

Dismal notes amid the joy

By Shauna Westcott

THE day Nelson Mandela "strolled to freedom" will go down in history books as a milestone on the long march to democracy in South Africa – and it was. But it was also a day of huge disappointment.

It was a day marred most obviously on the Grand Parade in Cape Town by gangs of young thugs, whose heedless violence caused one death and injuries to many, including marshalls hurt in the cross-fire as they struggled unarmed to preserve the peace and safety of 80 000 people. But there were other dismal notes whose echoes will return to haunt us if they are not recorded and addressed.

The question being asked – by committed activists, not enemies of the struggle – is: what has the National Reception Committee been doing for its period of office?

True, the final confirmation of Mandela's release gave them only 24 hours to implement plans for a rally. True, it is impossible to book stadiums over a weekend at such short notice. Granted, controlling such a huge crowd would have taxed even the most superb organisation.

But they had weeks, even months, of warning. Why were they so ill prepared? Why were contingency plans not in place to ensure at least that absolutely vital communications equipment – a crowd-proof PA system and walkie-talkies to link marshalls – was not only available but in place?



Marchers gather in Cape Town on the day of the opening of Parliament.

This lack alone was enough to doom the rally to chaos. Organisers and marshalls were unable to communicate with each other or with most of the crowd. As hours dragged by, rumours flew in the heat and an undisciplined minority surged here and there at any hint of action, toppling a scaffold, crushing others against barriers and disconnecting what sound equipment there was for some time.

As a result the majority were unable to act in accord against the unruly few, whose reckless actions included mobbing Mandela's car (which took a wrong turn), forcing him to retreat when he first arrived for fear of being torn limb from limb. Had organisers been able to inform the crowd, they would have had thousands of instant marshalls co-operating to clear the way for the leader they were all there to welcome.

As it was, only the vast patience and discipline of the majority – together with the courage and dedication of the marshalls –

preserved a semblance of the greeting Mandela deserved, and prevented a disaster that loomed heart-stoppingly close at times.

Other discordant and painful notes were widespread experiences of racism, sexism, sexual harassment and other personal violence – knives pulled on marshalls, two people carrying guns trying to enter City Hall, pickpockets, drunkenness, shoves from youths careless of others in toyi-toyis given more to aggression than to celebration.

Perhaps a minor oversight, but a suggestive one, was the lack of thought for the thirst of the masses who, it seems, are simply expected to roast quietly in the sun while their betters take tea. This was a party. Where were the refreshments for us to buy? Where were the cups to lift to toast our leader? Perhaps the fact that there is only one woman on the NRC lies behind this neglect of an elementary aspect of celebrations – one that men have a habit of regarding as not within their sphere of concern.

The disappointment may be timely, however, and its message is both clear and constructive. Our critical gaze must shift from the old opponent, whose outline anyway is beginning to blur, to "the enemy within". Democratic practice is far from established in our own ranks or in ourselves. The struggle continues.

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Time for a new agenda

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organisational coherence and discipline.

Of course, the state's repressive methods have made democratic practice extremely difficult, and at times impossible. The mere survival of formal organisations in the face of detentions, police raids, media restrictions, misinformation, bombs and assassinations was difficult enough.

And strategies had to be devised and developed to cope with this situation. Democratic practice, in these circumstances, even though it should have been "a principle which must be upheld without any exception", was a problem.

This however, should no longer be the case. In the wake of the De Klerk reforms, there should be no excuse that the goal of power can camouflage the need for democratic practice and democratic answerability.

What this means in reality is that the challenge should now be about developing structures and organisations, which are responsible to the people and whose leaders are subject to scrutiny and annual election by their members.

Crowds at rallies and marches are part of the democratic process. The right to meet and the right to march are democratic rights, as is the right to a free press, but they are only part of the process.

Within the emotional spirit of rallies and within the intensity of discussion in proverbial smoke-filled rooms, it is easy to talk about "the people" or "die volk daar buite". It is a very different matter in getting them to vote for you in an election.

When activists start walking the streets, knocking on doors of the

ordinary people and canvassing their support, they will find a very different situation from the rarefied atmosphere of in-struggle discussion and slogans.

They may find that rents or crime and gangsterism are closer to the real needs of the people than some of the loftier goals and well-worn slogans of the struggle. They may even find that groups that are dealing more effectively with those perceived needs will be able to win votes.

Then, the thoroughly undemocratic tactic of stoning cars, attacking opponents and groups of toyi-toying youths, apparently regarded by some as the frontline of the struggle, may have political consequences they never dreamed of.

There is also the very basic question of money. Political organisations are expensive and they have to raise considerable funds to be able to campaign effectively. They have to go to their members and supporters to get that money. In terms of the current law, and it is a sensible provision which may well survive the negotiations period, no political party may receive funds from foreign sources.

What this means is that the kind of financial extravagance that was lavished by foreign donors on the one-day Conference for a Democratic Future – publicly about R1,4 million but believed to be more – won't be around when the first post-apartheid elections are held.

Winning votes, raising party funds and commitment to democratic practice, as shown in the lead given by Nelson Mandela, give cause for hope for real democracy and true freedom in the future South Africa. That will be a welcome change from some of the activities of the past.

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