

Incremental gains: a way forward?

By WAYNE MITCHELL

IDASA has held several conferences, workshops and seminars which have looked at ways and means of bringing together individuals and organisations who are opposed to the apartheid system. The one principle, but not the only one, which these individuals and groups have in common is that they are seeking ways to create a non-racial democracy in South Africa. To date many different strategies have been employed with a great amount of energy. However, the status quo remains: the National Party is still in power together with its apartheid policies, backed by coercion, co-option and corruption.

Surely the time has arrived for those working towards a just democracy to sit down and reassess their *strategies* for securing further political gains.

One strategy which is yet to be fully opened up for debate in the search for a broader strategic objective to end the present impasse with the Nationalist government, is that of strategic incrementalist gains. Possibilities do exist for smaller local gains which could enhance the "national solution" to our present dilemma. The question which must be asked is: "Can non-racial political, social and economic structures be developed at a local level which will impact upon the strategy of a negotiated political settlement at the national level?" The answer in my opinion is yes, provided that the strategy is part of a "total strategy", a strategy which will require tolerance and understanding. The tolerance and understanding must be between all parties and organisations working for change despite past differences pertaining to strategy, which in many instances have become "holy cows" and should be reassessed. This tolerance must be exercised by government opponents currently working within governmental structures and those who are engaging in extra-parliamentary political activity.

The debate surrounding strategic incremental gains also needs to take place as a result of the emergence of an increasingly broad range of actors, who through co-option and coercion will, and have, become involved in promoting change at the local level by using governmental structures. This will occur due to the fact that there is unlikely to be a major breakthrough on reform (despite Nationalist promises which will be forthcoming prior to a September election) as well as the increasingly dim prospects for revolutionary change, a

strategy which has been dealt a severe blow by the State of Emergency.

The question is should "government puppets" or genuine non-racial democrats occupy these governmental structures of influence? Numerous indications point to the fact that anti-apartheid activists have recognised the utility of negotiation as a tactic for enhancing local control.

Prior to its banning in 1988, there was an active debate within the UDF over whether or not to participate in governmental institutions, including the con-

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testing of elections. A week after the government-backed incumbents of the Soweto Town Council were defeated in the municipal elections, the new council quickly began to negotiate an end to the Soweto rent boycott with leaders of the democratic movement. The passage of the Free Settlement Act through Parliament this year is likely to produce new opportunities for local non-racial political activity. More importantly, as the government remains in protracted leadership changes, the environment is likely to remain fairly conducive for exploring new avenues for promoting incremental gains and changes.

The discussion around such a strategy will also need to take into consideration the question of "empowerment". Empowerment is generally viewed as the means of transferring economic resources and opportunities to the black majority in the form of scholarships, grants, investment capital and other forms of humanitarian assistance. For a strategy of incremental gains to be successful, attention will need to be given to the political consequences of economic upliftment. Specifically, which institutions, organisations and individuals are best placed for creating alternative non-racial structures? It need not be the intention to catalogue such organisations but it would be useful to illuminate existing and prospective areas available within the political spectrum. It will also assist in the identification of the potential

alliances which are, or will be, most able to utilise the strategy in the development of non-racial structures.

Obviously from the above one would have deduced that a incrementalist strategy implies a need to look at the "participation" option, including regional services councils as possible bodies for non-racial decisionmaking and economic upliftment, the prospects of black economic action, as well as the establishment of trade and producer groups which would advance democratic interests.

The most important questions which need to be addressed and to which answers must be given prior to the implementation of such a strategy are "What conditions will maximise the chances of success?" and "How will success be defined?"

The answers to these questions will depend on the roles which both extra-parliamentary groups and those already engaged in governmental structures choose for themselves. Hopefully they will come together to formulate closer co-operation and strategies. Those operating within the governmental structures will need to realise that their role must not be to engage in "Third Force" politics but rather to become part of a broader movement for change by engaging and co-operating with extra-parliamentary organisations.

The extra-parliamentary organisations, on the other hand, will need to be tolerant of those working for change from within the system. If those operating within the governmental structures are to exert maximum influence it will need to be able to torpedo government plans which are contradictory to that of a non-racial democracy. Such actions will provide more platforms from which the extra-parliamentary groups could implement their political programmes. In the words of Friedman (*Weekly Mail*, April 6-13, 1989): "This would give an incentive to continue co-operating with the Democratic Party (or in my words, those co-operating in governmental structures) even if it continued to insist that participation was not an option for it."

The strategy and idea which has been outlined in this article is but one of many which deserve urgent attention. However, it is all very well intellectualising — let us also begin to organise and practically apply the insights gained through these protracted discussions.

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