

# WHITE POLITICS: a post-election assessment

How does white and especially Afrikaner-Nationalist politics shape up in the aftermath of the 1987 election? Appearances may be deceptive, in this case as well. The outcome of the election has proved a cruel blow to those who had been working for a general realignment in white politics and who thought they saw the signs that at long last the monolithic power of the National Party was beginning to crumble. Instead the National Party maintained and even consolidated its massive parliamentary majority and, somewhat unexpectedly, it was the more liberal opposition parties which could not hold their own in some of their traditional stamping grounds. Natal, for the first time ever, also elected a Nationalist majority, giving the NP a clean sweep of all four provinces and, following the election, it was the PFP, not even the official opposition any more, whose long term prospects looked very dim indeed. In short, the NP's hold on white politics had proved as strong as ever since coming to power in 1948.

But we should beware of jumping to conclusions. A decade of "reform" – politics has certainly brought home the truth of the old adage that **the more things change, the more they stay the same**. Sometimes, though, the converse may also hold: no change, or the appearances of it, can be just a front while crucial underlying changes are in fact taking place. The bare statistics of the NP's sustained parliamentary majority does not tell the whole story. Indeed, it is arguable that the National Party which has achieved such a massive victory in the 1987 white election is no longer the same National Party, or even the same **kind** of party, as the NP of 1948, 1960 or 1977.

This goes much deeper than the evident ideological shifts which have taken place in the NP since the days of Verwoerdian hegemony. Indeed, it may be misleading to continue to focus on the more pragmatic ideological stances of the current generation of NP-leaders: the main dynamic of the PW Botha "reform" – administration has already been spent. The 1987 election should properly be viewed in the context of the second State of Emergency, that is, in the light of the massive coercive clampdown with which the government responded in mid-1986 to the sustained political protests and insurrection that had swept the townships since September 1984. It was the NP government's hard line on security, rather than its more pragmatic stance on race and apartheid issues, which was so strongly supported by the majority of white voters. Fittingly President Botha interpreted the outcome of this "whites only" -election, held during a national state of emergency, as a mandate for the government to act against extra-parliamentary opposition and resistance.

Of course the split with the rightwing faction of Dr. Treurnicht in 1982, which led to the founding of the Conservative Party, was largely ideologically inspired. And the CP continues to project itself as the guardian of the

Verwoerdian ideological heritage. But too much should not be read into the fact that the rightwing parties managed to get some 26% of the vote. This is less than half of the electoral support which the NP mobilized for similar ideological positions only twenty years ago, while the economic and political condition of the mid-80s must be regarded as highly favourable to any rightwing opposition movement in white politics. That the rightwing parties did not succeed in doing much better than they did in this election is a further indication of the general decline in the significance of ideological factors.

What has happened to the NP, then, is not so much an ideological shift but a substantial change in the social composition and the character of its electoral support. Just who voted for the NP in 1987 as compared to, say, 1977? To start with, there has been a substantial increase of non-Afrikaner support for the NP. A detailed analysis of the electoral patterns must still be made, and from the nature of the case it will not be possible to calculate any very exact figures, but it is clear that country-wide the NP must have attracted well over 50% of English-speaking support. This includes substantial numbers of former PFP-voters, in confirmation of a similar trend in the 1983-referendum. Regionally the NP has finally managed to break through in the remaining non-Afrikaner ethnic strongholds in Natal, the Eastern Cape and the inner city of Johannesburg. And in social terms the PFP has been reduced to upper-middle class constituencies with the NP sweeping the board in English-speaking middle class and lower-middle class constituencies.

It is of course nothing new for the NP to attract substantial support from English-speaking voters. Even in 1966, with Dr. Verwoerd as leader, the NP achieved almost 40% of the total vote in the English-speaking stronghold of Natal. But in the past such non-Afrikaner support for the NP was grafted on to a solid core of ethnically mobilized Afrikaner nationalists. Up to the election of 1977, and following the demise of the United Party with its traditional hold on the residual Afrikaans "**Bloed Sappe**", the NP could count on the vote of well over 80% of Afrikaners. Moreover, due to the way in which the NP was meshed into a wide network of Afrikaner cultural and community organisations, ranging from the Dutch Reformed Church to the Broederbond, this was a particularly reliable and solid political constituency. To the majority of Afrikaner nationalists voting for the NP was part of a cultural movement and of a way of life: switching your vote to another party could be a traumatic experience. The NP certainly did not spurn the support from such floating voters as might come its way, but its political base was of a very different kind. Moreover a tightly knit structure of local branch committees, regional organisation, provincial and federal congresses and an

active spirit of internal democracy, mediated by both the parliamentary caucus and the Broederbond, ensured that the party leadership often was in close touch with its grass roots support while also allowing for some input by ordinary members in party policy. Despite the formidable presence of such towering figures as Malan, Strydom and Verwoerd, the NP's course was plotted, in a real sense, by a collective leadership.

