

## ARTICLE FOR LEADERSHIP MAGAZINE

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Most of us had it wrong on the CP and PFP holding their own in the last election; I for one underestimated and overestimated; the one did better and the other did worse. One thing was clear from the start however, the NP was going to win handsomely in any event, and as it happened came out stronger than expected. Now it is all over the the one thing which creates a feeling of mental paralysis in me is when people seize on "quick fix" explanations to alleviate their own frustrations or disguise their obviously wrong and overconfident predictions : "It was that last disastrous ad of the Progs; they had the wrong strategy; the Nats ran a superb campaign, etc. One of them involves me personally : "If Slabbert had stayed on, the PFP would still be the Official Opposition." Not only does this kind of individualistic nonsense do a gross injustice to Eglin and the PFP leadership who had managed to consolidate and increase PFP support before the election; but many of those wishful psephologists before polling day, were

enthusiastically endorsing strategies such as "Turbo-charge", "reformist alliance" and "alternative government" and already talking about a moderate-reformist victory in 1989. If the PFP had done well and all the Independants had won, all these "quick fix" explanations would have been unnecessary and Eglin would have been hailed as a wise ol' dog and a political genius. It is the same kind of myopic analysis that lay at the root of the Rand Club pub talk which inspired the idea of a "step-in-the-right-direction" as the major reason for supporting a disastrous constitution in the 1983 referendum.

The generic miscalculation in this kind of analysis lies in approaching "white politics" as a process which plays itself out in its own secluded and sealed off bubble of South African reality. It is looked at apart from what the rest of society is going through and it is assumed that all that needs to be done, is to discover some internal laws and regularities, then predict shifts to the "left" and "right". This same approach underpins P W Botha's advice to industrialists when he says they should leave politics to politicians and get on with their business. (Is it not staggering that he still believes that politics and business have nothing to do with one another ?)

What to make of election 1987? Consider the following question : Is there an historical precedent where an isolated white minority in power, and living under circumstances of self created seige ; has voluntarily shifted towards fundamental reform that would most certainly mean the loss of political control and socio-economic privilege? Of course not. Why should we be different? This kind of gradual reform is already difficult without seige, but with it, it becomes impossible. There was a time when it seemed almost as if the white electorate could be induced to go for fundamental reform : Remember the 1981 election? No right-wing in Parliament; the PFP had gained seats and PW Botha under pressure to move. "Adapt or die", he said and our hearts lurched in anticipation. But then the wheels of "real reform" started coming off.

Think of what actually happened between election 1981 and election 1987 :

- The Government changed the constitution -  
fundamentally and disastrously. The price for bringing in so-called Coloureds and Indians into Parliament was racist entrenchment into the constitution and Black exclusion.
- Massive extra-Parliamentary mobilization in

protest against the constitution and the creation of the UDF.

- Farcical and futile Coloured and Indian elections for the Houses of Delegates and Representatives.
- Riots and unrest led to the SADF moving from the "Border" into the Townships supporting the police on a continual basis. The distinction between Police and Army became blurred and the role of the latter totally politicized. All this took place under a blaze of international publicity and South African riot control became prime-time news viewing internationally.
- One of the critical consequences of the new constitution was the creation of an extra-ordinarily powerful Executive President. He, together with the security establishment effectively took charge of the country.
- Two States of Emergency followed; the one continuing until now. Extraordinary powers lie with senior police and military officers to detain people, ban meetings and control information.

- A massive clampdown on information and civil liberties became the order of the day.
- The disastrous "Rubicon speech" signalled the beginning of an international campaign which developed into sanctions and di- and disinvestment.
- In the meantime, a new language had developed in the townships, the trade unions and the exile movements : "Comrades", "people's war", "people's army", "the enemy", "people's education and courts", "liberated zones". These became part of the lingua franca of "the struggle".

All of this happened between election 1981 and election 1987 and it happened outside conventional white party politics; outside "the bubble". These developments impinged directly on all aspects of our daily lives and none of us were left without a sense of anxiety and a concern about security and the future. To ignore the impact of these forces on white attitudes and to continue with party politics as if it consists only of registration drives, cake sales, tracing missing voters and "Saatchifying" the image of the party, is tantamount to gathering braaivleis wood in front of a dam wall that has burst. Under these circumstances an all white

election was called and the graphic picture which comes to mind is of an encircled white electorate - on the right of its perimeter an extraordinary powerful executive/security establishment dealing directly with, on its left perimeter, a diffuse, angry and rebellious mass of people. An extra-Parliamentary government confronted by an extra-Parliamentary opposition and Parliament itself powerless to mediate in this confrontation. The parties in it could posture and gesture towards solutions, but they were really beyond the politics of it all. The President knew this when he called the election, because he experienced first hand how he had changed the rules of Parliamentary politics. I remember writing after the announcement that the opposition parties fighting Government in the election reminded me of a macabre scene in the Monty Python film In Search of the Holy Grail . A sinister Black Knight severs the arms and legs of a noble adversary and as he contemptuously walks away from the scene of battle, the stump of a torso hops after him shouting : "Come back and fight you coward." It was simply no contest. To call the NP campaign brilliant under these circumstances, is a bit rich. There is nothing particularly praiseworthy in a child that pulls the wings off an insect and then proudly proclaims : "Look, it cannot fly!"

