

THE 1974 GENERAL ELECTION IN SOUTH AFRICA*

by

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The general election was held on April 24, a year earlier than required by statute. The Prime Minister, B. J. Vorster, explained that he was holding an early election in order to ensure that a strong government was in power to meet the domestic and international crises which faced the country. "To be able to act effectively in the best interests of South Africa, there should be no misunderstanding, here or abroad, that it is the wish of the electorate to have a strong government in power again to serve and protect the highest interests of South Africa." Whether by luck or prescience, the election was held the day before Caetano's government fell in Lisbon.

An equally important consideration in holding an early election was to take advantage of the divisions in the United Party, the main opposition party in Parliament. Internal divisions have been almost the condition of existence of the United Party since it was formed in 1934. But the current divisions in the party portend a fundamental change in its position as the main parliamentary opposition party. The current crisis in the party, a continuation of a conflict between "liberals" and "conservatives" in the party which has simmered for years, came to a head during 1973 when Harry Schwarz, the leader of the Party in the Transvaal Provincial Council, wrested the leadership of the Transvaal Party from Marais Steyn, a leading "conservative". Steyn defected to the Nationalist Party.

Schwarz's victory was the visible sign of the strength of a new group of MPs and provincial councillors which had emerged to prominence in the Party after the 1970 elections.

In 1970, the United Party had gained 11 seats from the Nationalists, mainly along the Witwatersrand. Although the United Party increased its share of the popular vote only marginally in 1970, the election provided a basis for some optimistic projections of its future prospects. This was the first election since 1948 in which the United Party had actually won seats from the Nationalists. Was it the turn of the tide? The United Party certainly thought so.

The new group in the United Party claimed the credit for the modest victory. They had energetically reorganized the Witwatersrand division of the party, revamped its tired branches, and replenished the party's finances. The emergence of this group seemed to vindicate the view held in the group that the Nationalists should be vigorously opposed, in contrast with the mood of "me-tooism" which pervaded other quarters of the party.

An issue which crystallized these different sentiments in the party was the United Party's participation in the Schlebusch Commission, a parliamentary commission appointed to inquire into aspects of national security. The reports it issued in 1972 into student affairs and into the Wilgespruit community led directly to the bannings imposed on NUSAS and SASO leaders, the deportation of a leading member of the Wilgespruit community, and the harassment of other groups.

The United Party had run into difficulties in trying to reconcile its membership of the Commission with its professed adherence to the rule of law. The Johannesburg and Cape Town English press strongly criticized the party for participating in the commission. Although it did not base its case solely on this issue, the Sunday Times, for decades the United Party's most important press ally, called for Graaff's resignation during 1973, and generally modified its support for the Party. The Sunday Times gave considerable support to the Schwarz group before and during the election.

The Party's involvement in the Schlebusch Commission was widely believed to be a sign that the Opposition was now a junior partner in an alliance with the government. The Progressive Party and students (now very closely affected by the Commission's activities) attacked the United Party on this issue during the year previous to the election. The attack from the Progressives directly affected the Schwarz group's prospects as a viable movement for reform within the United Party. The Progressives threatened the United Party most seriously precisely in the areas in which the reform movement was strongest. The Progressives had made a strong comeback in the major urban centres since their disastrous performance in the 1966 elections. Even though the party won only one seat in the 1970 elections, it had narrowly missed winning another. It gained 25% of the popular vote in the seats it fought and over 35% in Johannesburg and Cape Town seats. In the event, this did not become a problem for the Schwarz group - the Progressives refrained from contesting seats in which United Party reformists were standing. All the same, the UP reformers and the Progressives draw their support from the same sorts of groups, and are based on roughly similar sentiments.

Schwarz himself avoided confronting his party publicly over the Schlebusch Commission. Another MP, Mrs Cathy Taylor, did criticize the Party's participation in the Commission, and eventually resigned. Schwarz ran into trouble with the conservatives in the party during the months before the election over another, rather minor issue - the well publicized, though somewhat innocuous "declaration of faith" which he signed jointly with Chief Buthelezi, chief minister of Zululand, earlier this year. The right wing of the Party could hardly object to the somewhat platitudinous contents of the declaration, so they accused him of breaching party etiquette in venturing into Natal to sign it without informing the Natal party. Natal is the bastion of the United Party's right wing. An urgent meeting between Schwarz and Graaff was held, from which Schwarz emerged unrepentant.

