
Liberals in the Revolution

What significant contribution can a handful of white Liberals make?

PATRICK VAN RENSBURG

A BOOK OF MINE published in January, 1962, met with a certain amount of criticism from some South Africans who had read it and considerably harsher criticism from some South Africans who had not read it. (I am not, of course, talking about that part of South Africa which simply banned the book.)

It was the last part of the book which attracted most of the criticism. One of the principal statements of this part of the book was that there was very little point in talking about non-racialism in South Africa until the minority had been divested of its exclusive power. Only after power had been transferred to the majority would efforts towards race conciliation have any point. This is arguable, I know, but I have seen no argument on this point.

What significant contribution can a handful of white Liberals make to improved race relations when the majority of whites are dedicated to racial oppression? And can the Liberal Party really gain and retain a large African following? I wonder, indeed, if there is any significant contribution that white or black Liberals can make to African liberation. Can it honestly be said that the policies and activities of the Liberal Party are likely to lead directly to the early overthrow of the Government?

If it is correct to say that efforts towards non-racialism must await the transfer of power from the minority to the majority, then that would imply that the transfer of power must be the prior objective of the non-racialist. And yet, how much can he really contribute towards this objective?

I think that it is time for Liberals to recognise honestly that there is very little indeed that they can do that will directly result in African freedom; it is time, also, to see clearly that their work for non-racialism can, at this time, amount to little more than personal acts of charity (though such social work is of the greatest importance.)

IT IS TIME TO ADMIT that Liberals can, at most, be only the very junior partners of Africans in working for the transfer of power to the majority. It is time to accept African nationalist leadership, in principle (leaving it

PATRICK VAN RENSBURG *resigned as South African vice-consul in Leopoldville to become Transvaal organiser of the Liberal Party, went to England in 1959 where he jointly initiated the 1959 trade boycott, and later wrote Guilty Land. He has just opened a nonracial school at Serowe, Bechuanaland.*

to Africans to decide which African nationalists shall lead them). Liberals should accept the goal of African unity and be more forthrightly Socialist. They should avoid action which appears as competition with the banned African movements (such as attempts at large-scale African recruitment). They should abandon any pretensions they may themselves have to forming a Government.

I believe that racial reconciliation will be possible only after liberation and that Liberals will then have an important role to play. They would need to have the confidence of Africans in the major African organisations. They will not have this confidence and trust if they are now in rivalry and competition with African organisations and leadership.

In both Northern and Southern Rhodesia, parties called 'Liberal' have recently disbanded themselves. There are not many parallels between them and the Liberal Party of South Africa, but there is one very important similarity. All three had one main objective in common, for all three were interested in racial reconciliation. The Liberal Party of South Africa has often said that it stands between Black and White nationalism, and the other two parties had positions roughly similar in their respective contexts. The principal achievement of all three has been a 'parity of abuse' (in varying degrees) from the two fires between which they stand.

I think that the 'Liberal' Parties of Northern and Southern Rhodesia should have re-assessed their objectives some time ago. In Southern Rhodesia, the C.A.P. should not have carried on as before after Mr. Todd quitted it. I am certainly not suggesting that the S.A. Liberal Party should dissolve itself. I am afraid, however, that unless it does review its objectives, it might later have to wind up. The Northern Rhodesian Liberal Party, properly motivated, should not have had now to end its life; indeed, now should have been its moment to come into its own.

ONLY IF LIBERALS COULD offer an alternative (and speedy) means of liberation to violence and anti-whiteism would they be justified in condemning them. The choice of condemning or condoning should be a personal and individual one, rather than that of the Party as a whole. It is the white man who has forced this choice of weapons on the African, and, in the circumstances, they may be justifiable *as weapons of revolution*, however intolerable they may be in a non-revolutionary situation. In my own view, the attitudes and actions of the Government have long passed the point where to fight them with violence can be said to be totally immoral.

If the Liberal Party could agree to make these various adjustments, I think that what might be called its welfare work would then become more valuable than ever before. It would be more effective in building African confidence and trust in the Party, because no one could interpret its charity as an attempt to recruit African members. Liberals would cease to be rivals of African Nationalists. The Party would have accepted that it was not in its hands to decide the choice of weapons against white supremacy; indeed, by implication, it would have agreed, at the very least, to condone

whatever action African Nationalists had chosen. The Party is, I think, essentially a party of protest, not itself possessing the means of overthrowing white domination. Its future activities would be confined to acts of protest (I include here fighting elections). It is probable that the activities of the Party would remain unchanged; its attitudes and declared objectives, alone, would be altered.

