

THE FAITH OF A DEMOCRATIC LIBERAL

(An address to P.F.P. members. We hope it will stimulate discussion in REALITY — Editorial Board)

The events of the past six months have left us battle-weary and shell shocked. The frustrations of being a small, preponderantly white opposition party in a seemingly intractable situation are palpable. Some, no doubt, believe that we have been finally marginalised or made irrelevant as far bigger antagonistic forces face up for the final apocalyptic clash.

Frustration can take several forms, and not the least destructive of these is a tendency to ideological faction-fighting and hair-splitting over rather small strategic and doctrinal points. It can also lead to a search for surrogate targets as displaced aggression seeks a release for its pent-up energy.

I have no intention of offering you advice on immediate strategic issues: I do not have the skills for that, and in any case it would be presumptuous on my part to attempt to do so.

Rather, I want to stand back and look at some of the values that underpin our commitments. I do so for two reasons: first, because many need to be reassured that liberal values have a long and honourable record in South Africa, not as an exotic import but as the thoroughly indigenised strain of a powerful and universal set of political beliefs; and secondly, because, as I shall argue, only liberal values are compatible with properly democratic forms of government.

Central to liberalism has been the belief that the individual is endowed with certain rights. The rightless individual is a stunted, diminished creature because, lacking that space or freedom, means that he or she is denied the opportunity of maturing into an autonomous, moral being.

The securing of human rights, universal adult suffrage, free elections, and the independence of the judiciary — these are the core elements of democratic liberalism. I was a little surprised to read, as a criticism of the PFP, that it stands for "a liberal, Western non-racial democracy, which may be a noble ideal, but means nothing to those who have no homes and are squatting in the veld".

I should have thought that empowerment by means of the vote, being secure in the possession of rights against the arbitrary exercise of power (such as forced removals), and protection against racial discrimination would be welcomed by those to whom this supposedly alien system "means nothing". The whole struggle against apartheid has been a struggle for human freedom and dignity, which stand at the core of the liberal idea. Governments in liberal democracies do not destroy defenceless communities and dump them on the veld.

It is true that liberalism's origins are Western — so, for that matter are socialism's. The point is surely that democratic liberalism has transcended its geographical origins and

become more universal in its application, and even more universal in its appeal. Indeed, no other system can rival its appeal.

Liberal-democratic systems have not thrived in Africa: perhaps only Botswana, Senegal and Mauritius come close to meeting their criteria: but the point is that so-called "Western" forms of government are those most widely aspired to by black leaderships who seek to restore constitutional government.

Similarly, in its political sections the Freedom Charter suggests very strongly a liberal-democratic type of political system as the goal.

More to the point is whether, given the critique of democratic liberalism, any society has produced a more effective and more equitable system. I have yet to hear of one, and until I do, I will continue to believe that a system which provides for the peaceful change of government and secures rights to its citizens represents a major feat of human achievement, which South Africans would be wise to strive to emulate.

All I have said begs the question of whether these utopian principles are capable of successful implementation in South Africa, with its legacy of deep division and raw conflict. Liberal-democracy has not fared well in deeply divided societies. Democracy, in one of its dimensions, is a way of regulating conflict, but its fabric is delicate and the intensity of racial or ethnic conflict may rip it to shreds.

The liberal-democrat has to accept long odds; but the question is whether any other system has a better track record in securing stability and justice in divided societies; and the answer is no.

This brings me to a controversial aspect of PFP policy — the minority veto. I shall say little about it since it is the principal subject of a Party commission of which I am a member. All I shall say is that it was not inserted into the policy as a covert means of protecting racial privilege. Rather, it was an effort to cope with the besetting problem of every divided society, namely, how do you cope democratically with the distinct possibility that the operation of competitive politics will produce permanent majorities and permanent minorities, with the latter being excluded in perpetuity from a share in power?

This was the problem of Northern Ireland, where from 1921 to 1972 the parliament or Stormont conducted its affairs along formally democratic lines but with the result that the large Catholic minority formed a permanent and powerless opposition. In another unhappy case, Sri Lanka, a comparable exclusion from a share of power largely explains the turbulence of the Tamil minority. Many other examples

could be cited. Domination of minorities by majorities is hardly more democratic than the reverse.

South Africa is different from all of these in one crucial respect: we cannot predict with any certainty what configuration of political groupings would crystallise as parties fought fully inclusive democratic elections under circumstances of voluntary association, i.e. without compulsory membership of statutorily defined population categories.

