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A REAL ELECTORATE REVOLUTION

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Over the last six years a real electorate revolution has taken place in South Africa, opening possibilities for far-reaching reform, until recently, discarded as unthinkable even in reform-orientated circles.

Although the Referendum of November 1983 cannot in all aspects be compared with the General Election of November 1977, the differences and the similarities between the two are so startling that they cannot be ignored.

The support for the NP in the 1977 election and the Yes-vote in the Referendum were exactly the same - 66 per cent! But both the ideological orientation and the electorate composition of the "majority constituency" of the Referendum differ drastically from that of 1977.

In the 1977-election between 90 and 95 per cent of the Afrikaners voted for the NP, while only between 20 and 25 per cent of the Englishspeakers supported the government at that stage.

According to my estimates more or less 70 per cent of the English speakers voted Yes in the Referendum, while in Afrikaner circles the Yes-vote was between 60 and 65 per cent. This means that almost 50 per cent of the Englishspeakers have switched allegiance (at least on one important policy issue) between 1977 and 1983, as against 30 per cent of the Afrikaners. The only way to explain these electoral movements is in terms of the important shifts that have taken place in government policy and orientation.

In 1977 the 66 per cent support for the NP was challenged by only 3,5 per cent support for the solitary rightwing party (the HNP), while the combined challenge from the two English-orientated parties (PFP, NRP) to the "left" of the NP was 29 per cent. (The small SAP was supported by 1,5 per cent of the electorate.)

In the Referendum the 66 per cent Yes-vote was challenged by a 22 to 25 per cent No-vote on the rightwing and by a 9 to 12 per cent No-vote on the leftwing.

With an English Yes-vote of 70 per cent the PFP has lost between 40 and 50 per cent of its 1981 support - when almost 20 per cent of the electorate voted PFP.

The 1977 election reinforced the myth of remarkable organisational unity and unanimity in the NP and in the Afrikaner clan. This outward unity, however, concealed the very sharp and mounting ideological tensions that existed at that stage between the Verligtes and Verkrampstes.

Mr. Vorster articulated his middle-of-the-roadism rather effectively and - in his obsession to maintain Afrikaner unity - created the impression that both groups had his ear. Looking back we realise that Mr. Mondale was on target, after all, with his remark in Vienna that Mr. Vorster was his own rightwing!

The Verkrampstes set the pace in the greater part of the seventies. Their effective control over key aspects of the party and the bureaucracy and of the top echelons of the Afrikaner Churches and cultural organisations gave them a seemingly unassailable position. As long as the power and initiative were in their hands the sectional interests of the Afrikaners enjoyed the highest priority. It took the Information scandal, the verligte initiatives of Mr. P.W. Botha and the split of 1981 to end the far too long regime of verkramptheid and of Afrikaner sectionalism and to release the reforming powers in the Afrikaner community.

The "electorate majority" of 1983 makes no claim about organisational (or party political) unity. But it accomplishes a remarkable middle-ground consensus between English- and Afrikaansspeakers on the very important ideological issue that constitutional reform can only take place in an evolutionary and incremental way.

While the election result of 1977 was a formula for continued stagnation, we have reason to believe that the consensus of 1983 and the new constituency on which it is based, will be a formula for dynamic change and on-going reform in spite of the conspicuous absence of organisational or party political unity.

The new constituency spells the final end of the long period of animosity and distrust between the English- and Afrikaansspeakers. The real strength of the new "partnership" between them lies in its spontaneity. It is not built on artificial agreements between the leaders of the two groups but on the consciousness and the shared convictions of ordinary English- and Afrikaansspeakers.

The attempts to force an artificial unity between Afrikaans- and Englishspeakers immediately after Union in 1910 and again during the thirties were in both cases catastrophic failures. Both tried to force organisational unity at a time when there was still no unity of heart and purpose but only mutual distrust and deep-rooted hostility.