It is not the fault of those inside the Liberal Party that it cannot attain its goals, but the madness of the

whites outside. It is not Liberals who are to blame if Africans have to choose illiberal weapons to rid themselves of domination. The fact is that the Liberal Hour must await the passing of many turbulent moments. I am convinced that after Africans have liberated themselves, the economic facts will dictate a social reconciliation. And that will be the time when Liberals will have a crucial part to play, provided they do not jeopardise their role by their present actions. ●

COMMENT

The land is inalienable

LET US LIVE above hypocrisy and let us speak the truth as we see it. In this world of ours, land is the determining factor in all major things of life. Unless one possesses absolute right to the land on which one lives, one is no better than a slave.

When Europeans came to this continent, Africans already accepted certain fundamental principles of law governing land ownership. Amongst these were:—

- (a) that the land in this continent is owned by all Africans as a national unit and by every African as an individual human being;
- (b) that the land owned by Africans is inalienable; and
- (c) that Africans or any other persons may be allowed the exclusive use of the land, properly assigned by representatives of the law.

As far as Africans are concerned they possess a dual ownership: (1) they own the land from the surface to the centre of the earth; (2) each individual African, in addition possesses the right to use the land.

On the other hand, foreigners may only acquire the right to use the land. Therefore, unless one is completely Africanised, it is humanly impossible, by wish or desire alone to confer ownership. Because the law of inalienability excluded foreigners from real ownership an ingenious device was conceived in an attempt to circumvent the practices of the Africans.

THE SYSTEM OF slavery is perhaps as old as the white man is. In its "modified" form it is legalised under the Master and Servant Act. The system of owning human beings had already become second nature to many settlers. It was therefore not a great task to regard Africans as hewers of wood and drawers of water. After Africans had been conquered a wrong assumption was arrived at that their land too had miraculously passed into the hands of the settlers.

But much more than this, great damage was done by a ruthless systematic conditioning and impoverishment. Paripassu with this scheme, Africans were taught the settlers' histories of conquest, which were biased. They were taught in schools, churches and everywhere that their land had passed into the hands of the settlers and they were taught to accept, childlike, the guardianship of the settlers.

Expressions of independent opinion are welcomed in this "Comment" feature.

But the seed of nationalism dies very hard indeed, if it dies at all. For, throughout the years of conquest and subjugation there remained a hard core of the Africans that became impervious to conditioning. We honour them for keeping alive and in motion, the wheel of resistance.

In recent years, some whites have not stopped to justify their stay here. They go so far as to allege that they have an equal claim to our sub-continent because "we arrived here at the same time". Apart from absurdity, this claim is nullified by the law of inalienability. After all it is a well-known fact that Africans are the aboriginal inhabitants of Africa and the settlers are not. Pruned of all false reasoning the allegation is silly and ridiculous in the extreme and it must be treated with the contempt it deserves.

WE HAVE SAID elsewhere that some Africans were systematically and ruthlessly conditioned to serve their masters; they were reduced to the status of hewers of wood and drawers of water; they even inadvertently undermined the law of inalienability. They had of course been misled into accepting the interpretation of the settlers.

To show the extent of the coverage of the misconceptions, the A.N.C., otherwise a militant organisation was itself caught in the trap of false interpretations. This organisation was so misled that its leaders coined the slogan "*Mayibuye*" (literally meaning "let it come back"). This misconception was made even more ridiculous by the whites who were members of the Congress Alliance who unwittingly also exclaimed "*Afrika! Mayibuye*".

If one follows up the logic of inalienability, it is only too correct to say that P.A.C. is the only custodian of that law, which is symbolised by the slogan "*Izwe lethu*" which means it is our land. It is ours because it is inalienable; it is ours whether conquered or not.

Before concluding I would like to say there are two false and outdated concepts of ownership that are being grafted on the minds of Africans:—

1. ethnic-ownership of the land. This is incorporated in the policies of the Nationalist Government.
2. multi-racialising the ownership of African land. This is a child of the multi-racialists.

These hybrid interpretations of ownership are a real challenge and in fact reflect the real struggle and conflict in Africa in general and in South Africa in particular.

The final answer resolves itself that Africa belongs to those from whom it cannot be alienated. ●

J. N. POKELA