

ARTICLE FOR OPTIMA
DR F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

12 JANUARY 1988

The present and future contribution of liberalism to the evolving conflict in South Africa was the common theme of the articles by Ken Owen and Jos Gerson in Optima December 1987. Both profess a commitment to a set of values usually associated with traditional liberalism : civil rights for the individual, political constraints on the exercise and abuse of power in a multiparty democracy, and minimum interference by the State in the economic activities of its citizens. Both are eloquent in the rejection of all forms of tyranny and the importance of protecting liberty.

Of special interest for those who share their concern with these values, is the attention they give to the likelihood that these values will survive and prosper in a future South Africa. But they do more than that, they implicitly and sometimes explicitly say what liberals can do to promote these values. And both no doubt unintentionally do so against broadly the same analysis of the current conflict in South Africa. This should give added relevance to their advice for liberals. Unfortunately, their advice, is not only dismally depressing, but politically irrelevant. In fact, both tend to argue that the future of liberal values depends more on the luck of the draw than what liberals can do. One feels it is just one small step away from the conclusion that liberals do not have to do anything at all, because the problem is largely out of their hands and in any

case, not of their own making. At one stage, Gerson even argues that if liberalism in South Africa is a "lost cause" then "perhaps the only (personal) solution is to emigrate" (P 252), but fortunately he believes there are some "flickers of hope" (P 248) which allows him to postpone such a drastic decision. However, let me take their arguments separately.

I begin with Owen partly because (as has often happened in the past) he misrepresents my own position. Owen is an excellent polemicist, but a poor analyst. As a self conscious controversialist he is predisposed to intellectual hyperbole. He wrongly believes that by ridiculing, distorting or heaping abuse on the arguments of his opponents he strengthens his own. I find him provocative and enjoyable to read, but I simply cannot take him seriously. Again in this article, all those who disagree with his interpretation of change suffer from some terrible affliction : they are "waiting for Santa Claus" or "for a big bang", or are driven to millenarism by the desperate uncertainty of their future", or "they evince an astonishing amateurishness in the politics of South Africa" or suffer from "intellectual bankruptcy and even laziness" And so on. Inevitably such vituperation and demolition heightens one's expectation for Owen's own solution. After all, the need for redemption is not unrelated to the pervasiveness of sin and Owen makes no bones about the fact that South Africa is riddled with political sin. As he says : Post Apartheid South Africa hangs half born, caught between violence that cannot succeed and negotiation that cannot begin. Until this deadlock is broken there will be incremental

change - progressive or retrogressive - and an unending sequence of choices." (P184)

Why are we deadlocked ? Because "the conditions for negotiation do not exist. On the one side the high ground is held by the socialist-dominated ANC, on the other by the neo-fascist National Party. Between these two blocs lie a score of other claimants to a seat at the negotiating table, but the shape of the table is impossible to envisage." (P184)

What does a liberal like Owen do under such circumstances? Because change is going to be incremental "the test for action or policies is whether they support a tendency towards liberalization or towards totalitarian systems." (P178), or "We are cast back on incremental change subject always to the test whether it widens or narrows the area of freedom." (P 184) "The precondition for success is to make liberty the lodestar of reform." (P 184)

In short, the political task of the liberal in South Africa is to support "progressive incremental change". Does this mean that the liberal is reduced to the role of political spectator; he can boo and applaud but he cannot partake? Is this an unfair deduction on Owen's advice?

Consider his analysis as to what is responsible for incremental change. It is the result of the opposing forces holding South

Africa in a state of deadlock.

As they struggle with one another there is sometimes movement towards more liberty, sometimes away from it. Owen does not like this juxta-position. He chides MP Jan van Eck for "dividing the population into two antagonistic blocks" instead of "trying to develop crosscutting cleavages" (P185), yet this juxtaposition is the touchstone of his own analysis. For example, he says: "Until black people confront the problem of Afrikaner insecurity, I fear there is little prospect that the Afrikaner's fierce hold on power will relax." (P177), or: "The evil of Verwoerdian Apartheid is apparent to all; but the tragedy of Verwoerdian Apartheid, which has been greater than the evil, is its tendency to divide South Africa into two huge blocs. The consolidation of Whites, English and Afrikaans, in a redoubt of privilege has had the inevitable effect of consolidating Blacks, Indians and Coloured people into a united front. The rich variety of language and colour, tribe and race, religion and history which is South Africa's special glory was hammered by Apartheid into crude lumps: black and white; rich and poor; master and servant; good and evil." (P 183). Owen bemoans the falseness of this juxtaposition but concedes that it is real and is responsible for us being deadlocked between the two blocs of the "socialist dominated ANC" and the neo-fascist National Party." (P154)

