Chapter Five

> Was there ever such a thing as a white civilisation – can there ever be in the world of the future? Michael Scott.[1]

On All Fronts

Parliamentary politics was an arid affair, endorsing the fiction that the country was a democracy. Ours was a wide-ranging engagement with the government on the day-to-day concerns of the majority of the population, for whom parliament and employers had only a marginal concern. I was active in the late war years from 1944 onwards but I often had to live with the policies the Party followed in the heat of the earlier years of the war. For instance, the ramifications of the Party's decision to mobilize the workers in support of the war effort sometimes placed constraints on worker militancy that stirred a controversy that is still being debated. It was mostly Trotskyists who kept open the controversy, taking full advantage of the complexities of a policy of all-out support for the war against fascism in a country where the labour practices for black workers were themselves close to fascist.[2] In the main, however, despite some of the constraints that this stance placed on strikes, it did not interfere with the Party's sense of obligation to expose whatever it saw as unjust.

There were reports of terrible housing conditions in Durban which were similar to those in the townships in Johannesburg and indeed all the segregated areas where Africans, Indian or Coloured peopled lived. Durban municipality's disgrace in providing mule stables as homes for its residents was the disgrace of municipalities everywhere where people lived in squalor. The notion that a single room that had been condemned 20 years previously was a home, or that a disused mule stable without windows was an acceptable form of shelter, was an intolerable indifference to peoples' welfare. The Party campaigned against this and also against the overcrowded housing in Fordsburg, the soaring food prices and the generally low standard of living of the Africans in the Witwatersrand. Shelters that had begun to appear in Pimville (outside Johannesburg), were made of corrugated iron without floor or ceilings and housed as many as four families in a single shack. These were condemned by the Party and shown as the ugly face of capitalism. It meant little to African residents living in slums without water, electricity or municipal services that the country was in a wave of urbanization that accompanied capitalist development everywhere. To the Party's credit it campaigned on every issue

from sanitation to social welfare. This was its essential humanity, which I think stirred us to make sacrifices that ordinary apolitical people would not normally make. It was what fired my activity; inspiring me to attend meetings instead of doing my homework, and to sell *The Guardian* newspaper in Diagonal Street on Friday nights and again on Sunday mornings in Sophiatown.

High on the list of protest was opposition to the operation of the pass laws. Official statistics revealed that in 1940 there had been one conviction a minute under the pass laws and the record hardly improved during the rest of the decade. Three quarters of a million Africans had either been arrested, prosecuted or convicted under the pass laws in 1942.[3] Originally introduced at the turn of the nineteenth century at the insistence of the Chamber of Mines to police the mine labour force, the system served to sustain a matrix of influx control regulations that separated families and sustained the apartheid system for the major part of the twentieth century.

On the labour front, in the darkest days of the war in 1941, dockworkers, miners, canners, dairymen, sugar workers, metal workers and sweet workers were at one time or another out on strikes led by enthusiastic young trade unionists who began to make their names in the trade union movement. Many of them were communists but by no means all of them. Some of them did not stay the course, others fought to the end. H.A. Naidoo organised the Sugar Workers' Union in Natal (where many were working for starvation wages); Hester Cornelius worked in Johannesburg in the Garment Workers' Union where Solly Sachs had been active since the mid-thirties. Betty du Toit was the feisty secretary of the Johannesburg branch of the Food and Canning Workers' Union and Ray Alexander was the militant national secretary of that union in Cape Town. Ray and Betty outlasted the NP and the "apartheid" half-century. Gana Makabeni did not survive the sordid 40 years of National Party rule but was an effective trade unionist in the 1940s. He was also president of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) as was Dan Koza, whose other "hat" happened to be that of the secretary of one of the largest African trade unions in the country at the time, the African Commercial and Distributive Workers' Union. Both of them were later claimed by the Trotskyists. M.D. Naidoo, another stalwart, had a long career in the liberation struggle, starting in the anti-fascist movement and in the 1940s in the Tea and Coffee Workers' Union in Durban.

