

DR. VERWOERD'S EXAGGERATED VICTORY

(Revised from an article by Dr. R.R. Farquharson in the Financial Mail, October 27, 1961: the Editor has granted permission for the article to be reproduced in whole or in part with acknowledgment.)

Superficially, the 1961 election result was a triumph for both ends against the middle. The National Party gained two seats and achieved a substantial swing; the Progressives won Houghton and a degree of support which surprised even their friends; the Liberal Party saved a deposit and secured four-figure votes in two constituencies. These victories were all at the expense of the United Party which, assailed on two fronts, lost votes heavily and suffered a massive defeat.

Real Opposition

But the National Party's triumph has been exaggerated. Two factors must be considered. One has already been stressed by commentators: it is now faced by the rising strength of a real opposition, with a genuinely alternative policy, which in the long run will be far more effective in countering apartheid than the United Party ever could have been. The second, which seems to have been overlooked by the Press is that in spite of the increase in N.P. majorities, there has been a substantial fall in N.P. votes.

Headlines like "Nats gain many more votes" and comments like "How did the N.P., in an almost unique way, grow stronger -- and impressively stronger in terms of votes -- after having ruled S.A. for more than 13

years?" simply ignore the statistics. The National Party gained seats, increased majorities, increased its percentage of votes; but in absolute terms lost voting support.

Arguments about the total number of votes obtained by each party have been bedevilled by uncertainty regarding the votes to be imputed to uncontested seats. But the referendum has given a reasonable reliable indication of how such constituencies would have behaved. All one needs to do is to assume that the swing in uncontested constituencies would have been the same as in contested ones. On this simple and not very controversial assumption, the nation-wide totals of votes for each party can be calculated.

Take, then, the constituencies in which there were straight fights in 1961 between the National Party and the United Party or the National Union. Exclude all U.P.-Progressive or U.P.-Liberal fights.

N.P. lost Voters

The swing in these constituencies, as calculated by the South African Press Association, is $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. since the referendum. Therefore, since the "Yes" vote in the referendum was 52.3 per cent., the N.P. vote in the country is now about 55.8 per cent. of voters. But what

number of actual votes can be imputed to the N.P. in this election? It is a matter of simple arithmetic:

1960: 52.3% of 90.3% of 1,800,848 electors = 850,458

1961: 55.8% of 77.75% of 1,823,000 electors = 790,899.

Thus the National Party, though its percentage has increased, has lost nearly 60,000 voters. The only reason this has not been apparent is that the U.P. has lost even more:

1960: 47.7% of 90.3% of 1,800,848 electors = 774,775

1961: 44.2% of 77.75% of 1,823,000 electors = 626,483.

U.P. Abstentions

Thus, where the Nationalists have lost nearly 60,000 voters, the U.P. has lost more than 150,000. The N.P.'s victories over the U.P., as well as the overall swing in percentage votes, appear to have been due not to any significant number of voters changing their minds, but rather to a vast number deciding to abstain. Few former U.P. supporters voted for the N.P. -- large numbers abstained.

Likewise, many former N.P. supporters could not face voting U.P. -- they, too, expressed their dissatisfaction by abstaining. In 1960, only 9.7 per cent. of the electorate abstained; in 1961 the percentage was more than double: 22.25 per cent.

So great a number of abstentions is unprecedented -- in 1958, abstentions were only 8.4 per cent. Exhaustion at voting three times in four years is not enough to explain so

great a change. Rather it indicates a great hesitancy among those who, till now, have reliably voted U.P. They have lost confidence in the U.P. The last thing they want to do is vote N.P., or even National Union. In most constituencies they have no opportunity to vote Progressive, so they abstain.

Paradoxically, the effect of these abstentions has been to increase Nationalist majorities. But these increased majorities are in no way indicative of increased support for the National Party. They can be completely explained as abstentions by former U.P. voters; and thus, very paradoxically indeed, it is the Progressives who can take most comfort from these increased majorities.

Moral Triumph

The moral triumph of the Progressives needs no emphasising. Their total vote, plus that of the Liberals, was more than 70,000 -- close enough to the 73,000 "Yes" majority at the referendum to make it clear that Liberal and Progressive sentiments now inspire enough electors to give the Progressive Party pivotal importance. In the Johannesburg area, no U.P. majority over a Progressive exceeded three figures. Only a very slight change in opinion could give the Progressives half-a-dozen MPs.

Furthermore, the election has achieved something just as important -- it has made progressive opinion respectable for the first time in South Africa. The support of the Rand Daily Mail throughout

the campaign and of the Star in its final stages, the results in all Johannesburg's wealthiest and socially most desirable areas have made voting Progressive what Nancy Mitford would call a "U-indicator". Upper-class usage has been vindicated by upper-class practice; the opinion-leaders have voted Progressive, and the spread of their sentiments to the U.P.'s main roots of strength, the middle-income English-speaking voters, will follow.

Radical Platform

The last time the Liberals fought Hillbrow (Leslie Cooper, 1954) they got 669 votes; in 1958 their vote reached four figures in only one seat out of the three they contested. Since then their policy has become much more advanced. That, fighting on a platform of "One man, one vote", Mary Walker could get 1,300 votes in Hillbrow, and Randolph Vigne 1,100 in so difficult a constituency as Constantia, indicates that the Liberals, whose policy in 1953 was about what the Progressive policy is now, have gained rather than lost support in spite of adopting an uncompromising policy of universal suffrage. The Progressives have their feet on the same road -- and it seems plausible that as they follow the Liberals along it, their support will grow greater, not less.

Sieg zum Tode

The National Party is celebrating its victory. In 1942, when the German Army was celebrating its Russian triumphs, a catchphrase in Germany

was "Wir siegen uns zum Tode" (We are winning ourselves to death).

This election has, in large measure, killed the United Party (though it may be a long time dying). But, if having held an election eighteen months early to ensure the most favourable result, the National Party can do no better than lose nearly 60,000 voters -- then, perhaps, another "victory" would kill it as well.

L I B E R A L O P I N I O N :

At its 1961 National Congress, the Liberal Party of South Africa decided to produce a regular commentary on South African and African affairs.

It is being sent to South African and oversea newspapers, to the representatives of foreign governments, to the United Nations, to members of the Liberal Party itself, and to any individuals or organizations, in South Africa or oversea, who would like to receive it.

The venture is being modestly launched, but it is the editors' hope that they may be able to improve the quality of the production shortly, as well as to increase the frequency with which the journal is to appear.

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