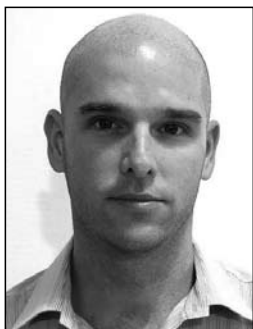


The Liberal Tradition in South Africa: Past and Present



Michael Cardo

holds a PhD in History from Cambridge. He has worked for the Democratic Alliance in various policy and research capacities, as well as being Helen Zille's speech writer during the 2009 elections. He was a visiting Research Fellow at the Helen Suzman Foundation while writing his first book, *Opening Men's Eyes*.

Liberalism in South African history

Owing to the fact that, historically, liberals in South Africa have been an embattled political minority – occupying the tenuous middle-ground between rival racial nationalists – their significance is all too often underplayed.

However, liberalism is the oldest and most enduring political tradition in South Africa. This is something which its opponents in the marketplace of ideas – principally, the proponents of African nationalism and communism – prefer to disregard or deny.

Yet liberalism has been a central theme in South Africa's political history from the time of Dr John Philip, the English missionary who championed racial equality in the 1820s.

And when the British government established a parliament in the Cape in 1853, it adopted a non-racial franchise, albeit with educational and economic qualifications. Everyone eligible to vote could stand for election to either house. In 1872, when responsible government was granted to the Cape, the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, insisted that the colour-blind franchise should be retained.

Many liberal principles and institutions were 'transplanted' from Britain to the Cape, such as parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, a free press, freedom of speech and freedom of conscience. However, mid-nineteenth century Cape liberalism was not the sole preserve of English-speakers. Some of the most prominent and enthusiastic supporters of liberal values in public life were Afrikaners, like Jan Hofmeyr, F.D. Malan, and their colleagues in the Afrikaner Bond.

The flame of liberalism has at times burnt brightly and at times dimly in South Africa, but liberalism has made two important achievements.

Firstly, liberalism resisted and overcame two waves of destructive nationalisms in the past – a jingoist British wave and an Afrikaner nationalist wave – by rejecting the politics of group identity.

Secondly, it offered us many of the tools to end apartheid and begin building an open society based on democratic government and respect for the rule of law; a society in which independent institutions protect people's rights and limit political power, and where the media are free and independent and able to perform their watchdog role.

What, then, is liberalism?

Alan Paton, who for a time combined his successful career as a novelist with active political engagement in the Liberal Party, once wrote:

“By liberalism I don’t mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom.”

That sums up the liberal tradition at its best in South Africa.

Peter Brown and the Liberal Party

Yet there has been very little real understanding and appreciation, both in the past and the present, of the nature and importance of the part played by liberals in South African history, especially in opposing apartheid and forging non-racial democracy.

Peter Brown, who was the national chairman of the Liberal Party of South Africa between 1958 and 1964, is one such liberal who made a significant contribution.

Winnie Mandela once wrote to Brown how, when she visited Robben Island in the 1980s and mentioned his name, she was “shocked to receive a whole lowdown on [his] quiet but most impressive political history” adding that she “had no right not to know it”.¹

The reasons for Brown’s relative obscurity are partly personal, partly ideological and partly political.

Brown was a modest man. Born in 1924 into a Natal family of Scottish descent, country traders on his father’s side and farmers on his mother’s, he inherited two abiding characteristics.

The first was a heightened sense of community awareness, shaped by an appreciation for the rhythms of rural life and an allegiance to the soil. Land and community were Brown’s two great concerns. They are the golden threads that connect his liberal activism in the 1950s and 1960s, when he opposed the state’s programme of ‘black spot’ removals, through his chairmanship of the Association for Rural Advancement in the 1970s and 1980s, to his development work with African farmers in the 1990s.

The second was a natural Scots reserve, a diffidence that was occasionally pierced by his teasing, dry wit, which made Brown entirely indifferent to matters of reputation and veneration.

Even so, personal reticence alone does not explain why Brown’s contribution has gone largely unheeded. Too often, those writing about South African history have vilified liberalism as a mere adjunct of imperial conquest, racial segregation and capitalist exploitation.

And in post-apartheid South Africa, the ANC has inevitably sought to remember its own heroes.