The Referendum reflects a coming of age and maturity in both groups. For too long both groups were rather childish - mainly because too many English- and too many Afrikaansspeakers pampered very unfortunate superiority and inferiority complexes respectively. These attitudes are now fossilised by the PFP and the rightwing parties respectively. They have become real anachronistic remnants of a bygone era.

It may be true that the lack of organisational unity will render the Yes-constituency vulnerable to the smallest disappointment on any issue connected with reform. But this potential vulnerability can prove to be the source of its dynamism. If the promise of creative, imaginative and on-going reform can be materialised, the coherence and pulling power of the new constituency will become much stronger.

Perhaps the time was never more appropriate for the government to tackle at least the two symbolic acts - the Mixed Marriages Act and Section 16 of the Immorality Act. It will be of enormous importance for Coloured and Indian participation.

The Referendum confirms my conviction that if the "electorate majority" of 66 per cent was again built on the same one-sided Afrikaner constituency as the one of 1977, it could not have been a sound basis for real and meaningful constitutional reform. We must accept categorically that neither the Afrikaans nor the Englishspeakers could ever go it alone on constitutional reform and hope to attain stable and lasting success.

The real long-run importance of the new middle-ground consensus between the two language groups may be that it creates - for the first time since 1910 - conditions in the White political arena that are favourable for a new and accomodative approach to the political rights of the Blacks. Concrete results in the next three years are now a distinct possibility.

The electoral revolution that took place over the last six years, is also indicative of what can be accomplished by a deliberate re-education of the White electorate and by confronting them with the hard realities. Both the Afrikaans and Englishspeakers are terribly spoiled by their position of privilege, protection and unwarranted affluency. But both groups are also the victims of a long process of systematic miseducation about the South African realities and options.

This is partly the result of our apologetic attitude towards the often unfounded criticism from abroad. But it is mainly the result of the struggle for hegemony between the two language groups. This struggle caused an escalation of blames, counter-blames and ideological rationalisation with the unfortunate result that many English- and Afrikaans-speakers were pushed into all kinds of fool's paradises about the real situation in South Africa.

The new middle-group consensus can create an excellent opportunity to accelerate the process of re-education. I am afraid that many of those who voted Yes, are still not aware of the urgency of constitutional reform not only for Coloureds and Indians but also for Blacks.

I am also afraid that the majority of the new constituency is still unaware of (and perhaps also unprepared for) the high economic sacrifices they will have to make in the short and medium-term on behalf of a more just and stable society, and on behalf of economic growth in the longer run.

The challenge to re-educate those who voted No (on both sides) will without doubt be a hard - if not impossible - task. But on behalf of a stable and peaceful future, it is essential that some measure of success should be attained to scale down the ideological extremism on both the far left and the far right.

All those institutions and organisations (including the English newspapers) which have an influence on the PFP, must try to convince it to drop its political arrogance and its moral haughtiness. Hopefully the smallness of its electoral support will force it to become more modest.

It would be helpfull if the PFP could become honest enough to calculate

the economic costs of Black representation in Parliament and of an immediate and abrupt abolishment of apartheid or acknowledge that these costs will be astronomically high and therefore unpayable.

It is also necessary to convince the PFP - and the outside world - that apartheid is not only a (political) policy but also a socio-economic structure. It is not possible to abolish this structure overnight. It is only possible to dismantle it over a rather long period of time. Given the First World orientation and the truly radical scenario's popular in PFP circles, it is improbable that it's leaders will ever learn the lesson about the true nature of the South African reality.

The re-education of the Rightwing could prove to be even more difficult. During the Referendum campaign its leaders displayed a kind of fanaticism that spells nothing good for the future. The only hope is that, if the Afrikaans Church could develop a more conciliatory attitude, they could perhaps convince the Rightwingers in our Deep North to take a more moderate stand. But I doubt it.

If one considers the alternatives offered by the parties on the far left and on the far right, the success of the middle-group consensus and the coherence of the new constituency, become commanding imperitives.