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How Liberal Is the Current ANC?

What is liberalism?

*The first question to ask is: what do we mean by “liberal”? A great deal has been written on this subject, and I shall not say very much. Ever since it was first applied in the English language to political opinions and attitudes, the word “liberal” has taken on a variety of meanings. In his book *Keywords*, Raymond Williams teases out some of these¹. The flavour of the word depends largely on the political perspective of the person who uses it. To a person of right-wing views, “liberal” is apt to suggest a certain slackness or sentimentality, a tendency to be over-generous towards the lower classes. To a person on the left, the word usually conveys a somewhat similar sense of slackness and sentimentality (with the addition, very often, of a suggestion of canny calculation), but now with the implication that the inevitable pressures of class conflict are being consciously or unconsciously evaded. People happy to describe themselves as liberal, however, would normally claim to be operating creatively and soberly somewhere in the area between the prejudices of the right and the presuppositions of the left. Most of them would be willing to accept the general definition of liberalism offered by Alan Paton: “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.”²*

Various attempts have been made to assess objectively some of the ambiguities held within the spectrum of liberal thinking. It has sometimes been proposed that the more progressive side of liberalism places its main emphasis on human rights whereas the more conservative side insists strongly on property rights.

All of these complexities have been and are still present, of course, in the South African scene and its accompanying discourse. The more conservative – or least socialist – edge of liberalism has been highlighted (and perhaps parodied) in recent decades by the introduction of the notion of “neo-liberalism”, which insists heavily on the value of market forces and the wrongness of too much government intervention in economic affairs.

What might the average reader of *Focus* mean by “liberal”? Maybe *Focus* has no “average readers”, but the Helen Suzman Foundation proclaims its support for “liberal constitutional democracy”, which means, presumably, a socio-political system of the kind envisaged in our Constitution. But a Constitution is a large and

complex document. Inevitably, and correctly, it echoes some of the tensions and ambiguities within the society that it is attempting to guide and regulate. In terms of the Constitution, one clearly needs a balance between the conservative emphasis on, say, property rights and the more egalitarian emphasis on the whole range of human rights. But where, in specific situations, should the primary stress fall?

The history of the word “liberal” within the ANC

Bearing these issues in mind, I'd like to look briefly at the history of the contested concept of liberalism, and indeed of the word “liberal”, within the ANC. In its first decades these matters weren't much discussed, but ANC members seem to have taken for granted the norms of the Westminster system of government, and it was against the South African distortions of this system that they raised their protests. In the 1930s some Marxist views entered the discourse, but even with the new militancy of the ANC Youth League in the 1940s it was still mainly the white government's failure to live up to its own supposed ideals – the ideals eventually put forward at the founding of the United Nations – that was targeted. After this, with the influence of South African Communists and the fact that the ANC in exile got much of its support and training from countries in the Socialist bloc, a fairly hostile view of liberalism and of liberals began to become common.

Meanwhile, inside South Africa, another challenge to “liberalism” had emerged: Black Consciousness. For Steve Biko and his colleagues and followers, liberals – “white liberals” – were people who made inept attempts to assist blacks in their struggle, whereas their real task should have been to conscientise their fellow whites. Liberals were also thought of as hypocritical: well-to-do, claiming a desire for social justice, but ineffective (and often not as distressed by this as they should have been). In the 1970s the pejorative sense of “liberal” was fairly widely found among those firmly committed to the anti-apartheid struggle, many of whom were opposed to capitalism and particularly to the way in which it seemed to be operating in South Africa. I once heard Beyers Naudé speaking very critically of liberals. I asked him who he would regard as a typical liberal, and he replied immediately “Harry Oppenheimer.”

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But of course many things changed within the ANC and within South Africa in the early 1990s. Now the movement, inspired by the newly freed Mandela, was aiming not for revolutionary victory but for a historic compromise, for reconciliation, albeit a somewhat hegemonic reconciliation. In these circumstances those who had often been branded as “liberals” turned out to be the people with whom the ANC had to work, and indeed could work. And the more perceptive thinkers within the ANC recognised that “liberalism” had in fact achieved a good deal in making it possible for the majority of whites to accept the radical political changes which were beginning to take place. The significance of Helen Suzman and the Progressives was quietly acknowledged, though often somewhat grudgingly. Alan Paton's great novel, with its talk of blacks and whites working together for the good of the country, which had in 1980 seemed to many to be absurdly unrealistic, suddenly appeared to make some sense. Speaking in Durban shortly after his release from prison, Mandela mentioned the example of Peter Brown, a leading member of the Liberal Party.

South African politics was transformed, but (for better or worse) the economy was not, so the ANC also found itself working with the Oppenheims and other leading industrialists and business people. And the new Constitution, which came out of tough negotiations, was a striking blueprint for what could only be called liberal democracy.