Under apartheid, the word ‘liberal’ was a term of abuse, employed with equal venom by opponents on the left and the right. To the Nationalist government,

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when prefaced with the word ‘white’, liberalism meant race treachery. To those in the ANC – which had its own liberal tradition – increasingly from the 1960s liberalism meant holding onto white privilege, submitting to white trusteeship and paternalism, and stunting the revolution.

The ANC has not always been hostile to liberals. In 1962, the ANC President, Chief Albert Luthuli, wrote in his autobiography that the Liberal Party had been able to speak with “a far greater moral authority than other parties with white members” because of the quality of people at its head – people such as Alan Paton and Brown.² And he called its policy of non-racial membership “an act of courage”.

A younger generation, centred on the ANC Youth League and among whose notables were Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo, were more dismissive.

Prefigured by the Pan-Africanists who broke away from the ANC in 1959, Black Consciousness activists likewise denounced white liberals in the 1970s and 1980s. They insisted that the liberal identification of non-racialism with colour-blind integration served to keep the basis of the apartheid social order – white privilege – intact.

Dismissive of dogma, Brown sought to bring together different interests, traditions and organisations in the anti-apartheid cause. His liberalism was of the practical, not the purist, variety.

Ideological mistrust of liberalism has persisted in post-apartheid South Africa, fuelled by opposition to so-called ‘neo-liberal’ economic policies (which the ANC accuses the official opposition of advocating, and which, ironically, the ANC’s own alliance partners charge the government with pursuing).

The ANC believes it is faced with a major ideological offensive, “largely driven by the opposition and individuals in the mainstream media”, whose ‘key

objective’ is “the promotion of market fundamentalism to retain the old apartheid economic and social relations”.³

Others denigrate the history of white liberals by arguing that they waged a McCarthyite cold war against the ANC’s alliance partner, the SACP; were sanctimonious about the ANC’s recourse to violence; and “acquiesced in [PW Botha’s] murderous states of emergency ... and aggression against neighbouring African states” in the 1980s.⁴

Peter Brown’s life and work present the clearest refutation of such arguments.

Brown had a pragmatic approach to communism. He wrote in 1959 that communists had “been in the forefront of those who have put up the most spirited defence there has been of fundamental democratic rights”, and pleaded for liberals and communists to sink “our ideological differences for the moment and get on with the job of disposing of the devil we know”.⁵

Dismissive of dogma, Brown sought to bring together different interests, traditions and organisations in the anti-apartheid cause. His liberalism was of the practical, not the purist, variety.

Always focused on the promotion of social justice and non-racial equality, Brown’s liberalism was nurtured by close personal friendships and interactions that transcended racial and ideological divides.

Although Brown abhorred violence, he never judged those, both in his own party

and in the ANC, who turned to arms. He believed that violence was “forced on reluctant people by the failures of the past”.⁶

The magazine *Reality*, which Brown edited after his decade-long ban expired in 1974, vigorously condemned the states of emergency imposed in the 1980s and the apartheid government’s incursions into neighbouring countries.

Peter Brown’s life history, which spanned the rise and fall of apartheid, offers the chance to re-evaluate some of the criticisms that are frequently directed at liberals. Brown’s biography is a political history of the times: in particular, it encompasses the history of a remarkable party, which, despite a brief life, left an enduring legacy.

Forced to disband in 1968 by the state’s Prohibition of Political Interference Act, which forbade blacks and whites from belonging to the same political organisation, the Liberal Party worked to make the common society a reality.

Through his leadership of the Liberal Party, Brown played an early and crucial part in articulating an alternative vision to the racial exclusiveness of apartheid: this was at a time when other anti-apartheid organisations in South Africa, such as those that formed the Congress Alliance, were racially compartmentalised.

Compared to the Liberal Party, the Progressives’ brand of liberalism in the 1960s was hidebound.

In some ways, the Liberal Party marks a rupture in the history of South African liberalism. In style and substance, there are important discontinuities between the Liberal Party and the political tradition associated with nineteenth-century Cape liberals that preceded and nourished it.

And here it is necessary to confront some of the misconceptions that linger about the South African liberal tradition.

Liberals versus Progressives

There were significant differences between the activist extra-parliamentary liberalism of the LP and the parliamentary liberalism of the Progressive Party in the 1960s.

