

THE 1958 GENERAL ELECTION

by C.P.E.

THE three judges of the Delimitation Commission have been listening gravely to arguments, consulting maps and inspecting constituencies. We can take it that the General Election campaign has begun.

For the next nine months, the country will pant through the stages of election labour. What will it produce?? Another shattering Nationalist victory, or a stalemate, or (dare we hope!) a turn of the tide?

The Nationalists claim that they have not yet reached the peak of their Parliamentary strength, and I for one am inclined to agree. But that is only half the picture. Parliament does not reflect the true strength of the Nationalist Party. Therefore it is necessary to distinguish between the Parliamentary sphere, in which wholly undemocratic laws give the Nationalist Party an utterly disproportionate amount of power, and the extra-Parliamentary sphere, where the National Party has suffered a series of resounding defeats.

For the sake of simplicity, I want to list the factors which will ensure probably that the Nationalists make good their boast of winning at least 100 House of Assembly seats in the General Election next year (at present they have 94, discounting the two United Party seats generously donated by Messrs. Jonker and Coetzee). Then I will list the factors which, taken together, demonstrate the inherent weakness of the Nationalist Government.

In reality, there is no such clear dividing line. The successes of the national liberation movement in the extra-Parliamentary sphere inevitably will be reflected inside Parliament. But let the proposition stand.

The first fact to be borne in mind is that no Coloured voters will take part in the coming General Election. About 40,000 of them (at 10,000 voters per constituency — the Union quota — this represents roughly four constituencies) have been taken off the roll. Without prejudging the decisions of the Delimitation Commission, one can state as a fact that this will necessitate considerable boundary changes, and that the Nationalist Party will benefit from these changes.

Nor can one ignore the general effect of the redelimitation of constituencies throughout the Union. At present, United Party supporters are concentrated in relatively few constituencies where thousands of votes are squandered on big majorities. The Nationalists, on the other hand, are scattered over as many seats as possible, and their voting strength is put to the maximum use. If this pattern is intensified under the new delimitation, the Nationalists will make further gains.

To ensure the maximum technical efficiency, the Nationalists are putting more men and money into this election than the United Party. In the Transvaal alone 60 fulltime Nationalist organizers have been appointed — an organizer for each constituency, excluding eight safe U.P. seats! Compare this with the U.P.'s half-a-dozen or so organizers in the province. The Nationalists have been raising more money than the U.P. Their supporters have donated more generously, and gentle persuasion has induced English-speaking business men to hand over a few cheques. The U.P. has lost the confidence of the business world and struggles to make ends meet, although matters might improve now that Mr. Harry Oppenheimer has taken a direct interest in the party's affairs and "Div" is infusing enthusiasm into his creaky old party.

But, more important, the Nationalist Party is a homogenous party with common aims. It can claim legitimately to be a *volksbeweging*, whereas the U.P. is a hotch-potch of groups, serving under a motley collection of business-world leaders (who are sneered at by their business colleagues!). The U.P. has no policy to bind its supporters together: the only coherent thing about it is its desire to get back to power. It offers no inspiration or excitement.

Indeed, the whole party-political Opposition is in a state of disunity and uncertainty. The U.P. is bent on obliterating the Labour Party, and the Labour Party, in retaliation, is nominating candidates to fight the U.P. in a number of seats. No progress appears to have been made in the direction of an alliance of the Labour, Liberal, Federal and other progressive groups. The "all-party" bodies, like the Black Sash (bless it!) and the Anti-Republican League, are groping for an opening. The S.A. Bond (does it still exist?), the Central National Party (Dr. F. J. Tromp's birth control party) and Dr. Wassenaar's National Democratic Party are all pursuing their right-wing "coalition" ambitions with absolutely no success. Held at arm's-length, the party-political Opposition in South Africa does not present an inspiring spectacle.

The Nationalist Party remains a single, monolithic party, unencumbered by coalitions or alliances. There is desperate competition for its seats in the Assembly and Senate (compare this with the U.P.'s frantic efforts to find a candidate for the safe East London North seat and settling finally on that naive ex-Liberal, Mr. Clive van Ryneveld, whose main contribution to the defeat of Nationalism will be to bowl out Dr. Donges at cricket.)

I could extend that list indefinitely, but the point, I hope, is made.

Now that is half of the picture. If there are no major national developments between now and the General Election, I see no reason why Strijdom should not increase his majority to 100 seats, or even more. The economic situation might change, of course, but that brings us into the realm of speculation. Strijdom has been worried by the almost total lack of overseas capital, and South Africa is being exhorted furiously to mobilise its own internal capital. On the other hand, exports have brought in more money, and the balance of payments position is so satisfactory that the total lifting of import control is predicted for 1958. Industrial development is slowing down, but that is not an immediate election factor. If wool and other export prices fall, or if there is a decline in uranium and gold production, the problem of foreign exchange might rear its head suddenly, but again that is speculative.

