

# Editorial

**WINDHOEK OBSERVER**  
SETTING THE NATION'S AGENDA

## Let them eat cake

THE Government's whole attitude to the Basic Income Grant (BIG) and the manner in which it handled the matter was disappointing.

The negativity it showed toward BIG from the outset has not brought credit to our Government, and overall it is not something we can be proud of.

President Hifikepunye Pohamba's statement that the Government will not give the poor a N\$100 monthly grant to alleviate their worst suffering, because it does not want to encourage them "to do nothing" is very troubling.

We hope that posterity will remember him for more than those words. For sheer insensitivity, the statement must rank somewhere up there with the words popular mythology attributes to 18th century French Queen Marie Antoinette.

During a famine in France, when the poor were crying out for bread, she flippantly remarked, "Let them eat cake".

What followed was the French Revolution in 1789. Popular disgust at the social system eventually led the French people to execute both Marie Antoinette and her husband King Louis XVI by guillotine. The rest as they say, is history!

The idea that the poor will no longer make any effort to improve their lives, or stop looking for work, because they receive N\$100 in assistance is far-fetched. That might be true for a tiny minority, but not for the vast majority of people.

Poverty becomes a vicious cycle because the poor spend all their time and energy scrambling around for something to eat in order to quell their desperate hunger.

That usually means that they have no time, or strength, left to think about how to break the cycle of poverty, which makes their destitution self-perpetuating.

If we, as a society, give them the means to eat one modest meal a day, they might be able to think about something else rather than constantly focusing on where their next meal is going to come from.

A whole chorus, including Cabinet, Prime Minister Nahas Angula and the National Union of Namibian Workers have now joined President Pohamba in his condemnation of the basic income grant.

The significance of the controversy surrounding BIG is that it appears to show a gradual shift in Swapo's political orientation from the centre-left to the right.

The only question that remains is how much further to the right of the political spectrum the party is prepared to go.

If the party is not careful, it could suddenly wake up and find it has inadvertently strayed into the same ideological camp as Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Margaret "Maggie milk snatcher" Thatcher.

Now that is a frightening thought!

The case for BIG is debatable, and there are clearly arguments both for and against. However far as we are aware, the Namibian Government never even seriously evaluated BIG before summarily dismissing the idea. In our view, the subject is important enough for us to hold a sober and thorough national debate around the issue at least.

There are several courses of action Government could have taken if had any serious intention of formulating policy to reduce poverty and inequality. It could have appointed a panel, a taskforce or a presidential commission of inquiry to consider a modified version of BIG.

If cost and affordability are the main issue, these bodies could have looked at scaled down and more limited versions of BIG with means testing, for instance. The argument that NAMTAX and the BIG Coalition puts forward against means testing does however have some merit. To quote:

*"The adjustments in the tax system are made in such a way, that middle-income earners will receive the grant, but at the same time their tax is increased so that they pay back the amount of the grant. The rich, however, will be paying more in taxation than what they receive through the grant. They become net payers and income is effectively redistributed."*

This also makes it clear that the argument about un-affordability is irrelevant since the programme would be self-financing. There is not a shred of evidence to show Government even seriously studied BIG, but it instead seems to have acted in bad faith in the whole saga. The most worrisome aspect of the whole affair is that it provides more evidence that Government and Swapo have become insular and out of touch with sections of the Namibian population at the grassroots.

They have developed a dangerous "wasn't invented here" mentality. If an idea does not come from within Government, or Swapo, it is automatically viewed with suspicion, seen as not even worth considering and then ultimately dismissed with contempt.

The main argument Government has advanced against BIG is one of morality. Giving money to people for doing nothing, the argument goes, encourages laziness and a dependency syndrome. This argument might have had some validity if Government was not already giving away money to a whole host of special interest groups for doing nothing.

It has created phantom jobs in the public service and the defence force, where people can stay away from work for weeks on end - with no questions asked - but still receive their salary at the end of the month. What can one say about David Namalenga except for that he is a good example of the sad state of affairs at our trade unions. First, he unconvincingly tried to claim that the National Union of Namibian Workers had never been a member of the BIG Coalition.

Why bother to disassociate yourself from something you were never part of in the first place?

He then went on to tell an even bigger whopper.

On NBC's Good Morning Namibia programme, he claimed that western countries were trying to impose social grants on Namibia, even though they don't have welfare grants in their own countries. Thousands of young Namibians, who have lived and studied in the U.K. and other overseas countries, know about the "dole", or unemployment benefits, and would have known immediately that Namalenga was talking rubbish.

To quote Abraham Lincoln "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time".

But perhaps a more apt Lincoln quotation in Namalenga's case would be:

"Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt."

During the NUNW Executive Committee meeting, union leaders apparently made insulting remarks about Bishop Zephania Kameeta of the BIG Coalition. Shame, shame on you!

To the NUNW victimising Bishop Kameeta and taking revenge against Peter Naholo is more important than serving the interests of the workers, or the needs of the poor.

These days if you are a Swapo member, but dare to criticise certain Swapo policies, the rabble of the party members automatically label you "anti-Swapo".

The more thoughtful and levelheaded members of the party are too frightened to speak out, because they fear the mob might turn against them. Our thinking has become muddled, irrational and sometimes even perverse.

Under apartheid people used to say, we live in an abnormal society. The fact is that we still live in an abnormal society!

Other African countries are seriously weighing the option of a social grant. What does that make Namibia - a retrograde and reactionary country? That is difficult to say.