"The war effort"

Wages and poor working conditions prompted many strikes which potentially undermined the war effort. "The workers must become the driving force behind a whole-hearted war effort, and its most vigilant guarantors", the Party told its supporters through the columns of *The Guardian*, after the Soviet Union entered the war in June 1941. "Their contribution is to bring about the greatest possible production of goods required for the war". It went

on (unrealistically) to call for "the establishment of workers' councils and factory committees to formulate proposals for increasing production, eliminating waste and inefficiency" – to secure the maximum output.[4] It was difficult to support the wave of strikes and at the same time promote the optimum level of production to win the war. At its Cape Town conference in February 1942, the Party unanimously endorsed its policy of giving full support to the government war effort, "directed towards the total military defeat of the axis powers". Later, Betty du Toit, secretary of the Food and Canning Workers' Union introduced a strident note into the discourse when on behalf of her union she sent a strong statement to the Minister of Labour in the Smuts government noting that "the workers have made great sacrifices for the war effort, while the employers are making big profits. The employers are taking great advantage of our workers' patriotism in an attempt to further their own selfish ends".[5] Her statement was even more pertinent when she added that the industry depended almost entirely on government contracts.

The Party soon paused to debate "whether it is the reverse side of patriotism to call off the class struggle on one side only".[6] Ultimately, however, it bowed to necessity and decided that pragmatism was the preferred approach and relied on the solidarity of the working class to support the war effort and strike only when conditions were dire.[7] Effectively, the Party left it to the judgement of workers and the discretion of trade unionists to decide whether or not to strike. It continued to mobilise African workers into the trade union movement, agitate for higher wages and oppose the obstruction of the mine owners to the recognition of African trade unions. But as the war dragged on, it took the moral high ground, convinced that the working class as a whole "is solid in its determination to take all the action necessary for the defeat of Hitlerism". The Party made it clear that it understood that not all workers would refrain from striking, but hoped that they would do their best to avoid such action whenever they could. This generated both confusion and debate, which was not made any clearer by the Party's explanation that "[the] CPSA believes the workers must make every effort, by arousing public opinion and developing all forms of pressure available, to obtain a satisfactory settlement, while avoiding any stoppage of work".[8] With the passage of history, I am not sure whether the "flexibility" of this stance was disingenuous or a serious signal to employers that it would be folly on their part to take advantage of the workers' patriotism "to further their own selfish ends", as Betty du Toit so impatiently pointed out in her frank statement to the minister. However, no matter how much the Party campaigned against the industrial colour bar, urged government and employers to support the war effort or called for the rapid "skilling' of African, Indian and Coloured workers, it met opposition on all sides of the profoundly undemocratic South African labour system.

The outcome was that in the years between 1942 and 1945, strikes continued to occur (although possibly fewer than might otherwise have been the case), often promoted

by trade unionists within or close to the Party. The pressures on the trade unions to call strikes came from a number of quarters. There were the rogue employers who used the war to line their pockets. There was also the intransigence of the government who, in deference to the Chamber of Mines, steadfastly resisted demands for the recognition of African trade unions. In addition, Smuts used the state's coercive powers to promulgate "war measures" to inhibit the organization of African workers and in some instances force workers to accept work that they did not wish to undertake. These regulations were promulgated from 1942 to 1944. War Measure No. 86 was particularly draconian. It was promulgated for the purpose of compelling the Durban dock workers' to accept work or be deported to their homes.[9] War Measure No. 1425, which was the subject of many campaigns, was promulgated in 1944 to prohibit gatherings on any gold proclaimed land. It was unashamedly supportive of the Chamber of Mines. The Party's objection to it was that it was seemingly intended to prevent activity by anti-war elements among the white miners but was never used to stop fascist meetings. Instead it was used to intimidate workers and inhibit their trade union organization. The presence of detectives at the gates of the mines was a silent warning to the workers that any move that they might make towards their trade union organizers, was being carefully watched.

It was a curious anomaly that while the Party was doing its utmost to promote the war effort, and in that sense co-operate with the government, the state did nothing to improve the quality of the workers' lives or to address the grievances of rural and urban Africans. For the Party, one way of addressing this was by contesting elections in the ("black") Advisory Boards and the ("white") City Councils. These contests provided a regular forum to address social issues and raise important political problems. On these occasions, especially in the years between 1943 and 1948, the movement always presented its most credible candidates. It also entered the elections for the Natives Representative Council (NRC) in 1942, 1945, and more half heartedly in 1947 and 1950. This was not without controversy, however.