Let me now get to where Owen mis-represents my own position. He says: "Among academics and certain politicians, it has become fashionable, largely under the influence of Dr Frederik Van Zyl

Slabbert, to mock 'incremental change'. In fact there is nothing else." (P178) Owen flatters to deceive and it suits his purposes. By saying that I mock incremental change, (which I do not and never have), he can deposit me in his hate-bag reserved for those who "wait for Santa Claus" and "the big bang of change". After that, all else follows. I join those who evince astonishing amateurishness" in the politics of South Africa etc, etc.]^k

In the first half of 1986 I attended a conference of liberals at which I presented a paper on revolutionary or incremental change. I argued that liberals find themselves in an invidious position in a fast polarizing society, that choices were being forced on them which they normally would like to avoid, but that if their values and influence are to have any relevance in the future, then they were not going to be able to avoid making those choices. I especially said the worst thing that liberals could do is to plead the merits of incremental change as a substitute for making a choice. Particularly if they deliberately avoid being part of the change which they commend.

What then, does it mean to say the task of liberals must be to support progressive incremental change? Do they support those who bring about pressure (ANC, UDF, trade unions etc) or those who respond to pressure with reform (i.e. the State)? Both would seem to be necessary for whatever incremental change comes about. Or do liberals avoid this choice by each time waiting for the

outcome of a struggle and then supporting or condemning the result? Must they not be involved in the process but simply anticipate the outcome? If so, it is almost inevitable that more often than not they will end up supporting those in power. Owen himself hints at this in the following quite revealing statement: "The scene is set for a repetition of the experience of the 19th century; a time of endemic violence by roving forces, constantly weaving tactical alliances that unweave as the need changes; a world where survival by stratagem or force is the one constant imperative. On such a stage, the suffering and destruction would be immense and victory would be likely to go to the most cohesive, best organized, most ruthless, most cunning force in the field. Barring massive external intervention I would put my money on an alliance dominated by Afikaners. They have the capacity to devastate the region and yet to survive." (P178)

Owen's personal vision reduces him to declare his faith in the liberal values that he believes cannot survive the political conflict which entraps him; to castigate the Afrikaner for his stupidity in bringing it about and to grudgingly support him whenever he moves incrementally towards Owen's "lodestar of liberty". As for the rest, we are all waiting for "quick fixes" and "big bangs" i.e. for Santa Claus. Owen appears to be deeply suspicious of those who struggle against oppression, seeing them as a possible source of even greater tyranny than the present one which provides him with the comfort of his own analyses. Better the tyrant you know, than the one you don't.

It is of course an illusion to think that Owen, as a liberal, has not made a choice. Not only has he chosen the likely victor in this conflict, but he also chooses to support him as the source for "progressive incremental change". For him the best hope for the survival of liberal values in the future lies with the white minority in power led by the Afrikaners. There is not much liberals can do but hope for the best and support incremental shifts in their direction. If this is the substance of liberal politics, now and in the future, it deserves to be thoroughly ignored. Or to put it in Owen's own words : "To describe a possible future without indicating how it might be reached is wishfulness : the visions and scenarios, disembodied and beautiful, float above the battle - at best an inspiration, at worst a fraud - boring beyond endurance." (Pl74)

Nowhere is this judgement more apt than Owen's illustrations in three areas where liberalization by incremental change may be pursued : law, economy and political institutions. In his analysis of these three areas he either formulates "if-only" clauses which redefine the liberal paradigm, or when he ventures into the empirical world comes across hopeless and helpless about the progress towards greater liberalization. For example it would be nice if business would realise its "social function" and focus more on wealth creation. But as a matter of fact human and financial capital is leaving South Africa at the rate of knots and "many (productive people) remain to expend their energy less and less in creating wealth and more and more in lobbying an all

powerful bureaucracy for special privileges, for protection, for the elimination of competition and for the corrupt and inefficient management of the economy" (Pl81). (Have they not also perhaps chosen a likely victor and are paying a deposit for "positive incremental change"?)

