

# Beautifully



# small?

Small is beautiful, according to 1960s cult economist E F Schumacher, but not many voters felt this way about the multitude of little parties that registered for the April election. In the absence of much support, should they have received state funds? SHIREEN BADAT investigates

**A** PLETHORA of new political parties emerged for the April elections, with virtually unknown people descending on Kempton Park almost daily towards the end of March in a mad rush to register. The Western Cape, home of the factionalist tendency, not surprisingly was the province with the most small parties.

In order to register, parties had to pay a deposit of R25 000 in the case of the National Assembly election, and R5 000 for each provincial election they wanted to contest. Parties which failed to have at least one representative elected forfeited these deposits.

One might therefore assume that many small parties lost a lot of money, but the matter is more complicated.

The Electoral Act required a party applying for state funding to provide the results of an independent opinion poll showing that it had the support of at least two percent of the voters in each election the party wished to contest. In the absence of such an opinion poll, parties could provide lists of signatures demonstrating such support, but then qualified for only half the amount of state funds.

It was impossible to find out exactly how much money parties received and what formula was used to apportion it. An Independent Electoral Commission spokesperson said the figures would be released in the final report of the chairperson, Judge Johann Kriegler. However, parties which qualified for state funding received it in proportion to the number of elections for which they registered. So, while most of the small parties failed in the electoral stakes and lost their deposits, they did profit from the election – financially, at least.

The Worker's List Party (WLP) is unapologetic. Spokesperson Immelda Whittaker feels there is no contradiction in the fact that although the WLP managed to get 10 000 signatures, it received only 4 169 votes.

"When we asked people for their signatures, we never told them to vote for the WLP," she said. "We wanted people to

support our long-term goal of forming a mass workers' party. Our programme goes beyond the elections. Taking seats in parliament was never the issue for us."

When asked how the WLP spent the money it received from the IEC, Whittaker said that, in line with its demand for the right to work, the WLP employed a number of jobless and elderly people to distribute pamphlets and put up posters.

Islamic Party (IP) leader Sheriff Mohamed was similarly upbeat, claiming that the IP did extremely well in the Western Cape provincial election – the only one contested by the party, although he did not know what the party's final vote count was.

Asked whether he would consider contesting the next election, Mohamed said: "I found politics very exciting. There were all types of conspiracies going on. It reminded me of Rome in the times of Julius Caesar."

Interestingly, Mohamed emerged as IP leader only after a leadership tussle which was finally resolved in court.

Another Western Cape contender riven by a leadership wrangle was the South African Women's Party (SAWP). Despite the embarrassment of having the wrong face printed on the ballot paper, the SAWP won nearly 2 500 votes. SAWP spokesperson Michel Muller proudly pointed out that the party did not apply for state funding and drew its campaign money from its members. She said the party's entrance into the elections was the first step in a long process. "It was important to get women on to the political agenda. We gained valuable election experience and for us seats in parliament were not important."

Far less upbeat was the Women's Rights Peace Party's Nina Romm. Disappointed by the results, Romm said she felt the larger parties did not allow for meaningful participation by the smaller ones.

"This parliament will be writing the constitution and it is important that people committed to women's rights are part of the process. As can be seen in the composition of the cabinet, women have already fallen by the wayside."

A woman apparently unconcerned about women's rights was Claire Emery of the Kiss Party, whose campaign revolved around lowering taxes and ending corruption. But in common with the SAWP, Emery is proud of not asking for state funding for her campaign. She asked her husband instead.

Kiss drew a surprising 6 000 votes nationwide, though Emery thought she would do better. "There was an obvious chiselling away of votes," she said.

However, she really enjoyed the election campaign and would like to do it again. "I found that it isn't politics that is dirty, just the politicians. I think the word politician is just a euphemism for gangster."

Charges of euphemism might well have been levelled at the Green Party (GP) too, certainly by the two candidates who resigned in outrage a week before the election when they discovered that the legalisation and mass production of dagga was part of the party platform.

Despite these problems, the GP seems to be the only small party with concrete plans for the future. GP spokesperson Nathan Grant said that in preparation for the forthcoming municipal elections the party would be opening two offices in the next three months.

As for the Soccer Party (SP), uncertainty seems to be the keynote. Possibly in line with the field-day newspaper cartoonists have been having showing SP offices enveloped in clouds of smoke and disconnected euphoria, the official SP phone number rang unanswered for days.

The final bill for the election has yet to come in but it is certain that it will be high. Although state funding of the small parties will be a relatively minor item in that bill, it is legitimate to ask whether such an item is justified. Most people agree that elections should not be limited to the major players and that there should be space for special interest groups. But surely these groups should have some sort of proven track record and constituency before they receive public funds? ■