

ARTICLE FOR FINANCIAL MAIL

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DR F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

There is a macabre scene in Monty Python's film "In Search of the Holy Grail" where one member of the search party is locked in battle with a sinister black knight who systematically chops off his legs and arms and as the Knight walks away from the scene of the battle, the stump of a torso hops after him shouting "Come back and fight you coward." This is the feeling I get when I think of the circumstances under which opposition political parties will have to fight this forthcoming election. The tri-cameral constitution which the 1983 referendum (with the generous assistance of the Financial Mail), handed to P W Botha on a plate, has dismembered the already flawed system of Parliamentary politics even more. The government lost no time in concentrating sovereignty on the Executive President, who had extraordinary unaccountable and discretionary powers. As a consequence, we now have an extended state of emergency where senior police officers can ban or prevent meetings and suppress information; there is a massive clamp down on the press; criticism of key aspects of government policy is circumscribed, as well as discussions on major opponents of the government and what should or could be done with them. In fact, all the conditions which make nonsense of what an election is all about.

All of this is symptomatic of another consequence of the new constitution, (which was stated repeatedly by some in the 1983 referendum and to no avail), and that is that it would polarize the country and that the centre of gravity as far as political pressure is concerned will be firmly located outside Parliament. That is why Parliamentary parties desperately try to position themselves in the confrontation between the Executive/Security establishment and extra-Parliamentary forces.

With an Executive that by passes Parliament when it wishes or treats it like a legislative laundry machine, one is hard put to find any obvious reason why the State President feels it necessary to hold an election for whites at all. Nevertheless, elections generate their own urgency and it is within the above constraints that one would have to calculate the shake out for the participants in the forthcoming one.

Obviously, I would like to see my old Party do much better than any of its competitors. If I was a betting man though, I would put my money on an outcome in which the distribution of seats would be more or less what exists now. Overall, there will be smaller majorities with a slightly larger Nat stay-away than usual. I am fairly confident that the bluff of the right-wing will have been called and that at best they will come back with one or two more seats than they have now. People forget that in 1981 the right-wing had 14,6% of electoral support and could not win one seat. After all the huffing and puffing since then, and even with Eugene TerreBlanche galloping all over the country side swallowing microphones, no poll has put right-wing support higher than 17%. In addition, of the 19 seats held by them in Parliament, only 3 have been won in battle, and I cannot see them holding Rissik, Sunnyside, Jeppe, Langlaagte or Germiston District. So, if they hold the rest, they will have to win at least ten fresh seats to come back with what they have got. A tall order. In any case, the threat of the right-wing lies in the bureaucracy, not in seats.

As far as the NRP/PFP alliance is concerned, it could have some positive spin-offs. Seats like the two in East London become possibilities and Albany looks much safer. But again, the NRP support that drifted away from 9% in 1981, to 3,5% today is not reflected in increased support for the PFP who had 21% then and 18,6% now.

The position occupied by Wynand Malan is an intriguing one. He threatens Nationalist's hegemony, more symbolically than electorally. The "New Nats" who ache to be with him cannot hold the seats they have if they break, and if they don't

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Wynand can only make them ache some more, (that is assuming he can hold randburg with PFP assistance). In any event, the significance of Wynand Malan is not confined to electoral politics, his break away touches a much deeper vein in our national politics.

So the question can be asked : if things are going to remain as they are, what is the purpose of the whole exercise ? I think that P W Botha can call the bluff of the right-wing and claim that he has a white mandate to do a deal with the blacks. Having locked up most of the leaders, banned or impaired the organizations which the majority of them support, one's imagination simply fizzles out as to what kind of a deal they think has the slightest chance of working.

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