

Tribune

PC16/6/4/2/44
ALAN PATON CENTRE

The Improper Interference Act has gone and non-racial politics become possible again 32 years after the Liberal Party first brought them on a national scale to South Africa and 17 years after the Act was used to destroy that Party and to compel what is now the PFP to jettison its black membership. What does this mean for the future face of South African politics ?

Other groups may emerge but so far only the PFP has announced that it is embarking on a campaign to recruit members from all communities, so most of what follows will be related to some of the implications of that announcement.

It is rumoured that Inkatha and the PFP may agree to joint membership of the two organisations. From Cape Town it is reported that people with UDF affiliations have applied to join the Party. The UDF reaction to this has been to accuse the PFP of poaching on its territory.

There is nothing new in all this. Over thirty years ago the Liberal Party had an understanding with the ANC and other constituents of the Congress Alliance which allowed joint membership. What usually happened was that people who enjoyed joint membership eventually found that the one organisation reflected ^{their views} more accurately than the other and that became the one into which most of their energies were directed. If the rumour is true one doesn't know how much the PFP or Inkatha will like that, but one great advantage of such an arrangement is that it makes it more difficult to sustain the stereotypes and caricatures of other organisations which all of us like to create. As for the argument that the PFP will be poaching on UDF territory, that is one with which we were very familiar. There was certainly a substantial body of Congress opinion thirty years ago which felt that whatever group you belonged to you should join that part of the Congress movement which represented it. If you were trying to establish a truly non-racial political movement, as we were, it was not an argument to which one could give much weight. The position is not quite the same today. The UDF is not made up entirely of racially-based organisations. Some of these members ~~of these organisations~~ want to have joint membership of the PFP, or any other non-racial political organisation, why shouldn't they ?

Are there likely to be UDF supporters on a substantial scale wanting to join the PFP ? There may well be some who would prefer the relatively tight-knit organisation of a single political party with a detailed and clearly-stated policy, to the rather amorphous free-for-all that the UDF must sometimes seem to them to be. And there are probably others who would feel more at home in a smaller organisation where their voice would be better heard than as an ordinary member of a UDF affiliate far removed from the levers of power. But if the PFP recruits black members, what is it going to do with them ? Will it decide to contest the Coloured and Indian seats ? If it does this will mean turning its back on its past rejection of the new constitution. It could logically justify doing that on the grounds that it is now faced with a fact of life which it must use to the best advantage -- and in any case it is already involved in the white leg of the new Parliament. But for a supporter of the UDF, the primary

motivation^{of which} has been a total rejection of the new constitution and anything to do with it, to now decide to work through it would be an enormous step. And where will an Inkatha member, whose rejection has been as emphatic, stand when this question arises? And if the PFP does not contest the Coloured and Indian elections, will it not find itself drawn, by the logic of its black membership, increasingly into extra-parliamentary activity. This is not something which would worry me. It soon happened to the Liberal Party. But it would represent a quite new departure for the PFP.

On the economic front, too, certain implications flow from an effective non-racial membership, and here again the Liberal Party has lessons to offer to aspiring non-racial political organisations. The Party started life with a basically laissez-faire economic programme tempered by welfare statism. Its membership was predominantly white. It ended life in the throes of a hectic debate on a new essentially social-democratic policy and considering changing its name to the Social Democratic Party of S.A.. Most of its membership was black.

What then are the prospects for a new non-racial political party, the PFP or any other, ~~rehabilitating~~ real strength across the racial barriers of South Africa now? In one important respect it ^{should be} will be much easier than it was. As far as the Liberal Party was concerned the passing of the Improper Interference Act was only the final step in government campaign, pursued against it with increasing hostility, intensity, and ruthlessness from the day it was born, and designed to make it impossible for it to function effectively. One recalls the mixture of glee and revulsion with which Die Transvaler published on its front page pictures of the members of the audience at the Party's inaugural Johannesburg meeting, caught in what it regarded as a "compromising situation". The "compromising situation" was for black and white to be sitting in the same row in the same hall at a political meeting. Things have changed a bit. Nowadays the Information Department would flash that picture round the world to show it what good friends we really are.

But from that day the Party was under continuous assault, sometimes physical, often verbal, and, as the apparatus of the state security system was steadily enlarged, increasingly the assault was "legal". Most white South Africans neither noticed nor cared. By the time the Party was closed down some of its most active members were carrying between them the burden of something approaching 300 years in banning orders. Congress and PAC supporters were carrying many more. The scrapping of the Improper Interference Act means that it won't be like that now. It means that although the Government almost certainly doesn't like non-racial political activity it is prepared to let it happen -- at least for a while. So from that point of view it will be easier. But in other respects it will be more difficult. We have wasted a full generation since the Liberal Party was launched and in that generation the Government has spent much of its energy in making it more difficult for us to meet. Racial polarisation has followed inevitably and there is now a substantial body of black opinion which is simply not interested in a non-racial instrument to achieve its liberation. Racial segregation

has been so effectively extended that it is more difficult now to arrange even routine meetings of committees -- the essential basis of effective political democratic political organisation -- than it was in our day. It was difficult enough then. Now distances are greater and transport worse, and more hazardous. Is there still a role for non-racial politics after all these wasted years? I am sure there is. With apartheid becoming increasingly unworkable white South Africa in particular needs to be shown that something else can work. Then, perhaps, it will finally be able to bring itself to take the long-delayed step and share its power with all South Africans.