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How did this happen? How did this liberal text emerge after years of Communist influence within the ANC? A number of things need to be noted here. The ANC didn’t become a communist organisation; it never merged with the SACP. The anti-liberal prejudice, in so far as it existed, had been against the sort of people that “liberals” were assumed to be rather than against all liberal concepts in themselves. Moreover, as I have noted, there was a new recognition of the value and

the values of liberalism. But almost certainly the crucial fact was that, with the collapse of international communism, there was really no viable alternative to the liberal democracy that dominant world opinion seemed to expect or demand. South Africa wished to be accepted by the international community: both any curtailing of democracy and the introduction of a command economy of any sort were out of the question. It is worth remembering, then, that though the ANC could certainly not be accused of accepting and indeed fully participating in the new constitutional dispensation in bad faith, it was to some extent ushered along the path that it took by the circumstances of the time.

The current ANC view of “liberals”

I have said something about the history of the concept of liberalism and of “liberals” within the ANC. What is the current situation? How are “liberals” regarded nowadays? And how liberal, in the broadest sense, are the views of most ANC members?

To tackle the first question first: for many ANC members “liberals” are still regarded as the enemy. One of the main reasons for this is that the Democratic Alliance, the official opposition which is growing stronger and beginning to become a threat to ANC dominance, describes itself as liberal. It does this with justification, as it is firmly committed to “liberal constitutional democracy.” Unfortunately and inevitably, however, the DA is also the party which represents the interests of the more affluent whites – whether it likes it or not, it is South Africa’s Tory party – and the result of this is that the term “liberal” still implies in the minds of many ANC members the notions of conservatism and a reluctance to seek ways of redistributing the country’s wealth.³

The views of ANC members

The question of how liberal are the views of most ANC members, and of the party as a whole, is the main question that this article needs to tackle, and it is of course the most difficult one.

One needs to begin with a few fairly obvious points. Any political party in any country is likely to harbour a variety of viewpoints; this is particularly true of the ANC which has a large following and is, as is so often said, a “broad church.” This “church” shows signs of getting even broader now that its newly affluent adherents are starting to

savour the advantages of the current status quo and its poorer members are feeling disgruntled and beginning to look for populist and/or radical left-wing solutions.

Another clear point is that, in any political party anywhere, a fair number of its members will be not particularly thoughtful or well-informed, and will rely to a large extent on the views of leading members. Again this is particularly true of the ANC, most of whose members or voters had had no experience of formal democratic processes before 1994 and were and are (for reasons that we know well) poorly educated.

Having said that, I must add that, in electoral terms, things have so far gone well under ANC rule. Though corruption has emerged in many areas of public life, elections seem to have been, broadly, distinctly free and fair. The Independent Electoral Commission has run things sensibly and has used procedures for counting votes which make vote-rigging very difficult. When one reads accounts of probably falsified election results in a country like Russia, one realises how fortunate we have been. There are of course the cynical voices which say: "No problems yet, as things are still going pretty well for the ANC. The real test of electoral integrity will come when it begins to lose votes on a large scale." This may perhaps be so; but, though in recent elections the ANC has lost votes in eight of the nine provinces, there have been no serious allegations of fraud.

One was aware too that, after centuries of discrimination and suffering, a great deal of resentment must have been simmering beneath the surface. But discipline was strong, and the unembittered and magnanimous Mandela was the role model.

The views of ANC leaders

It is, however, the views and attitudes of the leaders of the ANC that are most important as we attempt to tackle our main question. How liberal are these views and attitudes?

The ANC has changed a great deal in the last twenty years. In the 1990s, especially the earlier years of the decade, the leadership of the ANC seemed to be firmly supportive of the liberal constitutional democratic ideas that later became inscribed in the Constitution of 1996. The leadership was strong and respected by members, and there was an overall coherence in the positions that were advanced. There were a few maverick voices, such as those of Harry Gwala and Peter Mokheba, but one never suspected them of representing mainstream ANC points-of-view. One was aware too that, after centuries of discrimination and suffering, a great deal of resentment must have been simmering beneath the surface. But discipline was strong, and the unembittered and magnanimous Mandela was the role model.

When I joined the ANC in 1990 some of my old Liberal Party friends expressed some surprise; many of them headed in the direction of what is now the DA. They were no doubt very aware of the Marxist and totalitarian elements that seemed to have been present in the ANC until shortly before 1990. My view was that, after the struggle years in which so many people had died or suffered, the ANC, which for all its imperfections was now committed to democratic procedures, occupied the moral high ground. It seemed to me right that the transition to democracy and sanity should be led by the party the majority of whose members were black. Many of my white friends seemed to share my admiration for Mandela, but I found it frustrating that most of them were unwilling to vote for him and the ANC.

Change in the ANC

But in the years that followed the ANC began to change. Mbeki's leadership proved divisive, and divisions at the top led to a loosening of the political and intellectual discipline which had been important and impressive under Mandela. Mbeki also made some serious mistakes, particularly in relation to the arms deal and HIV/Aids, and these served to open the door for corruption and to shake the integrity of the organisation. Mbeki also had moments of paranoia when an understandable bitterness seemed to contradict the ANC's belief in a non-racist society. Without condoning Mbeki's lapses, one must recognise how difficult it was and is for the previous victims of oppression not to be irritated by the smooth, often complacent ride that many whites have had into the new society.