The question mark over elections had nothing to do with the fundamental issues of reform and revolution or the inability of palliative improvements in housing, health or the environment (encouraged by the presence of a communist representative in this or that institution) to alter the capital-labour relation in South Africa. The problem was more systemic. The local and national institutions for which the Party fielded candidates, particularly the urban Advisory Boards and the NRC, were exclusively "black". They were also deliberative and advisory rather than decision-making institutions. The NRC was a "talk shop", which P.R. Mosaka, the urbane youngest of the African elected members, politely called a "toy telephone". The name stuck. The municipalities, provincial administrations and parliamentary bodies, on the other hand, were exclusively

"white" but more effectual, and when the Party contested these elections, their candidates spoke for everyone.

Moses Kotane was quite sanguine about the Party's participation in elections, when he said in 1943 that

> The South African parliament is by no means a democratic institution. Within the House there would be brave voices that could not be bought or silenced, consistently defending the interests of workers and oppressed sections [of the population], drawing attention to the real vital issues.[10]

The question of our participation in the electoral process concerned the entire liberation movement, not only the SACP. In that year (1943) the CPSA entered nine parliamentary candidates in constituencies in Cape Town, Johannesburg, the Reef and Durban. All nine lost handsomely. The candidates were on the whole impressive, particularly Harry Snitcher and George Sachs, who respectively contested the working class areas of Woodstock and Salt River in Cape Town. Both were prominent in the Communist Party. Issy Wolfson, a trade unionist and rising star in the Party, described earlier by Hitler's official newspaper, the *Volkischer Beobachter*, as "one of the dangers to the Nazi movement in South Africa, stood in the Rosettenville constituency in Johannesburg. A strong, "hard-hitting straight-forward speaker", he related well to workers, was exciting to watch and gave as good as he got, but his "non-racial" message was the antithesis of what his audience wanted to hear and he lost the election badly. Frans Boshoff, an Afrikaner intellectual and eminent barrister, stood in Hillbrow with the same grim result. Errol Shanley, a trade union and Party stalwart, contested the Durban Point constituency in Natal with equally little joy if one measured success only by victory. The other candidates were all activists too but less well known at the time. It was 1943, a khaki election with singularly little concern for the noble ideals of the war.

Always a novelty when the outcome was successful, there was a degree of triumphalism in the CPSA when two other candidates, Betty Sachs (Radford), editor of *The Guardian* and Sam Kahn, then a rising star in the Party, were elected to the Cape Town City Council in that year, the first communists to sit on any official body: "A new period has begun in Cape Town's municipal affairs", *The Guardian* noted optimistically. Announcing another electoral "coup", *Inkululeko* proudly reported that Archie Muller, a member of the District Committee of the Party in East London, had been elected to the local town council as a representative of the Civic Workers' League, but the Party was behind his candidature.[11] He was selected with a majority of only 69 votes but the Party saw it as cause for celebration.

Although there were some notable successes between 1943 and 1948, the outcome of the elections seldom provided much cause for optimism. There were encouraging moments in 1943 and 1944, at the height of the war years, when the Party was sufficiently well identified with the Soviet Union to increase its electoral popularity and win a few seats in local government. In addition to its wartime popularity, the Party's programme must have had some resonance with the voters, as there were a few resounding victories in the municipal elections. David L. Dryburgh captured the Woodstock constituency and Cissie Gool, the Castle ward in Cape Town in 1944, but for the most part the outcome was disappointing.[12]

In Johannesburg, where I was active in nearly every election campaign after 1943, the CPSA had little cause for celebration. In March 1944, Betty du Toit, then local secretary of the Food and Canning Workers' Union, stood in the white working class constituency of La Rochelle-Rosettenville, and Rhona O'Meara contested the Hospital Hill constituency in the inner city. As this ward was more heterogeneous in its class composition, she had little chance of success there. Hilda Watts stood in a predominantly middle class constituency in Ward 10 in Hillbrow-Berea. Sadly, all three were defeated although both Watts and Du Toit were formidable candidates who clearly appealed to the voters.[13] Betty had a strong trade union background, starting as a trade union organizer in Cape Town, where she put fear into the hearts of employers and in one instance, was run out of the small town of Paarl by local bosses aided by the Blackshirts, for her trade union activities.[14] She participated in the anti-fascist front in the late 1930s and before that (in 1936/7) visited the Soviet Union, where she studied Marxism. She was banned in the early 1950s for her membership of the CPSA. Street-wise, elegant and an indefatigable campaigner, Betty du Toit was a legend in the Party and the trade union movement.[15] She would have created a sensation in the Johannesburg City Council had she won the election that year.

