

# SEARCHLIGHT ON THE LIBERAL PARTY

By **NELSON MANDELA.**

The formation of a South African Liberal Party has been announced. Prominent Liberals are among the office bearers. Its constitution purports to uphold the "essential dignity of every human being irrespective of race, colour or creed, and the maintenance of his fundamental rights." It expresses itself in favour of the "right of every human being to develop to the fullest extent of which he is capable consistent with the rights of others." The new party's statement of principles thus far contents itself with broad generalisations without any attempt to interpret them or to define their practical application in the South African context. It then proceeds to announce "that no person (should) be debarred from participation in the government or other democratic processes of the country by reason only of race, colour or creed." But here the neo-Liberals abandon the safe ground of generalisation and stipulate explicitly "that political rights based on a common franchise roll be extended to all **suitably qualified** persons." This question-begging formulation will not for long enable our Liberals to evade the fundamental issue: Which persons are "suitably qualified?" The democratic principle is "one adult, one vote." The Liberals obviously differ from this well-known conception. They are, therefore, obliged to state an alternative theory of their own. This they have, so far, failed to do. The African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress and the Congress of Democrats stand for votes for all—the demand, a century ago, of the British Chartists, for universal equal franchise rights. Does the Liberal Party support this demand? Historical reality demands a plain and unequivocal answer. Which side, gentlemen, are you on?

In South Africa where the entire population is almost split into two hostile camps in consequence of the policy of racial discrimination and where recent political events have made the struggle between oppressor and oppressed even more acute, there can be no middle course. The fault of the Liberals, and this spells their doom, is to attempt to strike just such a course. They believe in criticising and condemning the Government for its reactionary policies but they are afraid to identify themselves with the people and to assume the task of mobilising that social force capable of lifting the struggle to higher levels. Incidentally, this middle-course policy constitutes the foundation upon which the South African Institute for Race Relations is built and the same dilemma which faced the Institute in the recent past awaits them. For years this body talked about liberty, equality and the abolition of the colour bar. But when the people, stung into action by the vicious policy of the Nationalists, launched the Defiance Campaign, all talk of liberty and equality evaporated in the air and frantic efforts were made by Liberals of all shades of opinion to induce the people to call off defiance and to accept the status quo. Their advances were met with ignominy. The people spurned and repulsed them as frightened and vacillating hypocrites whose interests were identical with those of the governing circles. They were dismissed by the Nationalists as confused kaffer-boeties whose ideas were subversive of the traditions of the country.

Finally, the Liberal's credo states that to achieve their objects the Party will employ "only democratic and constitutional means and will oppose all forms of totalitarianism such as communism and fascism." Talk of "democratic and constitutional means" can only have a basis in reality for those people who enjoy democratic and constitutional rights. We must accept the fact that in our country we cannot win one single victory for political freedom without overcoming a desperate resistance on the part of the Government and that victory will not come of itself but only as a result of a bitter

struggle by the oppressed people themselves for the overthrow of racial discrimination. This means that we are committed to forms of struggle which seek to mobilise from our own ranks forces capable of waging a determined and militant struggle against all forms of reaction. The theory that we can sit down with folded arms and wait for a future parliament to legislate for the "essential dignity of every human being irrespective of race, colour or creed" is a crass perversion of elementary principles of political struggle. No organisation whose interests are identical with those of the toiling masses will advocate conciliation to win its demands.

In the South African context to propose that democrats limit themselves "to constitutional means of struggle" is to ask the people to submit to laws enacted by a minority parliament whose composition is essentially a denial of democracy to the overwhelming majority of the population. It means in effect that we must obey a constitution which debars the majority "from participation in the government and other democratic processes of the country by reason only of race, colour or creed." It implies in practice that we must carry passes and permit the violation of "the essential dignity of a human being" by reason only of race, colour or creed. It means that we must accept the Suppression of Communism Act, which legalises the gagging and persecution of leaders of the people because of their creed. It implies the acceptance of the Rehabilitation Scheme, the Bantu Authorities, the Group Areas, the Public Safety, the Criminal Law Amendments Acts and all the wicked policies of the Government.

The real question is: What is the political significance of this organisation? In the general struggle for political rights can the oppressed people count on the Liberal Party as an ally? The answer is that the new Party merely gives organisational expression to a tendency which has for many years existed among a section of the European ruling class and in the United Party. This section hates and fears the idea of a revolutionary democracy in South Africa, just as much as the Malans and the Oppenheimers do. Rather than attempt the costly, dubious and dangerous task of crushing the Non-European mass movement by force, they would seek to divert it with fine words and promises and to divide it by giving concessions and bribes to a privileged minority ("the suitably qualified" voters perhaps).

It becomes clear, therefore, that the high-sounding principles enunciated by the Liberal Party, though apparently democratic and progressive in form, are essentially reactionary in content. They stand not for the freedom of the people but for the adoption of more subtle systems of oppression and exploitation. Though they talk of liberty and human dignity they are subordinate henchmen of the ruling circles. They stand for the retention of the cheap labour system and of the subordinate colonial status of the Non-European masses together with the Nationalist Government whose class interests are identical with theirs. In practice they acquiesce in the slavery of the people, low wages, mass unemployment, the squalid tenements in the locations and shanty-towns.

We of the Non-European liberation movements are not racialists. We are convinced that there are thousands of honest democrats among the white population who are prepared to take up a firm and courageous stand for unconditional equality for the complete renunciation of "white supremacy." To them we extend the hand of sincere friendship and brotherly alliance. But no true alliance can be built on the shifting sands of evasions, illusions and opportunism. We insist on presenting the conditions which make it reasonable to fight for freedom. The only sure road to this goal leads through the uncompromising and determined mass struggle for the overthrow of fascism and the establishment of democratic forms of government.