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OPPOSITION, FOR PUBLICATION IN THE SUNDAY TIMES OF 8.2.1981

ELECTION 1981 - WHY?

The No Confidence Debate was interrupted by the Prime Minister announcing a general election for April 29. This surprise, which is uniquely the privilege of the Prime Minister to create, was almost immediately overtaken by one simple question : Why now?

The only explanation given by the Prime Minister so far is that vacancies have arisen in approximately 37 seats as a result of the re-delimitation of constituencies. But surely this explanation is transparent nonsense. These vacancies were known long before the session of Parliament started. Why wait for everybody - Members of Parliament, diplomats, civil servants - to rent accommodation, get children into new schools, etc., and after only eight weeks tell them all to stop and go back so that a general election can be held? With the present rate of inflation and cost of living this is simply criminal. Why not hold an election either before or immediately after this session? The surprise would have been as great and it would have cost the taxpayer far less. No, this cannot be the reason. So what is it?

The first thing to realize is that the Prime Minister simply has not told us. In 1977 the General Election called by Mr. Vorster was motivated by him as being necessary because the voters had to demonstrate :

- that they would not tolerate outside intervention in our internal affairs (the Carter administration being the main target);

- that they accepted the new constitutional proposals (which still have not been implemented);
- which official opposition they preferred (the PFP won).

Whether one agreed with these reasons or not, they were at least clearcut and simple. In this election the Prime Minister offers us nothing. As others have pointed out, he simply wants a blank cheque!

Why is the Prime Minister reluctant to tell us what the real reasons for the election are? I believe it is because he cannot deliver the goods. Remember, he has generated a great deal of excitement as well as concern with his promises of various kinds of reform. He was the first Prime Minister to visit Soweto; the first Prime Minister to clearly state that "hurtful and unnecessary" discrimination had to go; the first Prime Minister to concede that consolidation under the 1936 Land Act was inadequate; the first Prime Minister to acknowledge that the economic and social goals of separate development had to be abandoned, etc., etc. In other words, he disconcerted his own faithful by promising to slaughter some "holy cows" from the Nationalist Party ideological herd, and fanned expectations amongst those who hoped to benefit from it. He had to decide how cross he wanted to make some or how happy he wanted to make others. That is why the country has, for the twenty-eight months of his reign, been in a state of suspended animation. What practical steps did the Prime Minister have in mind to implement his promises? It became increasingly clear that the time to deliver was going to be the 1981 session of Parliament. The dilemma of the Prime Minister was clear : bite the bullet and carry out reforms or re-establish the unity of the Nationalist Party. The Prime Minister did not deliver. The unity of the Nationalist Party won hands down. He called a general election. But again : Why now?

Point Number One (a minor one) - the deadline for a general election is, in any case, November 1982. The longer the Prime Minister postpones calling an election before then (which is his right) the more predictable the time of the election becomes. Thus he loses the "surprise initiative".

Point Number Two (and far more important) - it is generally accepted that the present economic situation is heading for a downturn. Interest rates are on the rise, food prices will increase and inflation and the rising cost of living will become real headaches towards the end of the year. At the moment the Government can coast along on the tail-end of an economic boom. With the kitty they have accumulated from gold they can, in the short term, increase the salaries of civil servants, nurses, police and teachers to keep them sweet for the election and let price increases have their bite afterwards.

Point Number Three is that for the present there is a lull in the South West Africa/Namibian negotiations. This is a highly emotional issue within Nationalist Party politics with right-wing groups continually warning of a "sell out" by the Government. With the present lull in the negotiations the Government can legitimately claim that it has not "abandoned South West". But it is equally clear that this problem is not going to disappear. It is going to become more complicated and difficult to solve. That is why an election now is better than later when this issue could become a real thorn in Nationalist Party politics.

Point Number Four - Afrikaner right-wing politics is mobilizing inside and outside the Nationalist Party. More so now than ever since the Nationalist Party came to power. This kind of right-wing politics thrives on issues such as economic recession, Namibia and reform (even at the mention of them). Within important sections

of the Civil Service and in the platteland areas there is a growing disaffection with the Prime Minister's performance since he took over. There is also a growing awareness in right-wing groups within and without the Nationalist Party that the Party has lost its ideological certainty and conviction. Already contenders are coming to the fore to redefine ideological orthodoxy for the faithfully confused. It is better for the Prime Minister to call an election sooner than later before such concerns become too dominant in Nationalist Party politics.

All these considerations have to do with concerns which affect the unity/coherence of the Nationalist Party. They call for a diversion; a diversion such as a general election can provide. But not just an ordinary general election. No, this must be the General Election. Therefore the trick is not to tell people what they must vote for, but to tell them what they must vote against. "A vote for the Nationalist Party is a vote against The Total Onslaught!" (By implication it will be said "to vote against the Nationalist Party is to vote for the Total Onslaught"). There is no question that this will be the central theme of the General Election. The real goal is to consolidate the power base of the Nationalist Party. The Government wants whites to speak with one voice to the world : the voice of the Nationalist Party. This is the real reason for the Election.

