

THE WHITE OPPOSITION SPLITS

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THE annual congress of the official South African Parliamentary Opposition or United Party in August last year, on the eve of the Provincial Elections, resulted in the resignation of almost a quarter of its Members of Parliament and the formation of a new white political party—the Progressives. Amidst the exhumations and excuses, analyses and adjustments that followed, two highly significant conclusions emerged—the official Parliamentary Opposition has swung substantially to the right, narrowing the already narrow gap between Government and United Party on the doctrines of race rule; and, for the first time in South African history, a substantial white Parliamentary Party with wide, if not dominant, electoral support in many urban areas, had come into existence specifically in order to propagate a more liberal policy in race relations.

The origin of the Progressive break must be sought in the right-wing “rethinking” resulting from the total failure of the United Party to avoid a steady electoral decline during the 11 years in which it has been in Opposition. In 1948, the Nationalist Party came to power with a majority of fewer than half-a-dozen M.P.s. Today, it has two-thirds of the House of Assembly, partly due to the completely one-sided character of the electoral system (particularly delimitation methods) and partly to the growing numerical superiority of the Afrikaner. It did not take the United Party long to evolve the view that there was no profit in battering its head against a stone wall, and that the only chance of success lay in winning over “moderate” Nationalist voters.

After the General Election in 1953, when the U.P. suffered its second successive defeat, a right-wing breakaway movement, known as the Bekker or Conservative group, tried to swing the U.P. away from its anti-apartheid policies towards some entente with the then Nationalist Prime Minister, Dr. D. F. Malan. The movement failed, the group broke up, and the U.P. was able to consolidate its forces again. In 1958, the U.P. suffered its third big General Election defeat, and it is an indication of how far right-wing thinking had advanced in the Party by then that, instead of a small reactionary's group taking shape again, a powerful movement was launched to expel the small, so-

called "liberal" wing among the M.P.s.

It is not necessary to trace the tortuous path of the developing conflict within the U.P., except to mention that after the 1958 General Election defeat, Sir de Villiers Graaff, the leader, appointed a secret committee, consisting of U.P. Parliamentarians, to study the Party's racial policy; and that the points of conflict thereafter became more pronounced. During the 1959 Parliamentary session, rumours persisted of an impending move to expel the "liberals" from the U.P. caucus, on the grounds that their presence prevented "moderate" Nationalists from joining the Party. Sir de Villiers gave his considered reply to the Government's Bantustan policies, and one of his categorical statements was that the U.P. was flatly opposed to non-whites sitting in Parliament in any capacity. It was at this period that Mr. H. G. Lawrence, M.P., a former Cabinet Minister and the Party's front-bench debater, clashed with Sir de Villiers over the U.P.'s racial policies.

The fateful Bloemfontein congress was preceded by a congress of the United Party Youth, which is firmly under the control of the right-wing M.P.s. and which voiced its opposition to any liberal sentiments within the Party. Even before the Bloemfontein congress opened on August 11, there were rumours (some of which found their way into the newspapers) that the "liberals" were going to be "kicked out". Delegates from the rural areas dominated the conference, and it appeared that a definite campaign had been organised against the Progressives. On the first full day of the congress, Dr. Louis Steenkamp, M.P., a leading right-winger, introduced a resolution (which was not on the agenda) thanking Sir de Villiers Graaff for having stated that the U.P. believed that the African population should enjoy its political rights on a separate, not common, roll. The Progressives protested that the resolution closed the door to all future progress, and then the fur began to fly. Until late that night, the attack on the Progressives raged, with rural delegates overreaching themselves in their excitement and becoming positively abusive. One thing was made plain to the Progressives at that day's discussion: they were not welcome in the Party at all. Some observers believe that the plan was to goad two or three Progressives into resigning, but that the campaign got out of hand and led to a major split.

