

Some Notes on Liberalism



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Liberalism as a political ideology is the product of the peculiar political evolution of Europe during and after the decline of feudalism. As a system built on and sustained by undisguised privilege, feudalism had placed severe constraints on the individual, with impositions from both secular and clerical authorities. Consequently, the struggle for greater freedom was framed as one to emancipate the individual from what were seen as unreasonable laws, customs and mores that restricted individual freedom.

Liberalism regards the individual as the ultimate social and political agent, endowed with a number of rights. The ideology also acknowledges that individuals live in societies and are not totally autonomous atoms, so it recognises a number of societal obligations the individual should fulfil in order to co-exist with others. In the continent of its birth, liberalism proved most attractive to propertied classes of the emergent cities and gentlemen farmers of the countryside, who had embraced the anti-feudal ethos of high social status attained through individual achievement rather than through birth. As propertied persons, the early liberals were very distrustful of the working poor and property-less, whom they saw as venal and easy to corrupt. The franchise and attendant political rights were therefore to be enjoyed by the propertied classes, and extended to the other classes on the basis of merit, demonstrated by a certain lifestyle.

At its birth in the 19th century Cape Colony South African liberalism was in the midst of an expansionist, European settler, colonial society in which class, race, ethnic origin, religion and even home language directly impacted on a person's status. Liberalism was a political current among the White settlers, and was fraught with ambiguities and contradictions.

These are captured in the persons of Thomas Pringle and William Porter. Pringle, the abolitionist and pioneer of a free press, identified with the Africans' resistance to colonial subjugation. He campaigned tirelessly for the release of David Stuurman, whom he dubbed "The Last Hottentot King", and his poem, "Makanna's Gathering" is an unequivocal endorsement of the defensive wars of resistance.

The other renowned liberal, Porter, was a clever imperial political strategist. As Attorney General of the Cape Colony, he was largely responsible for the 1853 Cape constitution with its Whig franchise, deliberately designed to counter the weight of the Afrikaner vote with those of Coloureds and Africans and to encourage a cross cutting compact among the propertied classes. Porter famously remarked: "I would rather meet the Hottentot at the hustings, voting for his representative, than meet the Hottentot in the wolds with his gun on his shoulder", articulating a pragmatic preference for peaceful contest over armed conflict.

South African liberals' split personalities can be traced to the decades preceding the opening up of the mines in 1867. Their humanism persuaded a man like Pringle to raise his voice against racism, slavery and colonialism. But the liberals were also integral to the colonial settler society and saw their future within it. Thus were the majority of liberals tempted to expediently compromise principle when it clashed

with the interests of empire. Porter's liberal politics converged with the imperial project. But like his European contemporaries, Porter and his supporters distrusted the poor. In the Cape Colony the working poor were Coloureds and Africans. The Cape franchise thus had both a class and racial dimension.

For African and Coloured voters, the Cape franchise was the token of their citizenship, the promise of an expanding floor of rights as equal subjects of the British Empire with the Whites. For the strategists of empire, it was a political instrument to impose and secure British hegemony in South Africa, by containing the Afrikaners on the one hand while co-opting the Black propertied classes on the other, as junior partners in an alliance against the Afrikaners who sought to disenfranchise them. The Colonial Office in London regarded the Cape franchise as a device to build a multi-racial bloc amongst the propertied classes as the bulwark of empire in Southern Africa. Concrete material and political interests undergirded Cape liberalism.

In exchange for the surrender of Boer sovereignty at Vereeniging, the British surrendered the political rights of their erstwhile African and Coloured allies in the Cape. The Cape franchise was sold down the river at Vereeniging, a betrayal confirmed by the 1905 Native Affairs Commission, where the colonial system that evolved into apartheid was first elaborated. The 1905 Commission charted a new path for South Africa, in which only Whites would be citizens and all Blacks would be reduced to subject peoples. The tattered shreds of the Cape franchise were swept away in 1955, when the NP finally disenfranchised the Coloureds. By the 1960s, no Black South African had a claim on citizenship. We were Bantu citizens of some nine or ten "homelands", Coloureds and Indians, but definitely not South African citizens.

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A portent of the ambiguous role the White liberal was destined to play in twentieth century South African politics was W.P. Schreiner, the only White who associated himself with the delegation opposing the Act of Union that arrived in London in 1909. An outspoken Eastern Cape liberal, he had watched in dismay as the convention movement gathered momentum amongst the Whites, with emphasis on White unity against the Black majority. Schreiner was compelled to link up with the political representatives of the Blacks. After Union, liberals were compelled to fight a losing rearguard battle, as successive White governments whittled away the political rights the Black propertied classes had formerly enjoyed. What was horse-traded at Vereeniging and during the South African convention made the Black Sash, mourning the violation of the Constitution to abolish the Coloured vote, inevitable.

