

HOFMEYER REVALUED

1948 - 1973

by Edgar Brookes

It is twenty-five years since Jan Hofmeyr died, and perhaps it is time for us to set in its true perspective and revalue what he did. This may be a work of supererogation. Even Alan Paton never wrote a better book than Hofmeyr, and his praise for Hofmeyr's courage and loyalty to duty cannot be surpassed. Bearing these thoughts in mind we may, however, still try to estimate Hofmeyr's permanent value in South African Politics.

When the United Party considered throwing him to the wolves in 1948 – perhaps only his death stopped this ignoble process – it sold its soul and its future. It has never recovered. This in itself suggests that Hofmeyr's life had more than perishable values. We must always remember that he died twelve years before the decolonisation of Africa began. Can we rightly judge him by our own hindsight? To do this is to commit a fault of which historians, if they make moral judgments at all, must beware.

What would Hofmeyr's attitudes and policies be if he were alive today? It is an almost impossible question. He would be nearly eighty. He would have long survived the two biggest influences in his life – General Smuts and his mother. If he were alive now, he would, I submit, be a convinced and decided liberal, but neither radical nor revolutionary. Is there scope in 1973 for convinced, active and courageous liberals who do not flirt with violent revolution? if so, there would be scope for Jan Hofmeyr.

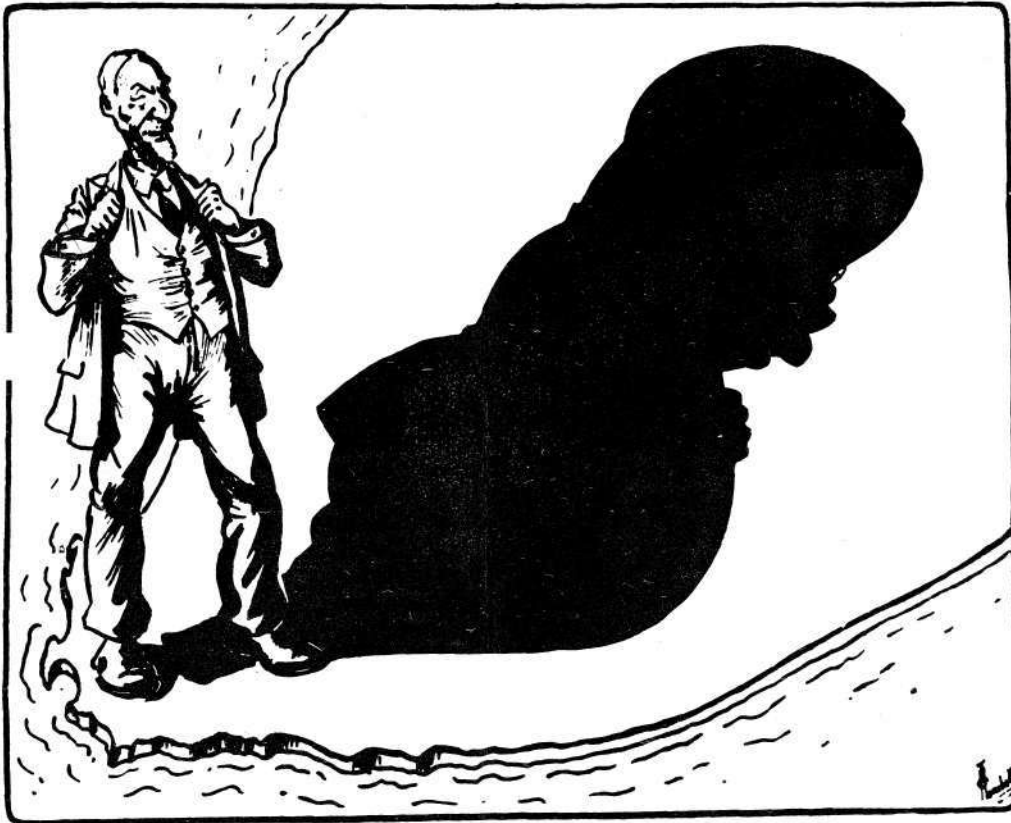
Let us try to sum up those things which are of permanent value in him. One of these is his conviction that all race policies should be tested by the touchstone of moral principle. When one adds to his deep morality his supreme clarity of intellect which scorned to deceive others and did not often allow self-deception, one realises that here he dealt the greatest blow to upholders of baasskap, apartheid, separate development or any other term which veils the policy of maintaining white existence, comfort and essential supremacy at any cost.

White South Africa, particularly Afrikaans-speaking South Africa, sets immense store by moral values, and can only evade them by elaborate and systematic self-deception. This self-deception Hofmeyr found it hard to practice. Moreover to him moral principle meant more, much more, than political office. This he showed on more than one occasion in his public life, and though we might have chosen different issues as being the critical ones, there is no doubt that he was willing more than once to sacrifice a brilliant career for what he felt to be right. Such an attitude can never grow obsolete.

Hofmeyr was willing to do what he could, where he could, and when he could. He introduced the principle of a daily free meal for every African school-child, not deferring it until radical changes in the wage structure could achieve the same result. He introduced social pensions for black sufferers, even though he could not give them the same rates as the whites. Was he wrong in this?



Jan Hofmeyr.



Cartoon in 'Die Burger' on election day, 1948, entitled 'Smuts-Hofmeyr Verkeising.'

Differences of opinion still remain among those interested in liberal policies. And there are many who, though far from being Communists, tend to hold the Communist doctrine that reform is the enemy of revolution. It cannot be denied that some who take this line have worked it out and satisfied themselves that it is right. But for ardent and impatient youth it is an easy doctrine, for it enables one to feel heroic and superior, and dispenses with the mental wear and tear of thinking out the details of reform, and the patient labour of carrying them out. No more un-British doctrine has ever been formulated. All British history and experience is against it, and it must be stated emphatically that Hofmeyr, whose hero was John Bright and who drew much inspiration from nineteenth century British history, would have been against it even in the world of 1973. He believed not only in the inevitability, but almost in the desirability, or gradualism.

But that his end in 1973 would have been short of complete freedom must be doubted. Even in 1948 he put no limit to African progress, and believed that you could set no bounds to the future. All his reverence for Smuts, all his compromising, all his talk about

"trusteeship" never prevented those clear eyes from looking into the future, nor that honest mind from treating any immediate solution as final.

He was essentially law-abiding, and there is nothing in his life to suggest that, even in 1973, he would have approved of bloody revolution nor of any direct action that moved in that direction. His essential Christianity — and he was emphatically, like Gladstone and Bright, a Christian statesman — the very Christianity which led him to challenge the accepted views of die-hard Nationalism and the comfortable upholding of the status quo, also made him shrink from the pain, bloodshed and almost inevitable injustices of revolution.

Despite the many ways in which the insights of 1948 lag behind the insights of 1973, it must be claimed that Hofmeyr's exaltation of moral principles and his practical reformism must inevitably lead to the Liberal solution of South Africa's problems. Had he lived until 1973, he would have been a Liberal without question. But for good or bad he would not have believed in blowing up policemen or even pylons.□