However, if anyone could reverse the fortunes of the Party it would be Hilda Watts (Bernstein) in ward 10, Hillbrow-Berea. Although she had already been active in Left politics in the UK and South Africa for about ten years before she contested the elections (she came to South Africa in 1934), she firmly established her career as an anti-fascist fighter when (in the words of *The Guardian* who published her profile and election manifesto) "few people recognised fascism as the greatest enemy of mankind". She, like Betty du Toit, faced angry Blackshirt and Greyshirt mobs in the 1940s, and was prominent in every progressive cause – many of them for women's rights. Du Toit and Watts were very different personalities. Du Toit was a militant trade unionist and communist activist, working class in background and mercurial in temperament. Watts, "a red-diaper baby", was middle class, English-born and of Russian parentage, with a North London accent and a silver tongue.[16] She was super-professional in everything she

undertook, while Du Toit was a political street fighter in a great tradition. Both of them left deep imprints on our history.[17]

I recall Hilda Watts' election campaign in March 1944 with some nostalgia as it was during that time that I inadvertently attended the small street corner meeting she was addressing – when I was sufficiently encouraged by Ginger Lieberman to join the Young Communist League. Hilda, Betty and Rhona (O'Meara) were defeated, although Watts was beaten by only 679 votes out of a total of 4 782 ballots.[18] This encouraged the Party to repeat the exercise in October 1944, when both Hilda and Rhona O'Meara once again contested the same seats. Rhona was a former school-teacher, in her mid-30s and rather shy as I remember her. She regrettably lost the election but that was to be expected, given the heterogeneous class composition of her constituency. In re-selecting the two contestants, the Party stressed that both candidates should "put primary emphasis on the needs of Non-Europeans who have no representation in the City Council and whose needs are neglected and forgotten by other (non-communist) candidates who are out only to catch the European voter." [19]

Hilda's victory was a triumph for the Communist Party. For once the privileged all-white electorate in Hillbrow-Berea voted with their heads *and* their hearts and quite extraordinarily delivered the seat to this exceptional candidate. On her election, she made the point:

> I regard my victory not as a personal triumph, but a triumph for the cause of the Communist Party, and of democracy … I shall make it my special duty to fight for a square deal … for the African people of the city.[20]

Solomon Buirski, one of the Party's amiable theorists, with little belief in the power of human agency or the capacity of the electorate to venture outside the stolid "white consensus", humorously referred to her electoral victory as "the confluence of accident and luck, aided by a fluke". It was a watershed election, not only for the communist victory in Hillbrow-Berea, but because the Labour Party, which had been the dominant party in the city council for some time, lost control when six of their eight candidates lost their seats. Three wards were won by National Party candidates during that election year, which provided their party with a foothold in the Johannesburg City Council, an indication of the changing shape of the political landscape.

Elections enabled the Communist Party to demonstrate its concern for ordinary people. They provided an opportunity to dispel the negative images the white voters had of communists, and enabled the Party to take its policies into the homes of the electors. Elections were also occasions for the development of credible reformist programmes, but were not always plain sailing. There was, for instance, much soul-searching when the

time, effort and money expended on electioneering were rewarded only with rejection by the voters. This was the case in 1945, when encouraged by Hilda Watt's successful election the year before, the party outdid all its previous efforts and presented a slate of four candidates for the Johannesburg City Council and a further four for the Urban Advisory Board elections. The city councils were exclusively "white" institutions and the advisory boards entirely "black". We had potentially more support in the advisory boards, but contested them all so as to spread our message as widely as possible "to the workers and oppressed sections of the population", as Moses Kotane had said.

Our manifesto's main theme was one of "Rights and Freedom for All". The Party assembled its most impressive cadres. Michael Harmel, a serious man in his early forties, somewhat soulful in expression for the revolutionary he was, was renowned for his political insights, which were often brilliant and sometimes after the event. He contested Ward 6 in the Von Brandis area, a white working class constituency, close to the central business district of Johannesburg. His election manifesto included "a bold master plan on a very big scale for the virtual rebuilding of Johannesburg", which he largely devised. The plan, as I repeatedly heard it, was the construction of a great community centre providing indoor swimming and other facilities for physical recreation. It was, in his words "an enlightened policy of making Johannesburg a city of greenbelts, parks and playgrounds, community centres, health clinics and nursery schools".[21] All in the CPSA knew that he was not only talking of the whites that would enjoy the fruits of this vision, but it was difficult to know whether the constituents of the Von Brandis ward were aware of that too.

