

ALAN PATON MEMORIAL LECTURE

4 June 1993

Dr F van Zyl Slabbert

INTRODUCTION

If I could have dinner with Alan Paton tonight, what would we talk about? Quite a long time ago I was at his house in Pietermaritzburg with Peter Brown and David Welsh and the then contemporary South African situation was being dissected, just as it would have been tonight, were he with us. He thoroughly enjoyed a good self-critical, uncompromising discussion on this country he loved so much, and especially how core liberal values such as liberty and justice could survive its political dynamics.

Three questions I would have liked to put to him : Why did South African liberalism evoke such vehement negative responses amongst those struggling for liberation? Why has this suddenly died

down? What implications does this hold for liberal values in the future?

Because he is no longer with us, and we certainly are all the poorer for it, I wish to honour his memory by provoking some argument and reflection on these three questions.

SOUTH AFRICA LIBERALISM : THE POLITICAL POLECAT

Dr Neville Alexander, who himself did time on Robben island for his political convictions, wrote on his release in 1974 : "Liberalism is a greater danger in the long run to the struggle of the oppressed than Fascism; for the very reason that it seems to speak with the tongue of the people". (1) Steve Biko also targeted "white liberals" in particular as the main danger to Black emancipation and the contempt of AFrikaner Nationalism and South African Marxism for South African liberalism is well documented.

I do not have the time, nor do I wish to trivialise this question by dwelling on jaded stereotypes about liberals being patronising, guilt ridden, leaning over 'backward", arrogant, indifferent, sentimental, soft, hard, "useful idiots", manipulators, underminers etc. These characteristics are not peculiar to liberals, or liberalism or any particular philosophy or political tradition. Liberals, like conservatives, Marxists or Nationalists, come in many shapes and sizes and do damage, or good, to their cause by their behaviour and how they are experienced or perceived by their antagonists. Mutual

stereotyping and labelling is an inevitable part of ideological conflict and political competition. If nothing else, it is boring and contributes very little to any serious debate. The more interesting theme to explore in trying to understand why South African liberalism was the political polecat for so long is this : why was the implementation of liberal values seen as both a protector of, and a threat to the status quo in the South African context? By the way, this is not peculiar to South African liberalism. It appears that 19th Century English liberalism, in particular, was seen in exactly the same light. Liberal values such as protection of property rights, rule of law, civil liberties were favoured by emerging merchant and commercial class and industrialists because it was argued, it enabled them to keep the growing landless peasants at bay whilst they could also undermine the position of the privileged aristocracy. In other words, liberalism, was seen to be indifferent, even antagonistic to inherited collective poverty as well as inherited collective wealth or privilege. It was the political philosophy of the selfish, talented individual who had the historical luck of the draw to get ahead on his/her own.

Much has been written and debated since then to show that matters were not as simple as that, but there is no time to go into this now. Suffice it to say, that in the South African context, when racism became institutionalised and legalised after 1948, it permeated through all the institutions and organisations in society, also those where people of liberal persuasion found themselves such as universities, the press, the courts and

business. At the same time, South Africa became polarized between competing redemptive ideologies aimed at saving the poor, oppressed and exploited majority or protecting the wealthy, privileged minority : a National Democratic Revolution vs Apartheid, Liberations vs Domination; Socialism vs Racial Capitalism, a Total Strategy to meet a Total Onslaught, the Struggle vs the System. It was anathema for anyone in this climate to suggest that there was no grand theory of change, no final solution, no guaranteed outcome, no monopoly on truth. To question the reality of "a total onslaught" immediately got one defined as part of it; to doubt any strategy of "the Struggle" immediately made you a willing or useful idiot of "the System". It was a time when dogmatic confidence rode roughshod over any expression of reasonable doubt.

It was also a tough time for liberals and it showed. Some of them began to politically degut each other in public debate. Suddenly there were "soft liberals" and "hard liberals"; liberals who "tucked in behind tyranny" and those who became Sancho Pancho's in the struggle. Ken Owen said of me that I was a "political glamour boy who whored with English votes and betrayed the cause". He reminded himself of this 10 days ago in his regular column on Sunday,. It may not have been pleasant then but it served a purpose. It kept the focus on the relevance of core liberal values in our time. (I personally am comforted by Ken Owen's own words in the foreword to his recent book These Times. "Everything I have written can - or should- be improved, corrected, altered, modified or polished." (2) He is obviously

a liberal who knows how to make a mistake and how to recognize it. Perhaps I am an Andy Capp liberal : a man with many mistakes, but being wrong is not one of them.)

WHY NOW ARE LIBERAL VALUES FASHIONABLE?

Today, the major protagonists, when trying to negotiate an agenda for successful transition talk about : a justiciable Bill of Rights where core values such as the rule of law, freedom of association, speech, movement and information are placed beyond the capricious political will of a minority or majority; how to protect and nurture a market economy; how to have effective checks and balances in a democratic constitution to guard against the abuse of power. Liberal democratic values permeate and guide discussions at the Multi-Party Forum, the Peace Accord and its structures, the Goldstone Commission, the NHF, NFLG, NEF. Both the NP and the ANC have moved away from ideologically defined positions of exclusive and inclusive intolerance and preach the virtues of inclusive tolerance and respect for diversity. They have abandoned core assumptions about their respective, predestined and mutually exclusive roles to lead this country to redemption and seek solutions of mutual co-existence and power sharing. All rather embarrassingly liberal and tentative given the messianic convictions with which they confronted one another.