On the following day, when a number of delegates had left already, Mr. Mitchell, the right-wing Natal leader, introduced

the controversial resolution declaring that the U.P. would not purchase any more land in terms of the 1936 settlement—by which further land had been promised to the Africans in return for their disfranchisement from the common roll in the Cape—if that land was going to be used for Dr. Verwoerd's Bantustans. The Progressives protested vigorously. They knew that the reasoning was spurious: that it was a tactical, not a policy, resolution, and that it would be used to exploit the resentment of white farmers who objected to the expropriation of land for African use. In fact, two years ago, long before Dr. Verwoerd announced his Bantustan policies, Mr. Mitchell (to quote one of the Progressive M.P.s.) was "indulging in this type of propaganda, despite objections from some of his Parliamentary colleagues".

The protests of the Progressives left the congress unmoved, and the break then became inevitable. In the days that followed there was a series of meetings, or rather nostalgic farewells, between the Progressive M.P.s. and Sir de Villiers, which shows that far from being a hard-bitten bunch of politicians eager to launch out with a new Party, the Progressives were being positively sentimental about their departure.

Sir de Villiers later issued a lengthy statement and, on behalf of the Progressives, Dr. Jan Steytler, M.P., formerly leader of the Party in the Cape, replied with a statement that drew murmurs of applause from sympathisers all round South Africa. "We believe", said Dr. Steytler, "the time has come when white people should stop taking important decisions affecting non-white people without proper regard as to how the latter think and feel. Since the Bloemfontein congress we have, in fact, consulted a number of responsible Natives and we have found that they deplore in the strongest terms this decision taken at congress. They most certainly regard it as a breach of faith on the part of the white man. It is our view that South Africa cannot afford political stratagems of this kind, which destroy the trust and respect of the Native people in the guardianship of the white man . . . We have come to the conclusion that the temper of the Bloemfontein congress showed a complete unwillingness on the part of most delegates to face up to the challenge of contemporary events here and in Africa. The impression we have is of a Party congress reluctant to move with the times, unwilling even to interpret its own principles in a forward-looking manner. From the tone of congress we believe

that many delegates want to fight the Nationalists with the weapons of race fear and race hatred. The slogans of 'swart gevaar' (black danger) and 'kafferboeties' (kaffir-lovers) will be used against the Nationalists by people who should know better".

Even before this statement had been issued, Major A. Z. Berman, a U.P. member of the Cape Provincial Council and an ultra-rightwinger, had declared that the U.P. would fight the Provincial Elections in October on the old Nationalist slogan of the "swart gevaar". The departure of the Progressives was hailed by the more vocal right-wingers as positive proof to "our Nationalist friends" that the U.P. was now a purged, conservative Party. In a Press statement on August 25, the Progressives observed: "The delegates at congress showed an unmistakable tendency to go backwards rather than to go forward . . . they felt that by making a minimum of progress the Party would become an acceptable political home for the 'moderate' Nationalist, whose support congress was primarily concerned with getting". Captain Jack Basson, M.P., one of the least subtle members of the right-wing, predicted that for every "liberal" who left the U.P., four conservatives (presumably "moderate" Nationalists) would join it. Unfortunately for Mr. Basson, the results of the Provincial Elections have not borne out this prophecy.

The land resolution which was the cause of the trouble at the congress was passed by an overwhelming majority of the delegates, although Sir de Villiers himself was opposed to it, and in fact had made it known beforehand that he considered it to be of dubious propaganda value. That the Progressives had not gone to the congress with any intention of causing a split is proved by the fact that only a few were still in Bloemfontein when it was decided to issue a statement of protest. The others had already left the city, and they learnt only afterwards of the action of their colleagues, whereupon they promptly identified themselves with it. One of the Progressives subsequently declared: "I am certain that the delegates who favoured the motion did not realise that its acceptance would lead to a major split in the Party. Some of them may today be wondering if the possible gain of a few hundred votes in seats like Vryheid was a good exchange for 11 M.P.s. (now 12 with Mr. Lawrence), five M.P.C.s., several excellent candidates for the Provincial elections, and scores of the Party's best workers and supporters, and, not the least bad part of a bad bargain, the

further loss of confidence of the Natives in the white man's word".