By the time the election was announced, the United Party contained two clearly defined factions. The press christened the Schwarz group the "Young Turks" and the conservatives the "Old Guard". Nomination contests in the United Party were followed closely in the press and the results scored as victories and losses for the two factions. Graaff, though he avoided openly committing himself to either faction, imposed his own nominees on a number of constituencies, often against the choice of the local party organization. It is not clear to me whether critics were right in saying he imposed conservatives in all cases. He seems to have tried to keep the members of the Schlebusch Commission in their seats, but in other cases it is possible that losing nominees tried to attach labels to themselves whether or not they fitted. And at Edenvale, where the nomination contest was particularly acrimonious, Graaff seems to have accepted the Schwarz nominee, the verlig Professor Nic Olivier, against the advice both of the conservatives and of the local branches. This was embarrassing to Graaff because

it meant that he broke a promise to find a seat for Mr George Oliver, a hot critic of Schwarz.

The most important case of a member of the "Old Guard" being imposed was E. G. Malan, a member of the Schibusch Commission and a close friend of Marais Steyn (who was now fighting Turffontein for the Nationalists against a former protégé). Malan's nomination caused considerable annoyance in the constituency. Party workers in at least a number of branches declared they would vote for the Progressives. The issue was interesting, not only because Malan lost his seat to the Progressives but also because he has sat for the seat for at least a decade: the rift in the party had reached the grass roots.

Five parties contested the election. The United Party put up 108 parliamentary candidates, the Herstigte Nasionale Party 46, the Progressives 23, and the Democratic Party 7. No doubts existed anywhere about a Nationalist victory. There would have to be a swing of votes of around 22% to the Opposition to oust the Nationalists, and the most generous forecast made on behalf of the United Party was a swing of below 3%. The election took the form of a contest to decide the shape and future of the parliamentary opposition. The Progressives mounted their campaign squarely on the issue of the "quality of the Opposition".

Every Progressive Member of Parliament ... will be a step towards establishing an effective opposition ... Every Progressive Party vote will help along the process of constructive change that is already starting to take place.... The issue at the polls ... will not be "Who will govern in South Africa?" but "What kind of Opposition will there be?" ... If there is concern about the policies and performances of the Government, there is dismay to the point of despair with the chaotic situation which has developed within the official opposition ...

The Progressives emphasized their own effectiveness in "opposing, not appeasing, the authoritarianism of the Nationalist government". They claimed an incomparably better record than the United Party in opposing the Government on a wide range of issues relating to the conditions under which blacks live and work, and offered economic expansion to the country, "making it possible for an economy based on free enterprise to raise the standard of living of all our people".

The argument that an "effective opposition" would create an instrument of change towards a "sharing of power" between blacks and whites was developed in a number of English newspapers. The Johannesburg Star mounted a campaign to get the "best man" elected, irrespective of party affiliation.

Shared power is the only means of securing the future of the whites and winning the allegiance of the voteless millions who will be watching this election.

So cast your vote ... in the direction of the dynamic change which the country needs so urgently in the next five years. Vote for the candidate, irrespective of party, who is most likely to spur on such change. The choice varies widely in different constituencies and you may have to weigh more than simple party allegiances. Your choice should be for effective reform.

(Star, 23 April 1974)

(The Star even nominated a Cabinet Minister, Mr Punt Janson, as a reformist. Jansen ducked the compliment in some embarrassment, declaring that he was verkramp.)

The press campaign influenced (or corresponded to?) voting strategies in a number of constituencies. The provincial council elections were held simultaneously with the parliamentary elections, thus giving an opportunity to test the extent to which party loyalties were modified by the availability of reformists and conservatives. In a number of seats, United Party candidates were returned to the Provincial Council and Progressives to Parliament. In the Johannesburg seat of Orange Grove, the "Old Guard" United Party candidate, E. G. Malan, was defeated by the Progressive Party, while his reformist running mate won the provincial council election. In Parktown, there was a similar difference, though the United Party candidate who lost his seat was not a conservative - he was probably the victim of his party's reputation in Orange Grove.

