

SUNDAY INDEPENDENT**F van Zyl Slabbert****June 1999**

Ken Owen has a point about opposition politics, although he raises dilemmas for which I have no simple solutions. It serves no purpose to treat him as if he is a fulminating deranged pensioner. He was, and still is, one of the best political columnists in the country. Yes, he is crusty, ad hominem and irreverent. He has said things about, and to me, that would make what he has said about Tony Leon sound like high praise. And I have not spared him either. We get on very well with one another. If democracy is to thrive in South Africa, then the Ken Owen's of this world are indispensable. But let me get back to the point I think he is trying to make.

The rules of electoral competition under a liberal democratic constitution are pretty straightforward. Given the basic conditions of fairness and freeness, a party stakes out its position and tries to mobilise as much support as possible. It is Tony Leon, and the DP's right to play it as hard as they can according to these rules, and they deserve to be congratulated for improving their support from 1,7% to +- 10% since the last election. An impressive performance by any standard. But I am afraid, this is not even the beginning of the story.

Election politics in South Africa is not like a computer game where a cyberspace monster munches its way through all obstacles until it gets to the target. A politician has to deal with the fears, prejudices, aspirations and ambitions of the average voter. These are shaped by historical circumstances that give content to the current dynamics of politics. One never campaigns in a void or with a clean sheet. I was Leader of the PFP in the Parliament of the "old South Africa." Tony Leon is Leader of the DP in the Parliament of the "new South Africa." Both parties subscribed to more or less the same set of principles. Let me immediately say that it was a much more clear cut and simple business to oppose in the "old South Africa" than in the new one. Nevertheless, I too went to Pietersburg and Potchefstroom, Bloemfontein and Broederstroom, Ventersdorp and Vredendal etc. I talked to stony faced audiences of between 50 and 51 persons. My meetings were booed and broken up at a few Afrikaans universities, and once in Umtata, only the platform party pitched up. Needless to say, we faced 800 empty chairs and immediately declared the meeting closed.

Most of the people in those areas supported the NP and parties to its right such as the old UP. They did so because it promised them change without sacrifice. White South Africa could go on living like that for as long as you supported the Nats. The PFP was presented as an immediate threat to that security and this was demonstrated quite clearly at the polls. It is very difficult to escape the conclusion that these people formed a substantial chunk of the support that improved the DP's position from 1,7% to +- 10% - perhaps as much as 6% or 7%. This surely must pose a problem to the DP given the principles it subscribes to. Those people left the NP, not because they suddenly accepted the values of a liberal democracy or Tony Leon's commitment to them. They left because some felt betrayed by De Klerk's capitulation; some because they were ashamed by the revelations of the TRC; some because Van Schalkwyk did not inspire

them; some drifted into apathy and those with transferable skills and/or wealth left the country. But most of them voted for the DP. Why? I would guess because they are fearful, angry and frustrated. They believe the ANC is responsible for everything that has gone wrong in this country, and in addition, they face head on, the prospect of change with sacrifice - the very thing that their support for the old NP promised them would never happen. They like Tony Leon and the DP's style, more than their principles. Tony and the DP have "the guts to fight back" and prevent "them" from getting a 2/3 majority.

The NNP under Van Schalkwyk grapples with the same dilemma. Faced with the prospect of terminal decline, it has tried to "reposition" itself nationally in order to become part of the "new debate" in the "new South Africa". However, its lifeline is in the Western Cape with the conservative Coloured vote. The conservative White vote has already left it for the DP. Their support in the Cape desperately hope that NNP can "hold on" and "save the Cape"; that they can escape the fate of permanently being between the tyre and the tar. That is why a DP/NNP coalition in the Western Cape would eventually feed off the same support base - fearful, angry, frustrated voters. I am afraid such a coalition will prolong a sense of siege and polarisation. A DP/ANC or even a NNP/ANC coalition is preferable in the long run. In this way, the DP and NNP supporters will come to terms with the realities of the "new South Africa" more quickly.