It was at the stage when the Progressives were having difficulty in persuading the Opposition public that their breakaway had been unavoidable and, in fact, desirable, that Mr. Harry Oppenheimer, chairman (among other concerns) of the giant Anglo-American Corporation and De Beers, controller of much of South Africa's gold and all of its diamond industry, and himself a former United Party M.P., resigned from the Party, stating that he was "in general sympathy with the Progressive group". Although he has not formally joined the group, he has promised it financial support. Coming from South Africa's premier millionaire, with the reputation of being the most enlightened capitalist in the country, this was a lucky break for the Progressives. Even if the announcement did not have much effect on rank and file U.P. voters (their views have still not been determined), it certainly had an impact on influential business, newspaper, and other circles, where it was known that Mr. Oppenheimer was not the kind of man to throw his considerable weight behind ineffectual splinter groups. For the first time, probably, the business world, and many others, began to think of the Progressives as a group with a future.

The next lucky break for the Progressives was the announcement by Mr. Harry Lawrence, M.P., that he, too, was resigning from the United Party. Mr. Lawrence, unlike most of the Progressives, was well-known to the public. One of the most experienced Parliamentarians in the House, he had served as a Cabinet Minister under General Smuts, and then, in Opposition, had become virtual Parliamentary leader of the U.P. The significance of Mr. Lawrence's resignation was that he was no liberal; but in recent months he had displayed increasing concern over the state of race relations and over the U.P.'s obvious inability to frame a colour policy that faced the realities of the racial situation.

In his statement, Mr. Lawrence revealed that, before the debate in Parliament on the Government's Bantustan Bill, he had felt it prudent "to admit in principle the full implications of the acceptance of a multi-racial community . . . As a consequence, I had several full and earnest talks with the Leader of the Opposition and later made my views known to the Party caucus". After the debate on the Bill, Mr. Lawrence went so far as to write a letter to Sir de Villiers "making my own position quite

explicit". In that letter, Mr. Lawrence told Sir de Villiers that he was "unable to agree that your Native policy statement was an unequivocal acceptance of the implications which must flow from accepting the multi-racial state in preference to Verwoerd's policy of partition". At the time, Mr. Lawrence's Parliamentary colleagues were aware that the dispute between Mr. Lawrence and Sir de Villiers was a fundamental one. Indeed, it even seemed likely that Mr. Lawrence might break away from the U.P. These facts show that the conflict in the U.P., which led to the Progressive breakaway, had deep roots. As Mr. Lawrence explained in his statement, the resolution on the land issue at the Bloemfontein congress was only "the proximate and immediate cause" of the break.

I have dealt with Mr. Lawrence's position at length because it emphasizes two points: that the trouble in the U.P. was deep-seated and fundamental, and that the break, therefore, was inevitable; and that, essentially, what the Progressives represent is not a liberal flutter, but an alarmed reaction to a deteriorating situation by persons who, if they had lived in any country other than crazy South Africa, would be the respectable pillars of society.

The future of the Progressives, of course, depends on the United Party's breaking up further—that is, their future in Parliament. As Mr. Marais Steyn, M.P., expressed it, they cannot survive as a Party unless it is at the expense of the U.P. What, then, is the future of the U.P.? If the U.P. now intensifies its "*swart gevaar*" and "*kafferboetie*" propaganda, and concerns itself mainly with winning over "moderate" Nationalists, inevitably it is going to break up further. Up to the time of the Progressive break, Sir de Villiers had succeeded skilfully in holding the U.P. together, by balancing the right-wing against the left-wing, and vice versa. Now the left-wing has gone, and Sir de Villiers is left with a right-wing and the sprawling middle-wing, which contains several M.P.s who are not at all happy about the right-wing's manoeuvres. The Nationalists have been saying that Sir de Villiers is now Mr. Mitchell's prisoner.