Nor, in my opinion, is the average Nationalist voter sufficiently perturbed by the cost-of-living to switch his vote, or even abstain from voting. The farming community, in spite of having run itself into debt by indiscriminate purchasing of tractors and other equipment and generally spendthrift ways, has in face never had it so good. The Afrikaner worker in the cities is much worse off, but can we say that he has suffered sufficiently to make him lose all faith in his party? I think not.

Reluctantly, one comes to the conclusion that on polling day next year the Nationalist electorate once again will be in a fine state of ferment, and the emotional tide will carry Strijdom on to victory.

But these calculations take no account of the growing strength of the liberation movement, and this is a factor which could cause a complete change in the political situation within a relatively short period. In the past six months, the determined efforts of the opposition forces outside Parliament (White and Non-White have produced an immediate impact on Nationalist circles.

Pressure by the Dutch Reformed Church achieved an amendment to the "church clause" of the Native Laws Amendment Act — and the protest did not reflect the genuine anxiety of the D.R.C. (which has glossed over equally pernicious laws in the past), but anxiety over the storm of protest raging in the country. Again, pressure by the Nationalist universities reflected anxiety not over the university apartheid bill itself, but over the wave of indignation inside and outside South Africa. One can assume that if the opposition forces in South Africa were supine and had accepted the university apartheid bill and the "church clause" without protest, there would have been no "revolt" from the D.R.C. and the universities.

The undoubted dissension in the National Party over apartheid is not a case of authentic heart-searching: it reflects the perturbation, bordering on alarm, of the so-called Nationalist "intellectuals" over the failure of apartheid to achieve anything except a few public notices asserting the supremacy of the White man and a wave of fury such as South Africa had never seen.

The 1957 Parliamentary session culminated in an unofficial disclosure that the Minister of Native Affairs, Dr. Verwoerd, is to give up the Portfolio of Native Affairs. The development is of the utmost significance. It means that Dr. Verwoerd, by common consent a prodigious worker and utterly dedicated to the implementation of apartheid, has not only failed to prove that there is such a thing as "positive apartheid", but has exposed his whole party to attack. It means also — and the historic significance of this fact must not be overlooked — that once Dr. Verwoerd goes, apartheid becomes a fumble, a day-to-day stumble.

And all this is due directly to the irresistible advance of the liberation movement.

Whites, too, have taken courage from the example set by their Non-White brothers, and — unique event! — the churches, Nusas, welfare and health bodies have embarked, with their eyes wide open, on a White "defiance campaign."

Opposition outside Parliament is running higher than ever before. In the three years he has been Prime Minister, Strijdom has made no conquests. The trickle of United Party followers over to the Nationalist laager has dried up. Strijdom has made no friends, only enemies.

The strategy of Nationalism was to crush, first White opposition, and then to turn on the Non-Whites. But the former task is even more formidable now than it was, say, six years ago, when Dr. Malan's blandishments were beginning to produce results.

The record since January 1957 is an astonishing one. The bus boycott, a total, shattering defeat for the Nationalist Government, springs immediately to mind. And Mr. Schoeman had the effrontery deliberately to turn it into a trial of strength. What a gross miscalculation of the strength of the African people!

Now there is the anti-pass campaign among African women which, though still in its early stages, has the makings of a titanic struggle. Already, the women have scored astonishing victories.

There were — oh, so many things more! The protest strike on June 26; the Mamathola tribe's refusal to budge; the boycott of Bantu Education and the Bantu Authorities Act; the mass march to the Johannesburg City Hall (and Mayor Goodman's smiling tolerance, "Never mind if they trample on the flowers. We can plant new ones."); the grim loyalty of the people to their arrested leaders . . .

The Suppression of Communism Act is invoked — and Congress grows stronger! Bannings follow namings, and banishments follow bannings — and Congress grows stronger! Arrests follow raids — and Congress grows stronger!

The situation brims over with possibilities. Anything, literally anything, could happen in South Africa today.

Meanwhile, the "wild men" of the Nationalist Party are coming to the top, trampling on the shrewder, more flexible ones with their jackboots. Their philosophy is to take apartheid through to its logical conclusions — the very situation the shrewder ones want to avoid. The Abrahams, Greylings and Von Moltkes emerge as the pace-setters.

Their whole behaviour points to another trial of strength: something to put the liberation movement firmly "in its place" as the United Party, presumably, will be put "in its place" next year. It stands to reason that Congress will not be allowed to escape scotfree with its recent victories. Strijdom has not learnt his lesson. He is going to seek another trial of strength. Already, Mr. Swart is making the familiar, ominous noises.

To sum up: Ultimately, of course, the liberation movement will triumph. Meanwhile, Strijdom may succeed in entrenching himself even further behind Parliament's walls. He may succeed also in inflicting injury on the masses and on their organisations, because after all he has not yet fully mobilised his modern police state in the struggle for White baasskap. Irresistible though the strength of the liberation movement might be, it would be foolish to underestimate these factors.

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