I am sure Alan Paton would have realised, as we do, that there is no mass liberal democratic movement/organisation/party

carrying or driving these values. As I have pointed out most of the conventional institutions in society that sustain liberal democratic values, in our country, have been deeply contaminated by the legacies of the past; think of the courts, the media, education, Parliament, civil society in general. And yet, precisely now, with South Africa in fundamental transition trying to consolidate around a fragile new emerging centre, liberal democratic values seem to guide the negotiations. The very same values that Alexander, Biko, Marxists and Nationalists either scorned as irrelevant and of no consequence to the future of this country, or paradoxically, posed a greater threat to the "liberation of the oppressed" than Fascism. How do we account for this?

Obviously, one has to pay generous tribute to Paton and others like him who have with great fortitude proclaimed the core values of liberal democracy. Even sometimes in the most hostile of environments. Also, liberals have not only proclaimed and sermonised. They were active in civil society, business and politics and although they could never match the sense of collective destiny and unity of purpose of Marxism or exclusive Nationalism, some of their pragmatic common sense obviously prevailed until today.

But more than liberal activism in the South African context is needed to explain the current vogue of liberal values. The last five years saw the gradual erosion and collapse of one of the most powerful redemptive political ideologies that dominated more

than half the 20th Century world. Its practical bankruptcy is everywhere in evidence. In the South African context, this collapse coincided with the demonstrable collapse of another redemptive ideology that has not only dominated, but oppressed, South Africa for the last 40 years, namely Apartheid/Separate Development as an articulation of Afrikaner Nationalism. One is reminded of Paul Johnson's observation that "history painfully demonstrates that collective righteousness is far more ungovernable than any individual pursuit of revenge." (2) Between the struggle for liberation and the repression of domination, this country has been brought to the threshold of ungovernability. Is it unsurprising that when the major antagonists confront each other in deadlock on the ashes of their mutually antagonistic redemptive ideologies they fall back on liberal values in order to get negotiation under way?

But, there is another dimension. In deadlock power frustrates power. Neither side has the ability to impose its will on the other, only the ability to frustrate each other's intentions. When, in such circumstances negotiation becomes the dominant mode of transition, nothing is calculated to make a liberal democrat of a tyrant more quickly than the prospect of his most ardent adversary coming into power. Suddenly, an independent judiciary and media, the role of law, a justiciable Bill of Rights and a democratic constitution, riddled with checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power, becomes such obvious common sense to major parties.

I have written elsewhere that South Africa, together with Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, has also entered its own age of incredulity. Particularly when NP and ANC spokesmen vie with each other in defence of liberal values.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS FOR LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN THE FUTURE?

Of one thing I am quite sure : premature triumphalism is completely inappropriate as far as the future of liberal democracy in South Africa is concerned. Particularly if formerly hostile opponents to it, seize upon it as a political compromise to bring about a negotiated transition. Why do they do this? Is it because now they genuinely believe in it? Or is it a temporary expediency to outmanoeuvre each other for the time being so that new political space can be created for future invasion and the resumption of old battles. Or is it simply a slower more incremental way to protect the privilege of the few or realise the aspirations of the many? We simply do not know and it is very difficult to find out.

Two things need to be appreciated in this context. Firstly, even if political leaders may have suspended or even abandoned, the messianic/redemptive aspirations of their parties or movements, a sizeable section of their constituencies have not. Leaders cannot simply dismiss the political pressures that flow from such fears and aspirations. Romantic populism on the left and right of the spectrum is an ever present and growing possibility.

Secondly, if liberal democracy is seen as the vehicle that has to meet and solve these aspirations in the short term, e.g. where democracy is equated with economic development or with protecting the self-determination of exclusive minorities, then a burden is placed on democracy which it cannot carry. If this perceived "failure" of democracy translates into the spread of confrontational populism, then, as comparative analysis shows, the result is not sustainable democracy, but renewed repression

That is why perhaps now is the most dangerous time for people of liberal persuasion to heave a sigh of relief that more liberal values have become fashionable in the prevailing rhetoric of politicians. If anything, it is now the time to actively engage in building institutions that can sustain and consolidate a liberal democracy. The abiding virtue of a democracy is that it is the easiest way for a society to change its mind to meet changing circumstances. It enhances a country's ability to adjust and be flexible. But this cannot happen just because there is a liberal democratic constitution. Such a constitution has to be sustained by supporting institutions that enhance a society's capacity for self-critical understanding. Institutions that continually remind us that no body, party or organisation has the monopoly on truth. Also institutions that help us to understand that the issues which redemptive ideologies try to solve in a dogmatic fashion, i.e. poverty, inequality, minority self-determination, growth, unemployment etc., must enjoy sustained attention of an adjusting, critical flexible nature.

I am talking about professionalism and independence in the media, transparency and accountability in the civil service, critical enquiry in education, real freedom of enterprise in the economy, independence in the administration of justice and autonomy in civil society. Such institutions prevent any special interest lobby or party from claiming the right to build a nation on behalf of everybody and instead makes nationbuilding a never ending enterprise for all the interest groups in society. Building such institutions to underpin a liberal democratic constitution will demonstrate that the pursuit of core liberal values is not the preserve of a privileged few or a threat to the disempowered majority. In fact, such institutions become the means by which we, or our country, can most effectively explore the best relationship between growth and redistribution, stability and legitimacy.

In Paton's times, liberals were defending, protecting, protesting and opposing. Given the prevailing dogmas they very often found themselves excluded and isolated. They found it difficult to engage. Hence the image of talkers and moaners. However, when a country like ours undergoes fundamental transition, it is also a time for institutional transformation and building. It is not a time for liberal democrats to coast along with relief at the current fashionability of their long held convictions. They have a brief time to actively build those kinds of institutions that can sustain a liberal democracy. In the South African context it is quite unique that liberals get an opportunity to put their money where their mouths are. Liberals have it now.