

Out of the constitutional frying pan . . .

Sir – One hesitates to contradict a Nobel prizewinner, especially one associated with a campaign on behalf of Aids sufferers, but Nadine Gordimer was very wide of the mark when she claimed recently that South Africa has ‘one of the best constitutions in the world’. More accurate is R W Johnson’s account in *South Africa: The First Man, The Last Nation*, published this year, in which the 1994 constitution is described as a ‘scandalous political bosses’ charter . . . unique in the world’s electoral history’.

Under this constitution, as Johnson says, there are ‘no constituencies at all and no possibility for local communities to have any control over their representatives or to choose who they might be. Even when MPs resigned or died, there were to be no by-elections . . . Instead, 400 MPs were to be elected on a purely proportional basis from party lists. Any MP who disagreed with his party could be thrown out of parliament by the party bosses. These party bosses – in the case of the ANC, the group around President Mbeki – even have the power ‘to move people at will into and out of seats in parliament and the provincial assemblies’.

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Archbishop Tutu – another Nobel laureate – complains that members of the South African government show ‘uncritical, sycophantic, obsequious conformity’ in relation to Thabo Mbeki’s policy towards Zimbabwe. That is what the constitution was designed to secure. The same conformity has cost so many lives in relation to President Mbeki’s policy on Aids.

Paul Trewhela, Aylesbury, Bucks.