

Contact: an introductory essay

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Contact was never the official newspaper of the Liberal Party, but was the only pro-Liberal Party newspaper in the country. After Duncan, it was edited by Peter Hjul, until he too was banned. Hjul also ran a trade magazine in the fishing industry. He was succeeded as editor by Ann Tobias, Vice-Chair of the Liberal Party in the Western Cape. She was the daughter of a retired Anglican bishop from northern Namibia (then South-West Africa), and her brother headed the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Cape Town until he emigrated to New Zealand. After Tobias was in turn banned, she emigrated on a no-return exit permit, and later married a retired political scientist in the USA.

I helped with Contact from somewhere between 1963-64, when I was a schoolboy, until 1967, when the paper collapsed prior to the Liberal Party dissolving itself in the face of a law making it a crime to have an integrated political party. I did not know about its earlier history, except that it supported non-racialism, majority rule, and had its editors Patrick Duncan and then Peter Hjul until he too was banned. The last remaining radical newspapers - Spark, and Forward, were suppressed by the Special Branch around 1962. One Contact street-seller, Solwandle Looksmart Ngudle, became the first detainee to be tortured to death by the Special Branch during "90 days" detention without trial around 1963.

As the law governing newspapers made it compulsory for newspapers to print the name of their editor, there was no way of hiding this. We thought that since Patrick Duncan, Peter Hjul and Ann Tobias were probably banned for their leadership roles in the Liberal Party rather than for editing Contact, we should ask someone to become editor who held no other posts nor responsibilities. An ordinary member of the Liberal Party, Mike Francis was approached and he agreed to have his name listed as editor. As best I recall, he did not come to the offices or play any role other than lending his name, to minimize his risk and exposure. Nevertheless, in the mid-1960s the Special Branch banned him. This could only have been solely because of his name appearing as editor. It confirmed the intimidatory intentions of the Special Branch and its attempts to suppress Contact.

Some of the banned editors in turn continued to edit at risk to that person and whoever worked with them. For example, Ann Tobias worked with Peter Hjul secretly for some time. When Tobias was in turn banned, she worked secretly with Anthony George. Another unpaid volunteer was Joan Block, the only working class white in the Liberal Party in Cape Town, who helped around the office with running things.

In the early 1970s, the British newspaper The Guardian published claims that a police spy named Michael Morris was an editor of Contact. I remember being warned by a Liberal Party member, Jill Jessop, that they were 'suspicious' of Morris. When he kept offering to 'help' Contact, we decided, after discussion, to give him the job of emptying the post-box and bringing in the correspondence. Letters and parcels, when not stolen outright by the Special Branch, showed consistent delays compared with other post, and there were clear signs of them being opened and re-sealed.

When banning each editor did not succeed in suppressing Contact, the Special Branch stepped up the intimidation to cower suppliers and vendors. During the 1960s we volunteers handed in full typed mock-ups to typesetters, the Argus Printing and Publishing Company, who would then set the paper in lead type and print it. One day, about 1965, when I took the proofs to the Argus, the supervisor

handed me an envelope. It contained a letter from the Argus refusing to accept any further business from us. They gave us no reason for refusing to make profit from a customer. The Argus Company and its newspapers then supported the United Party, and were opposed to the Progressive Party as too leftist, never mind the Liberal Party.

We then went in turn to all six or twelve little printing businesses in Cape Town. Each one looked eager to get an extra customer. But when they saw that it was `politics' everyone grew too afraid, and refused to print. Even printers who themselves were Coloured or Indian, and victims of racist apartheid, were too frightened of prosecution or persecution by the Special Branch. This climate of increasing fear was a barometer of the success of Vorster in erecting a police state. Finally, a new printer, who had just arrived from the UK and wanted to build up customers, agreed `to take a chance'. This required us to hand him the full mock-up, this time with letraset headlines. His company would then photograph this onto thin aluminium plates. We would now have to wipe these with chemicals, and then buy a printing press through which we ran Contact. When we mastered this process, the Special Branch started lobbying the CNA, virtually the only remaining sales outlet for Contact. They refused to continue selling the paper. After that, for about our last eighteen months or year, we continued to sell only by subscription, and at meetings.

One creepy development that occurred during the last twelve months of Contact's existence should be mentioned. I had ensured that every issue of Contact carried the fullest possible summary, from the national press, of every banning, house arrest, torture, detention, and political trial that I could discover. Suddenly around half a dozen security police units at various police stations as far away as Natal sent in subscriptions! Since they merely needed to steal one copy from the post to find out what was in it, the only explanation of this weird development could be that the Security Branch HQ did not inform security police themselves of what their colleagues were doing, and they were curious. This was in the years before there were email, photocopiers or office faxes.

We had none of the overseas financial support that helped the publications of the Black Consciousness organizations of the 1970s, and the UDF of the 1980s. The paper ran on unpaid labour. We ran on my and others' unpaid labour during my student years. Alan Paton made a monthly donation, but that was about it, and the paper ran on the unpaid labour of students like me. Not officially a Liberal Party publication, we used their offices rent-free. So after the Liberal Party was criminalized by the Prohibition of Improper Interference Act, our office space was lost and Contact died. I continued struggle journalism as the features editor of the UCT student weekly newspaper VARSITY for some years, and also launched and was editor of the publication of Radical for the UCT Radical Students' Society.

Like some of the other younger party members, and Eddie Daniels, I did not fully share the Cold War politics of the older liberals. Our priority was on removing the apartheid regime from power, and replacing it with a democratically-elected government. I had read omnivorously about the police state system in the Soviet Union and its satellites. But the 1960s soon made clear that the successor governments of the eighteenth-century liberal revolutions refused to give military aid to our liberation struggle. The Soviet Government was the only government with substantial resources that did, so it earned respect for this. Third world countries such as India and the Organisation of African Unity only had the financial and administrative capacity to give military and other aid on a far smaller scale. So my politics slowly evolved leftwards. Since every organization to the left of the Liberal Party was banned, or crushed through the banning of its leaders by 1964, the Liberal Party was the only surviving party (though shrinking under Nationalist intimidation and repression) to advocate universal franchise. Supporting the pro-liberal Contact was therefore logical. A few years

later I discovered the even-tinier discussion forums of the Non-European Unity Movement, but that is another story.