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A GENERAL ELECTION : THEN FUNDAMENTAL REFORM? NOT VERY LIKELY!

The Prime Minister : "Let me say this to the hon. Leader of the Opposition today. ... during the past two years or slightly longer that I have been Prime Minister I have undertaken to do nothing that I do not intend to carry out. ... What I said in public I would do I shall carry out as leader of this party as long as I receive the strength and the grace to lead. ..."  
(Hansard, Col. 1976/20.2.81)

The Prime Minister : "Let me tell the hon. Leader of the Opposition ... that any attempt to get me to split the NP, from his ranks or from the ranks of the Press that supports him, are futile. I shall not help to bring about a split in my party which I helped to build up over a period of more than 40 years. Let us understand one another very clearly on this point now. ..."  
(Hansard, Col. 219/28.1.81)

And then he called a general election! Since he has done so, political pundits have tried to find the reasons. This in itself is significant because it means one of two things, or even both : the reason given is not convincing (3 dozen vacant seats as a result of delimitation), and/or the need for a general election is not self-evident (the Government has an enormous working majority that is under no immediate threat). Why then?

A fairly common reply : the Prime Minister needs his own mandate. Lately every Nationalist Party Prime Minister needs to comfort himself with more support from the white electorate. It is

argued that P.W. Botha is trading on B.J. Vorster's 1977 results and needs to be his own man. But then again : a mandate for what? Consider the above two quotations again : The one is a commitment to do something and the other is a commitment not to do something. The Prime Minister is saying : Whatever I promised to do, I will do, but whatever I do, I will not let it split the Nationalist Party. This is a crucial point of departure in understanding the Prime Minister and his actions. It has guided every Prime Minister since 1948 and the present one is no different in this respect. Every promise or statement of reform must be seen against the background of this fundamental rule of Nationalist Party political life. This rule determines both the type and tempo of reform, i.e. what will change and how fast it will happen.

One thing about which a great deal of confusion can arise during this election is the word reform. All the Parliamentary Parties contesting this election want to embrace the concept of reform, even some Nationalists. In fact, if the Prime Minister has done anything during his term of office, it was to make the word reform respectable in political vocabulary without actually saying specifically what it means. The right will say there is too much reform, the moderates will say there is not enough and the Government will most likely say the one wants to go too slow and the other too fast. And so on, the Prime Minister playing political Goldilocks.

How does one judge the nature of reform? Surely reform must stand in some rational relation to some end goal. Reform arises out of deliberate, premeditated government action. This is the difference between reform and change. All reform is change but not all change is reform. Population increase; the change in the gold price; urban migration, etc., are all changes which

which affect political decision-making in some way or another but it would be a foolish government that insists that it has enough control over these events to predictably and rationally determine the frequency of their occurrence. More often than not governments react to these events rather than initiate them. It is when a government deliberately initiates political action with some end goal in mind that one can talk about reform. In this sense, President Reagan's recent budget is a major effort at political reform. The goals are to cut back on government spending, increase private enterprise and bring down inflation. One may question it, accept it or reject it, but there is no question that the budget is an act of political reform.

Is there something comparable in South Africa? Can one, when talking about reform in relation to the Government identify clearly some goal towards which the Government wished this country to move? Yes, the only systematic political policy of reform which this Government has embarked upon and which fundamentally affected the structure of our society has been the policy of Apartheid and/or Separate Development. Systematic and premeditated political decisions resulted in the Population Registration Act, the Separate Amenities Act, the Group Areas Act, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, Section 16 of the Immorality Act, the various Acts affecting homelands, the Urban Areas Consolidation Act, etc. The end goals to be achieved by these political acts were complete racial segregation in as many areas of life as possible (apartheid) and separate political and geographic units for the various black groups (separate development). Therefore the legislation referred to still today provides the legal infrastructure which affects all the patterns of association of people of different races : people are classified racially, public amenities are provided on a racial basis, land is allocated on a racial basis, education is provided racially,

people marry racially, etc., etc. Over the last more than thirty years, South Africa has been deliberately re-formed by the Government in this manner.