It may come as a surprise only to Owen and those liberals who think like he does, that the sides trapped into the polarized conflict which he identifies are not exactly wild with excitement by the role he ascribes to liberals and the kind of support he urges them to give for "progressive incremental change". Those in power, treat him and others like him (and there is ample evidence of this) as quaint political decorations, sometimes useful, sometimes a nuisance, but mostly irrelevant. Those who struggle against tyranny and oppression have nothing but contempt for such opportunistic cynicism. I definitely do not mock the need for and reality of incremental change. History very seldom unfolds differently. But I certainly question the political relevance of, and have no respect whatsoever for, the kind of support Owen and others like him are so gratuitously prepared to bestow on "progressive incremental changes" for which, by his own analysis he is not involved in nor for which he wishes to take credit. It is true that Owen is not waiting for Santa Claus, but it is not true that he is saying farewell to him; he is simply riding on his back into the future and does not like him because his name sounds like van der Merwe.

Gerson's article deserves to be taken more seriously. He has no

obvious axe to grind, displays a refreshing modesty about the contribution liberalism can make to the evolving conflict. (Perhaps he is too modest.) What is particularly important is that he accepts that if liberalism is to be politically relevant and have credibility, it has to become involved. Liberals cannot hover around like some nebulous and supercilious support group waiting for history to happen so that they can give nods of approval or clucks of disdain. They need more than principles, they need strategies. Gerson admits that "for liberals the country's history is a chronicle of setbacks." (P 246) and "It is not easy to conceive of practical strategies for the promotion of liberal values in South Africa", but he nevertheless takes this task seriously. In fact, he says : "The best hope for salvaging liberal values in this country lies in the perception by both sides of a permanent stalemate : soaring costs for whites and a no-win situation for blacks. As it happens, such a stalemate is clearly on the cards." (P253) He accepts "that liberals in South Africa will never be in the vanguard of the major competing forces - Afrikaner Nationalism on the one hand and black populism on the other" (P253) and therefore their strategies have to take account of this political reality.

Before I discuss Gerson's "three-pronged strategy" for liberals, I wish to deal with two problems I have with his contribution : one minor, the other major, but both with relevance to strategies. The minor problem has to do with what Gerson says liberalism is not all about. Thus he argues there is no

necessary connection between liberalism and sentiment (i.e. loving ones fellow being or being compassionate), or liberalism and guilt (i.e. about being privileged in a sea of oppression), or liberalism and moral heroism (i.e. if you do not suffer for your values you do not deserve to be taken seriously). I certainly accept that there is no necessary connection. As Gerson says "a liberal is simply someone who believes in liberal values, no matter how courageous or cowardly he may be in standing up for those values." (P249) But there is no necessary connection between these characteristics (i.e. guilt, sentiment, courage) and any major political philosophy. Why single out liberalism in this respect? Surely liberals do not have to feel uneasy if they display these characteristics. Generally I prefer passionate, morally sensitive and courageous liberals to coldblooded, heartless cowards, but that is a personal matter. In the South African context there is a danger for liberals to appear or become uninvolved if they insist too much on the separation between liberalism and these characteristics. This is the minor problem.

The major problem has to do with Gerson's definition of liberalism and its relation to "order". Liberalism he says (borrowing from Kenneth Hughes), is essentially the "Critique of Tyranny". It involves recognition of the fact that oppression and tyranny characterize much of man's history. Liberalism offers an approach that systematically attempts to avoid such an abyss." (P 250) So far so good. He then goes on to say, "A prerequisite for all that is the establishment of

order"...."because liberal principles become totally impracticable in an anarchic environment" (P250). If Gerson means that no political philosophy or policy, including liberalism, can be implemented in a state of chaos and disorder, it is surely a non-controversial if somewhat trite observation. But he says more than that. He says "liberals should be extremely circumspect when they criticize the maintenance of order (even when the laws are unjust and the rule of law has to some extent been undermined)" and, "the inclination of "liberals" both at home and abroad (e.g. in the United Kingdom) always to condemn police actions in difficult circumstances and to defend the actions of riotous groups, runs against the grain" because "the liberal vision should place a high priority on the maintenance of order". (P250)

