

POLICY FORMULATION: COMMENTING ON PRICE

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Max Price's commentary (*Transformation*, 27) on the changing role of progressive policy groups in South Africa is most timely and welcome - as is his appeal for an open discussion on the issues involved. He raises the issue of how independent and critical intellectual participation is to be maintained even as individuals and organisations previously committed to oppositional stances to the apartheid regime are being drawn into advisory and policy roles for or in the current Government of National Unity (GNU). The significance of his contribution lies not only in its intrinsic interest wherever and whenever such dilemmas might be faced but because of their particularly sharp relevance for the South African transition. Those from whom independent critical commentary might be expected, whether from academic or broader MDM (mass democratic movement) origins, have become an endangered species as they have been swallowed up by government and as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and GNU have become ideological tokens of loyalty and commonsense. Yet, as expectations and aspirations are being continuously revised downwards and policy stances compromised, it is unfortunate that the tradition of critical commentary should be most prominent on the conservative and establishment side of the debates. Indeed, the uniqueness of the South African situation is in whether critical progressive commentary will meaningfully survive at all in the immediate future.

With considerable sensitivity, Max Price recognises in his opening paragraph that the experience in health is not unique nor is it liable to be representative. As an academic who has been in a similar position in some respects in relation to economic policy over the last ten years, I find this point particularly telling. Paradoxically, then, his commentary is almost without substantive reference to health at all. To use an old-fashioned vernacular, it is all about the form of the dilemmas but neglects the content of what is involved. Thus, he deals with funding sources and the control of the research agenda, consultancy versus research, the potential aversion to participatory research, the requirements of secrecy and against advocacy, the risk of poor quality undercutting by private

consultants, and a number of other issues. No doubt, each of these factors will have a different weight in the dilemmas faced by progressives both within and between each of the broad policy areas concerned. In addition, one crucial factor seems to have been overlooked, namely the continuing inertia, power and hierarchical structure of the government service - which has profound direct and indirect effects on what and how research is commissioned, quite apart from how policy implications are drawn and implemented.

But my purpose in this short note is not to add to the list of the forms in which progressives face the dilemma of both participating and being independent. Rather, it is to insist on the debate being carried forward through being tied to the specific and central substance of the corresponding policy issues. For example, whilst I was researching for the section on health in the MERG (Macro Economic Research Group) Report, it became clear that a central issue from an economic perspective was how to control the burgeoning private health care system, with its potential intensification of inequalities and inefficiencies and its promotion of unnecessary curative at the expense of primary and preventative care. The details need not detain us but surely the example illustrates how much weaker is Max Price's commentary for not addressing the progressive's dilemma in this context specific to health. The same must apply in other policy areas, including economics. How can we express the dilemma without reference to the unchallenged powers of private corporate capital, the Reserve Bank, and so on? Indeed, it is precisely the capacity to hold onto such realities which is at the greatest risk when critical gives way to constructive, constructive to compromise, and compromise to capitulation - as the imperatives of politics and pragmatism come to the fore.