The general results of the election confirmed a shift from the United Party to the Progressive Party. The Progressives won five seats in Johannesburg and Cape Town seats. A sixth was elected in a subsequent by-election. There was a swing generally of around 13% from the United Party towards the Progressives. The Nationalists also increased their share of seats by 4. Neither the Herstigte Nasionale Party nor the Democratic Party won any seats.

Counting reformists in the United Party and the Progressive Party, there will be something between a dozen and fifteen "verligtes" on the Opposition benches when Parliament meets in October. It is not certain what their relationship will be, but it is likely to consolidate unless the United Party offers more hospitable lodgings than it has up till now. Schwarz himself is in Parliament for the first time, at the head of a fairly well defined group of "Young Turks" from the Transvaal.

A third force is clearly present in Parliament, reflecting a mood in the country. What influence it can have over the parliamentary opposition and government policy is difficult to estimate. One of the problems that faces the UP reformers and Progressives is the relationship between them. The problem which Schwarz faces is to decide whether his group can exert an influence "for change" better by remaining in the United Party or by leaving it and possibly facing in the short run the difficulties which confronted the Progressives after their split from the United Party in 1959. The Progressives, too, have to decide precisely what sort of party they want to be, and what they have in common with the Schwarz group. There are personal rivalries involved between Progressives and "Young Turks". The Schwarz-Buthelezi declaration was greeted rather sourly by the Progressives. The Progressive Party in Parliament is no longer a single critical voice but a possibly ragged chorus. What tunes should it sing, and to whom?

One symptom of Progressive difficulties became apparent immediately after the general election, when the Senate elections were held. The Senate is elected by a college composed of all MPs and Members of Provincial Councils in each province. The United Party nominated the redoubtable Mrs Anna Scheepers, who had been a close associate of Solly Sachs in the Garment Workers Union during the 1930s. Somewhat surprisingly, Mrs Scheepers had joined the United Party last year and stood as the party's candidate at Boksburg. She lost the seat. Should the Progressives support the United Party's nominee (whom they personally admired) or - the alternative if they abstained - let the Nationalists gain an extra seat in the Senate? They supported the United Party's nominee.

But, aside from the tactical problems facing the "Young Turks" and the Progressives, no party defined very clearly what they meant by "change". "Change" has become something of a shibboleth in white politics, each party refracting the idea of change through the rather narrow prism of its own interests, support and ideological position. Even the Nationalists, while asserting that the government did not intend to change its basic policy, drew attention to changes which were

already taking place and to others which it contemplated. Job reservation, Vorster stated, would be maintained, but "we do not oppose changes which allow non-whites into higher-skilled jobs provided these changes are orderly and with the concurrence of trade union leaders". Government policy was aimed at "narrowing the gap" between black and white wages, "but for obvious economic reasons it is not possible to do it overnight". The United Party wanted "equality of economic opportunity", trade union rights "for sophisticated workers", and equal pay for equal work. But the party was characteristically vacuous about what it meant by change: "It recognises what must change and what should be changed - and what cannot be changed", a nervous ditty sung to the sound of feet shuffling in different directions.

The Progressives were more explicit about the need for change, but their commitment to bringing about a "free enterprise" economy suggests some of the limits which are contemplated by the vanguard of the reformers. These limits are even more forcefully emphasized when it is recalled that three of the new Progressive Members of Parliament hold senior positions in the Anglo-American Corporation. One of them, Gordon Waddell, is a possible successor to the chairmanship of the corporation when Oppenheimer retires. Since taking over the Schlesinger group this year, Anglo-American is believed to control something like 40% of the investments traded on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. The potential the party holds for effecting "change" rests, then, as much on a diagnosis of what changes it is willing or able to contemplate as on what it is capable of bringing about.

Van Zyl Slabbert, now the Progressive MP for Rondebosch, was the only candidate who was very specific in what he meant by change. He spoke of the need for a "transfer of power" and specified that this should come about through a qualified franchise. It was a specification which hardly needed stating - whatever other terrors the Progressives hold for white South Africa they do not want a mass democracy.

