

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Idasa's goals are:

- To promote the development of a democratic culture in South Africa
- To address fear, prejudice, anger and other obstacles in the transition to a non-racial democracy in South Africa
- To engage influential groups and individuals who may be outsiders to the transition process
- To provide, wherever possible, information on critical issues and to explore ways of addressing these
- To facilitate discussion of constitutional and developmental issues relevant to Southern Africa
- To assist and encourage others to contribute to the attainment of these goals

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EDITORIAL

Reconciliation: a tough and tricky journey

RECENTLY Deputy Minister Leon Wesels became the first member of the cabinet to apologise publicly for the "mistake" of the apartheid system. The minister is to be commended for his courage, but his action falls far short of what is needed before South African society embarks on the long and difficult journey of national reconciliation.

Fundamental to the start of this process will be an exercise of self-examination on the part of whites in this country. Unless this happens, there's little hope that black people will be willing to begin the journey of reconciliation.

There have been calls from senior members of the government for South Africans to "forgive and forget" – to forget the past and start afresh with the "new South Africa". It is tantamount to asking millions of South Africans and the world to view the past 43 years as a minor aberration in the course of this country's history.

Misconception

At best, this attitude reflects a misconception about the origins of apartheid and little knowledge of the toll it took and continues to take from the majority of people in this country. At worst, it reflects the callous arrogance of a distant ruler.

Apartheid was not an "accident" that happened on a remote country road. If reconciliation is going to take place, the government, and all South Africans who supported it, will have to move to the point where they are able to recognise and acknowledge this simple fact. They will have to demonstrate their sincerity through action, which must begin with a commitment to listening and understanding about the lives and living conditions of the black community. At best, whites can claim that they did not fully comprehend or did not have the full facts of what was being done in their name.

Sincere

Those in government are not so fortunate. No doubt they have changed course for a range of different reasons, some of them being a sincere change of heart, others of a less noble nature. For reconciliation to be possible, however, black South Africans must, at the very least, know how the government now views the effects of its past policies.

Reconciliation will demand that the injustice of the apartheid system be exposed by all who have the power to do so. The people of this country must know that social engineering on a scale unprecedented in the modern world excluded the majority of a country's population from enjoying the social, economic and political benefits of a modern state. The present rapid repeal of apartheid legislation will do little to alleviate the bitterness of those who suffered under it, nor will it lessen the burden on those who are guilty of its original implementation. Our country needs the cathartic experience of looking at its past honestly and squarely before we can face the future with confidence.

Reparations

The foundations of that future can be built on reparations: of human relations, of resources and facilities, in the spiritual realm, in the field of education and in the township ghettos of South Africa's cities. Government intransigence on perfectly reasonable demands for reparation, for example by the victims of forced removals, must be challenged. The poorest and most marginalised must see some reward for their participation in the transitional process.

Symbols

National symbols which unite and promote the common commitment towards, not a country or a people, but the ideal and practice of non-racialism and democracy must be found. This land cannot afford the arrogant nationalism of the past. The culture of violence and political intolerance which permeate our society have their roots in South Africa's vicious past and present. Just as the dead of two world wars are commemorated annually by a section of South Africa's population so too must we mourn our own more recent dead and intensify the struggle for peace and harmony.

We are faced with an enormous challenge in South Africa as we set out to attempt to build – in an uncertain future – a nation from the sorrows of the past.

– David Screen
National Director