

REALITY

by Alan Paton

REALITY of September 1981 published two important contributions, one by Hendrik W. Van der Merwe (HWV) entitled "Constructive Involvement in South Africa", and one by P. N. Malherbe (PNM) entitled "Too Despairing". The first article related indirectly, and the second directly, to a REALITY editorial entitled "Poles Apart". I quote an extract from this:

When no Herstigte, and not many Nationalists, would dream of even saying a polite word to Bishop Tutu, whose conditions for peaceful change are perfectly reasonable, and a growing number of black people won't talk to any white person, Herstigte, Nationalist, or anything else, what hope is there of avoiding the ghastly conflict even Mr. B. J. Vorster could see might come?

Not much, judging by the tone of the election campaign mounted by the various brands of Afrikaner Nationalism.

HMV in an article in the QUAKER MONTHLY rejects extreme opinions about racial polarisation in South Africa, and consequent premonitions of doom. He does so for two reasons. The first one is rational: he thinks the judgements inaccurate, i.e. too extreme. The second reason is emotional (and I am not using this word in any derogatory sense): he thinks such judgements lead to despair.

PNM also rejects extreme opinions and also for two reasons. The rational reason is that he **believes** that it is "entirely possible" that the next election might go like this:

NP	80
PFP	52
HNP	33

PNM's emotional reason is the same as HWV's. Such an item as this editorial "reveals a tone of despair".

In other words both HWV and PNM still believe in the possibility of an evolutionary solution of our tremendous problems. Particularly they believe in an evolutionary solution of what often seems an insoluble problem: is there any way in which white and black can have a future together in South Africa?

It should I think be noted that the editorial says that there appears at the time of writing to be not much hope of an evolutionary solution, and there is also the assumption that this conclusion is justified as long as there is no change in Afrikaner Nationalism.

HWV argues that it is an **oversimplification** to see the establishment as racist and as constituting a "unitary force". His knowledge of Afrikaner Nationalists does not lead him to that conclusion.

PNM suggests certain evolutionary steps and finds "white liberals" too rigid and uncompromising, partly because they believe that any compromise will alienate black opinion. He rebukes "white liberals" for making the "paternalistic assumption that they know the answer." He then proceeds to make

a tremendous paternalistic assumption himself, namely that blacks regard the politics of protest as irrelevant. He calls this "my own finding" and I would not hesitate to describe it as a finding reached for emotional reasons. I would like, for the same emotional reasons, to reach the same finding, but I would regard it as rationally unjustifiable to do so.

Now let us return to the editorial. I know the writer well (MFB). He does not, as HWV suggests, adopt a "cynical attitude" towards evolutionary possibilities. He does, however, adopt a highly "sceptical attitude". I will admit that scepticism can easily become cynicism, but this has not happened in this instance, and it is not likely to happen. What has happened is that MFB has become highly sceptical of all Afrikaner Nationalists. Has he become **irrationally** sceptical? I would think so, but I shall admit that as a result of the shameful happenings at Nyanga, I am going through a sceptical phase myself. Neither MFB nor I share HWV's somewhat sanguine view of "Pieter Botha's pragmatist cabinet ministers." For emotional reasons I prefer to be sanguine rather than sceptical; for rational reasons I find it at the moment extremely difficult.

Now let me try to sum up the position. REALITY is a journal of opinion. HWV is a Quaker activist who still works for the evolutionary solution. PNM is a PFP activist with a great faith in his Party. It is not surprising therefore that they should criticise MFB's sceptical view of the elections. They consider that the editorial discourages and disheartens people who should be working for a more just society.

Should REALITY be something more than a journal of opinion and an observer of the political scene? Has it a responsibility to encourage and hearten? I would say Yes, even if the outlook is gloomy; it is an heir of the old Liberal Party, and therefore it is the heir of an activist tradition.

I am often invited to speak at schools, forums, clubs, and other institutions. If I could not give some encouragement and some heartening, especially to boys and girls entering an unknown future, I would not accept the invitation. If I fell into a despair about South Africa, I would go and live somewhere else, but I admit that I might evade coming to a decision through pure inertia, as some people do.

If I came to the final conclusion that the Afrikaner Nationalist was psychologically incapable (because of his history) of making any meaningful social and political and economic change, I would get out. But again I admit that it would be very difficult to reach such a final conclusion.

In any event I am glad that HWV and PNM wrote to REALITY. It should help us to avoid the dangers set out by HWV in the first paragraph of his article. He wrote:

In recent months many foreign observers have commented on the polarized nature of South African society, on the rigidity and intransigence of the white establishment and the excessive inequality, injustice and oppression in my country. While I agree with the latter observations I find their diagnosis of polarization and intransigence to be inaccurate. In addition, I find that such interpretations lead either to despair and subsequent withdrawal or to violence.

There they are again, the rational reason and the emotional reason. Nevertheless, HWV, almost thou persuadest me to be a Quaker.