

TIME TO BURY THE GREAT WHITE HOPE

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"When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle". (Edmund Burke)

A persistent myth in white electoral politics is the "Great White Hope" (G W H) : an enlightened, charismatic and obviously white political figure who can mobilize non-reactionary white voters in sufficient numbers to either unseat the governing National Party or somehow decisively influence democratic reform from "above". Part of this myth is the often unstated assumption that all politics in South Africa is about whites deciding who gets what, when and how. Therefore, democracy, if it is ever to be, can only come about from white politics and the rest of the population, or "the masses" or the "outside world" must curb its impatience and restrain its irrationality and wait for the G W H to lead us "constitutionally", "evolutionary" and "peacefully" to democracy and justice.

This myth is kept alive in a number of ways : Obviously by politicians who churn out reasons that satisfy the needs of those voters who dream about the myth. For example the "real split to the left" within the NP is yet to come, or, after the next election "we" can hold the balance of power and force an enlightened choice on those who govern, and so on. It is also

kept alive by those who propogate a facile, simplistic "constitutionalism" (particularly some editors and political correspondents), i.e. politics is about power, power is in Parliament; Parliament is controlled by whites; get the "right whites" to control Parliament and voila - Democracy ! Academics contribute their share to the myth as well. Especially those who fancy themselves as experts in "real politics" and who plead for the "rights of minorities" in some future democracy in South Africa, when what they really have in mind is that "whites" have a definable "community of interests" that exist independantly from their present position of constitutionally entrenched racial privilege and that democracy in South Africa is only possible if such "white interests" can co-exist with other "interests", whatever those may be. This is simply a variation of "the-road-to-Black-liberation-goes-through-white-interests" argument.

Recently, this myth was again unambiguously reflected when the Sunday Times with characteristic hyperbole, led with the headline "Slabbert Bombshell"! In the non-report that followed I was going to "rally and mobilize the left", persuade extra-Parliamentary forces to "participate" in structures of Government and personally do a "dramatic U-turn and return to Parliament", i.e. my hat was in the ring again to be "G.H.W." What was depressing about this report was not its inaccuracy or tendentiousness, but the complete absence of analytical rigour. It was totally irrelevant to the political reality of South Africa in exactly the same way in which the G.W.H. myth is : Both reflect a dogged

determination on the part of whites not to come to terms with the political reality they have helped to create.

I left Parliament not because of principled objections to participation - after all I "participated" for a dozen years; not because any participation was irrelevant - I have and still do defend the protesting, muckraking role of Suzman, van Eck, Soal, etc., not because I do not respect the institution of Parliament itself - it is precisely because I do. And as for some editors and crusty cognoscenti who frequent the pub of the Rand Club and pose as amateur psycho-analysts and who claim "that I did not have the staying power or stamina for politics", whilst I was there, I worked harder addressing meetings, fundraising and promoting the Party than at least 80% of its members in the caucus and I had a pretty good idea how most of them spent their time : For most MP's politics is no sweat - you do not need stamina, just the ability to ride out ritual and boredom until you can pursue your own affairs again.

I left Parliament because it had become a waste of time. A waste of time for what? For promoting the idea of a non-racial democracy in South Africa and then building up a Parliamentary political party that could effectively bring it about. Perhaps it was a mistake for me to believe that this was possible in the first place. But at least, it was worth a try. Also it had become a waste of time, not because most of those in the PFP Caucus were not sincere in their commitment to a non-racial democracy or that I no longer believed in the constitutional

policy of the Party - (how could I, since I had drafted it for consideration by the Party leadership and congress?) It had become a waste of time because the rules of the game and the context of politics had changed fundamentally.

Nothing dealt the concept of Parliament and accountable government a more fatal blow than the change to the tri-cameral constitution. This shift suddenly revealed a number of basic guidelines within which all politics from "above" would be conducted :- The centrality of racially compulsory groups as fundamental elements in any constitutional developments, the increasing power of the Executive President over all other forms of civilian administration; the overriding emphasis on security interests and the systematic encroachment of the security establishment into conventional civic affairs; the control over more and more information and news, the growing realization that "reform" would in all cases be subordinate to "security" and that its goal was to adjust not eliminate white domination.

