

IT WAS a curiously dispassionate affair. No cheers. No tears. No roll of drums nor fanfare.

But in 90 minutes on Friday night in Bloemfontein the Prime Minister, Mr P W Botha, finally set in train the most radical revision of South African politics this century.

In a tentative, almost solemn silence, 5 000 people listened as he outlined a plan to sweep aside 72 years of parliamentary rule and replace it with a presidential system in which the head of state will hold massive executive authority.

The new President — a South African De Gaulle — will wield decisive control over an entirely new political system that will start to introduce coloureds and Indians to decision-making in the country's affairs.

But the National Party's first tryst with political power-sharing amounts to a flirtation rather than a consummation.

The opening moves, the equivalent of a chaste peck on the cheek, leave in their wake a lingering alchemy of unfulfilment and suggestive allure.

Virtue remains intact, reputations untarnished, but the occasional flashes of thigh and dropped eyelids signal a come-on to would-be suitors that the chase could be interesting and eventually rewarding — perhaps.

What is unmistakably clear is that in this new and fragile political courtship between whites, coloureds and Indians, the pace is going to be distinctly Victorian and the National Party is going to keep a firm hand on the zippers and fasteners.

The essence of what Mr Botha was trying to achieve was revealed in the closing stage of his watershed address, when he claimed the constitutional dispensation he had outlined would achieve justice for other races without jeopardising white security.

Fulfilling general expectations, the plan he unveiled relied heavily on the National Party's 1977 proposals — a point he was careful to stress in an obvious attempt to soothe fears of a white abdication.

The lure to attract coloureds and Indians into the relationship lay in an equally emphasised assurance that this was the beginning of a process, of which the ultimate destination was left tantalisingly open-ended.

The central and overriding element of the plan lies in the creation of an executive presidency which will wield enormous and, in its first unveiling, virtually untrammelled power.

Ultimately, it will be the President who sets the agendas and who dispenses authority down to the legislature.

It is he who will determine the crucial definitions of what constitutes matters for mutual white-coloured-Indian consideration and what constitutes matters of exclusive concern to one or other of the participating groups.

And the mechanism provided for refereeing the legislative process remains inextricably part of his domain.

At central government level the profile of power will comprise the President and his multiracial Cabinet, a three-chamber Parliament and a newly constituted part-elected, part-appointed President's Council.

The current House of Assembly will make up the white chamber while the size and location of the coloured and Indian chambers remain undeclared at this stage.

The de Gaulle flirtation

‘The essence of what Mr. Botha was trying to achieve was justice for other races without jeopardising white security’

The President will be elected by an electoral college drawn from the three chambers comprising 50 white, 25 coloureds and 13 Indians. His term of office will coincide with that of Parliament with provision for a transitional

period should a new President be elected. The President will be separated from the legislature; once elected he may not be a member of any of the chambers.

He will then select his Cabinet, whose size will be fixed by the constitution, but whose members need not be members of the legislature.

This leaves for the moment unresolved one of the contentious issues in the new deal; it is not clear whether the entire executive will be separated from the legislature or only part of it.

There is no statement yet about the racial balance of the Cabinet (in the 1977 proposals the ratio was fixed), although it is distinctly implied that the Cabinet will include members from the coloured and Indian communities.

There is provision for impeachment of the President “by a body constituted like the electoral college”. This can remove the Presi-

dent for reasons of misconduct — defined as “corruption/dishonesty” — or mental or physical disability. This is the only immediately apparent check on the President's power.

The courts, for example, do not figure in the outline of authority apart from a reaffirmation of the principle of an independent judiciary. This makes the proposed system profoundly different from the American presidency, for instance, where the supreme court is the final arbiter with power to check any executive move against the provisions of the constitution.

In the South African system the referee will be a newly constituted President's Council. It will be in almost every sense a council belonging to the President.

In matters of exclusive concern, the single relevant chamber will decide. Legislation on matters of mutual concern must be passed by all the chambers separately with “normal voting majorities”.

The entire edifice, where mutual affairs are concerned, will rest on a network of standing committees, comprising members of all the chambers. Where they are unable to reach consensus the issue in contention will be referred to the President's Council.

Throughout his description of the vital central government proposals Mr Botha was heard in absolute silence, broken only once by applause when he announced the executive presidency, whose office would combine the functions of the State President and Prime Minister.

At the executive level the handling of “community interests” and the initiation of “community interests” legislation would be the task of cabinet committees (whose members would be drawn from the Cabinet).

