

ARTICLE FOR THE PRETORIA NEWS - on the by-elections

- Dr. F. Van Zyl Slabbert, M.P.

One thing that the by-elections has made very clear is that the good old days for the National Party are finally and irrevocably over. By "the good old days" I mean the days when the National Party could sit back comfortably and trot out platitudes to suit the preferences and prejudices of whichever voter they wanted to woo. If they were fighting an urban constituency where there was a majority of reform-minded voters, they would come across very reform-minded. If they were fighting a rural constituency where there were many reactionary and extremely conservative voters, they could outbid anybody on the right in the field. This is no longer possible because the message from the campaign in the Berge, and particularly the message from Waterkloof, is that the Government has to make up its mind about where it wants to lead South Africa : Does it want to lead South Africa back to the previous age demanded by the Conservative Party or does it want to lead South Africa towards a new future of systematic reform and evolutionary change.

To put it in another way, is the Government going to take its lead from Waterkloof or from Waterberg in deciding in which way South Africa has to go.

Or, to put it in yet another way, does the Government want a strong opposition against reform or does it want a strong opposition in favour of reform.

I believe the Prime Minister's announcement of a referendum is a desperate attempt on his part to draw the heat out of the by-elections as far as the Government's constitutional proposals are concerned and is a transparent attempt to create the impression that there may be disunity or tension within the PFP on the possible question to be asked in a referendum.

Another equally transparent manoeuvre is to create the impression that the PFP and the Conservative Party are in the same boat in opposing the Government. This is of course arrant nonsense. The PFP and the CP are poles apart politically and ideologically and it is precisely because the Government is trying to sit on both these poles that it is being eroded away on both sides.

There is a very clear and simple test which can be applied to highlight the fundamental differences between the CP, the National Party and the PFP. Take three very important issues : South African citizenship, racial discrimination and power-sharing. On the question of citizenship, the CP believes that only Whites can be South African citizens. The National Party believes that Blacks cannot be citizens and only Coloured, Indians and Whites can be. The PFP believes all groups in South Africa - Black, Coloured, Indian and White - are entitled to South African citizenship.

Take the question of getting rid of racial discrimination. The CP believes that racial discrimination is necessary to maintain

the position of domination and privilege of Whites and that it should therefore not be removed. The NP believes that, where necessary, some forms of discrimination can be removed. The PFP believes that all forms of racial discrimination, and particularly statutory racial discrimination, have to be scrubbed from the lawbooks.

Take, then, the question of power-sharing. The CP believes no power-sharing should take place in South Africa at all. The NP believes that a limited form of power-sharing between Coloureds, Asians and Whites is acceptable. The PFP believes that genuine and effective power-sharing between all the different groups in South Africa is necessary in order to avoid confrontation and violence.

It is therefore quite clear that the PFP opposes the Government because it does not move fast enough towards reform, whereas the CP opposes the Government because it believes it is moving too fast. The PFP opposes the Government because it believes it does not do enough to bring about genuine power-sharing in South Africa; the CP opposes the Government because it believes it is doing too much.

Overall, therefore, one can say that to the extent that the political realignment is taking place in South Africa, those in favour of genuine and systematic reform in South Africa tend to support the PFP, while those who are against any kind of reform increasingly begin to support the CP. The Government

is caught in the middle and has to make up its mind about the direction in which it really wants to move.

For this reason I believe that South Africa needs a growing and stronger opposition in favour of reform and that the by-election in Waterkloof is of far more crucial significance for the future of South Africa than the by-elections in Waterberg and Soutpansberg.

In the Waterkloof by-election, as opposed to the Waterberg and Soutpansberg by-elections, the voter has to ask him or herself the following question : Does he or she want systematic reform towards a peaceful future? Does he or she want a strong opposition to bring about pressure on the Government for such reform? If so, then Waterkloof can lead the way out of the present indecision and double-talk by sending a PFP member to Parliament.

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