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Mbeki became unpopular, and was ousted. Zuma took over, but he arrived in power without any very definite political programme. He had been chosen not as a person with clear proactive views but largely as a charismatic and colourful personality, a pleasant alternative to the austere and somewhat obscure Mbeki: he had wooed the people mainly with a song and a dance. It is hardly surprising that his leadership has been fairly weak and that he has been unable to restore the political unity and the conceptual coherence

that the ANC had in the early and mid 1990s. Zuma's own views are not always clear: from time to time he makes statements, sometimes unconsidered statements, which seem to place him well outside the liberal constitutional democratic paradigm. And under his presidency of the ANC political factions and an at times wild variety of opinions have flourished more or less unchecked.

The current situation

I have mentioned corruption, which includes fraud and cronyism. I don't need to elaborate on the issue: it is well known. What is relevant here is that people who are corrupt, people whose main reason for being involved with the ANC is to seek positions of power or simply to make money, are likely to have no strong or clear political views, but their very presence, their constant desire for often huge illegitimate perks and advantages, inevitably pushes the whole organisation and the government away from being that stable configuration of fair practices and checks and balances that is implied in the phrase "liberal constitutional democracy."

The ANC government's failure to deal effectively with the issues of poverty and proper service delivery is also, arguably, an indication of its inability to function in a democratic manner. The unemployed and the poor make up a considerable percentage of the South African population, and many of them customarily vote for the ANC, but most of those who have acted in government, in the name of the ANC, have lacked the competence, the imagination or the political will to transform South African society

The Constitution stands firm, however. But at the moment it seems to be under threat from a number of different directions. A new security bill (which has recently been softened but remains ominous) may well curtail the freedom that the media have enjoyed since 1990. It is difficult to tell whether the ANC is fully aware of the implications (including the international repercussions) of the restrictions that it is

preparing to impose. Similarly the independence of the judiciary seems to be threatened: leading members of the government have said that the courts should not be able to dictate to democratic institutions, and have proposed that the decisions of the courts should be “reviewed”. This strongly suggests an imperfect understanding of constitutional democracy and of the independence of the judiciary which underpins it. Under Mandela and even under Mbeki (for all his mistakes and miscalculations) one had a sense that a firm constitutional structure was in place and that the people at the top of the ANC understood this. Under Zuma, one cannot be sure. One often has a sense that he regards legal systems of any sort as inherently oppressive; he spends a good deal of time complaining about them.

One of the reasons for this, of course, is that he himself has been charged with corruption. His close association with Schabir Shaik led to Mbeki’s dismissing him as the country’s deputy president. The charges brought against him were later withdrawn in controversial circumstances; the court has now judged that these charges may be resurrected. Members of his large extended family have also managed to enrich themselves. A country which has a president with a record like this cannot easily be described as “liberal constitutional democratic.”

The woolliness and uncertainty of Zuma’s thinking seems to be fairly widespread within the ranks of the ANC. The tension between left-leaning members who would modify property rights and favour rapid redistribution and those who opt for strict constitutionality and a more gradualist approach is

a lively and healthy one. But voices advocating racial nationalism or economic radicalism – understandable as they are to some degree – are worrying, all the more so since every deviation (real or apparent) from expected constitutional norms frightens investors and lowers the country’s international reputation. The makers of the 1996 Constitution laid down the railway lines. We are still riding on them, but will the train be derailed? Will the ANC keep to the straight and narrow?

Conclusion

A great deal depends, as I have said, on the views of the leaders of the ANC. Things could go either way. If the leadership recognises the importance of maintaining a liberal constitutional democracy, and if it is prepared to insist on adherence to this model, the ANC after its few serious wobbles could swing back on to the path of wisdom. Most of its members and voters would be likely to follow it back on to that path. But if it stumbles on as at present, it seems fairly likely that the liberal constitutional paradigm will slip away.

At the moment (at the time of writing) there seems to be an impending choice between Jacob Zuma, Kgalema Motlanthe and perhaps Tokyo Sexwale as the leader of the ANC. Zuma’s instincts do not seem to be notably liberal; Motlanthe’s do. So complicated and paradoxical, however, is the factional warfare that has erupted within the ANC that to many people a vote for Motlanthe would be taken as a sign of support for Julius Malema, one of the most illiberal, unconstitutional and undemocratic people to have appeared on the recent South African political stage.

NOTES

1 1976. Fontana/Croom Helm. Pp. 148-150.

2 Alan Paton, 1988, *Journey Continued*. David Philip. p. 294.

3 A sharply critical view of liberalism is not uncommon. In a chapter on “The liberal tradition in fiction” in the recently published *Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2012), Peter Blair says “The terms ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’... remain widely pejorative.” (p. 479)