

# Non-Event

ROBERT SCHRIRE

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*From an address on political trends in South Africa delivered to Cape Western Region by Dr Schrire, who is a senior lecturer in the Political Science Department of the University of Cape Town.*

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ONE of the troubles in South Africa is that — given the literacy of the white population — we must certainly have one of the lowest levels of political dialogue in any so-called civilised country, and one of the least critical electorates.

We are told that one of the pre-eminent reasons for the election was the constitutional proposals, and yet nobody has any information about what these constitutional proposals contain. I am told on good authority that the information which the public has is all the information that the government has. Surely a hard-hitting electorate should ask what they are voting for if they are called upon to hold an election on these grounds.

The second stated reason for the election was American foreign policy, which is not particularly popular. How is a South African white electorate going to send any kind of message to the United States? One thing the Americans do know is that white South Africans support the government. In fact, the Americans tend to overestimate this support.

So I believe these were spurious reasons which were given for the election.

On the valid reasons I have two theories. One is that Mr Vorster is still a good street fighter. He is a man of many strengths and even greater weaknesses, but one of his strengths is a very shrewd understanding of the white South African electorate and white opinion. So he chose this opportunity to demolish the opposition, and he has been successful.

The second reason is that it is almost universally recognised that one of Mr Vorster's critical weaknesses is a lack of courage in human relations. He may be a man of granite on principles, but he is not a man to call an M. C. Botha and tell him the time has come to go back to the Transvaal. Therefore I think a second reason is that there will be an opportunity after the election to engage in a Cabinet re-shuffle.

But the pre-eminent reason was that Mr Vorster could not resist a partisan desire to get the opposition at a very opportune moment.

Now let us have a look at the result and some of the implications.

First of all and very clearly, South Africa has moved in the direction of a one-party state. And this has somehow not received the publicity it deserves. The NP is pre-eminent and the official

opposition has under two dozen seats. When the new constitutional proposals are implemented the opposition will become even less relevant in some ways.

What are the implications of a one-party white South African state? On the black and the brown population this is perhaps going to have a negative as well as a positive effect.

On the negative side people like Sonny Leon, Gatsha Buthelezi and others have without doubt given up on white South Africa. There has always been the hope, almost a residue of the old days of the ANC, of a possible non-racial coalition for change with liberal moderate white opinion. This has been decisively crushed.

But a positive side may be that, given a realisation that liberation cannot come from white SA, there may be far more of an attempt to forge black unity and to try and develop black uplift in terms of social and economic circumstances.

A second factor is that now the NP has an exaggerated majority, but I do not think the size of the vote reflects hardcore bedrock of NP support. A vast number of people voted for the NP because of confusion, because of the emotional rhetoric, or because of a desire — completely misguided in my view — to send some kind of message to the US.

Yet, paradoxically, the inflated majority of the NP may make political change easier to bring about. I do not believe that political change, political reform, has not taken place because Mr Vorster has not had the support to bring about any changes he desires. It is a complete myth that he has been held back by the right. The so-called right-wing members of the Cabinet were brought into it by Mr Vorster, and presumably the Cabinet he chose is the Cabinet he wants.

But with a greatly increased majority the influence of the individual back-bencher will become much weaker. In other words, the larger the group, the stronger is the position of the leaders. Mr Vorster will find a larger caucus easier to organise if he desires to bring about change.

A development that could be very significant is simply that a heterogeneous party has peculiar problems. The whole strength of the NP has been that it represented a people, that it was an ethnic party, that it was far more than a political vehicle for power, but that it represented the

heart, the soul, the welfare and the interests of a particular segment of the population.

Now, in terms of the logic of the change, we are moving towards a more healthy stage, the de-ethnicization of politics. The language group to which one belongs should become less important.

What is very interesting is the double standard that the members of the NP have been able to get away with. They have appealed on a non-ethnic basis to English-speaking people to support the party, but Pretoria or Potchefstroom or Stellenbosch academics will tell of the tremendous pressures brought to bear on them as Afrikaners to support the NP.

While appealing to the language-loyalty of Afrikaners, the Nationalists have urged English-speaking people to move away from the primitive instincts of language politics towards a broader South Africanism! If the NP ceases to be the vehicle of Afrikaner nationalism, and becomes a genuine South African party, this could have significant implications.

A final factor of importance is the rise of the PFP as the official Opposition. Here once again there are interesting conclusions.

Though under normal conditions only a centre party could have any hope of removing the NP from power, as long as SA was dominated by language politics the UP had no realistic chance of doing so, simply because of the demographic situation. From that perspective it may well be a blessing that the centre party, the NRP, the UP, has probably permanently vanished from the scene.

But obviously this means that the task of the official Opposition is going to be interesting. Normally an opposition is really a government in waiting, but the PFP is unlikely in any circumstances to have even as many as 30 seats in the foreseeable future: they have probably reached for the moment their limit of growth. I think this means two things.

On the one hand we need what we have not had for a long time — a really effective critical opposition, one that does not aspire to power, a party that realises that amongst the white electorate its pre-eminent task is to play a critical and dynamic role.

Within brown politics, I see the opposition as having a very important role. In terms of the new constitutional dispensation, the Coloured people are going to have their own parliament, and the Indians are going to have theirs, which from one point of view makes the opposition irrelevant.

But from another point of view the opposition may be more relevant than ever before, because the government itself has now re-introduced the coloured political movement into the national political arena, where the PFP has a valid right to exist.

So we may find a close working relationship developing between the PFP, the members of the

Indian Representative Council and especially the Labour Party. There could be a three-fold dialogue between the government on the one hand and the white opposition, the coloured parliament and the Indian parliament on the other.

Fundamentally the election was a non-event. One of our small-scale tragedies — and SA has many tragedies — is the incredible effort, physical, emotional and financial, that goes into a white election when the government has already 70 per cent of the seats in Parliament, and its gaining 75 per cent, 80 per cent or 90 per cent makes no difference to anybody.

The proposed new constitution far transcends in importance the election or any other development in white politics. The outlines have been made public, the three parliaments, the Presidential Council and so forth.

Mr Vorster has agreed to hold elections for the CRC at the earliest opportunity on a fully elected basis. This probably means that the Federal Party will be eliminated and that the Labour Party will have an even bigger majority than the NP has in the white Parliament. Mr Sonny Leon will serve as PM, and from a very firm and secure basis is going to have far more visibility, far more status and prestige to build up the support of his people.

Yet the Indian Representative Council and the CRC have rejected the constitutional proposals. The obvious question is, why develop coloured politics to the status where they have a Cabinet and a PM if they are not co-operative? The answer is that members of the government genuinely assume that they are going to win the support of these politicians.

But if you ask members of the Labour Party and the CRC what it is that has turned them most radically against the new constitutional proposals, they will say very frankly that they have simply been listening to what Mr Vorster and Dr Mulder and Mr Kruger have been saying at NP congresses.

This is something that this government still has to recognise that fortunately or unfortunately our black and brown population read newspapers, and they think. Mr Worrall may talk of power-sharing, but when you hear Mr Vorster in full flourish in Pretoria Town Hall, or what Mr Kruger reports, the impression is quite different.

This is something which has not permeated to the SA government — that you cannot simultaneously conduct two different dialogues with two different people in the same country. In the same way, fairly obviously, you cannot have two governments, or three governments, in one geographical area.

The elections must be seen in the particular context of the changing role of the opposition, the changing role of Coloured and Indian politics, and an entire change in SA politics which, although they are probably a paradise for the political scientist, may well be a disaster for those who live in this country.