

## Introductory essay:

### Contact

On 8 February 1958 Patrick Duncan, son of the former Governor-General of South Africa, and his wife Cynthia launched *Contact*, a fortnightly news magazine in support of the Liberal Party of South Africa. The name had been used by Liberal Party for an internal party journal, then renamed Liberal Opinion. The Duncans set up Selamela Publications as proprietors and appointed a board of directors, all of them Liberals - they included Alan Paton, Jordan Ngubane and Walter Stanford MP - and engaged George Clay as editor, though he was in line for a possible appointment as Africa correspondent of the London Observer. Eulalie Stott set up the administration in Cape Town and *Contact* appeared in good professional style in time for the 1958 General Election in which the Liberal Party was fielding candidates. Duncan's early hope of broadening *Contact's* political base was lost when both Chief Lutuli, President of the ANC, and Professor Z.K. Matthews refused Selamela directorships. *Contact* got away to a flying start nevertheless.

All this changed dramatically when the third issue, on 8 March 1958, ran a profile which lavishly praised Piet Beyleveld, Congress of Democrats (COD) official, Treason Trialist and a candidate for a 'Coloured Representative' seat in Parliament (for which Paton and Duncan had both refused nomination, on principle). Duncan's anger was at Clay's breach of their agreement that he would neither favour nor attack the crypto-Communist COD. An emergency board meeting led to the resignation of the directors. Clay left to join the Observer (he was killed by a landmine in the Congo a few years later) and Duncan took over as editor, without Clay's paid assistants. Peter Hjul, Randolph Vigne, Joe Daniels and later Timothy Holmes, all became board members.

The professionalism of Clay and his staff was lost but was replaced by an exciting populism that made *Contact* a strong rival to the COD-supporting *New Age*. *Contact* was alone among South African newspapers in reporting African politics almost as comprehensively as the home variety. Numbers of sales agents and copies sold north of the Limpopo and in the then South West Africa rose steadily and made occasional leaps, such as when the entire Devlin Report, which heralded Malawi's independence, was issued as a supplement. South African reports revealed the coming storm in the Transkei and followed political trials covered sketchily in the national press. *Contact* had a popular columnist in Lewis Nkosi and ran book and arts pages that added a less political readership to the growing sales motivated by the 'wind of change' (Duncan's conversation with Harold Macmillan in Cape Town was a scoop of the time).

Always his own man, Duncan gave great offence, with his leading article calling on Chief Lutuli to remove the Communist plank in his platform (he was later to serve 22 days in gaol for refusing to reveal the source of a report that the underground CPSA had elected a new central committee). His support for the ANC's 'Africanists', soon to form the Pan-Africanist Congress, was controversial too but gave *Contact*, and Duncan himself, a trusted role when the PAC launched its 'positive action campaign' in March 1960 and in the post-Sharpeville and Langa emergency. This was *Contact's* finest hour, when the clamp-down on political reporting was defied and *Contact* was alone in covering the PAC campaign and the emergency. The issue featuring the march of 40,000 African protesters into central Cape Town, led by the young student Philip Kgosana, who had been a *Contact* sales agent, broke all sales records.

A heavy price was paid. Duncan was brought to court but the fine was quickly raised from subscribers and from Canon Collins's Christian Aid. Confiscation of copies and legal costs created financial problems, staved off by funding from David Astor, editor and proprietor of the Observer. Inevitably, in March 1961 came a banning order, under the Suppression of Communism Act (ironic in view of Duncan's sustained attack on Communist since entering public life in the early 1950s). He escaped confinement to his home district near Cape Town, drove overnight to Lesotho (where he had served as a judicial commissioner) and ran *Contact* from a house in Maseru.

As Duncan moved closer to the PAC he set up his base in the mountains and allowed his Cape Town colleagues to take over *Contact*, a shrunken, underfunded ghost of its former self. Its advertisers had fled but there was still a loyal readership. Vigne and Hjul were banned early in 1963, as were the succeeding editors and *Contact* entered its last phase.

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