

Note to the second impression

Gingerly, gingerly, the angels are beginning to tread. The language debate is getting serious. People are becoming used to reaching for their Constitution when they have a problem. They are finding that there are several provisions dealing with official languages and language rights, and that they are not easy to sum up in a single phrase. Exactly.

The biggest problem is that of numbers. What was the strategy the drafters used to deal with eleven languages? The one danger was linguistic swamping - everything times eleven - this would be massively expensive and impossible to realise. The other was linguistic deception: to pretend that all eleven languages were equal in status but in reality to use only one for all significant purposes.

What follows is an attempt to explain the rationale behind the constitutional provisions on language. As will be seen, a great deal of flexibility is built in to them. The approach is developmental rather than rigid, and the underlying spirit is that of language accommodation rather than language competition. Lots of give and lots of take on all sides. More pride, less petulance.

Principled public debate is vital. The SABC\SAUK alliansie has set a good example by throwing open to the whole community the issue of language in broadcasting. I hope the following pages help inform the debate and contribute towards more openness. Unless fools discover the angelic in themselves, and angels take the risk of being foolish, there is no progress. Language concerns us all, and we must all take part in the debate.

A.S.
August 1994

Note to the second impression

Gingerly, gingerly, the angels are beginning to tread. The language debate is getting serious. People are becoming used to reaching for their Constitution when they have a problem. They are finding that there are several provisions dealing with official languages and language rights, and that they are not easy to sum up in a single phrase. Exactly.

The biggest problem is that of numbers. What was the strategy the drafters used to deal with eleven languages? The one danger was linguistic swamping - everything times eleven - this would be massively expensive and impossible to realise. The other was linguistic deception: to pretend that all eleven languages were equal but in reality use only one for all significant purposes.

What follows is an attempt to explain the rationale behind the constitutional provisions on language. As will be seen, a great deal of flexibility is built in to them. The approach is developmental rather than rigid, and the underlying spirit is that of language accommodation rather than language competition. Lots of give and lots of take on all sides. More pride, less petulance.

Principled public debate is vital. The SABC\SAUK alliansie has set a good example by throwing open to the whole community the issue of language in broadcasting . I hope the following pages help inform the debate and contribute towards more openness. Unless fools discover the angelic in themselves, and angels take the risk of being foolish, there is no progress.

A.S. August 1994