationship between the two houses, their committees and how legislation was to be considered, had to be created afresh. The officials of Parliament under new speaker Frene Ginwala deserve a round of applause.

The Government of National Unity began functioning. Ministers from their disparate political backgrounds apparently got down to work with a will.

There have been some glitches. These point to potential problems, which if allowed to widen, will make serious chasms. When President Nelson Mandela named his cabinet the confirmation that Derek Keys would carry on in the finance portfolio came as a massive relief. Regardless of declarations by Mandela and others that they have abandoned nationalisation and other command economic practices

there was apprehension about their sincerity. The appointment of Keys immediately calmed the waters. The accord with his ANC deputy Alec Erwin at the presentation of the Budget still further allayed fears. They had managed to find considerable funds to begin the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) without sacrificing internationally accepted economic principles. Now Keys has resigned.

Mandela, Erwin and Deputy President F.W. De Klerk have all said that his "personal" reasons are compelling. But, in spite of the appointment of a respected banker to replace him, the uncertainty will remain. And we can ill afford it. Keys' reasons may be deeply personal and he may well be loath to air them in public but until he does the uncertainty will remain. It goes with the job, and the new buzz word of transparency, for Keys to reassure the nation that he is not in deep conflict with the ANC-dominated government over how they intend to fund the RDP.

Talking of conflict, there were two occasions when the ANC caucus moved to overrule its elected executive. The first was over the appointment of a secret cabinet committee to investigate moving Parliament from the Cape to the Transvaal. There are serious financial implications which could affect the delivery of

promises to the electorate. The ANC's elected representatives in the caucus will bear the brunt of grassroots unhappiness and they demanded a public committee to do the work of this shadowy committee.

More serious was the caucus decision to overrule an amendment to the constitution which had been approved both by the cabinet and the multi-party standing committees on constitutional affairs. This because the pressure which the caucus brought to bear on its ministers in the cabinet caused them to override the rules of Parliament in order to get the legislation through on the last morning of the session.

The ANC comes from a tradition of immediate democracy. Shop, floor and township structures were intimately involved in presenting mandates to their leaders. ANC ministers must ensure that, in exercising their power,

investigation into the shootings at the ANC's Shell House in March, Mufamadi chose to be highly selective in what information he presented to Parliament. He brushed aside suggestions that the ANC had failed to co-operate with the police in doing ballistic tests of the weapons in Shell House. Now he faces a grilling, and possible demands for his resignation, over misleading Parliament.

It is instructive that within a week of the row boiling upon the floor of the National Assembly suddenly talks were being held with the police and weapons handed over. All the evidence suggests that Mufamadi tried to shield the ANC's obstruction of the police investigations. Documents, apparently from the police (and in the minister's possession), clearly set out the difficulties which they experienced in getting any co-operation from the ANC. More disturbing still are the large number of weapons that were apparently on hand in Shell House.

Questions in Parliament are designed to put a brake on executive power. Mufamadi's problems can be seen in the context of an uneasy transition from underground movement to governing party. Certainly everyone is on a learning curve. Ministers, members of the caucus, and opposition parties. They must act with great caution and honesty.

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Robert Mazibuko

ROBERT "Treeman" Mazibuko, who died in the city on Monday, was remarkable in many ways. Most knew him as a conservationist, internationally respected for his pioneering work in conservation farming. Long before "greening" of the environment had become a popular cause, Mazibuko taught organic methods of growing fruit and vegetables and encouraged the planting of trees. Many people now follow his example to grow their own food, and his erosion-control techniques are also widely used. It was a privilege to hear him teach, for his vast knowledge never made him self-important or condescending, and his energy came from love for all living things, including people. Some felt his combination of wisdom and goodness to be almost saintly.

From a more practical point of view he was an example to every South African. Mazibuko's imagination was seized, early, by the principle of organic farming and how it might benefit poor people scratching a living from already-ruined soil. He took every opportunity to educate himself — often by correspondence — and then to educate others, formally and informally, in Natal and elsewhere. This continued on an ever-widening scale to the end of his life. Mazibuko's success, and the respect he commanded everywhere, is the triumphant result of blending service with dedication to an ideal. His work, and that of his pupils, and theirs in turn, will keep Robert Mazibuko's memory green.