The policy of Apartheid and/or Separate Development, needless to say, has caused us much hardship and frustration. It has isolated us internationally and divided us internally. Increasingly it has made us a tense, desperate and unhappy society. So much so that today in our land reform has become associated with anything that signifies a move away from Apartheid and/or Separate Development. That is why the right hates it, the moderates want it and the revolutionaries dread it.

The enigma of the Prime Minister's term of office is that the word reform has become associated with him both negatively and positively without his being able to solve the dilemma. Both the right and the moderates want to know whether he is going to move away from Apartheid, but obviously for very different reasons. The one because they fear a white sell-out, the other because they fear a racial confrontation. All we do know is that the Prime Minister goes into this election without clearly giving an answer to either.

Yet certain things have happened during his term of office, more by chance than by design, that tell us that Apartheid and/or Separate Development is in trouble. For one, it is now quite clear that complete segregation is totally impossible. If only by sheer weight of numbers than anything else this has been driven home to us. The Government has been forced to crawl away from rigid segregation, permit by permit. Also it has become quite clear to this Government that urban blacks are a permanent group in our industrial areas. The persistence with 99-year leasehold rather than freehold is a futile gesture that simply

underlines this fact. Furthermore the BENS0 report has made it equally clear that the economic goals of Separate Development are unobtainable, in fact to the extent that the Government persists in pursuing them it would threaten our economy. Finally this Government has placed its plans for land consolidation into cold storage because it would simply cost too much and, even if paid for, would not, in the eloquent words of the Chairman of the Consolidation Commission "have increased the economic potential of the independent and national States by half of a percent" (sic). Now all these developments cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be seen as acts of reform. They are important changes nevertheless, brought about by the hard economic and social realities of our country. These realities simply say one thing : Apartheid and/or Separate Development, as an act of political reform, is a colossal flop.

The Prime Minister is in office at a time when it has become increasingly clear that the official policy of his Government, which has been systematically implemented over more than thirty years, cannot work. This fact alone is almost sufficient to make him an illusionary figure of reform. But it is not the Prime Minister's fault that Apartheid is not working. The right should not blame him for this nor should the moderates give him credit for it. Apartheid would be a failure no matter who the Prime Minister is. The question is : Where is the Prime Minister going to lead us now? What has he done so far? Well, there was the Carlton Conference which so far simply has demonstrated that free enterprise and Apartheid can operate to the benefit of some but not to all, and that businessmen cannot make right what politicians have done wrong. Then there is the President's Council which is fast developing into a political treadmill between the obscure intentions of the Prime Minister and the will of the Nationalist Party Congresses.

And finally we have the General Election. Why? Because the Prime Minister needs his own mandate? For what? For a new direction, a new goal for South Africa to pursue? But surely that would mean fundamental reform? Fundamental reform at least would imply the scrapping of the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, the Separate Amenities Act, etc. "Sshhh!" say some, "the Prime Minister has a hidden agenda to do so after the election". But the history and unity of the Nationalist Party is inseparably linked to the creation and existence of the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, etc.

What has the Prime Minister himself said? He has said that he will do what he promised to do. What has he promised? Who can know for sure? But whatever he intends to do, he does not intend to split the Nationalist Party.

First a General Election then fundamental reform? No, it is not very likely! In fact, I would say he needs this election in order to re-establish Nationalist Party unity rather than get a clear-cut mandate for fundamental reform. The logic is simple : the Prime Minister simply has not asked for such a mandate and he dare not. This is not simply a statement but also a challenge to the Prime Minister to react. Let him tell us in clear and precise language what fundamental reform he has in mind (not in the vague mumbo-jumbo of the 12-point plan). I will eat my hat if he does so before, during or even after the election. As a former Party organiser he, more than anyone else, should know what Nationalist Party unity is all about.