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ECC Discussion Paper - August 1991

A SYSTEM OF CIVILIAN NATIONAL SERVICE FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

Introduction

At the 1991 ECC national conference it was proposed that ECC should examine the issue of non-military national service. This paper, in the form of a proposal for a system of civilian national service (CNS), is intended to provide a basis for further discussion within ECC.

In the past ECC has motivated for "alternative service" to be available to those who in conscience felt that they were not prepared to serve in the South African Defence Force. The issue of "alternative service" was often seen as a means to expose the contradictions of the existing system of military service, in particular the fact that the existing system of military service was seen as upholding minority interests and was not in a true sense "national service". This discussion document has been drawn up with a different set of considerations in mind.

The Political Context

In the recent period, dramatic advances have taken place in the political life of this country. This has included the unbanning of some of the major political parties, and a commitment by the government to participating in a process of negotiations on an equal footing with its political opponents. The fact that these political conditions exist should not be taken to imply that the path towards political democracy will be problem free. Political violence, and violence more generally continues. The continuing conflict in Natal, random massacres, and the recent events in Ventersdorp, bear witness to the fact that armed conflict is an ongoing feature of our political life and that the broad political situation continues to be a volatile one.

Nevertheless this discussion document has been written in the belief and the hope that a negotiated political settlement will be reached in the not too distant future in South Africa. The implication is that South Africa will become a fully democratic country in which all South Africans will be full citizens and have substantially equal rights. A further implication is that a government will be elected which is representative of and accountable to all South Africans. The hope is that such a government will pursue policies which seek to contribute to the well-being of all South Africans, but most particularly the well-being of those who are most in need.

The proposal contained in this document would depend on such a political settlement being reached in order to be properly implemented. Nevertheless there is no need for a full political settlement to have been finalised in order for the process by which it is implemented to begin.

Circumstances in fact motivate for the process by which such a system is to be implemented to be entered into without delay. Firstly, this is because the problems, which it is hoped that this proposed system would begin to address, are extremely pressing and will only become more pressing the longer they are neglected. Furthermore, as it is envisaged, CNS could be integrated into a national development strategy in such a way that it would contribute to the process of reconciliation which is so urgently needed in this country.

Terminology

The choice of the terms "Civilian National Service" follows the terminology in the report by David Shandler, "National Service...or Service To The Nation?: The Case for Civilian National Service", Centre for Policy Studies, research report No. 7. May 1990.

Civilian National Service (CNS)

A system of CNS should be developed in South Africa along the following lines:

Recruitment for CNS would have two components, a compulsory and a voluntary component:

1. All who receive state subsidised tertiary education could be required to perform a period of service. The obligation could be of a contractual nature, a course requirement, or a legal obligation. Here the intention would be that the skills which they have acquired be channelled into developmental work.

2. The system would otherwise be open to all on a voluntary basis. It would however be orientated to those who are perceived to have been disadvantaged as a result of apartheid and the political turmoil that has affected South Africa in the recent period. Within the CNS system some form of educational programme would be provided for these people. This programme would be orientated towards providing these people with basic skills which will be of use to them so that they can better be able to lead independent, economically active lives.

The system of Civilian National Service would be created with a number of developmental objectives in mind:

A: The provision of education and skills to those who have been educationally disadvantaged as a result of unequal education and the collapse of the education system.

B: More broadly the CNS system would be orientated towards engaging in a program of social upliftment of disadvantaged communities. The interventions that are made at this level would be based on an assessment of the most urgent needs of people in these communities. These could involve the construction of buildings such as clinics, classrooms, or houses, literacy or AIDS

education, health care, or other forms of developmental work.

C: For those who have acquired skills and education at a tertiary level the intention would be that they be provided with the opportunity to put what they have learnt to work in achieving the developmental objectives (A and B) above.

The social context

There are two primary features of the South African situation which serve as a background to this proposal:

1. The circumstances of large numbers of people in this country who live in conditions of extreme poverty and desperate need. Unemployment, shortages of housing, lack of access to land, overcrowding, hunger, lack of access to education, and poorly developed health services, are part of the reality of life for many. An effectively implemented CNS system could be used to provide developmental assistance to people in communities where this is most urgently needed.

2. The existence of what has been termed the "lost generation". The policy of the National Party government, particularly prior to the "reform" era, has been to provide black South African youth with an entirely sub-standard education.

The present situation is one where large numbers of black youths have received little or no education and are not capable of performing any other than the most menial tasks within the economy. The present unemployment rate and the present problem of widespread crime bear witness to the existence of a whole stratum of youth in our society who, by their historical circumstances, have in effect been excluded from participating in the economic life of this country. Amongst this stratum of the country's youth there is likely to be an increasing sense of disaffection. They need the opportunity to be able to participate as economically active citizens in this society. If they are not provided with opportunities for their own advancement more and more of them will have little chance of entering into the mainstream economy.

Duration of service/Remuneration

This proposal does not at this stage deal with questions such as those of remuneration and of duration of service in the proposed CNS system. Questions of this kind would require a more in depth assessment and should not affect a consideration of basic principles contained in the proposal.

CNS and ECC policy

At its recent national conference ECC adopted policy declaring the organisation to be opposed in principle to any form of conscription whether this be for military or non-military purposes. It is possible that some people will see the proposal that recipients of state-subsidised tertiary education be obliged in law to

perform CNS as a form of conscription. This proposal may therefore be seen to be in conflict with ECC policy in this respect.

Efficiency

It is proposed that if a system of CNS were to be adopted the system would function in such a way as to promote efficiency on a number of different levels:

1. There should be efficient use of personpower. One complaint about the present system of military service is that national servicemen spend large amounts of their time doing absolutely nothing. Recruitment into the proposed system of civilian national service would have to be subject to the condition that there are avenues open for recruits to perform a useful function within the overall system.
2. There would be a thorough assessment of areas of need so that CNS is deployed in such a way that those communities which are most in need and are capable of benefitting from the program are targetted.
3. Where possible optimum use should be made of available skills within the CNS system.
4. Voluntary participants within the CNS system would derive genuine benefits from their participation in the programme. In other words the envisaged system should not serve purely as a source of labour but participants should leave the programme better capable of participating as independent and self-sufficient agents within the economic system.

Consultation

There would have to be an extensive programme of consultation with a variety of different organisations for CNS to be implemented.

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