

Guidelines debate

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general and universal — and were difficult to disagree with as they stood at present.

The notion of a unitary state aroused some debate. It was felt that a strong central state could abuse power, and was not the most effective mechanism to ensure significant economic development and wealth redistribution. The regional unevenness and cultural diversity of the country warranted some form of a federal option.

Understandably, federalism had a racist and negative connotation in the South African context — but a federal structure based on geographic and economic grounds could ensure non-racialism and popular control.

Proponents of unitarism argued that a strong central state was vital to ensure the socio-economic restructuring and wealth redistribution that was necessary to the stability of the post-apartheid society. Apartheid had entrenched ethnic divisions — and only a strong central state could forge a new national identity among the people. A centralised state could easily co-exist with strong organs of local government.

There was general disquiet expressed among the participants in the workshop that the judiciary was not clearly granted independence in the constitutional guidelines.

The participants agreed that there was much further discussion required of the constitutional guidelines. Many of them felt that the guidelines should be discussed in conjunction with the Kwa Natal Indaba proposals and the recently released Law Commission Bill of Rights.

While the discussions on the ANC Constitutional Guidelines were very important, they tended to be somewhat abstract and rather technicist.

But the shape of the new society will ultimately be determined in the course of political struggles. The precise content of the post-apartheid society will depend crucially on the manner in which it comes into being and the balance of social forces at the time.

Such factors as the class or strata which dominates the anti-apartheid movement; the precise strategies and tactics adopted to end apartheid; the terms on which negotiations occur; the influence of the international economy; the role of foreign governments; and so on, will impinge directly on the practical meaning given to each clause in any constitution.

Discussions on constitutions must therefore include an analysis of social processes. It was the failure of the IDASA workshops to do this that was their major weakness.

(With acknowledgement to POST NATAL)

HISTORY



High school students listen intently as the history workshop is explained.

Understanding the past

“UNDERSTANDING the Past to Build the Future” was the title of the first of two workshops in a series on “Making History” hosted by IDASA’s Eastern Cape region in March.

The workshops aimed to stimulate an interest in history among school and university students, to encourage them to form “oral history groups” to do their own research, and to explore together their common history without prejudice.

The first workshop was attended by 60 high-school students, and was very much “action-orientated”, rather than listening to speakers, the students divided into groups and went through a series of exercises. Starting off by reading different historical accounts of a very emotional event in South African history, the murder of Retief by Dingane, the students then had to put on plays illustrating the different historical interpretations of the event.

It was learnt from this exercise that secondary sources are not “neutral”; that every historian has a point of view. They went on to examine different

primary sources — documents, letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, even poems and songs. The final exercise was one in which they practised interviewing each other, pretending to be historical figures. The evening was greatly enjoyed by all, proving that history need not be a “dry as dust” academic exercise.

The second workshop involved 30 students from Vista University who concentrated on obtaining oral evidence by means of interviewing older people in their community. Gary Baines, lecturer at Vista, explained how this should be done; and four elderly, experienced members of the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage community — including Graham Young, longest-serving city councillor in Port Elizabeth — were present to be interviewed by groups of students.

Hopefully these workshops will be just the beginning of a process of stimulating a vibrant interest in history, and will end in the production of local histories by students which can be presented to the public.



A demonstration of “history in the making” . . . veteran councillor Graham Young is interviewed by lecturer Gary Baines about his experiences in Port Elizabeth over the years.