In essence, the President would be able to decide on law legislation would be classified — and hence who should decide on it — and he would have absolute say over the composition of the Cabinet and virtual say over the composition of the President's Council.

He would also have an implicit right of veto over “community interests”. Bills once they had been approved, and through his hand-picked cabinet, would be able to initiate community legislation.

He would also wield considerable influence in the arbitration of disputes over matters of “common interest” through his 25 appointees on the President's Council.

Turning to the present Provincial Council system, Mr Botha implied that this would wither away, as its present functions would be taken over by the three chambers and local authorities.

To loud applause from the delegates, he said the present provincial boundaries would remain unchanged and the provincial councils “will exist at least until the end of their present terms of office”.

The greatest level of co-operation between the three groups will take place at the level of local government. In terms of Mr Botha's outline:

“As an urgent interim measure”, the chairmen of coloured and Indian management committees should be given full voting rights on the white local authority or white management committee in their area.

Some of the other possibilities he mentioned were:

City councils could send non-voting deputations to meetings of the coloured and Indian management committees and/or vice versa.

Joint committees and sub-committees of the three groups' local authorities could be formed.

There could be full joint sessions of all three local authorities for the purpose of discussion but not for decision-making.

A special joint committee could be formed “for all matters of common interest”.



Here, representation would be decided by means of “some or other proportional basis”, he said, citing financial considerations as an example.

At local government level, he placed strong emphasis on the need for urgent interim measures to improve relations between autonomous municipalities (whose composition would be racially determined where ever possible).

Here again, Mr Botha advanced with caution, acutely alert to possible sensibilities.

He listed a number of ways in which interim co-operation might be achieved, ranging from joint decision making down to the current formula of liaison committees for consultation. The choice of interim measures would be left to local option.

The atmosphere that prevailed throughout Mr Botha's exposition was strangely subdued.

Although a good proportion of the audience must have been present at the National Party's previous watershed federal congress (in 1960 on the threshold of Republic) it was almost as if they were overawed by the Prime Minister's self-styled “date with destiny”.

Mr Botha was given three standing ovations, but none during his speech which was, however, interspersed with rounds of applause.

In an almost surrealistic juxtaposition that may have been reassuring to some members of the audience fearful of a sudden change in their lifestyle, the sounds of a lively floodlit university rugby match sometimes floated into the hall.

Beforehand, Mr Botha was in good spirits, greeting passers-by and stopping in the lobby of his hotel to tell journalists and on-lookers of his hunting successes the previous day where he bagged two gemsbok and a blesbok.

But, from the podium he struck an almost academic, sometimes ponderous, figure as he read his 16-page speech. Even his characteristic finger waving was hardly essayed.

It was as if the occasion imposed altogether new behaviour, the sort of reflexive deference that induces whispers in church.

Against the roar of enormous power being concentrated in the hands of one man, there is a danger that the advance of putting some “non-whites” at the start of a form of power sharing might be reduced to a whisper as well.



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The awesome powers

AWESOME powers will be concentrated in the hands of one man in terms of the guidelines spelt out in Bloemfontein on Friday night by the Prime Minister, Mr P W Botha.

And the President's Council — at present only an advisory body — will have life-or-death decision-making powers over contentious legislation.

In outlining his tentative plan for the governing of the “new South Africa”, Mr Botha made these points:

● The present Parliament would be replaced by three separate chambers — one for whites, one for coloureds and one for Indians, with the three having joint sessions only “for ceremonial purposes”.

● Each chamber would decide separately on matters of “community interests”, while matters of “common or mutual interest” would be decided on a consensus basis — a yes or no vote from all three chambers.

● Where consensus between the three chambers could not be reached, the President's Council would step in and decide the issue.

● The President, advised by the President's Council, would decide what legislation is classified as “community” and what as “common”.

● As an interim measure, “community interests are mat-



Mr and Mrs Botha listen intently at the congress on Friday

By TONY WEAVER

ters which are considered by a group as part of its identity”, such as education, religion, community life and “aspects of welfare such as the care of the aged”.

● The President's Council would have 60 members — 25 appointed by the President and 20 whites, 10 coloureds and five Indians elected by the three chambers.

● A cabinet would be appointed by the President. Its members need not be drawn

from the three chambers, but all three groups would be represented.

● The office of president would replace that of both the present State President and Prime Minister and he would cease to be a member of any of the chambers once elected.

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