In more than one way this would no longer be a valid description of the NP in the 1980s. The Afrikaner nationalist movement has lost much of its ideological fervour as well as its social cohesion, and the NP can no longer count on the overwhelming support of Afrikaner voters. Already in the 1981 election there were substantial defections to the HNP, especially in the Transvaal and amongst Afrikaner workers and lower middle class voters, as well as a significant rise in abstentions. The HNP did not win a single seat but gained some 13% of the total poll. The rightwing split from the NP in 1982 further accelerated this trend : the indications were that nation-wide Afrikaner support for the NP was down from over 80% to under 60% with an even lower figure in the Transvaal. This picture has essentially been confirmed by the outcome of the 1987 election. Of particular note is the fact that in Transvaal the NP drew well below 50% of Afrikaner support, while a majority of those who did vote for the NP were probably non-Afrikaners. This is a far cry from the Transvaal NP of Strydom and Verwoerd and, in fact, in some ways it may be closer to the electoral profile of the old United Party! In other regions though, and especially in the Cape, there has been much greater continuity in the NP's political base and profile.

Concurrently with these changes in the ethnic make-up of the NP's electoral support there have been extensive changes in its internal dynamics and organisation. The political significance of both the Broederbond and of the parliamentary caucus has, in different ways, been severely eroded. Provincial and federal congresses are increasingly manipulated and stage-managed so as to provide "mandates" for policy initiatives by the leadership rather than providing any real opportunity for democratic accountability or grassroots input. With few exceptions party membership at branch and constituency level is much less tightly organised than it used to be, while the leadership has become increasingly remote, inaccessible and isolated. If anything, the leadership is now meshed into the military, security and technocratic bureaucracies, while the media, and especially TV, has become the crucial means for mobilising electoral support for the party. The 1983-referendum, was in all probability the first national electoral contest in which television played a decisive role. (Significantly, and almost without precedent, NP party organisers were way below the mark in their predictions of the extent of the "Yes"-majority). This trend has been continued in the 1987 election. According to many accounts it was above all the media presentation on security issues during the last few weeks which rallied large numbers of floating voters to support the NP. In short, the organisational cohesion and relative internal democracy of the old-style NP has given way to a less stable media-influenced plebiscitary endorsement.

It is in this context, too, that the other main development of the 1987 election, namely the rise of the "Independents" and the defection of the NP's academic support base, should be seen. The change, in terms of the 1984-Constitution, to an executive presidency has also affected the nature of the NP-leadership itself. Arguably the executive presidency has meant the end of the NP's collective leadership in any broad sense. Parliamentary backbenchers, Afrikaner academics and business leaders increasingly found that they no longer had the ready access to the leadership to which membership of the "inner circles" had accustomed them. More often than not the blame was put on Mr Botha's personality, and there was much resentment of his "management style", but in truth these were symptoms of underlying structural changes. The crunch came when a group of Stellenbosch academics, used to having insider access and proud of a longstanding tradition of "loyal dissent", found that the party leadership both resented their critical suggestions and were not prepared to make any gestures to accommodate these. And so, while the media persuaded large numbers of whites who had never been fervent Afrikaner nationalists or even party members to vote for the NP, the insider Afrikaner academics who had at long last become frustrated by the failures of the party's internal democratic processes went the other way and rallied around Denis Worrall and the Independents. When it came to counting the votes the intellectuals were, of course, very much in the minority but in the long run their defection may prove of greater significance to the future of the party than the media-induced support of any number of floating voters. (It remains to be seen to what extent the NP will make special efforts to draw its academic critics back into the fold – and how they will respond to such overtures.)

On closer analysis the NP's massive electoral victory in the 1987 election may thus be less solid than it would at first sight appear to be. Indeed there may well be circumstances, especially with the media taking a different line, in which a substantial number of those who voted for the NP this time round would be quite prepared to switch their allegiances once more. But in which direction? The Conservative Party may still have some growth potential among more conservative Afrikaner NP-members, but it is difficult to see how it will be able to attract the non-Afrikaner floating vote. The PFP is once again close to being marginalised, and the Independents have a long way to go to be anything but marginal. For the time being, the NP remains the only game in town – and it is in effective control of the media. Short of a major crisis in the contest of a rivalry for succession to the leadership, should P.W. Botha decide to retire, the NP looks set to continue its dominance of white politics well into the next decade.

The real challenges to NP-rule, of course, should not be sought in the "whites-only" parliamentary arena at all. Increasingly it is the extra-parliamentary forces which provide any effective opposition and resistance. It is to this confrontation that we must look for significant developments. It is to be hoped that this will take the form of political realignments rather than coercive showdowns.□