The dilemma is obvious. Certainly it is wrong for liberals to "always criticize the police" and "defend the actions of riotous groups". But how does a liberal resolve the problem of one man's order being another man's tyranny? Gerson is sensitive to this problem. Thus : "the danger now arises that the State may eliminate the rapacious forces of anarchy only to itself become the tyrant par excellence." (P250) Precisely! But Gerson simply says this should not happen and that "various restraints should be placed on the State". In spelling them out, he then, like Owen, restates the liberal paradigm. But surely this begs the question. What does a liberal do when the very maintenance of order is a contradiction of everything he believes in? Does he

insist as Gerson does that, under all circumstances, order is more important than law and/or justice? Surely this is a hopeless contradiction of his own definition of liberalism which is the Critique of Tyranny. If he persists in this insistence he must end up defending rather than resisting tyranny. Like Owen, he has to say : "Better the tyrant you know, than the one you don't."

Gerson's "three-pronged strategy" for liberals in the current South African situation immediately becomes suspect against this background. He advises that between the major competing forces of Afrikaner Nationalism and black populism liberals should content themselves with not being "front-line troops" but to play a "less visible role". They should be the "army engineers building bridges behind the lines." (P253) They can do so in three ways :

(a) Keep lines open to black populism (i.e. "UDF and similar organisations.") or,

(b) Attempt to civilise Government forces from behind the scenes. (He explicitly says the above kind of liberals "cannot afford to be the same kind of persons". (P253))

(c) The third group of liberals he calls "beacon liberals" (e.g. Paton, Suzman). They "do not wish to enter into alliances with anyone and simply wish to uphold principles for which they stand in an uncompromising way." (P253)

To sum up Gerson's position : a liberal in South Africa should not be too pre-occupied with sentiment, guilt or suffering; at all times insist on the maintenance of order whilst keeping lines of communication open to "black populism" or "civilizing Afrikaner Nationalism" or simply being a shining "beacon" of liberal principles. Presumably the more "civilized" Afrikaner Nationalism becomes, the more tolerable the maintenance of order is likely to be, and the more satisfied blacks will become and so South Africa will increasingly resemble a liberal democracy. I am afraid we are back to Santa Claus van der Merwe as our major agent for "incremental" liberal change. The clear implication of Gerson's analysis is that Afrikaner Nationalism has to maintain order and herald in the new age, with the able assistance of liberals either working quietly behind the scenes or proclaiming liberal principles in order to make "liberty the lodestar of reform".

Both Owen and Gerson fail to meet the enduring challenge that faces liberalism in South Africa. How to give political content to an obviously commendable set of values. Gerson is absolutely correct when he says it is not easy to devise strategies for liberals in the present conflict in South Africa. I have no objection in principle to Gerson's three-pronged strategy, except that I believe it is devious, bordering on dishonest, to engage anyone whether Afrikaner Nationalist or ANC with a hidden agenda and patronizingly "civilise" them to your way of thinking.

It is possible, as Gerson points out, to be an uninvolved liberal either through deliberate choice or because of circumstances beyond control. There may even be situations where simple survival becomes the major pre-occupation. But it seems to me that when liberals do decide to become involved, particularly to give effect to their liberal principles, a few inescapable choices confront them in the South African situation. These choices may change as the situation changes and this means that a constant re-appraisal of the evolving conflict is inevitable in order to test strategies and assess the state of play.

However, for the time being, (to indulge in one of Owen's recurring rhetorical flourishes), "I offer an assertion" : If liberalism is about the critique of tyranny, and if those who maintain order in South Africa do so in a tyrannical way, then if liberals wish to become involved, they have no option but to be part of the struggle against tyranny. JK

To accept this is to lose political innocence; to become stereotyped, appropriated and defined into "for" and "against" situations. You cannot "float above the battle" commenting on the progress of incremental change or lack of it, or go on "recce" missions behind the front lines and then report back to some non-existent liberal headquarters about the "civilizing process" of Afrikaner Nationalism or the lines of communication to "black populism".

For liberals to accept that they are part of the struggle against tyranny is to accept some inevitable implications in the South African context :

(a) They are not only against, but actively oppose those in power. Whatever juxtaposition is used to describe the polarized situation in South Africa, (and I believe both Owen and Gerson oversimplify it too much into a black-white confrontation), there are those with varying degrees of commitment and resolve, who wish to maintain the present order and their position of power and privilege in it, and those who wish to change it. If liberals do not accept that they are part of the struggle for change, then in terms of their own definition of what they are about, they become politically irrelevant.

