

MARION FRIEDMANN

By Alan Paton

The death of Marion Friedmann, in London recently means the loss of one of the foundation members of the Liberal Party. The party was founded in 1953 for the purpose of rejecting and resisting the racial laws of the Nationalist Government, and of endeavouring to establish an organisation which would help to counter the racial polarisation that its members felt must inevitably result from laws like the Group Areas Act, the Bantu Education Act, the Extension of University Education Act, and many others.

In those early days the influence of the Cape was very strong in the councils of the party, and this accounted in large measure for the adoption of a non-racial but qualified franchise, the educational qualification being Standard VI.

It was largely due to Marion Friedmann that the party adopted the universal suffrage in 1954. She argued that the qualified franchise was a white device to perpetuate white supremacy, and that such a provision was incompatible with true liberalism. What was more, she argued that it was incompatible with what had become the party slogan, *Towards a Common Society*.

She was very powerful and persuasive in debate in spite of her frail physique. It was extremely difficult to defeat her in argument. Intellectually she was one of the most gifted members of the party. It could be said that she used her debating powers to push the party "to the left".

In the early days of the party, it declared one of its main aims to be to combat all forms of totalitarianism including fascism and communism. This aroused considerable controversy within the membership. Some argued that any form of totalitarianism was totally incompatible with liberalism. Others argued that one must not appear to be supporting the government in its anti-Communist mania, or in its anti-Communist legislation such as the Suppression of Communism Act.

Marion was torn in two by this issue. She regarded the anti-Communism of a member like Patrick Duncan as pathological, and a danger to clear thinking and sensible action. But she herself was strongly anti-Communist. She distrusted the Congress of Democrats which was the white wing of the Congress Alliance. It had been formed the year before the Party came into being, largely as a result of the Defiance Campaign. It was not a communist party, but many of those who had resigned from the Communist Party to avoid total banning from public life, joined the Congress of Democrats. The Congress was devoted to the cause of racial justice, but many of its members had a quality of ruthlessness that is alien to liberalism. What is more, they believed, or liberals believed that they believed, that the end justifies the means. Publicly they espoused "bourgeois" values like the free-

dom of the press, the autonomy of the university, the rule of law, but Marion and many others, believed that if they came to power, they would destroy them all.

Matters came to a head in 1955 when a great Congress of the People was planned. The Liberal Party was invited, and the delegates came back from the planning meeting with the conviction that they had been manipulated. In the event they did not attend the Congress, and many of them, Marion amongst them, firmly believed that the Congress of Democrats always intended that the Liberal Party should appear to rat from this great movement of the people.

I wrote above of her considerable intellectual gifts. Her two loves were politics (and in her case that meant the pursuit of justice), and literature. She wrote some fiction but was not successful as a creative writer. Her outstanding literary gifts were those of analysis and criticism. Her monograph on Olive Schreiner was brilliant and penetrating, and was in my opinion the best thing ever written about that strange, sad woman. I should add that I have not read the latest biography co-authored by Ruth First, because her books cannot be distributed in South Africa.

I asked Marion several times why she had never written a life of Olive Schreiner, but after a while I desisted. That was because she would give me a look compounded of sadness and wistfulness. She never said to me, but she could easily have done so, because that was her idiom — "Why do you have to speak to me about what I might have been?"

Her lethargy, if one could call it that, was largely due to her health, because she contracted emphysema, the disease that is so painful to the sufferer and to those who watch them. But there was another factor also, a diffidence about her powers. She was indeed a woman of both confidence and diffidence, but as she grew older and as her health deteriorated, the confidence to a large extent disappeared.

The house of Allan and Marion Friedmann was my home whenever I went to London, which I did very often in the seventies. I had a great affection for them both. Although she was never well, Marion was most solicitous about my welfare. Her solicitude was partly because of affection for me and partly because of affection for the Party, and in remembrance of things past. Those of us who knew her in those early days will always remember her clear and compelling and challenging way of speaking. She was devoted to the cause of justice, and was as keen as any of us that the Party should be a microcosm of what South Africa could be. And thanks to herself, and others, so it was.

REALITY sends its deepest sympathy to Allan her husband and to Julian, her son. □