

# 'LIBERATION' AND THE PROGRESSIVES

*From A CORRESPONDENT*

**I**N its editorial last month, *Liberation* stated: "We must confess that we do not share the optimism which has seen in the exodus of the 'Progressives' an encouraging major development in White politics in this country."

This blunt statement of opinion is then supported by several flimsy arguments, which can be answered with little difficulty.

"The Steytler group," declares *Liberation*, "did not break away from the U.P. in order to found a new and better political party, with a reformed platform of its own. In fact, several weeks after their resignation, they have still failed to produce any programme at all, and when they do we doubt whether it will differ significantly from that advanced by the United Party at the last election."

Surely, *Liberation* knows that the Progressives deliberately refrained from launching their new political party until after the Provincial elections, and that they booked the Johannesburg City Hall on the first available date thereafter? The Progressives decided that it would be inadvisable to do anything that would distract the Opposition in the Provincial Council election campaign, and I cannot say that I disagree with this view.

As for the allegation that the Progressives did not want to found a new and better political party, with a reformed platform and programme of their own," this is quite unjustified. There is irrefutable evidence (as persons in contact with the Progressives can testify) that the Progressives were itching from the start to launch their new party.

"It is true," *Liberation* continues, "that they (the Progressives) have said, and we must welcome even this timid beginning, that 'the non-Europeans' should 'be consulted.' But which non-Europeans? Consulted about what? All is conveniently vague."

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# Liberation and the Progressives

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The announcement that the Progressives would consult with non-Whites was made in one of the early statements, soon after the break at Bloemfontein. Did *Liberation* expect the Progressives, at that stage, to give precise details of their plans? It has since become known that the Progressives have consulted with non-Whites in most of the major centres of the country, that these non-Whites have included African and Indian Congress leaders (among them, Chief Lutuli), and that the subjects have ranged from Pass laws, influx control and the free movement of labour to the industrial colour bar, trade unions and job reservation, as well as the all-important question of the franchise.

*Liberation's* criticism, therefore, was unnecessarily hasty, and as it turns out unwarranted.

"The truth is," declares *Liberation*, "That the Progressives did not leave the United Party voluntarily. They were hounded out of the party. Their departure does not mark a turning on their part to the Left; they stand where they stood before. It marks a turning by the dominant Party leadership to the Right."

Admittedly, the Progressives were hounded out of the party. But what *Liberation* fails to add is that, having been hounded out, they did not beg to return. In fact, they were thankful, as shown by the alacrity with which the absent Progressives signed the statement of resignation, and the enthusiasm with which they all began preparing for their new role in South African politics. Perhaps *Liberation* could not be expected to be aware of the relief of the Progressives at having their minds made up for them, or of the optimism with which they looked forward to the launching of their new party; in that event, *Liberation's* comments should have been more cautious.

It is perfectly true that the break with the Progressives "marks a turning by the dominant Party leadership to the Right." But on what grounds does *Liberation* base the assumption that the Progressives "stand where they stood before?" We must wait for their programme of principles before making this criticism.

Finally, says *Liberation*, "the Progressives themselves are not really a homogeneous group; their delay in publishing any common statement of plans and aims is not the only indication of divergencies among themselves. It may well prove that we shall witness further regroupings and interactions between some of them and elements of the Liberal Party, perhaps, symptoms of the shifting scene."

I have dealt with the argument concerning the delay in issuing a common statement of aims. As for the speculation on possible interactions between the Liberals and Progressives, this is irrelevant to the subject under

discussion. All that needs answering here is the contention that the Progressives are not homogeneous.

It seems to me that they—at least, the M.P.s—are most homogeneous. We must not confuse petty jealousies and rivalries with lack of political homogeneity. The Progressives have been manouvred over the years into their present position and, as a result, they have developed a marked fellow-feeling in their general approach to politics. They are not supporters of the present Right-wing leadership in the U.P., nor are they Liberals. Judging by reports, they are presently engaged, with a minimum of friction, in drawing up their draft programme of principles for submission to their congress in November. *Liberation's* argument that the Progressives stand conservatively on the 1936 legislation is again unjustified. We must wait and see.

I would not have dealt with these various criticism of the Progressives if they had not been published as *Liberation's* editorial opinion. I think they are hasty and faulty arguments, and the approach a haphazard one.

*Liberation*, I feel, should have asked two questions: is there a role for the Progressive to play in present-day South African politics, or are they as a group out of joint with the times? If *Liberation* feels that there is no role for them to play, then it should explain why. The second question is: if there is a role for the Progressive group to play, are they *capable*, as individuals; of playing it?

My own view is that there is a role for the Progressives to play. As others have pointed out, they represent an important break in the White front has been developing as a result of the U.P.'s increasing appeasement and the consequent narrowing of the gap between the two major political parties.

The importance of this occurrence should not be under-estimated. If a sizeable section of the White electorate can be kept in the fight against the Nationalists, the overall struggle against Nationalists tyranny will be assisted. The White Parliamentary Opposition serves as a brake on Nationalist tyranny, and its continuance, even in the form of a smaller but nevertheless possibly effective political party, is not to be derided.

If *Liberation* has said that there was a job for the Progressives to do, but that it doubted whether, as individuals their past record of equivocation and spinelessness qualified them for the job, that would have been a legitimate expression of opinion. But it is erroneous to say that there is no task for them to perform, and it is unfair to judge their immediate actions too hastily.

The Progressives will draw up their programme of principles at their first national congress in Johannesburg on November 13 and 14. When

that programme is published, surely the test we must apply to it is whether it will serve as an effective *basis for attack* on apartheid? We must not expect the Progressives to express themselves in favour of universal suffrage. Their aim is to win seats among the White electorate. And while the Congress alliance has different aims and methods, it must assuredly recognise that there is room for a political party between itself and the Nationalist Party. Buffers can be very valuable.

The Progressives then have a task to perform in South African politics. It is a task that will be performed within a limited field, but that does not mean it will be an unimportant task. Their policies will not stand comparison with the Freedom Charter, but if they are sufficiently realistic to serve, as I have suggested, as a *basis for attack* on apartheid, they will have achieved a useful purpose.

Perhaps the Progressives will fail in the 1963 General Election and collapse, or partially collapse. If, however, they can establish themselves as an effective national party, with reasonably realistic policies, and ensure that between now and 1963 an adequate section of the White electorate remains in the fight against the Nationalist Government, they will have made their contribution to the struggle, and it will have been an important one.

The situation is too grim in South Africa for influential journals like *Liberation* casually to reject what assistance the Progressives might have to offer to the struggle. Even if the Progressives survive for only another four years, these are crucial years.

*(This article is referred to in the Editorial.)*

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