For most of the twentieth century the overwhelming majority of Whites refused to accept and embrace the verdict of history: that it was impossible to unscramble the historic omelette that South Africa has become. Consequently, twentieth century White South African politics was dominated by ever more dangerous attempts to deny and reverse the reality that Black and White lived together in a common society, in which powerful centripetal forces were knitting them ever closer together. In contrast, the oppressed majority responded to their existence in a common society by evolving an inclusive African nationalism that defined the national project as the realisation of a non-racial democracy.

For decades, South African liberals were pre-occupied with the dilemmas this posed. During the 1920s a few were attracted to the notion of territorial segregation, a South Africa devolved into two autonomous White and African states. Liberal ambivalence about African urbanisation is evident too in the Alan Paton of “Cry the Beloved Country”, who portrayed it as a disastrous loss of innocence, leading inexorably into gangsterism, prostitution and political opportunism.

A British aristocrat who has attained notoriety for indiscretion reportedly once required Tony Leon to explain why they chose the name Democratic Party when they claimed to be a liberal party. Unconvinced by the convoluted rationale Leon offered he muttered, “Quite!” before stalking off imperiously.

Apocryphal tales are invariably as highly spiced as this one is, but can nonetheless be helpful in uncovering un-acknowledged truths. The explanation Leon withheld is that it was not wise because the name “Liberal” would have antagonised White voters but would not have attracted a sufficient number of compensatory Black voters.

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He also withheld the fact that there had once been a Liberal Party, founded in 1954 after the 1953 elections in which the NP increased its parliamentary majority. While the African voters of the Eastern Cape, holding on to the demeaning communal vote tossed to them by Smuts in 1936, elected the Liberals Margaret Ballinger and Donald Molteno as Native Representatives in the Assembly and Senate, it was a

hard fact of South African politics that White constituencies did not elect Liberals. Perhaps more significantly, commencing in 1948, the African voters of the Western Cape successively elected the Communists, Sam Kahn, Brian Bunting, and then Ray Alexander to these positions. When named Communists were excluded from Parliament, they elected Len Lee Warden of the Congress of Democrats, an ANC ally, who held the seat until the Native Representatives were abolished in 1960.

Yet, even as its voice in Parliament was being kept alive by African voters, the Liberal Party regarded a universal franchise as far too radical. Running like a blue thread through the history of South African liberalism is a readiness to defer to White prejudices consistently repaid in the coin of unambiguous rejection. Left to their own devices after the removal of the Native Representatives, for the next twenty five years the White electorate denied every liberal, save Helen Suzman, a seat in Parliament.

The recommendations of the Fagan Commission of 1946 represent the farthest that post-war South African liberalism was prepared to go in embracing a common society. One of Fagan’s findings was that African workers were destined to displace Whites in virtually every sector of the economy. Yet the liberal, Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr, acting as Prime Minister during Smuts’ absence at the United Nations, prosecuted the leadership of the African Mineworkers Union for organising a strike in 1946, then charged the leaders of the Communist Party with sedition for its involvement in that African Mineworkers strike!

The Smuts government downplayed the significance of the commission’s findings for fear of confirming the NP’s “Swart Gevaar” electoral rhetoric in 1948. It remains a matter of speculation what direction South African politics might have taken had Smuts had the political courage to run on Fagan Commission’s recommendations in 1948. Fear of the conservatism of White voters persuaded him to be cautious.

The vision of the liberals of the 1950s was essentially integrationist : A state designed, defined and dominated by the White minority, into which “deserving” Blacks would be integrated on the basis of merit. As Percy Qoboza once explained, there was degrading racial presumption implicit in the notion of a qualified franchise that assumed that any White tramp was competent to have the franchise, while the African editor of an important daily was required to demonstrate his competence.

South Africa’s liberals tried for decades to merge elementary democratic principles with a political order that would give the White minority veto power over the will of the majority. During the early fifties they thought a qualified franchise, applicable only to Blacks, would achieve this. While the liberals accepted that White and Black lived in a common society, it would be on terms determined by the Whites.

The Liberal Party found it increasingly difficult to manage this tension in its politics. Ghana’s independence in 1957 had set in motion the rapid decolonisation of the African continent. The more far-sighted among the Liberals found ways of coming to terms with these continental developments. Patrick Duncan used his journal, “Contact”, to cover these unfolding African events as did “The New African”, a literary magazine founded and edited by Randolph Vigne. By 1962 the Liberal Party was ready to embrace a universal franchise and was remaking itself as a predominantly Black party fully supportive of majority rule. Patrick Duncan, the most radical amongst them, ended his life as a member of the Pan-Africanist Congress. (PAC)

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The Liberal Party opted to disband when the NP statutorily banned non-racial political parties. The Progressive Party (Progs), explaining that this was the only way to retain a foothold in Parliament, bowed to the racist ban and expelled its black members. For well nigh twenty years after this the Progs managed to hold on to only one seat in Parliament. At moments when the democratic movement was at its weakest, a number of liberals once again toyed with the idea of territorial separation. It was the weight of mass political action that persuaded most liberals to return to the mainstream of elementary democratic principles.