The major political consequences of those developments were twofold : massive popular revolt against the reform constitution and white right-wing reaction against the risks of reform for old style white domination. Both have far-reaching consequences for so-called white liberal politics in Parliament. Mass revolt against the tri-cameral Parliament brought the issue of "participation in structures" to the forefront, created a credibility crisis for the PFP and similar types of parties in Parliament and (maybe temporarily) narrowed the recruitment base

for support in the extra-Parliamentary arena.

At the same time, the most dramatic, sensational and visible opposition was in the extra-Parliamentary arena (UDF, Trade Unions, ANC, National Forum etc.,) which in turn led to repressive actions from the State and a sustained demonization campaign against any non-Parliamentary opposition. The growth of the right-wing reaction on the other hand made white domination and white security the central issues in white Parliamentary politics. White racial outbidding is the order of the day and the National Party has successfully manoeuvred itself into the quaint position of the "moderate centre" in white politics and presents itself as more reasonable in its domination than the crude alternative of the Conservative Party and its cohorts, or the (white) "capitulation" of the parties struggling on its "left". At the same time, the security establishment with the State President as its Chief Executive has made it clear that neither "left" nor "right" will be allowed to threaten the "security of the State" (and the bottom line for that remains effective white control of the machinery of state, whichever way you look at it.)

It is in this context that the PFP or any other party with similar liberal sentiments has to present itself; not as a protesting, declining, well-intentioned minority, but as a growing democratizing electoral threat in white politics to the alternatives presented by the NP or the CP. It has to credibly persuade the white electorate that it can overcome growing right-

wing fascism, calm mass extra-Parliamentary revolt, oust a security obsessed, increasingly unaccountable Executive President and his party, and implement a liberal democracy for South Africa. Furthermore and incredible dictu! It has to convince the country and the outside world that the tri-cameral constitution is a viable political instrument with which to do so.

And yet, this is precisely the kind of ridiculous conventional political wisdom that is dished out to them by some liberal newspaper editors and semi-politically conscious businessmen. They meet at dinners and cocktail parties and mutter amongst themselves : "What is Dennis trying to do? Where is Wynand going? Its time Eglin and the PFP started performing. I see Slabbert is nibbling at the edges again. Wish these buggers would get their act together" Blah, blah, etc and so on. The GWH endures as the anaesthetic that helps them not to come to terms with the unfolding political reality.

Nobody administers this anaesthetic more professionally than Ken Owen, Editor of Business Day. I single him out because unlike the Sunday Times, he is analytically incisive and systematic, he does not trivialize GWH thinking by personalizing it (certainly not in my own case whom he constantly suspects of political male fides), and most important, he does vigorously and consistently criticize the NP and the CP. (I suspect editorially the Sunday Times and a few other English speaking newspapers have already

begun to transfer their G.W.H. expectations onto the National Party. Again, as in the case with the 1983 referendum, it was the first newspaper to support the latest constitutional fruit salad dished up by President P W Botha during his vote.) Few correspondents could match Owen's devastating demolition of the 1983 tri-cameral constitutional proposals. Since then he has continued to point out how executive power together with the security establishment is at the arbitrary beck and call of a single individual; how Parliament has become an unaccountable, impotent shell; how a growing and bloated bureaucracy with delegated and, in many cases, unaccountable authority, is undermining economic growth, destroying initiative, bypassing civilian and representative government and consuming our dwindling resources; how civil liberties have been mauled and crushed in the courts, the media and in voluntary organisational life. In short, Owen has in my book been the most eloquent English language press chronicler of the sustained and massive assault by those who govern on what has remained of the values and institutions which could make up a liberal democracy in South Africa.

But, at the same time, he has been contemptuous, even vicious, in his attacks on the massive revolt against this assault. The whole extra-Parliamentary field of opposition is almost dismissed entirely as consisting of Marxists, fellow travellers, do-gooder sentimentalists, useful idiots, romantic revolutionaries etc. For him, they represent the forces of darkness and irrationality, a heaving, shoving, jostling mass of discontent that perforce has

to be controlled and contained by extraordinary measures, because for Owen, finally, the "masses" pose an even greater threat than the tyranny of those who govern. When the 17 organisations were banned on the 24 February this year and the State made clear its intentions to cut off foreign funding for extra-Parliamentary organisations, Owen almost exulted that it reminded him of the "gay sixties". Then, as now, the State stomped on the "lefties", banning organisations, imprisoning leadership and house arresting and detaining without trial. After which Owen argued, life returned to "normal" and politics to "business as usual". And what is politics? Why, of course - Parliamentary politics!