"Mick" Harmel, as he was familiarly known, although nothing in his appearance or speech ever suggested a common touch, was joined in a neighbouring ward by Molly Fischer, married to Bram and a candidate who did have a good rapport with ordinary people. She stood in the Braamfontein constituency, a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking, working class ward, hostile to every item in her election platform. At the time she was in her late thirties and although young, could be assertive when attacked but was uncomfortable in the limelight. She related well to the white electorate who appreciated her candour, respected her family background, but rejected her politics. Both the Fischers and the Kriges (Molly's family) were eminent South Africans whose views on race and social justice were probably quite different from those of Molly and Bram.

Frans Boschoff, another CPSA candidate, was also an Afrikaner, tall, ruddy in complexion and professional in his manner. He contested Ward 10 in Hillbrow-Berea (another seat in "Hilda Watts' constituency"). By all accounts, Boschoff seems to have appealed to the electorate's sense of fairplay and to their reason: "Like peace", he told them at one of his meetings,

> the health of the community is indivisible. There cannot be one standard of health for one sector of the community and another for the rest … Disease knows no colour bar and invades the homes of the rich as well as the poor … There is a vital necessity for the poorer sections of our population, particularly the non-Europeans to have someone to fight for better conditions for them within the city council.[22]

Paternalistic as it sounds over a half century later, Boschoff was direct in his presentation and had the courage of his convictions. I remember the occasion quite well and helped to swell the audience in the small hall at the Commodore Hotel which was close to where we had once lived at Agol House in Soper Road, Berea. Issy Wolfson, the fourth CPSA candidate in the 1945 local government elections, stood in the Yeoville constituency, where his campaign headquarters were located at our house in Grafton Road. All four candidates lost the elections and collectively received a combined total of 4 000 votes; Issy Wolfson did best by capturing 1 300 of these. *The Guardian* noted, by way of consolation, that the candidates, "who worked hard and fought well in the 'white' areas, may take comfort from the knowledge that the majority of people from whom they could expect support, have no vote."[23]

It was not so in the black townships. In Johannesburg, four CPSA candidates contested the advisory board elections on a programme centred on health, housing, welfare and community development. These themes were linked to the overall slogan of "Votes for All!" All the candidates were well known residents of Orlando: Edwin Mofutsanyana, Armstrong Msithana, Solomon Moema and J. Masophe – and all of them lost the elections. It was difficult to know whether their defeat was due to the Byzantine electoral process or to better campaigning by other parties. There was no secret ballot. Voters called out the preferred candidate's name to an official who then recorded their vote. There was no way of checking the accounting. Unlike the local government ballot in the white wards, the right to vote for the advisory board candidates depended on the presentation of rent receipts, paid up to the month of the elections. For women, the vote was restricted to widows of deceased male residents, provided they had been resident in the urban areas at that time.

The defeats, however, were demoralizing. One commentator, B. O'Brien (probably a pseudonym for a party activist; it could have been Rusty Bernstein or Brian Bunting) writing in the Party's theoretical journal, *Freedom*, said what most of us did not want to hear. "The results of the municipal elections on the reef in October 1945 were a defeat for the Communist Party. [There were] four candidates and all came bottom of the poll, one losing his deposit" This prompted the obvious question:

> If the Communist Party's policy is acceptable to the non-Europeans, by reason of their political, social and economic status, why does the party devote so much time, effort and money to contesting municipal elections in which Europeans vote and in which only Europeans are canvassed? … Should we confine the contesting of elections to only the remaining fifth [of the population?].[24]

Michael Harmel, on the other hand, ever strong on analysis, did not help to clear up the confusion, when he explained in *The Guardian* – soon after the event:

> Only powerful active, well organized branches of the Communist Party, continually deepening their own understanding of Marxism and Leninist theory and practice, always responsive to the needs and problems of the people, always deepening the workers political consciousness and eradicating capitalist influences – only such activities can have a deep and lasting effect upon the people.[25]

This was obviously profound political leadership but was only indirectly pertinent to the question of whether it was more important to win seats in institutions that had little clout but where our policies would reach large numbers of people, or whether we should seek support for Party candidates in white institutions which had all the power, but where the constituents (Hilda's election triumph, excepted) were too prejudiced to hear us. I suspect, however, that somewhere within Harmel's argument was the oblique criticism that winning seats in an election may be important but it required good organization and more diligent work than was the case in this instance.

