

THE 1974 ELECTION —

Some Personal Reflections

by DAVID WELSH

To many people, who dismiss the relevance of 'White' politics, it was either a non-event or irrelevant. For those of us who participated in it the results were beyond all expectations. No-one expected the Progressives to get more than two new seats at the most. Six was quite overwhelming. And with the by-election in Pinelands coming up (as a result of Mr. Ossie Newton-Thompson's tragic death) there is every chance of making the tally seven, with the distinguished addition of Dr. Alex Boraine.

The election has spelled the doom of the United Party. Wracked by savage internal fighting and hamstrung by incomprehensible and unworkable policies, it took hard blows in the election. Frankly, I'm not sorry. The election propaganda of most of their candidates was a disgraceful exercise in swart gevaar, rooi gevaar and other non-issues, which made it impossible to conduct a reasonable campaign in which the merits of rival policies were thrashed out.

The United Party, as presently constituted, has little to offer South Africa. It has traded on the traditional loyalties of thousands of its supporters and has done precious little to educate them in the realities of the South Africa of 1974. The most damning indictment of the United Party's role in this period is the way in which it has shamefully tried to outbid the Nationalists in the market for the most reactionary votes, by appealing to the worst instincts of voters.

The Progressives are entitled to some controlled euphoria, but at the same time they are well aware that the election brought fresh gains to the Nationalists. It is perhaps true that electorally speaking the Nationalists are impregnable; but it is equally true that they are not impervious to change.

The Progressives' hope is that a hard-hitting opposition group can force the Government to face issues and have them thrashed out in Parliament in a way that has not been seen for a long time. At least this will have some educative effect on White opinion and may have some effect on the Nationalists themselves.

I don't think anyone considers that Helen Suzman's incredibly brave stand has been completely without effect on the Nationalists. Surely it is not too much to hope that the addition of five colleagues will increase this effect.

I have never believed that politics is a 'zero-sum' game, i.e. one in which the winner takes all. Beneath the vigour of interparty strife the parties influence one another as well. A strong verligte opposition in Parliament, with equally strong backing outside Parliament could have the effect of pulling the centre of gravity of the Nationalists perceptibly leftwards until a point is reached when a genuine accommodation between Black and White can be reached.

Few people of any political persuasion think that the South African government can proceed indefinitely in its unbending way. Change must come. It has marginally come already. The role of the opposition is to prepare Whites to share power and to accustom them to the idea that racial discrimination is doomed.

It is one encouraging fact that virtually all of the H.N.P. candidates lost their deposits; not one of the Progressive candidates did. The success of the Progressive Party will breed further success and a lot of alienated, disenchanted or depressed people are going to be given new hope that there are positive ways of working for change.

Working for change involves at least three inter-related tasks: first, presenting a critique of the existing social order; secondly, presenting an alternative view of an open society in which adequate protection for minority groups is provided; and thirdly, ensuring as far as we humanly can that the polarities between Black and White are contained within manageable bounds. Of course, the latter task is a virtual impossibility if the thrust of official policies is continually towards polarization. But there are private associations that can help to mitigate this effect.

The biggest and potentially most effective of these private associations is, of course, the Church. Nearly all the churches are multi-racial associations: they have the heavy responsibility of keeping alive the social tissue on which a new society might be built. Put in another way, the point is that if the racial cleavage goes right through the society and eliminates any cross-cutting ties, as in a multi-racial association, the chances of any future reconciliation are seriously lessened.

The message of the election is that at least a beachhead has been established in Parliament. A significant minority of the electorate has voted for the ending of racial discrimination. These gains must be consolidated and expanded. A revitalized Progressive Party can do a lot to bring about change.□