And yet there were some unexpected and significant

developments in this election. One of them was the phenomenon of the Independants together with the revolt of Afrikaner academics and the young professionally mobile. I do not believe that within the confines of white electoral politics there is enough on the ground here to develop into a full blooded movement that could electorally threaten the Government or the CP. It certainly could develop into an Afrikaner dominated PFP type of party, but subject to the same restraints of white electoral politics I have referred to already. So far it has all the characteristics of a trend searching for a cause and one hopes the cause and the manner in which it is pursued would transcend the divide between Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary politics. Whatever the case may be, the Independant phenomenon in this election conclusively demonstrated the ideological and intellectual barrenness of the NP. Together with its bureaucracy it has become a kind of B-team in crisis management.

Which brings one to the other significant, and certainly for me, unexpected development. The elevation of the CP to the status of Official Opposition in Parliament. There has always been a "right-wing" threat in white South African politics. So far it has manifested itself in the civil service. I have consistently maintained that a right-wing General does more damage to this

country than an additional 20 seats in Parliament for Andries Treurnicht. Now the right-wing is the Official Opposition as well. What does this mean for whatever "reform plans" the Government has in mind? During the election, the Government played up "Reform & Security" for white voters. To the right-wing voters it could promise that its concern with reform would never jeopardize their security and to moderate voters it could promise that its concern with security would never jeopardize reform. It worked and most whites felt wonderfully secure. But now the election is over and "reform and security" suddenly becomes relevant to what is happening outside of Parliament and white elections. In that arena "security" has meant States of Emergency; the arrest and detention of thousands of people; banning of meetings and a clampdown on information. This has happened to the very people who have had to show their gratitude for and co-operation with "reform". It is not surprising that the State President has to place full page ads in the newspapers asking for "genuine Blacks" to come forward and clear up this paradox with "sincere negotiations". It is precisely on this paradox where the CP lies in wait within the Parliamentary game. It is quite content for Government to maintain "security" if it means knocking over the head those who have to co-operate for "reform". The moment the Government moves further it will exploit white fears on a "sell-out" on their



security. The significance of a right-wing as an Official Opposition lies in them constantly reminding Government that it cannot play according to the rule of white electoral politics and use Parliament to bring about "genuine reform". In order to do that the Government will have to move into the extra-Parliamentary terrain. Just as it coped with "security" on an extra-Parliamentary manner, it will be forced to deal with "reform" as well. Already in his opening speech State President P W Botha has referred to the clause in the constitution which gives him sole discretion to deal directly with Black constitutional affairs. The dilemma is clear : if the Government "goes weak on security" it runs into right-wing Parliamentary opposition; if it reneges on "reform" it runs into extra-Parliamentary opposition, whether inside or outside the country. It would seem that both "reform & security" are increasingly going to become extra-Parliamentary affairs. This could be the most important consequence of this "all-white" election.

When I write, or talk like this, people become depressed. They complain that I do not give them anything to cheer them up. If they mean by this : Is there any easy way out of our dilemma? The answer is No. Is there any way to avoid pain and suffering? Again all the available evidence suggests No. Is there no prospect of a secure, predictable middle class future for our children and

theirs with regular lift clubs, bridge parties, flap-jacks and cream for tea? For some yes, for most certainly not. But if one wants to be in a society in which most of the conflicts of the 20th Century have come into focus with prismatic clarity, it is here : East vs West; Colonialism vs anti-Colonialism  
First World vs Third World; Traditional vs Modern, Industrial vs non-Industrial, Rich vs Poor, White vs Black, Capitalism vs Socialism, etc. The juxta-positions continue without limitations on the imagination. What sets us apart is the enormity of our challenge, not the quality of our failures; not even one as uniquely petty as Apartheid. In the fact of this challenge our responsibility must surely be to alert our children and theirs, as well as ourselves, to its dimensions and to seek ways to respond to it in building our future. This may not always be cheerful, but it can be exhilarating. Because, the simple matter of fact is, we do have the potential to respond to that challenge. And to explore that potential is far more constructive than to mope with "quick fix" explanations for why possibly our last all-white election went wrong. When I say we have the potential, it is not only a statement of fact, but a confession of optimism. The final word on South Africa has not been written by a long shot, and it certainly will not be written by those who try to govern us now. There is much, much more going for this country that

can save it, than depends on the policy bankruptcy of the  
National Party.