Challenging the Power Relations

The concept "Votes for All!" reflected the political climate nationally and internationally, especially after the defeat of fascism in Europe.[26] It linked together under one umbrella all the major demands for the abolition of discriminatory legislation that was inconsistent with a free people. In a single slogan it included a call for the right to vote, to take part in government, to own land, receive a decent education and move about freely. They were in effect social rights, which would be included in a future constitution, although not yet formulated in a Bill of Rights or a broadly liberal Charter.

The linking of the specific demands with the overall aspiration for equal human rights was expressed ten years later in the Freedom Charter and in 1996 in the constitution created under the ANC's first government. Yet the slogan "Votes for All!" was controversial at the time. Ironically, Rusty Bernstein, who was to write the Freedom Charter which gave form to these aspirations thought that the slogan was wrong. Acknowledging that the slogans of the party should always be in advance of the general

consciousness of the working class, he felt "this slogan at the present time, is so far in advance that it does not bring the party into the position of leading the working class, but leaves [it] out on a limb, far ahead of the working class". To the average worker, he believed, it represented a dream, an ideal, which did not appear possible at the time."Votes for All!" he insisted, was a slogan of advance in the struggle, but we were currently in a defensive period. "It was not correct at this time."[27]

Nothing stirred Moses Kotane into debate more than a polemic of this nature. He was especially incensed by the dismissal of the aspirations of the African people as a *dream* and by its critic's lack of political imagination. "Comrade Bernstein is hopelessly wrong in his political analysis and contentions", he protested in reply.

> That the Africans do not regard the demand for equal rights as representing a dream was shown recently when Sam Kahn, who stood for "Votes for All" defeated his opponents by a majority of 3 000 votes … The present world struggle is essentially a struggle for freedom, equality of rights and opportunities, [a struggle for] peace and progress.[28]

This was a persuasive theme in its appeal to the members of the national executive of the ANC who were strongly encouraged by Kotane's advocacy of this policy and the Party's support of their recent militant stance against the government's paternalism. The decision taken at the 1946 National Conference of the ANC to boycott elections to the NRC, had in Kotane's view created a space for deepening the strategic unity of the Party with the national movements, and Bernstein's criticism of the aspirational slogan was out of tune with this.

Cultivating the slogan was an opportunity to raise the level of struggle and take a strategically offensive position. It was a buoyant moment in Kotane's leadership. He sensed a new mood in the ANC and was making a conscious effort within the Party and the national organizations to achieve a subtle shift in the level of struggle beyond the particular struggles to a general confrontation with the power relations in the country. As he put it, a decisive thrust was needed "to lift the veil behind which the political enslavement … of the African people [is] … perpetuated".[29] The focus was on the abolition of all discriminatory legislation and the granting of full citizenship rights. Bernstein, whose insights were invariably astute, did not believe that the struggle had reached that strident moment. He was probably more aware than most of us that we were on the cusp of a qualitatively different, more confrontational, phase of the struggle, to which the state would ultimately respond with increased repression. He doubted the readiness of the movement – organizationally and politically – to sustain this strategic

turn in approach, especially when the country was reeling from successive waves of repressive legislation.

In the event, the movement as a whole followed Kotane.[30] The Party endorsed the ANC's 1946 conference decision to boycott the elections under the 1936 Native Representation Act and worked towards a united front with its strategic allies in the national anti-fascist movements. Its reasoning was that the real safeguard against dictatorship lay in the extension of democracy by giving political rights to all the people. South Africans needed to "unite to extend the vote; to maintain freedom of speech and organisation, assembly and the press … [and] to guarantee freedom of movement and residence".[31]

A slightly different attack on Rusty's criticism came from another quarter. According to Danie du Plessis, the Johannesburg district secretary of the Party, "Votes for All!" was a living slogan. His intention was to correct "some confused thinking" on the part of Bernstein. The two had clashed before, during the 1946 sedition trial, but this was on a different level. Danie believed that Rusty had

> lost sight of the fact that our slogan "Votes for All!" … is our general political objective – whilst the tactical slogans are day-to-day issues. The confusion arises out of the fact that Comrade Bernstein cannot conceive of the role the Party has to play in the struggle at the present moment – we are struggling for the alignment of forces directed towards democracy.[32]

Bernstein probably understood this perfectly well, but his concerns were about the timing of the new policy and the capacity of the movement to sustain such a thrust at that moment. As the author of the Freedom Charter, Bernstein certainly did not lack political imagination.

