

REVIEW IN "THE WEEKENDER"

White liberals have quite normally been the object of bitter criticism in South Africa. The Boers hated Dr Philip for preaching against slavery, just as English jingoes loathed Colenso for taking the part of the Zulus. Alan Paton was repeatedly attacked and ridiculed for his views, while Helen Suzman had to put up, even in parliament, with remarks such as %Carl Marx was also a Jew+. Those who spent such energy in attacking Tony Leon seldom reflected on what historical company they were putting themselves in. Future generations may find such attacks almost incomprehensible for on any sober count he is by far the most successful leader the South African liberal tradition has had. One has to stand back and recall just how few would have bet on a liberal party becoming the principal Opposition in a universal suffrage polity here, and how many, after 1994 had nearly wiped the DP out, thought the liberal tradition might not survive at all.

Leon's memoirs are fuller and franker than is common. Early on he talks of %the sort of muscular, no-nonsense liberalism which I thought was crisply clarifying, as opposed to much of the sentimental hand-wringing which often passed for modern liberalism+. Hence, of course, all the highly personalised criticism of Leon for being too abrasive. Often what this came down to was the new South Africa involved a great deal of myth-making and pretending and Leon was not one to pretend. He points out, for example, how Selma Browde, an ANC member was made the IEC's chief returning officer for greater Johannesburg in 1994 . an obvious one party state foul that, as we all know, was followed throughout the country. Similarly, he points out that the %negotiations miracle+ was really a fraud, for it was really all one-way concessions by the NP. He recounts how one Israeli cabinet minister, having been lectured about the %miracle+, replied that %We now know who to contact if we want to give up power. But that's not actually on our agenda.+ He also recounts Van Zyl Slabbert's verdict that what the negotiations really saw was the rich Afrikaners selling out the poor ones. This sort of truth-telling caused one journalist to accuse him of %spurning the rainbow nation+, while in 1999 Business Day said the %Fight Back+slogan was %off-key+. Not with the voters, though, who multiplied the DP vote six-fold. Leon also had a sense of humour and often joked at the new sacred cows. This was a serious problem. As another DP MP put it %Sensitivities to race are nowadays so great that irony is neither understood nor accepted+.

The central conundrum of this book is what on earth happened to Mbeki ? Before he became President Leon found him urbane, pleasant and human; afterwards, completely the opposite. When Leon crossed the floor of Parliament in 2004 to congratulate Mbeki on his re-election, Mbeki sent him a message that he should stay on his side of the floor and keep his hand to himself. As one reads of this and many other similar occasions one can only assume that there has, for some

time, been something seriously wrong with the President. Leon offers no answer but one suspects we will know soon enough.

Leon was often accused of racism, essentially because he refused to lie down before the ANC and because he accepted the logic of universal suffrage, which was that all votes are equal, be they of blacks, Indians, Jews or Afrikaners. The DP (and then DA) found it easier to gather in Afrikaner votes than black ones but its appeal was never race-based and one can hardly criticise a party for maximising its vote. Mandela was forthright about the fact that Leon had far more support among blacks than was at all visible.

When the Progs were formed back in 1959, Harry Oppenheimer, one of their major backers, explained his support by saying, of course they won't win many seats. But it is essential that the party exists to state liberal principles clearly and feed them into South Africa's bloodstream: slowly, the effect will be seen. This was extremely prescient: 35 years later both de Klerk and Mandela admitted that it was Helen Suzman's principles that had won through as the country adopted a liberal constitution. For those who wanted to see the country become a robust democracy, nothing was more important than that this steady infusion into the nation's bloodstream should continue . and this was exactly what Leon achieved. Imagine South Africa without the DA: a corrupt and criminalised one party state. Leon speaks of the DA as the %in blue line+between us and that and he is surely right. He writes of an Afrikaner woman who came over from the Conservative Party to the DP in 1999: %here's no place for the CP and its ideas in South Africa any more...we've got to find each other's hands and a way of holding them and of moving forward. And the DP gives us the best way of doing this.+That is, Leon won such people over to liberal ideas, an enormous achievement.

Leon tells us that he resigned partly because thirteen years as party leader was quite enough but also because of his pessimism over attracting more black votes, based upon a (highly questionable) analysis by Ryan Coetzee. This may, actually, have been wrong. South Africans are the most leader-directed electorate there is and currently Zuma has only 36% support. That is, he is rejected by half of the entire ANC electorate. Quite what this means for the future is, as yet, unclear but it should surely augur well for the Opposition. What is clear is that Leon did the heavy lifting, carrying the party through the most difficult phase of ANC ascendancy. This book is his not inconsiderable monument but, one suspects, the real record will be written in the election results a year and six years from now.

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