The Liberals launched as a non-racial party, whereas the formation of the Progressives in 1959, Brown noted, “was an all-white launching and the policy decisions were all-white decisions”.⁷

The Progressive Party only reopened its membership to blacks, in defiance of the Prohibition of Political Interference Act, in 1984.⁸

While the Liberals advocated universal suffrage from 1960, the Progressives continued to support a qualified franchise until 1978.

Where the Progressives rigidly adhered to ‘constitutional’ means of protest, the Liberals advocated boycotts and sit-ins. And, as the Progressives focused on civil rights, the Liberals campaigned for socio-economic rights, proposing various forms of regulation and redistribution to deracialise the economy.

Compared to the Liberal Party, the Progressives’ brand of liberalism in the 1960s was hidebound.

While the Liberals actively worked for the common society through extra-parliamentary campaigns against sham ‘self-rule’ in the Transkei and ‘black spot’

removals in Natal, for example, the Progressives focused on the Sisyphean task of converting the white electorate to non-racialism through the ballot box.

This is not to undermine the Progressives. They achieved something the Liberals did not: they bequeathed an enduring and sustainable *institutional* legacy for liberalism, through a political party which still exists today.

In his memoirs, Tony Leon observes that the history of the Progressive Party is not that of a “pristine political priesthood”, but of a political party that had to make “pragmatic ideological compromises in order to stay competitive and relevant”.

That is exactly what the Progressives did, and South Africa is better off for it.

But the Liberal Party also achieved something very important in the fifteen years of its existence, and Brown made a significant contribution to that achievement.

The Party championed the principles and values that, decades later, would constitute the foundations of non-racial, democratic, post-apartheid South African society: universal suffrage, the rule of law, and the legal protection of basic civil liberties *alongside a commitment to social justice and equity*.

In the 1960s, it was the only party in the electoral arena to do so.

While the Liberal Party failed in its quest to win a seat in the whites-only parliament, it succeeded in attracting a substantial black membership. The majority of delegates at its 1961 conference were black.

The Liberal Party was not a party for minority interests.

It was not beholden to big capital. And it understood that liberalism is not just about formal equality alone.

Liberalism in the future

Very few people on all sides of the political spectrum understood and appreciated what the Liberal Party was attempting to do in the 1960s.

Very few people on all sides of the political spectrum understand and appreciate what liberals are attempting to do now.

Of course, liberals must take on board informed criticism. But they should reject with contempt the suggestion that they are engaged in an offensive against our democracy, as their opponents on the left have contended. The exact opposite is true.

The biggest challenge for liberals in our plural and unequal society is to find ways of accommodating diversity and addressing poverty while gaining the momentum of political support.

This task requires liberals to meet majority aspirations and quell minority fears, which seem at odds with one another, but which needs to be done if the liberal project is to succeed.

What did Brown think of the prospects for South African liberalism before he died? Interviewed in 1996, he predicted:

“There may come a time when the ANC starts to disintegrate or to produce factions ... and ... perhaps as the economy improves and so on ... there will be an opportunity to form a fully non-racial Liberal Party again. Something which will absorb the DP [now the Democratic Alliance] and elements from other political organisations ...”⁹

Time will tell if he is proved right.

NOTES

- 1 Alan Paton Centre (APC), University of Kwazulu-Natal, PC16/5/3/3/92, Winnie Mandela to Brown, 15 January 1982.
- 2 A Luthuli, Let My People Go (Cape Town: Tafelberg/Mafube, 2006 [1962]), p 132.
- 3 Commission reports and draft resolutions, ANC national policy conference, 27-30 June 2007, Gallagher Estate. At www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/policy/2007/conference/commission.html.
- 4 K Asmal, L Asmal and RS Roberts, Reconciliation through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996). For discussion on Asmal's criticisms see M Lipton, Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp 138-144.
- 5 'Apartheid is the real enemy', The Long View, Contact, 13 June 1959. Duncan's open letter appeared in Contact, 2 May 1959.
- 6 'Why I support the boycott', The Long View, Contact, 6 February 1960.
- 7 Cited in R Vigne, Liberals Against Apartheid: A History of the Liberal Party of South Africa, 1953-1968 (London: Macmillan, 1997), p 112.
- 8 C Eglin, Crossing the Borders of Power: The Memoirs of Colin Eglin (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2007), p 200.
- 9 APC, 96 APB3, interview with Peter Brown conducted by Norman Bromberger, 11 March 1996, Interview 8, p 13.