

# A PEEP AT PROGRESS

BY HANS MEIDNER

**W**ITHIN one year of its formation the Liberal Party has fought two Municipal Council by-elections and finds itself engaged in election work for the Provincial Councils in three Provinces and contesting a Parliamentary by-election in the Western Cape. During this same year the first National Conference of the Party took place and a Provincial Congress was held in Natal. Formulation of detailed policies has been taken a long way and will be taken further at the next National Conference. Recruiting of members and formation of Branches has progressed in all Provinces. If activity is any measure of the "aliveness" of the Party then it certainly has no need to be dissatisfied.

In the course of this first year of the Party's existence support from the public, both enfranchised and unenfranchised, has varied. In the Johannesburg elections it was most encouraging. On the other hand the membership of the Party has grown slowly and it does not yet enjoy the substantial support from unenfranchised citizens which it would like. However, while admitting these facts and facing up to them, we need not be discouraged. Real support comes when a party proves its worth by its own actions. During the year in review opportunities for such action have been limited and distrust of political parties is an understandable attitude amongst people who have, so often in the past, been fed on empty promises. Nevertheless friendly relations have been established between the Liberal Party and various Non-European political organisations and these relations may yet blossom into active support from people who, for the time being, prefer to watch and remain critical.

There is another very important field in which a political party makes its existence felt and that is in its impact on public opinion in general. Perhaps it is in this field that the Liberal Party has met with its most notable success, although it must be realised that those forces which gave rise to the formation of the Party have continued to bear on the South African political situation and to act as valuable allies to the Party. However, let us see what effect the Party itself has had in influencing the political atmosphere of South Africa and in putting the liberal case before the public.

On the whole the Party has received fair publicity. Its policies have been published and its meetings have been well reported. This fact alone has put "liberalism" before the public eye and helped to keep it there. How have other political organisations reacted to the existence of the Party? The radical left has complimented the Party by subjecting it to constant criticism and severe attack. The Nationalists have paid it the compliment of saying that Liberalism presents the only logical and honest alternative to Nationalism. The Labour Party, we are tempted to think, has been forced to make its own policy more liberal. The United Party has clearly taken full account of the Liberal Party programme and is struggling to meet its challenge as best it can. That a Liberal Party platform need not necessarily frighten away white voters has been clearly shown in Johannesburg. In Durban, certain very significant points emerged from the Berea by-election. The existence of a Liberal vote and constant questioning by Liberal Party members forced both the United and Federal Party candidates to change their ground and to speak in more and more liberal terms as the campaign progressed. Most recently, within the unhappy United Party, comparatively liberal statements have been made. Mr. Strauss has been forced to make his over-celebrated "integration" speech and, it is said in some quarters, that it was the existence of the Liberal Party, offering an alternative home to some of his supporters, which induced him to do so. Although there is much to be criticised in Mr. Strauss's speech and although the United Party is already saying that the speech has "been misinterpreted outside the house" the Liberal Party welcomed it as a sign that the United Party may at last be going to make up its mind on the questions which really matter in this country.

It is in this situation then that the Party embarks on its first Provincial Council election. In Natal the elections will be held earlier than in the other Provinces. In Durban candidates have been nominated, canvassing is under way, and the Party has held its first public meeting in the campaign. In Maritzburg canvassing is about to start and the Party will probable contest one seat. In Johannesburg it is hoped to conduct a "model" campaign in the



Hospital Hill constituency and other seats may also be contested. What prospects there are of success can only be judged by the people on the spot. Important as the winning of an election is, there are other advantages to be gained from an election campaign. The name of the Party is brought to the front-doors of a number of the electorate ; the policies of the Party are distributed and are publicly debated ; the Party's members take part in a campaign which calls for a common and combined effort from them. Finally, other political parties are forced to meet the challenge with which the Liberal Party confronts them. All these things are, in themselves, worth while.

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## PRESS COMMENTS

The publication of the Party's first newspaper *Liberal News* was widely reported and several papers ran a picture of Mrs. Ballinger and Mr. Gibson (Cape Western candidate) inspecting the first issue.

In the *Natal Daily News* "Crossbencher" comments on the fact that during the last year Liberalism has come into the open and the public is not nearly so disconcerted as might have been expected. Of the Party he writes, "The Liberal Party, for all its extreme youth, its small membership and its Puritan principles, is held in notable respect, not least by the Nationalists who see . . . the thing they fear most of all—an anti-Nationalist alliance of White and Black". He feels that, with the gradual acceptance by white people of partnership with the Non-European, "an historic stage is being reached" in South Africa.

Three different Indian newspapers carried leading articles criticising the Natal Indian Congress's recent criticisms of the Liberal Party's franchise policy and method of struggle. *Indian Opinion* considers that one of the "essential principles of satyagraha is never to lose an opportunity of honourable compromise if it can be found". It thinks that the proposed franchise of the Liberal Party "on a common roll but loaded for the time being" is a step forward which should not be spurned but to which serious thought should be given. These sentiments are themselves a step forward and the Party would welcome more Non-European support along the same lines.

In Natal considerable publicity has been given to the Party in different ways. Both the *Natal Witness* and the *Daily News* quoted extensively from the leading article in February's *Contact*. The Party's meeting at Kokstad was very well reported and in addition, "Crossbencher" of the *Daily News* gave up his column to Mr. Paton's "Liberal Point of View" on Mr. Strauss's integration speech in the Assembly. At Kokstad Mr. Paton again stressed the fact that the path which led to a common society was the only one which could be followed if South Africa was to be saved. In his article in the *Daily News* Mr. Paton praised Mr. Strauss's speech although he also found grounds for criticism. The U.P. had at last moved forward from the vague country in which it had for so long lived. However, Mr. Paton regretted that the speech dealt only with the material motives for extending political rights. "Admittedly", he said, "it is difficult to stress these moral motives in politics ; but they are real and very powerful". Speaking of the Liberals he wrote "It is said they go too far and too fast ; they must continue to go as far and as fast as they think it is right for them to do. By going as far and as fast as they have they have at least caused some movement, some break in an iron system, which if not broken will break us all".

From the Afrikaans Press there have been lurid details of what will happen in South Africa if Liberalism is persisted with. *Die Vaderland*, apropos of the formation of *Liberal News*, does not doubt the intellectual honesty of the Party but wonders if the ultimate results of our "unpractical idealism" have been sufficiently thought out. *Die Volksblad* maintains that we have no need of the *Liberal News* as papers like the *Rand Daily Mail*, the *Star*, *Argus*, etc., do our work for us ! This same paper hails as a triumph for the Liberal Party the now expressed liberalism of the United Party.

In the *Evening Post* a correspondent discusses the misuse of the word "liberal". Apropos of Dr. Jonker's favourite term "neo-liberal" he writes "After hearing . . . and Dr. Jonker expound on the colour issue, however, I felt that if either of them had been liberals they must have been neolithic-liberals".