Political imagination was not a commodity everyone had. This was not the case with Michael Harmel. In the 1948 elections, for instance, he contrasted the CPSA's vision of a democratic South Africa with that of the National Party:

> Two kinds of future could face South Africa. The one was the Communist Party vision of a better South Africa in which everybody had enough to eat, a decent job, a weatherproof roof over his head, schools for his children and the democratic right to share in the government of this country. The alternative was deepening economic crisis, and intensified racial antagonisms leading to Fascism. There is no middle road.[33]

This is what I would repeat to the voters during the 1948 parliamentary elections as I went from house to house, eliciting votes from potential supporters in the Hillbrow

constituency. They would peer at me peculiarly and wonder what on earth I was talking about. I had not appreciated that in the overwhelming whiteness of their world, every child went to school, everyone had a job, every family had sufficient to eat and a weatherproof roof over its head!

Harmel's vision is still the vision of the Communist Party, in more than a decade after liberation. We have secured the *political* right to participate in the government of the country but the *social* rights for all are not so surely attained. This important discussion belongs in another place and concerns the concept of the national democratic revolution (NDR). It is, however, interesting to reflect on how easily we believed that our vision of the future would quickly fall into place, and how we could talk of the defeat of capitalism and the victory of Socialism in a breathless moment, as if it were all to happen tomorrow.

Chapter 5

1 Michael Scott, *A Time to Speak* (Faber and Faber, London, 1958), p. 212.

2 See Baruch Hirson, *Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa* (Zed Press and Wits University Press, London and Johannesburg, 1989), pp. 85–89.

3 Donald Molteno MP, cited in *The Guardian*, 02.04.42. The figure may have been an exaggeration but the point was well taken.

4 *The Guardian*, 29.01.42.

5 *The Guardian*, 26.02.42.

6 *The Guardian*, 31.07.41.

7 *The Guardian*, 29.01.42.

8 *The Guardian*, 22.10.42.

9 *The Guardian*, 20.08.42.

10 *The Guardian*, 13.05.1943.

11 *Inkululeko*, 14.08.44.

12 Other candidates in Cape Town did reasonably well in that year but were defeated. Unlike the elections in the rest of the country, there was a small Coloured vote, which helped to sway the balance towards the Party.

13 Hilda Watts (Bernstein) stood again in October that year and became the first Communist in the Johannesburg City Council.

14 *The Guardian*, 17.02.44.

15 For biographical details, see *The Guardian*, 17.02.44 and Apollon Davidson, et al, *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History, Volume 1* (Frank Cass, London, 2003); see also Karis and Carter eds, *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 4*.

16 Her Russian-born father, a zealous Bolshevik, returned to the Soviet Union soon after the revolution but his influence must have been strong. See Hilda Bernstein, *A Life of One's Own* (Jacana, Johannesburg, 2002).

17 *The Guardian*, 17.02.44.

18 *The Guardian*, 28.03.44.

19 *Inkululeko*, 14.08.44.

20 *Inkululeko*, 30.10.44.

21 *The Guardian*, 09.08.45

22 *The Guardian*, 25.10.45. See also *Inkululeko* 25.03.45 which ran a feature on the scandal of the virtually all-white representation.

23 *The Guardian*, 08.11.45.

24 B. O'Brien, *Freedom*, 5, 1 (February 1946).

25 *The Guardian*, 08.11.45.

26 *The Guardian*, 12.07.45.

27 L. Bernstein, On the slogan "Votes for All!", *Freedom*, 1, 6 (December 1948).

28 Kotane, *Freedom*, 1, 7 (December 1948), p. 4.

29 Kotane, *Freedom*, 6, 3 (October 1947).

30 Resolution of the CPSA, adopted at its National Conference, January 1947

31 Resolution of the CPSA, adopted at its National Conference, January 1949, cited in *Freedom*, 1, 9 (February 1949).

32 Danie du Plessis, in "Some Confused Thinking", *Freedom*, 1, 9 (February 1949), p. 4.

33 *The Guardian*, 13.05.48; *Freedom*, 5, 4 (August/September 1946), p. 10; *Freedom*, 1 (new series), 7 (6 December 1948), pp. 3, 4.