

By Nic Borain

No time for empire builders

time for people and organisations that agree on broad principles to reach out and find each other.

TWO right-wing American politicians visited me at my office the other day. A polite political discussion turned into a slanging match when I disagreed with them by asserting that I did not believe that the greatest threat to this country was Soviet expansionism.

These two hardened Cold War veterans were watching all their power and influence slip away as fast as Gorbachev could say "multi-party democracy". These were powerful people desperate to maintain the myth of the "evil empire", because that struggle had been their life's work and their prestige was related entirely to the validity of the premise.

We have a similar problem. Our country is emerging from a "cold" and "hot" war situation where the real political dynamic has been between implacable enemies who have spoken to each other exclusively in the language of force.

The only objective of either side has been the defeat of the enemy. All debate has been about undermining the enemy forces and their allies and strengthening your own.

Over the last six months the terms of this conflict have changed rapidly, leaving most players breathless and confused. There has been perestroika and glasnost, the political transformation of Eastern Europe; in

National Party policy there are ongoing shifts and important new thinking in the ANC's Constitutional Guidelines.

The possibility of real negotiations has suddenly landed on our doorstep and none of us appears ready. We can't seem to believe that we are about to start talking and worse still, listening, to what each side is saying.

We have our own veterans and Very Important People whose only training has been in ideological and physical warfare and whose only importance is attached to the continuation of that war.

The nature of the struggle up until now has allowed pumped-up little bureaucrats from all sides to manipulate the political process to protect and advance their own interests. Ideological positions are raised by minor political princes like buttresses to protect little political castles.

At a time when both the ANC and the Nationalist government are talking about throwing the debate about the future open to all comers, and even about surrendering control and ownership of symbols and ideas to the terrain of the body politic, there is no place for builders and defenders of empires.

Differences are narrowing and now is the

Only those more concerned about the dilution of their own power and influence than about the interests of our country and our people are threatened by such a process. These political bosses should be removed as swiftly as possible by those who have elected or supported them.

Both the National Party, the ANC and their respective supporters have to define their objectives and then ask themselves the simple and direct question: "Who else could support these objectives?" If they are honest and courageous, they will eventually find themselves snuggled up with some strange and unexpected bed-fellows.

It is only in the creation of a culture of democratic debate that we have a chance of building a democratic country. It is only with a democratic and humble political leadership that we have a chance of breaking the patterns of the past.

If the Cold War veterans are not able to change we need to leave them behind. The two Americans who visited my office are off somewhere lobbying in vain for the view that the Soviet Union is about to invade the rest of the world. Well, old soldiers never die . . . they just fade away.

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Striving for a united front

THE AIM of the CDF was to demonstrate dramatically the unity of anti-apartheid forces in South Africa and to use the process of the conference to extend that unity. This second objective related particularly to black consciousness organisations which until then had not been incorporated into the liberal-left alliance - the Mass Democratic Movement.

In the opening speech, Jerry Mosala of Azapo called on conference delegates to listen to all perspectives and to seize the initiative by agreeing on a programme of action for unity. He also spoke of the need to build a national culture.

The final speech in the open session of the conference was given by Walter Sisulu. With the calm insight of a fine statesman he outlined the history of the struggle against apartheid.

On the subject of National Party reforms Sisulu said: "Our grievance is our exclusion from political power; our objective is transfer of power. Segregated beaches have symbolised our exclusion but their desegregation is not a transfer of power . . ."

In a dramatic gesture Sisulu turned as if to face De Klerk and addressed him saying, "Mr De Klerk, your back is to the wall . . . look up from the stony ground that lies between you and us. Don't be afraid. Others have stepped forward and found a home with the democratic movement. We've welcomed them. Like you they love their people and their country. Unlike you, they love democracy."

Finally Sisulu called on the meeting to "build a united front of all anti-apartheid

The Conference for a Democratic Future (CDF) was held on December 8 last year. About 4 600 people from over 2 100 organisations attended. BARBARA KLUGMAN, reports.

forces, for the establishment of true democracy and lasting peace."

Discussion on a range of issues followed, but it was the question of negotiations which dominated the conference and stirred up acrimonious debate.

The issue was the adoption of the Harare Declaration and ANC proposals for the process of creating a climate for negotiations in South Africa which had been accepted by the Organisation for African Unity.

Although the dominant view was that "the people" should set the agenda for negotiations as one strategy for change, many delegates from black consciousness and unity movement organisations agreed that "it is impossible for the oppressed to negotiate with the oppressor". Their call was simply for people to intensify the building of organisations and the struggle against apartheid - a call also expounded by the MDM delegates.

When it was time to vote, a resolution to

adopt the Harare Declaration and calling for a constituent assembly was passed virtually unanimously.

Discussion followed on children, the environment, the apartheid army, health, international pressure, labour, welfare, Natal violence, the national education crisis, the death penalty, press freedom, repression, resistance in rural areas, the sports boycott and rebel tours of South Africa.

Given the size of the conference, detailed debate was not possible, however it was hoped that the resolutions would form the framework of a programme of action to be discussed and implemented both by individual organisations and as national campaigns.

Overall the CDF was a success. It brought together groupings which would have been unable to work together and however difficult it was at times, a broad consensus was reached. It also showed the degree of unity that had been forged already and it started a process of broadening the anti-apartheid movement.

However, it was clear that many participants had not prepared sufficiently and this limited the extent to which resolutions could be considered binding. Another unfortunate reflection of the nature of anti-apartheid organisations was the absence of women both in the stage convening committee and, more importantly, as speakers from the floor.

The experience of the CDF and the resolutions arising from it offer strong motivation for the building and consolidation of organisation in the 1990s as the motor force for negotiations.