

INDUSTRY AND INTELLECT ARE NOT ENOUGH

Paul B. Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial segregation and South African liberalism* (Ravan Press, 1984).

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LEGAL DEPOSIT

'South African liberalism', writes Dr. Rich, 'has for the most part been the political expression of a small body of white educationalists, philanthropists, missionaries and social workers who have been concerned to alleviate the harsh economic and social consequences of industrialisation in a racially divided society. Although the South African liberal tradition from the time of Union in 1910 has taken over a fairly cohesive body of political values — freedom of expression, the parliamentary franchise and individual rights transcending racial or religious affiliation — from the nineteenth-century Cape, it has been unsuccessful in translating these into a political programme that had real impact on the body politic' (p. 123).

This is a recognisable summary of what most liberals would probably defend, and of the limited extent of their success, but it comes as a bit of a surprise in the last chapter of a book which has far more to do with the failure of the liberals to project these values than it has with the failure of the society to assimilate them.

The liberals are not always as easy to define as a group as our author would perhaps have liked; but he writes mainly of the Joint Councils, the Institute of Race Relations, the white Natives' Representatives, the Liberal Party, and — finally — the Christian Institute. Dr. Rich is fairly explicit in his estimate of the cumulative extent of their failure. They were unable, he states to emulate the United States and project their values as a universal standard (the extent to which this was achieved in the higher courts, if not the lower, being ignored). They were driven to make an accommodation with white segregationist thinking, with which they at first identified (e.g. Brookes), later accepted with some distaste (e.g. Hoernle), and eventually rejected but without proposing an agreed alternative programme in its place.

Because they failed to project a comprehensive political programme which offered blacks an acceptable place in society, they gradually lost their early following among the politically deprived, ceasing to be able to co-opt them after the 1920s, and running into stiff opposition from the 1940s. This was because they never reached agreement over the political role of blacks, some liberals taking a surprisingly lukewarm stance over the crucial representation bill of 1936, while liberals as a whole failed to reach a proper accommodation with African demands either during the political crisis of 1946-8 or after the Nationalist victory in 1948.

Liberals also followed divided counsels as a result of the changing insights of anthropologists in the 1920s and 1930s, tending at first to see cultural separation of the races as desirable, but opting at a later stage for assimilation (on the white man's terms, of course).

Liberals were also divided in their economic prescriptions, sometimes devoting their energies to the reserves and ignoring the problem of the towns; sometimes accepting the assurance of the neo-classical economists that market forces would remove the injustice of segregation, but sometimes feeling bound to recommend interference with those forces on the ground that they could not be relied on to do this.

CONCLUSIONS

The book ends with a fistful of conclusions which were no doubt intended to startle the bourgeois, like the question-begging reference at p. 129 to the 'survival' of the Liberal Party's 'Whiggish belief in the potential of Westminster-type constitutional systems' in the 1950s' at a time when 'constitutionalism was still an important political creed' (as if it does not matter today). This is linked with a suggestion over the page that 'an essential moral pillar of South African liberalism began to crumble in the 1960s' after the abolition of the Natives' Representatives and the banning of the congresses (as if the moral standing of liberalism was any way diminished by an arbitrary attack on its principles.) Ultimately, after the dissolution of the Liberal Party, 'with no coherent political base left, the rhetoric of liberalism increasingly took on the mantle of a charade, full of sound and fury but signifying very little' (p. 133), as if the intrinsic worth of that 'rhetoric' was properly determined by those who chose to destroy its base.

For all the loose statements and stylistic lapses in this poorly proof-read book, it is nevertheless a tight-packed study, and it is clear that Dr. Rich has read widely and deeply into the literature associated with liberalism in this century, and he has a number of stimulating — sometimes provocative — passages about the ideas and outlook of leading liberals. Edgar Brookes the Natalian is there,

in the shadow of sugar and Shepstone, convincingly converting from segregation in 1927 (p. 33), almost unbelievably devious and careerist in 1936-7, and closer to Heaton Nicholls than I imagined possible, but must

now believe (p. 65), coldly activist rather than passionately conciliatory in 1946-7, which I certainly do not believe (pp. 102-7), and with not a suggestion of the Christian conviction which those who knew him recognised so clearly. William Ballinger seems to start too buoyantly, in view of his early quarrel with Kadalie, but is subsequently cut down to size – credibly – when measured against Max Gordon and the flamboyant Hymie Basner. What is much harder to pass over is the relatively slight attention paid to his wife, who had a much closer relationship with her constituents – on the evidence of her massive constituency correspondence – than Rich allows, and whose activities as a parliamentarian before 1948, and likely influence on Smuts during the difficult negotiations leading up to the Fagan Report do not reflect a person ‘taken very much unawares by events’ so much as an alert mind weighing the limited possibilities of the situation and opting for a course which she recognised as no more than a strategy to buy ten years for real reform to take root.

Hoernle, by contrast, is handled in a few deft strokes, his honest pessimism properly stressed and accounted for,

and his ability to confuse his liberal successors and provide escape routes for their later governmental opponents well set out (pp. 66-73). Similarly, the insight shown with regard to Leo Marquard’s quality of mind is appreciated by this reader.

The overall impact of the book is uneven. It is the insufficiently imaginative work of an intellectually sensitive mind, and clearly a product of immense industry. The topic is not an easy one. The temptation to assume that the liberals were wrong, or hypocritical, or victims of some kind of false consciousness, would not be easy to avoid if the only alternative were to see them as the only ones in step. But the issues were far more complex than that, and at least the stage needs to be set fairly for them. Thus the author’s awareness of the power of Afrikaner nationalism is greater than the solitary reference in the index suggests; but he hardly concerns himself at all with the liberals’ confrontation with their most immediate political rivals, and that is to throw the whole liberal-black relationship under a distorting lens. With a lot more about white power, and a bit more about the liberal conscience, this could have been an important book. □

by YUSSUF BHAMJEE

UNFAMILIAR PERSPECTIVES

A Documentary history of Indian South Africans Edited by Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai (David Philip 1984)

This documentary history edited by Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai is most welcome as a contribution to understanding the history of Indian South Africans. In a sense it follows on ‘Documents in Indentured Labour’ by Y.S. Meer et al and reminds one of the excellent collection of political documents of extra-parliamentary organisations in ‘From Protest to Challenge’, edited by Karis and Carter.

While the sample of documents put together by Bhana and Pachai speak solely from an Indian perspective, they are in a sense, making up for the lack of insight into this area of the history of South Africa. However the documents ultimately transcend this limited perspective by

showing that the political evolution of this group of people cannot be divorced from the political evolution of other Blacks.

Although some of the documents are anecdotes, they give an account of the socio-economic, political and cultural experience of a ‘non-white’ group rejected by both the English and Afrikaner sections of the white dominant group. As a result of this rejection, Indian South Africans were forced to develop a broader political consciousness and came to see themselves as part of the wider Black collectivity. The continuous threat of repatriation, the imposition of the £3.00 poll tax, the immigration laws, forced segregation, the denial of economic opportunities and the withdrawal of political and trading rights forced them to develop, through political struggle, a common cause with other ‘non-white’ South Africans.

This development, as the documents show, involved a gradual process. When Indians were denied equal status