The results of the Provincial Council elections in Natal were most heartening. The three Progressives (who stood as Independents) polled exceptionally well. In Pinetown, Mr. Lester Hall lost to the U.P. candidate by only 160 votes. In Durban (Gardens), Mr. Leo Boyd polled 1,954 votes against the U.P.'s 2,639. In Pietermaritzburg South, Dr. W. G. McConkey

polled 1,964 votes against the U.P.'s 2,692. These three candidates had less than two months in which to organise their election campaigns. The position in which the U.P. found itself in the Provincial elections was a disturbing one. It lost seats and votes to the Nationalist Party (apart from isolated successes here and there), and it also found that it was shedding voters to Progressives and Liberals on the other flank. The moral of the Provincial elections appeared to be that the political situation in South Africa is becoming more fluid, with an important section of the electorate showing a preference for Progressive and Liberal policies.

The next Parliamentary session will see the start of the clash between the Progressives and the U.P. Assuming that the Progressives establish themselves as a cohesive Party, what role will they fulfil in South African politics? Why should they succeed where the United Party has failed? The answer is that the U.P. need not have failed. It could have remained as a powerful Parliamentary Party if it had persisted in its opposition to Nationalist policies, which would have crumbled sooner or later.

What will the Progressives represent in South African politics? Even if the U.P. is reversing its direction, it will not be sufficient for the Progressives simply to take up where Mr. Mitchell is leaving off. The Progressives have stated that they intend to interpret U.P. policy in a "forward-looking manner"—this could mean anything or nothing. The situation facing the Progressives is this: if they adopt a policy that is only a few shades different from the U.P.'s policy, they will fail to make any impact on the racial situation and the U.P. electorate will see no reason why it should vote for Mr. Lawrence and Dr. Steytler rather than for Sir de Villiers and Mr. Mitchell. If, on the other hand, the Progressives adopt a bold racial policy, their survival as a Parliamentary group will depend on a qualitative change taking place in the white electorate. If this change does not take place, then they fail at the polls; if it does, then the future is theirs. In other words, they have nothing to lose by adopting a bold policy. With a bold policy, they *may* fail; without a bold policy, they will *certainly* fail.

Some observers have suggested that the Progressives will represent, in the main, the views of enlightened industrialists. In the present race-obsessed situation, a white Parliamentary Party, expressing the needs of progressive industrialism, and

speaking boldly on matters like the industrial colour bar, pass laws, living wages, influx control, the group areas act, job reservation, etc., could definitely serve a progressive purpose. To imagine that the Progressives will be liberal for the sake of being liberal is unrealistic.

But, and this is the point I should like to make in this article, it is not essential in South Africa today to advocate universal suffrage and equal rights in all spheres to be progressive. An enlightened policy on the issues I have mentioned should be heartily welcomed by every right-thinking South African. The situation is so grim in South Africa that a move such as that now being made by the Progressives must be given a fair trial—and every possible support. After that, it will be up to the Progressives to show their supporters and sympathisers that the faith in them has not been misplaced.

If South Africa ever reaches the stage where there is a clear dividing line between white supporters of apartheid and non-white victims, with nothing in between except a small and ineffectual group of white liberals, then there can be no peaceful solution to South Africa's racial problem. For helping to prevent this stage from being reached, the Progressives deserve thanks.

It is foolish to argue, as some people do, that between the Nationalist Government and the Congress Movement there is no room for a major political force; and it is just as unrealistic to insist that the Progressives must adopt radical policies which, while they would be welcomed by Congress supporters, would be rejected by 99 per cent. of white voters. The Progressives are not catering for Congress. They are catering primarily for urban white voters. If they can achieve something in this field, if they can keep a substantial number of white voters in the fight against the Nationalist Government, then they will have done considerable good.

The ultimate outcome of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa is foregone. Apartheid will be defeated. What is not certain is whether this victory will be achieved with the help of whites, and with the minimum of violence, or whether it will flow from a direct and bloody clash between the non-white masses and the white police state. If the Progressives succeed in their aim, and a section of the white electorate behaves sensibly, then South Africa will not be reduced to carnage and chaos. It will be a valuable victory.