One interesting aspect of the Progressive campaign was its anxiety to establish the legitimacy of South African political institutions in the eyes of the international community and the blacks. Lawrence Gandar, former editor of the Rand Daily Mail and long a pillar of the reform movement, echoed Progressive sentiments when he wrote:

What we are voting for, then, is a chance to improve the quality of performance of Parliament and the provincial councils and to indicate to the Government our own voteless Black millions and to the outside world the direction in which the electorate is moving. This is all we can do, but it is important that we make the most of it.

(Rand Daily Mail, 20 April 1974)

A cartoon published in the Johannesburg Star on the day after the election illustrates substantially the same theme. A group of whites and blacks survey a desolate landscape entitled "SA's political drought". A small cloud ("Enlightened vote") hovers over the scene, from which a few raindrops fall. Over the group's head, the simple legend "Hope".

The election marked the final disillusionment of any belief that the Nationalists can be ousted from power in elections. Fragmentation of the parliamentary opposition is a sign that neither opposition leaders nor supporters believe any longer in the need to maintain a united opposition. What has become an important issue now is the legitimacy of elections themselves. The white opposition has always believed that the purpose of elections is to provide the

framework for a competition for power. Even minor swings to the United Party, such as took place in 1970, sustained the belief that there was fractionally a chance of the Nationalists losing power in an election. A minor psephological industry developed to search the entrails of by-elections for signs of a turn of the tide.

The recognition by the body of opinion that goes to make up the white opposition that only the Nationalists can win elections marks some sort of crisis point in white perceptions of the political process. If elections do not offer the chance of a change in government, what is their purpose and what is the role of parliamentary opposition?

Do the divisions in the United Party and the emergence of the Progressives as a presence in Parliament herald the polarization of white opinion between reaction and reform which will at least clarify the "real issues" in South Africa? Or was it the case that when the champagne corks stopped popping and the haze of Havannas lifted over fashionable suburbia the battlefield was somewhere else?

It has long been felt that the United Party's main function was to fudge the issues and to obfuscate the monolithic character of white power. But the Progressives, too, sustain myths about the poles of interest in society, which suppress the role of capitalism in maintaining a racist society in South Africa and which neglect the time scales which are involved in bringing about reform. After having initially reacted rather negatively towards the categories of "verlig" and "verkramp", the Progressive Party - particularly under the influence of the leader Colin Eglin - have incorporated them into their analysis of the political situation. The Progressives believe that white opinion is polarizing around these groups, and that the polarization is a significant index of a desire for change. On this assumption, verligtes are to be found in all parties, in the Cabinet, the public service, and above all in the higher reaches of the business community. On this assumption, the election would show the breadth of support which is already explicitly committed to verlig goals. But it would also suggest that this explicit commitment is only a fraction of its real proportions. The assumption underlying reformist and Progressive activity is that there is a vast hinterland of implicit support for change. The function of these groups is to articulate the issues which will bring this support into the open and clarify the issues for those who cannot declare themselves openly.

In turn, the belief in the division between reformists and reactionaries rests on a set of assumptions about the role of economic development in bringing about changes in race relations. The belief that economic development will transform social and political relationships has assumed the proportions of an orthodoxy in the reform movement. Racial divisions will be displaced as economic development creates the opportunities for the upward mobility of whites. Whites will abandon the tenacious prejudices formed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and case-hardened during the period after the first world war.

This is not the place to assess the doctrine. But it may now be seen not only as one defence of industrial capitalism in South Africa but also as an argument conferring authority upon the "meliorist" case. The reformists are as anxious about the international situation as they are about their position in domestic politics. The news from Lisbon on the morrow of the election deepened their anxiety.

It is possible that the role they might assume as spokesmen for meliorism will displace any functions they might develop as critics of racism.

Notes

The statistical analysis which was under way in Johannesburg when I left had not yet reached me by the time I wrote this piece. If it has arrived in time for the seminar, I will discuss it then.

The statements of party policy are taken from the Johannesburg press and from party manifestos. The estimate of the Progressive Party's performance in 1970 is cited from K. A. Heard, General Elections in South Africa, 1943-1970 (Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 213.

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*This paper was given in October 1974, and is reproduced here as originally presented.