There will be those who will try to give a more benign explanation for the Prime Minister calling an election. It will be said :

Either :

"The Prime Minister is a shrewd politician; he needs his own mandate; he needs to neutralize the right by means of an election in order to implement fundamental reforms."

I believe that the myth underlying this explanation has to be exploded as soon as possible. People must stop writing or wishing fundamental reforms into the minds of the Prime Minister and Government members. There is one basic law in white politics : The Nationalist Party cannot consolidate its power base and be a Party of fundamental reform at the same time. These are simply diametrically opposed goals. Why do I say this?

Firstly, at present the Prime Minister has a massive majority in Parliament which he can use if he really wishes to initiate reforms. Any Government with such a majority that cannot implement reform, will not be able to do so if they have an even bigger majority. The problem which prevented the Prime Minister in the first place will still be there, perhaps in greater measure.

Secondly, the demands for urgent reforms originate outside the boundaries of white electoral politics. In other words, those who most urgently desire reform (blacks, coloureds, etc) cannot vote for those who bring it about, whilst those who can vote have to be persuaded about the necessity for reform. In this explanation the Government can be constantly outbid from within its own ranks against the need for urgent reform. This is so precisely because the Government has created the very laws which have to be scrapped in order to bring about reforms (i.e. the Pass Laws, Group Areas Act, Population Registration Act, etc.). On these laws the coherence and unity of the Nationalist Party very largely depends.

Thirdly, therefore, any envisaged reforms by the Prime Minister (no matter how well-intentioned he may be) have to be calculated in terms of the threat such reforms hold for Nationalist Party

unity. If this is ignored, the power base of the Nationalist Party will become eroded. No politician worth his/her salt will allow this to happen without trying to create an alternative power base.

Fourthly, the only way an alternative power base can be created during a process of reform is to jettison those sections of the present power base who are against reform, and to broaden the base of power by getting the co-operation and support of the majority of those who are most likely to benefit from reform. In short, it is possible to get the support of a significant number of blacks, coloureds and Asians with genuine reform, but the price will be the present basis of unity in the Nationalist Party. No Nationalist Party Prime Minister (including the present one) has been remotely interested in paying this price. That is why this General Election must be seen as an attempt to consolidate the basis of Nationalist Party unity and not as asking for a mandate for fundamental reform.

Does this mean that there will be no reform whatsoever? Of course not! But only such reforms that will not threaten the unity of the Nationalist Party. The tempo of this kind of reform will be hopelessly inadequate to combat the tempo of racial polarization between white and black in this country. We will have ad hoc, unsystematic and unco-ordinated reform because the guiding principle will be Nationalist Party unity and not peaceful evolutionary change. That is why this Government needs more opposition, not more support. I repeat, a Government with such a majority in Parliament can do whatever it wants to if it wants to, and it is abundantly clear that it does not want to bring about fundamental reform.

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or, in the other benign explanation  
it will be said :

"The Prime Minister needs five years rather than eighteen months to overcome resistance within his ranks and to use his power as Prime Minister to bring about change."

A simple question raises sufficient doubt to destroy this argument. Is the climate for reform going to become easier as time goes by? No, the longer reform is postponed the more difficult it becomes to bring it about and the more difficult it becomes to make it palatable to those who resist reform in any case. Do those who offer this explanation really believe pressures for fundamental change are going to decrease amongst blacks, coloureds and Asians? Do they really believe that such demands will not be articulated by more dramatic and sensational means such as boycotts, strikes and riots? Do they really believe that the more this happens the more conducive the climate for reform will become? NO! Reform from a position of strength, without dramatic pressure and in time is far more effective than a little reform too late. Therefore the Prime Minister does not need five years, he needs to start reform right now.

Is there any sensible person who really seriously believes that reform is going to be effective if it denies the black man the same rights of citizenship as any other person? Is there any sane person who, in all sincerity, can claim that we can have peaceful constitutional change without negotiating such change with the real leaders of all the groups? Can anyone with conviction claim that security and peace can last without justice, with bannings, arbitrary arrests and detention without trial?

Is there anyone who can be so shortsighted as to propogate the view that a free enterprise economy for all people can be effective whilst laws such as the Group Areas Act and Pass Laws destroy the chances of the vast majority of people from participating in that economy on an equal basis? Let us not delude ourselves about what reform is all about. Reform is about the possibility of creating a stable, peaceful and just future for us all.

Therefore, in this Election, if voters are serious about reform, there is only one word that counts : Oppose! The PFP says : Do not vote for the unity of the Nationalist Party but for the unity of South Africa. The Nationalist Party cares only for itself not for the people or the country. Our country is infinitely greater than the interests of one political party. This Election is a vital opportunity for the white electorate to demonstrate this.

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