



This is the African Service of the BBC and this is Keith Carter with another book for today. And the book I've chosen is called "Hofmeyr" by Alan Paton. Jan Hofmeyr was Deputy Prime Minister in the last United Party Government of South Africa, before the Nationalists came to power in 1948. Their victory meant defeat for everything he had worked for and when he died later the same year he knew he had been a failure. The election of 1948 was a turning point in South African history. The only issue that really mattered was race relations. Pressure for political rights for Africans was growing. The ruling United Party under General Smuts, with Hofmeyr as his second-in-command, was drifting uncertainly. Officially they were committed to a policy of white supremacy. But they were uneasy about it. Nobody could tell which way they would go if they were re-elected.

Their Nationalist opponents, on the other hand, had no doubts whatever. Under the guidance of their leader, Dr. Malan, they had already drawn up a plan for their new policy of apartheid. This meant an end to all compromise, and the introduction of new much stricter laws to ensure the maintenance of white supremacy in perpetuity.

Smuts and Hofmeyr were not particularly worried by the Nationalists' challenge. The United Party had an overall majority over all parties in Parliament including the Nationalists, and though the Nationalists had been slowly increasing their strength for many years, there was no hint of the landslide which was to sweep the once-powerful United Party out of office, possibly for ever.

Smuts himself lost his seat. But nobody blamed him for losing the election. But there were many who blamed Hofmeyr instead. They did this because of all the leading members of the United Party, Hofmeyr was the only one who had spoken out plainly in favour of equal rights for all South Africans regardless of race. It was not the official policy of his party, but then it was hard to tell just what the official policy of the United Party was. That was its tragedy. If it had been wholehearted for white supremacy, then it might never have lost the election. But in that case it could never have kept Hofmeyr as deputy leader. If on the

other hand it had come right out in favour of Hofmeyr's ideas of equal rights, people would at least have known where it stood, and it could not have done much worse in the elections than it did.

The United Party's tragedy was Hofmeyr's too. He was a man of compromise in a situation where no compromise was possible. He wanted equal rights for all. He helped to get representation for Indians in Parliament, and he would have done it for Africans too, in time. But it was an impossible task. The majority of White South African opinion was against him. For what he wanted to do he needed a climate of confidence and growing trust between the races. In fact the climate was one of growing fear and mistrust, and in these circumstances the trend to extremism was inevitable.

The Nationalists sensed the mood of White South Africa perfectly, and they exploited it ruthlessly in the 1948 election. Hofmeyr was their main target. Even those who supported him, knew he had made a tactical blunder. Hofmeyr was too far ahead of public opinion, and he played straight into the Nationalists' hands.

They made him the main target of their attacks from 1946 right up to and during the election. One Nationalist speaker put the case against Hofmeyr like this "There is no such thing as a compromise. On the one hand we can have separation, and, failing that, we must have total equality. There is no middle course."

Most people, whatever they think of the Nationalist government of South Africa, would probably agree with the logic of this. Hofmeyr, who was a brilliantly clever man, could see it too. He was simply powerless to do anything about it. Alan Paton gives his final judgement of Hofmeyr and Smuts in these words. "Was it not true, that whatever faults or weaknesses they had, they were both defeated by the refusal of White South Africa to share its power? Therefore the story of their lives is also the story of white South Africa."

I've been talking about "Hofmeyr" by Alan Paton, published by the Oxford University Press at 58/- in the U.K. So until next time this is Keith Carter saying goodbye for now.