I do not believe Tony Leon is a racist or is not sincere in his commitment to liberal values. In any case, it is simply cheap and abominably ignorant to call someone a racist for being liberal. I certainly have the highest regard for people like Eglin, Dene Smuts, Moorcroft, Andrews, Selfe in the DP, and I am not so precious that I cannot understand that there is a fair degree of elasticity between principles and tactics. Most parties succumb to expediency and opportunism at some or other stage in order to expand support. In fact, the DP was born under exactly such circumstances in the house of Dr Louis Luyt, a few weeks after he asked me, in the same home, to lead a new party. I declined. It had the same kind of quick fix artificiality that inspired the formation of his Federal Alliance. Fortunately, the DP had more able and skilled politicians to guide its course.

I assume the tactical advice that Tony Leon's American consultants gave him went something like this : "Tony, for the DP to be taken seriously, you need volume. Dislodge the Nats and come back as Leader of the Opposition. Then you will be noticed and taken seriously. There are a lot of "gatvol" voters out there looking for a home. Go and get them. The fact that the vast majority of them happen to be White is neither here nor there. First get volume and then perform". This is not entirely unreasonable advice.

However, this is the "cyberspace-monster theory" of electoral competition and Tony and the DP have applied it very successfully in the 1999 election. The underlying logic of this kind of advice must be that your pursuit of volume must eventually make you a threat to the incumbent government, otherwise what is the whole exercise about? The monster must get to the target to complete the game. To what extent does the DP's

growth from 1,7% to +_ 10% present it with a ceiling through which it will be difficult to penetrate? If it does, the short term pursuit of volume becomes self defeating. Put differently : in the "old South Africa" the white minority thought they would be in Government forever. Does the White minority want to be in opposition forever in the "new South Africa?". If, in a democratic "new South Africa" votes are pursued in such a way that the white minority is in permanent opposition, then the problems of the "old South Africa" will continue to haunt us in the "new South Africa" - problems related to racial polarisation and intolerance. The manner in which one stalks the "gatvol" White, Coloured and Indian voter must not make the potentially Black "gatvol" voter inaccessible. If so, the DP's preoccupation with volume in the short term, will have painted itself into a corner in the long term.

Tony Leon and the DP have five years to show us how they are going to get out of this corner. I am sure they will try and may even have some limited success. But it is a tough call and they have my sympathy, if not my support. But that would be no skin off their noses as they performed more than credibly under the rules of the game despite any effort on my part. I have not been a member of the DP or any other party for that matter. I have been in workshops and discussions with most of the opposition parties discussing strategy in the "new South Africa". There are no simple solutions to their dilemmas. As I said, there is an elasticity between principles and tactics which is inevitable in politics. Each one of us has his/her own personal threshold which cannot be crossed. Like Ken Owen, my threshold has been crossed in this election.

In the meantime, there is a vital debate being conducted within the ANC. The outcome of that debate will shape the ideological future of South Africa. Space prevents me from doing justice to this debate. It has to do with the most effective way to create jobs and improve the quality of life for the majority of South Africans. In the certain knowledge that I may be misunderstood and misrepresented, let me caricature this debate to make a point. The ANC is broadly divided between a "militant" and "progressive" wing. The militants are impatient and want populist, redistributive and state controlled solutions to South Africa's economic problems; the "progressives" want gradualist, market driven and co-operative state intervention. Currently the "progressives" are in ascendancy. Three years from now the "militants" break away and form a growing Parliamentary opposition that could unseat the incumbent "progressive" ANC. It is my contention that in such a situation, all the existing opposition parties with the possible exception of one or two ethnic ones like the IFP, will evaporate and join either the "militant" or "progressive" party. The dilemma of opposition parties such as the DP, UDM and NNP, is that there is no serious ideological dispute between them and the Government, and they are not positioned to play any significant role in the resolution of the debate within the ANC. Perhaps if they could enter into coalition at the Provincial level it may create a new dynamic, but the "gatvol" vote would not be very happy about that.

* * * TRANSMISSION RESULT REPORT (8.JUN.1999 14:42) * * *

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STANDARD

M : MEMORY
D : DETAIL

L : SEND LATER
F : FINE

E : ECM
> : REDUCTION