

Becoming active in the 'trenches'

By Sue Valentine

NO MATTER how well worded a constitution is, it cannot ensure democracy for all South Africans. Arguably the best way for voters to ensure that the government acts according to their interests, and not those of a small powerful elite, is through strong civilian pressure groups – civic organisations.

In a seminar organised by the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (Cace) at the University of the Western Cape recently, the question was raised whether community organisations and unions should retain their independence from the state in a post-apartheid society.

Sharing his thoughts on the subject of the state and civil society was a visiting Canadian researcher, Dennis Howlett, who said no neat, clear lines divided the state from civil society. In searching for a definition of civil society he suggested that it included all social organisations in society, excluding business.

Howlett is a popular educator and chairperson of the Education and Communications Committee of the Pro-Canada Network – a



Dennis Howlett: no clear dividing lines

coalition of movements opposed to the social policies of Canada's conservative government led by Brian Mulroney.

To merely write about Howlett's presentation is to do it an injustice, however, for after sitting in on his dynamic lecture of civic movements in Canada, the message lingers on in the form of vividly drawn illustrations and symbols rather than from copious notes.

This method, nick-named the "Ah-ha" method (because people exclaim "ah-ha" as they realise a concept clearly for the first time), aims at helping participants to piece together their individual experiences in a way that clarifies

their understanding of economic and political systems.

In line with the thinking of the Italian social theorist of the 1920s, Antonio Gramsci, Howlett said civil society formed the "trenches" which kept the state in power. Although the government of the day and its policies might change, control of society was maintained through social organisations such as schools, churches, cultural bodies and the media. To truly change the nature of the state, it was also necessary therefore, to change these institutions, otherwise the same forms of domination and control would continue.

In an explanation of what social movements had achieved in Canada, Howlett sketched the development of the Pro-Canada Network. He said the emphasis was on informing the Canadian public about certain policies advocated by the Mulroney government and the need for creating news events that would ensure access to the media in order to get their message across.

"Political parties tend to follow public opinion rather than to lead it," said Howlett. It was not enough just to oppose certain measures, but consensus had to be built around an alternative.

He said that all governments – even the most well-intentioned – were caught up in bureaucratic structures. Strong social movements were needed to force governments to focus afresh on the demands of citizens and to move in a direction which benefitted the broader society.

"AS THE ANC becomes a political party, we need to ask what kind of groups and structures will ensure that this kind of dialectic continues," said Howlett.

Responding from a South African perspective, United Democratic Front executive member Johnny de Lange said the majority of people had not been part of political society and attention had been focused on building the ANC through civic organisations.

Since the ANC's unbanning, resources were being transferred from civil society to political society, but it was important that civil society should not be neglected. He said the disbanding of the UDF, "the most coherent political force in civil society in the Western Cape", would have serious repercussions.

He said that while the ANC should be taking up local matters such as rents in their political campaign, civic organisations should still organise around those issues in order to keep up pressure on the government.

Long struggle to unity... in Germany

WHILE MANY South Africans are inclined to believe their country's problems constitute the be-all and end-all of global socio-economic and political affairs, many people in the newly united Germany have a similar national self-obsession.

Reiner Erkens, a senior researcher from the Free Democratic Party in Germany, spoke to a small group at Idasa's Western Cape office early in March. He sketched some of the difficulties confronting the new nation which is worlds apart – in spite of speaking the same language.

No one, he said, had been prepared for reunification when it came. It happened very quickly, in a revolutionary rather than evolutionary way, but with very little violence. However, the rapidity of the transition and people's lack of preparedness is causing some serious problems.

Erkens said that in the beginning West Germans feared the imposition of a mixed economy which retained elements of East German socialism. However, it was soon realised that conditions in the East were so bad that once East Germany was incorporated into the West, no changes towards a socialist economy were likely.

On paper the East German economy was said to be the 10th largest in the world, in reality though, the economy of the former German Democratic Republic was found to be totally uncompetitive on international markets.

"IT IS estimated that by the end of 1991, only 20 percent of the old GDR industry will survive," said Erkens. East German car factories would probably also be closed down because the cars produced (for which there had been a waiting list of 15 years in the GDR) were unwanted and were piling up with no willing buyers.

It was expected that economic growth would begin in the old GDR and Hungary only in about 1994/95.

What was needed was a movement of qualified people into eastern parts of the country to offer their expertise there. There were 50 000 lawyers in West Germany, but only 300 in the East. These were trained in Marxist law and had no thorough understanding of the new constitution, taxation policies etc.

The question was, how to convince skilled West Germans to live in such a delapidated part of the country? Tax incentives had been one suggestion.

Offering his conclusions of what all this meant for South Africans, Erkens said countries in Europe, and Germany in particular, were concerned with their own problems first and those of Europe second. The rest of the world barely featured.

"You have to do it on your own in South Africa; you cannot wait for someone else to help."