For diametrically opposite reasons, both White and Black South Africans distrusted liberals and found liberalism unattractive. The gestation of South Africa’s liberal democratic Constitution was ironically a dialogue between parties from the opposing poles of the political spectrum – the ANC on the left, the NP on the right. Representing constituencies that were suspicious of liberalism, in the process of finding each other in negotiations they arrived at the common ground of the institutions of liberalism.

Racial oppression and apartheid in South Africa were the institutional framework brought about by the development of capitalism in a colonial environment. It required mass action, in which the individual was often subordinated to the collective, to bring it down. Liberals played a very marginal role in these developments.

Because they have historically preferred reformist instead of revolutionary methods the liberals have invariably locked themselves into White South African politics, making them hostages of the racially privileged Whites. Liberal politicians who relied on White votes had a very short shelf life in South Africa. The poor performance of the Progs after 1963 indicates that it was only the wealthiest Whites,

fearing no competition from the Blacks, who were ready to relax the regime of racial oppression.

All political leaders, White or Black, who sought change, were keenly aware of the racial conservatism of the White voters. In deference to such racial prejudice the farthest the ANC of 1923 was prepared to go was a return to the old Cape franchise, to be applied throughout South Africa. The same considerations counselled moderation in language and in political tactics, constraining the leadership to prefer petitions, deputations and a search for dialogue rather than militant tactics. In their desperation to save the Cape African vote, threatened by the Hertzog Bills in 1935, some African leaders even resorted to pandering to White fears with re-assurances that since White women had been enfranchised in 1930, there was no possibility of African voters overwhelming Whites.

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For two decades after 1910 Black leaders clung to the illusion that political moderation on their part would persuade a critical mass of White voters to elect a reformist government that would incrementally abolish racism. Unfortunately Liberals made no headway amongst a White population all of whom recognised and cherished their status of privilege at the expense of the Blacks. Liberals usually opted to yield to the prejudices of the Whites, leading to the parting of the ways in the post-war years. Writing to Dr Rheinallt-Jones in exasperation in 1942, ANC

President Dr. A.B. Xuma declaimed: "One cannot wait for public opinion to be ready for reforms. One must lead public opinion to see the need for reforms by stating the case to its final and logical conclusions no matter whose interests it affects."

"The Africans' Claims", adopted by the ANC conference the following year, defines the divergent paths hewn by what had formerly been allies. Democracy in South Africa would inevitably result in the political dominance of the African majority. As this was an outcome Whites found unacceptable, the liberals preferred to compromise democratic principles and capitulate to racial bigotry. In opposition to the integrationist project of the liberals, the liberation movement put forward a national democratic revolution. The liberation movement's vision is captured in the preamble of the Freedom Charter, as "South Africa belongs to all who live in it!" But this would only be realized by a democratic transformation that would amount to a political revolution. A South African nation, defined not by race, colour, creed or ethnic origins was considered an extremely radical idea during the mid-1950s. By the '70s it had become so commonplace that only the most dogmatic racists and ethnicists rejected it. But even at that moment the party that had become the flagship of liberalism, the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) was still not comfortable with a universal franchise. When it finally did embrace this basic democratic notion, the PFP hedged it with a federalism, explicitly designed to thwart what it delicately called "majoritarianism."

After the revival of a mass movement in the wake of the Soweto Uprising, those liberals who had overcome their fears of African majority rule, like W.P. Schreiner in 1909, found ways of cooperating with the movements of the oppressed. Despite

their own misgivings, doubts and scepticism they discovered that the ANC had acquired a growing hegemony over the struggle for change and in order to be relevant they had to relate to it. Those liberals who remained fearful of real democracy sought and found temporary allies amongst homeland leaders, toyed with various constitutional models or tried to stimulate dialogue among the antagonists.

As the system of apartheid unravelled during the 1980s, liberals could be found spread amongst a number of political trends: the Institute of Race Relations, the Urban Foundation and a few smaller bodies that had recently discovered the evils of apartheid on the right; on the left the Five Freedoms Forum, the End Conscription Campaign plus smaller bodies affiliated to the UDF. In the centre was the Institute for a Democratic South Africa (IDASA), founded by the former leader of the PFP, van Zyl Slabbert, and the new phenomenon that Thabo Mbeki dubbed “the New Voortrekker”. The 1988 White elections indicated shifts in the tectonic plates of White political opinion when a few liberals were elected on the PFP ticket. But in both CODESA I and II the liberals were a sideshow.

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Liberalism remained an isolated minority trend amongst Whites. The NP’s impressive showing in the ’94 elections demonstrated that the majority of Whites still supported the party of apartheid, perhaps in the hope that it would thwart the ambitions of a democratic government.

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Under the leadership of Helen Zille, liberalism’s flagship, the Democratic Alliance, has finally come to terms with the post ’94 political settlement and dropped its “fight back” posture. It is trying to appeal Black voters by appropriating the language, style, the icons, images and totems of the liberation struggle.

Perhaps one’s final verdict could be the words of Oscar Wilde: “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery!”