It would be a fair bet to suppose that both racially mixed and racially exclusive parties would be thrown up in the process. It is highly likely that South Africa's legacy of racial, class and ideological divisions would impress itself upon the party system. A non-racial democracy is the ideal, but for non-racialism as an animating spirit to penetrate the warp and woof of society in general and the political system in particular will take time.

I have tried neither to defend nor to criticise the minority veto. My concern is more with the problem that the veto was intended to cope with. That the problem is a real one is hardly deniable: in one form or another it recurs in every divided society. Whether the veto is the most appropriate way of dealing with it is ultimately for the Party to decide.

While I am a believer in constitutions and constitutionalism, I am not so naive as to suppose that constitutions alone can regulate and mitigate major social conflicts. Whatever constitutional mechanism we ultimately propose will have to be construed as a secondary line of defence against the abuse of power.

Ultimately, the best protection for minorities, in whatever shape or form they crystallise, will be derived from three interlinked factors: their usefulness to the majority, their interdependence with the majority, and the extent to which they are perceived as non-threatening by the majority.

A second set of considerations turns on how we suppose the transition to a democratic system might occur. The question invites endless speculation, but I would say that it is inconceivable that a position will be reached where today's dominated groups could simply write their own constitution and impose it. I do not believe in the apocalypse, or the "big-bang" theory of change. I foresee rather a long process of struggling to break out of a deadlock.

It is this deadlock or "no-win" situation that is the major feature of South Africa today. Blacks have acquired, or are acquiring a veto power in society as a result of their increased labour power, growing consumer power and their sheer weight of numbers, to name but a few of their resources. The old order of domination has lost all its legitimacy, and it will find it increasingly difficult to coerce and repress in the way that it has done historically. At the same time, the state has not used much more than a quarter of its potential coercive capacity in dealing with the violence of the past three years — and in saying this I am, of course, aware that it is the state's structural violence that was largely responsible for the violence in the first place. The point is that the revolution is unlikely to happen.

Deadlocks can last a long time and they can inflict a devastating toll on the society as it diverts more of its energies into destructive conflict. It is not easy to persuade conflicting factions to reach a compromise, and to begin to rechannel their joint energies into the creative task of reconstruction.

Either there will be an historic compromise in South Africa: or we are doomed to a wasteland.

Political settlements become feasible when conflicting factions mutually recognise that the conflict is deadlocked, and that neither is going to be able to impose its will on a comprehensively defeated adversary: both will sustain severe losses, but neither will be eliminated as a force. The crucial mutual perception requires a mutual appreciation of the adversary's strength and staying power — and I fear we are still some way off from that critical threshold.

Were it to be reached, the next stage of conflict accommodation, in turn, becomes feasible: that is, that a compromise, while not securing to either side everything that they want, at least holds out the promise of an end to violence and mutual destruction, as well as important material and psychic benefits as the joint task of reconstruction is enabled to get underway.

It is here, I believe, that what the PFP has been saying may ultimately bear fruit. It has been advocating the politics of accommodation and the politics of power-sharing. It has pointed the way forward to an alternative political system that could satisfy the reasonable aspirations of a great majority of South Africans. It is not so much the detail of policy that counts: much more important is the spirit and direction.

If my analysis is correct, it carries certain implications. First, that how the present power-holders react as the pressures upon them mount is of crucial importance. In turn, this implies that, contrary to the views of some, white politics **are** highly relevant. A second implication is that if it will be impossible to force or to persuade the power-holders to **abandon** power, pressure of circumstances may well induce them to **share** power. An option which holds out some measure of security to them might facilitate the process. We have to be absolutely clear, though, that "security" does not mean the shoring up of racial privileges: it means the securing of rights.

You will realise that I am not making confident predictions about some ultimate vindication of what we stand for. We have learned, painfully, about the limits of our political influence, but I would not rule out the possibility that we have had, and will continue to have, a quiet, unseen but definite catalytic effect on the discourse of South African politics. Today's visionaries sometimes become tomorrow's architects. Parties or groupings can only acquire significance to the extent that they believe that they have a role to play and then set about trying to play that role as well as they can.

It has by now become a cliché that the PFP's position on "law and order" cost it dearly in the election. We must not allow ourselves to be browbeaten into weakening the stance we took. The PFP has a truly honourable record as a principled upholder of civil liberties and the Rule of Law. We have always maintained that these institutions are the very conditions of a free society, and our insistence has been a nagging reminder of how far down the road of authoritarianism South Africa has travelled.

