

Thompson & Prior's SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS

(Cape Town, David Philip, 1982.)

Reviewed by Ralph Lawrence

Professor Leonard Thompson, a noted historian at Yale University, and Dr Andrew Prior, a specialist in South African politics at University of Cape Town, have collaborated to produce an interesting and informative survey of the South African political system. The authors (and their publishers) have succeeded in incorporating a considerable range of topics, discussed at a moderately sophisticated level, in a text of slightly less than 250 generously printed pages.

The unifying theme of **South African Politics** is the exercise of political power. This is analysed from the perspective of mainstream or orthodox comparative politics, suitably adapted to capture the character and dynamics of the political process in South Africa. A similar methodology shaped Thompson's earlier work, **Politics in the Republic of South Africa**, which first appeared in 1966.

Thompson and Prior begin by presenting the historical, demographic and economic context of political activity. Demographic trends indicate two factors of crucial political significance. First, the rate of increase of the African population far exceeds that of Whites; second, the growth of the urban areas. Given the wealth of the urban areas, the demand for labour and the inevitably high degree of social interaction between Whites and Blacks, these are the areas, the authors suggest, where South Africa's future political struggles will be waged. The hallmark of the South African economy is its strength and its inequality, which is primarily based on racial divisions. Political power and economic power sustain and nurture one another but political power predominates: economic strength serves political ends. There is little comfort here for those who hold that the growth of the capitalist economy will of its own accord erode racial barriers and lead eventually to the demise of the political structure of **apartheid**.

The next section of the book deals with the composition and processes of the major political institutions, national, regional and local, for Whites and for Blacks, including the 'independent homelands'. Their historical development is described to indicate how control of various provisions made for Blacks rests ultimately with the White Parliament in Cape Town and how Parliament enacts what the Prime Minister and his Cabinet decide. All this could be reinforced if the authors had indicated how power is actually exercised in decision-making on public policy and how the operations of the state distort the political process at the expense of the majority of the population. If the constitutional proposals unveiled by Mr P.W. Botha at the end of July do become law then this part of the book will need revision. Even so, the main theme holds. There is no evidence to suggest that the Nationalist government has any intention of sharing political power with anyone, although they are willing enough to shed territory and responsibilities. The retention of political

power is pragmatic and the room for manoeuvre has been lessened even further by the defection earlier this year of some Nationalists to form the Conservative Party under the leadership of Dr Treurnicht.

In 'How the System Works' this country's political culture and organisation of political activity are examined. This reinforces the picture of how every resource is utilised to entrench political power in White hands in general and in Afrikaner Nationalist ones in particular. The explanation is based on a remarkably complicated interpretation of South African society. According to liberals, the main cleavages in our Society are racial; according to radicals, they are based on class, defined in economic terms. Thompson and Prior are closer to the liberal view. In their view, South Africa is a caste society, a pigmentocracy, with a rigid separation between the White caste and the African, Coloured and Asian castes. Each caste can be sub-divided in terms of class, based on socio-economic criteria, or in terms of ethnocultural criteria, which distinguishes between communities. The White caste is also an oligarchy with political power exercised by an 'inner oligarchy', the Afrikaner Nationalists. Little argument is advanced for this caste interpretation. In my opinion, greater accuracy and clarity of exposition would be achieved if this multitude of cleavages was explained by criteria of social class alone, with political power used to account for the ranking of classes.

The last quarter of **South African Politics** gives an overview of the internal and external pressures on the political system. This international dimension is valuable for all too often in comparative politics political systems are treated as if they operated in complete isolation from one another. I cannot go into detail here on the wide range of participants and forces striving to remake South Africa in their own image. Let me say, however, that no credence is given to the view that South Africa is facing the full blast of a 'total onslaught' carefully planned on a global scale by strategists in the Kremlin poring over maps with the aid of compasses and vodka.

Every South African political scientist is asked, 'How long before the Big Bang? Should I pack my bags or oil my rifle?'. Thompson and Prior almost resist the temptation to get out their crystal ball. But not quite. They foresee an ever-increasing reaction and counter reaction of Black resistance and White repression, expressed more and more violently. Sooner or later things will fall apart, but how, or when, or what the consequences will be, they do not say. Very wise.

If you want an almost brief, reliable guide to introduce you to the issues of South African politics, then this book is the best on offer at the moment. For those who desire more detail, there is no bibliography, but extensive references to further reading are incorporated in the footnotes. □