(b) But it further means that those in power will see you as a threat to their position of power and privilege. At the end of the day, if there is a liberal democracy in South Africa, there is very little likelihood at all that someone like P W Botha and the party that he leads will be President or dominate the political system in South Africa. There is no way of sugaring this pill by liberals, and the more they try and do so, the more pathetic and dishonest they come across. Liberals do their own cause an injustice by fudging on this issue and trying to comfort those in power at present that their concern for the "protection of minorities" and the "tyranny of the majority" is going to make transition away from the present less painful and traumatic for those in power. The liberal struggle is against all forms of

tyranny and for the present it is a struggle to do away with the "tyranny of the minority". And it is an illusion to think that the minority in power are not aware of this. The assumption that Magnus Malan, Chris Heunis and F W de Klerk only need a bit of "civilizing" in order to discover the obvious merits of the liberal cause, is not only embarrassingly patronizing, but hopelessly in error. This does not mean that they cannot change or that one should not attempt to engage them for such purposes. But so far, they provide ample evidence that they grasp their present position of power and privilege with remarkable lucidity and display a chilling determination to maintain it whatever the cost. Owen is right, it would be foolish "to underestimate their cunning and ruthlessness" and they themselves have said so many times. Liberals in turn should make no bones about it, to them and any one else, that they see this resolve as part of their struggle against tyranny.

(c) For liberals to accept that they are part of the struggle against tyranny in South Africa also means that they become part of a struggle that involves many others, some of who are not liberal in any sense of the word. This realization, I suspect, has been a source of great discomfort and intellectual agonizing for many liberals. Many of them spend more time putting distance between themselves and others struggling against those in power, than opposing those in power themselves. One senses a desperate attempt to fabricate a rejection from "both sides" so that the virtue of one's "involuntary neutrality" becomes a commentary on the "irrationality" of the "major opposing forces" and of one's

own helplessness. From there it is a small step to hawk the merits of incremental change, (over which you have no control), or to eulogize "beacons", or to become a secret double agent for the liberal cause in a "less visible way".

To realise one is part of a greater struggle against tyranny, does not mean one accepts uncritically the strategies, position or philosophy of all those involved in the struggle. I agree with Gerson that there is nothing more pathetic than liberals who avoid the responsibility of stating their own position, by abdicating it to "the people" or "the masses" or whatever. The real challenge is to take up this responsibility and to argue strategy and principle as part of the struggle against tyranny. It is more than likely that this may lead to one's rejection and questioning of bona fides by some others in the struggle but there is nothing new in liberals being called naughty names on all sides of a polarized conflict.

By accepting the above implications it does not mean that liberals are incurable romantics; have experienced a collective flight of reason; are waiting for the "big bang" or "Santa Claus". Nor do they automatically become "useful idiots" in competing hidden agendas incapable of understanding either the intricacies of the capitalist mode of production or the deviousness of some revolutionary agenda. It simply means that in the evolving conflict in our country one accepts the political boundaries within which you have to pursue the consequences that

flow from your own principles and one's commitment to them. This is the context in which political strategy has to relate to principle.

Finally, a commitment to struggle against tyranny is no guarantee that liberal principles will prevail. On this I am at idem with both Owen and Gerson. I also agree with them that such a commitment involves an act of faith. I sense the difference between us is that I may place more faith in a liberal democracy being pursued by those who resist the present tyranny than they do. Both appear to place more faith for this in those who govern, although neither could be accused of being fanatics in this regard.

I believe it is extremely important that the liberal position be put and carried as part of the struggle for change and leaving no doubt as to one's opposition to those who maintain the present order. Liberals have to be part of the struggle for change and not get trapped into defending those who resist it. I have argued elsewhere that there is more going for democracy outside our present Parliament than inside it. I may be wrong, but I am certainly prepared to debate it. Similarly, I believe there is more going for democracy amongst those who struggle to change the present order, than those who wish to maintain it. From what I understand of both Owen and Gerson's arguments, they would find such a position very difficult to accept. As liberals they would appear to take their chances with those who govern the present order. They may be liberal in their convictions, but in terms of

their commitment and involvement to change, they come across as old fashioned conservatives.

Obviously I have written this response to their articles because they have focussed attention on what I believe to be a very necessary and important debate. I certainly hope they will respond. The point is this : For liberals it is a time of choice, not constructive fencesitting. "