Although it is not much comfort, the unpopularity of the PFP's views was a classic case of killing the messenger. But our position rests on more than principle. A. S. Mathews, one of South Africa's foremost legal theorists, has recently argued that the indiscriminate use of coercive authority has exacerbated the conflict. He writes: "Even if order is restored in the short term, the chances of future peace and accommodation have been gravely harmed by making security authorities . . . unaccountable to the law."

No party can condone the use of violence, but we must certainly reject a security apparatus that is more concerned with buttressing the **status quo** than with maintaining law and order.

I turn now to another aspect of PFP policy which has made us unpopular in other quarters, and that is the question of economic policy. We are perceived on the left as the party of high capitalism, although the policy, as I read it, accepts a mixed system and a strong element of welfare-ism.

I would make no apology for an emphasis on the market system as the most efficient instrument yet devised for the production and allocation of goods. But what impresses me more is the clear correlation between states that are preponderantly market in their orientation and the ability to sustain those freedoms which must be central to any adequate notion of democracy. The converse is equally clear: that socialist systems which embody state ownership and central planning invariably turn out to be authoritarian. This latter kind of state, whether it is Marxist-Leninist or radical African socialist, has not only been disastrous in purely economic terms, but utterly destructive of human rights as well.

The problem with hard-line socialists is their absolute conviction that history is on their side and that they are in exclusive possession of the revealed truth about what is good for the rest of us. From their dogmatic certitude you might infer that they can point to a number of humane, prosperous and open societies that exemplify their convictions: but this, alas, they never can do. Promising models appear like oases on the horizon and then dissolve into sterile tyrannies.

Unquestionably the issue of capitalism and socialism is one axis of South Africa's conflict. We cannot afford to be complacent about capitalism's record in South Africa, and nor can we react to socialism's critique in knee-jerk fashion. We have to recognise that the grotesque inequalities of our society will not be overcome by invoking the free market as a panacea. There is a social-democratic strand of thought in the PFP, which I personally would wish to encourage. (Social-democracy, I might add, has been described as the liberalism of liberals who really mean it!)

These reflections lead me to another issue which has forced liberals — unnecessarily — onto the defensive: communism. Only the wilfully ignorant believe in "the total onslaught", just as the credulous will accept unquestioningly that the ANC is a pawn of Moscow. These aspects

of the issue, however, concern me less than the wider question of what is the best prophylactic against communism. I would unhesitatingly respond that the best answer is to democratise society. If you look historically and comparatively at the circumstances under which Marxist-Leninist movements have acquired power you will observe the striking fact that in no single clear-cut case have they been voted into office in democratic elections.

I believe that this is the kind of retort we should make to the shameless exploitation of the issue by the Nationalists and their tame **handlangers** in the SABC; and we should not cease to point out to whites just how intellectually and spiritually impoverishing it is to perceive their society and the world through the miasma of "total onslaught" thinking.

There remains a substantial middle-ground in South Africa, by which I mean people of all colours who would prefer a negotiated advance towards a democratic South Africa over the perpetuation of inconclusive violence and haemorrhaging conflict. You will find middle-grounders span the political spectrum from elements inside the NP to the ANC. They don't agree on every aspect of future policy, but they are united by a common fear of the abyss of racial war, and a belief that reasonable people arbitrate their differences through democratic parliamentary institutions. The liberal faith in these institutions is the distillation of several centuries experience. What the great liberal Attorney-General of the Cape, William Porter, said in 1853 remains true in 1987: "Now, for myself, I do not hesitate to say that I would rather meet the Hottentot at the hustings, voting for his representative, than meet the Hottentot in the wilds with his gun upon his shoulder."

I hope I have given you some grounds for believing that your efforts have not been futile. It is to the PFP's credit that time and again it has bounced back after suffering blows that would have knocked out a party made up of men and women of lesser mettle. It has not been easy to stand up for decent values and rational policies when this has attracted flack from both right and left. There has been dangerous polarisation, but I believe that it would have been far more serious had it not been for organisations like the PFP that have stubbornly stood in the middle ground.

Perhaps our time will come: you may derive some comfort from the cynical saying that "men and nations act rationally when all other possibilities have been exhausted".

Hang in there! □