So now again, let us return to Parliamentary politics. But how? How does a liberal minded party in opposition make progress when the Parliamentary terrain is dominated by an unaccountable Executive authority that uses its power to rig the game totally in its favour and is threatened only by a growing party to its right that believes it is not rigging it well enough. At the same time the extra-Parliamentary terrain is dominated by "the masses" whom Owen seems to believe should be kept as far away from parliamentary politics as possible in any case?

His advice in this regard is not very inspiring: "Parliament is a noble institution", "Parliamentary politics is what it's all about"; "get down to the nitty-gritty of hard work"; "keep your eye on the lodestar of liberty" and similar floppy prescriptions

seems to be the level of penetration into strategy that one can glean. It's all a load of rubbish of course, and if Owen knew even half of what it takes to win a constituency against the odds he would be embarrassed by his own prescriptions. Out there in the hustings of white politics it is getting tougher, not easier for liberals. Businessmen are beginning to cast an approving eye to the NP when previously they supported the PFP (remember their step-in-the-right-direction in 1983?), and some people who voted Prog in 1974 have moved straight into the camp of the Conservative Party without even a gearshift at the watering hole of the NP. The "Total Onslaught" is working precisely for the very developments that Owen has so incisively criticized when lamenting the assault on liberal values. To limit the struggle for a liberal democracy to the terrain of Parliamentary politics is to accept that those who govern will exclusively set and change the rules as it suits them.

The simple truth of the matter is that constitutional politics in South Africa is not geared to restore democracy, but to adjust, rationalize and sophisticate white domination. The kind of liberal politics Owen espouses in fact depends on this domination because he appears to accept that liberalism has nothing creative to contribute outside the Parliamentary arena. This kind of liberalism will slowly fade out of political life in South Africa like a long drawn out wail of impotence.

In the meantime it succeeds in trapping liberal white voters and politicians in the fishbowl world of white parliamentary politics. Any attempt to venture outside those boundaries, e.g.

by talking to ANC, Trade Unions, or other extra-Parliamentary organisations brings on the twin attack of sustained rubbishing and demonizing by the State as capitulating white interests, or so-called liberal minded editors dismissing it as cheap publicity stunts and exercises in futility. "Come back to the 'real' world of politics" they urge, meaning Parliament, and then they leave those politicians twisting in the wind like pieces of biltong and even castigate them for not "getting their act together".

But is there then no chance for democracy in South Africa? Certainly not from the kind of constitution making coming from the State. We will simply have to wait until the logic of co-optive politics has played itself out before any fresh initiatives can be expected. However if, (and I stress "if"), there is to be a democracy in South Africa, then in terms of the very logic and structure of this form of Government, it will have to be sustained, invigorated and institutionalized through the active involvement of the majority of people in South Africa. It is on them that a political culture depends which accepts cultural diversity, freedom of association, speech and movement, multi-party competition and limitations on the abuse of power. I have no romanticism about "the masses" in this regard or delusions about the "historical correctness" of the "will of the majority". Totalitarianism is not the sole preserve of a threatened minority and the potential for Jacobin intolerance on the part of some of "the masses" have already been in evidence in

South Africa, and no doubt it will rear its ugly head if not constantly guarded against. But a culture of democracy has to exist and thrive before a system of democracy can operate. The political culture coming from Parliament is profoundly undemocratic, including some of the liberal laments which sometimes accompany it.

Is a democratic culture possible in the extra-Parliamentary terrain? Yes, and it is worth building on as vigorously as possible. If I did not believe this, I would not bother to write one word for this article, nor would I be involved in arranging meetings between different groups of organisations in the extra-Parliamentary terrain who believe in different strategies, tactics and even goals, or for that matter between Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary organizations to see whether they do have anything in common. It is in this context that I and others in IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa) have been active in talking to a wide spectrum of interests : UDF, COSATU, NDM, ANC, INKATHA, students, dominees, businessmen, writers, educationists, etc., to find out what unity or diversity of purpose exists on matters of strategy, tactics and goals for bringing about a non-racial democracy in South Africa.

It is also in this context that the question of "participation in structures of government" as a strategy to promote the idea of a non-racial democracy is being discussed. Needless to say, this is a highly controversial issue and discussions are very tentative and at initial stages. Most blacks in extra-

Parliamentary organisations come from a history of non-participation and have a deep suspicion about collaboration and co-option, whereas many whites come from a history of participation. Consider in this regard the strategy of the Conservative Party. They abhor tri-cameralism, continuously question the legitimacy of Parliament and openly use the rhetoric of guerilla warfare when explaining what they are bent on doing. Ferdie Hartzenberg, their Deputy Leader, goads the Government into setting up as many multi-racial structures as possible, because as he says the CP will go in there and "sabotage" them, i.e. a form of institutional/constitutional guerilla warfare. But there is no similar tradition in extra-Parliamentary politics. In fact, I find a dearth of flexible strategic thinking at the moment. But to think that any G.W.H. can simply snap his fingers, "rally the left", "drop a Bombshell" and march on Parliament is to display a distressing and profound lack of understanding for what is at stake. At this stage for the vast majority of extra-Parliamentary organisations, participation is "still a waste of time".

This poses very serious problems for a party in parliament that wishes to play a role in bringing about a non-racial democracy in South Africa. (Precisely the same kind of problems I experienced when I was there.) However, I believe that the kind of discussions the NDM have been having with extra-Parliamentary organisations, including the ANC, has opened up new points of debate, e.g. can a party in Parliament reflect a broader extra-

Parliamentary struggle for a non-racial democracy in South Africa?

Increasingly the political/ideological divide in South Africa - with differing sub-ideologies and political strategies on either side - is between those who tuck in behind the co-optive policies of the State and take their chances with the adjusting face of white domination, and those who try to work for a non-racial democratic alternative amongst the majority of South Africans. This divide is not a simple black vs white dichotomy, e.g. Afrikaner versus African Nationalism or White vs Black interests, or "ANC socialism" vs "neo-Fascist Afrikaner nationalism". One of the startling consequences of co-optive politics is how multi-racial white domination has become. It would not surprise me one bit, if after a head count, it is found that more Blacks than Whites work in State and semi-State structures and, that not all, but certainly many of them would be loathe to sacrifice present patronage for the risks entailed in a future democracy (and I certainly include for this argument so-called Independent States.) Nor would it surprise me if within the next five years the State succeeded in presenting a photograph of a super State Council with more black faces on it than white ones (but of course with final control still firmly in white hands.)

It is in this context that it becomes possible for some of those who believe themselves to be in opposition to the Government to come to depend on continued white domination for their opposition - like pilot fish who are biologically programmed to live off the

remnants of the scavenging shark in whose slipstream they swim. It is even more extraordinary when whites believe that all politics in South Africa is what happens when they participate in Parliament. It becomes ritualized Government vs Opposition - a political pantomime in which political reality is traded for political ritual and G.H.W. expectations become credible lines in the script. (Vide Alan Hendrickse, leader of the largest "opposition" party in the tri-cameral Parliament who, in a general all party debate on the National Council Bill had to first wait for whites to support and oppose before he, as a classified "Coloured" could stand up from "opposition" and support). This whole edifice is an impossibly narrow and unsuitable base on which to build a democratic culture for the future.

Can a liberal minded party in Parliament be part of building such a democratic culture? Can progressive people "participate in structures" and promote democratic principles? How does one deal with the problem of co-option and collaboration? These are the questions which are the subject of intense debate in extra-Parliamentary circles and amongst some inside Parliament as well. They cannot be settled by ticking off "success" or "failure" behind a one day meeting of NDM and ANC representatives in Frankfurt or a weekend workshop of the Five Freedoms Forum. To the extent that I have been involved in such debates, and I certainly have had discussions with many individuals and organisations, I have more and more come under the impression how

these questions relate to a much wider and urgent debate in South Africa : Is democracy possible? What does it mean? This is not simply an intellectual exercise. It is a basic practical problem that is being hammered out in many contexts of our society, in labour, management, education, religion, community development, youth organisations, etc. It is a debate that whites in particular have to become involved in because I believe the quality of their involvement can make an important contribution to the growth of democratic culture in South Africa. To do so at a time when we are experiencing deepening repression and increasing authoritarianism is not easy, but that is precisely the nature of the challenge if democracy as a desirable objective is to be taken seriously. A necessary first step for whites into this debate is to bury all G.H.W. illusions and to participate as ordinary South Africans in an extraordinary situation.