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"COLOURED POLITICS" IN SOUTH AFRICA:
THE QUISLINGS' TREK INTO THE ABYSS

By

Trevor Abrahams

Much of the international indignation at the abhorrent system of Apartheid in South Africa has focussed on the granite-like, unchanging nature of this racially ordered society; yet a closer look at its history reveals that a great deal of effort (largely by the government agencies) is spent at creating an image of change and moderation. Most of this effort can well be dismissed as 'window-dressing,' designed to placate or diffuse the growing international condemnation of South Africa's racial policies. However, the increasing unity and tenacity of the struggle against the Apartheid regime has thrown the South African authorities into a desperate scramble for a 'new political dispensation' to diffuse and shatter the growing black unity among the disenfranchised South Africans. While the still-born creation of the 'independent Bantustans' has done frightfully little to legitimize the long-range Apartheid blueprint set out by Verwoerd, the recent President's Council (P.C.) proposals¹ of Prime Minister P. W. Botha, more vividly reflects the desperate efforts of the regime to cling to its power and privilege in the face of growing Black opposition in South Africa today - as Dr. Allen Boesak commented on the P.C. proposals:

*The P.C. proposals are trying to coopt coloureds and Indians to make the Apartheid machine run more smoothly, and were a move by the government to meet the economic, military and political crisis it faces (SASPU National, March 1983). And now, all of a sudden, the government's problems have become our [the 'coloureds'] problems. Apartheid's crisis has become our crisis. All of a sudden we are told that we are no longer 'lepers', that we too are people with dignity that we "belong with" the whites.**

*New York Times, 2/23/83.

The significance of the P.C. proposals for 'coloured politics'² and the decision of some members of the "coloured" Labour Party** (L.P.)³ to participate in the P.C. must be seen in the context of the history (albeit inglorious) of 'coloured politics' in South Africa.

The proclamation of Ordinance 50 in 1828, abolishing the "Hottentot Laws," was significant in two respects: (i) it introduced the principle of legal equality before the law for all citizens of the Cape Colony as was reflected in the qualified male franchise (which resulted in, among others, "coloured" votes in Cape Town constituting some 20% of the electorate), (ii) it reflected not only the moral concerns of British liberalism, but as Trapido suggests it was also intended to address the numerical imbalance between English and Dutch in the colony at that time. The extension of the Cape franchise thus bore a highly manipulative element in the British colonial administration's efforts to woo the non-white support to counter the numerical clout of the Afrikaner settlers. This manipulative element was to recur throughout the history of the "coloured" franchise, though involving different puppeteers and adversaries. The 1828 franchise qualifications largely remained intact till 1910, though with Union, the qualified franchise immediately became the target of white political attack, led by the representatives of the ex-Boer republics. A series of discriminatory legislation ushered in by the Act of Union and during the period up to World War Two, systematically eroded the relative strength of these political rights in the Cape and Natal.⁴ For example, the South Africa Act 1909 (Act of Union) restricted the right to be elected to persons of "European Descent" only, the 1930 Women's Enfranchisement Act was only extended to White women; the 1931 Franchise Laws Amendment Act removed franchise qualifications for Whites only in the Cape and Natal (it had already been applied in the Transvaal and Orange Free State), and by 1945 it became compulsory for the registration of white voters, while similar requirements did not apply for "coloured" voters.

**The author is aware of the divide-and-rule political manoeuvres of the Apartheid system in its futile attempt to win acceptance in the world, by appearing to incorporate the "Coloured" people in its "parliamentary" System. But, given the complexity of the South African problem, it is necessary to analyse single elements which make up the totality of this problem, the intention being to bring about a clarity of vision of the issues involved. The Labour Party should be seen in this context, since its existence within the system makes it an objective accomplice in the criminal practices of the system, rendering it superfluous to condemn the party's actions. The contradictions of the Labour Party are therefore, in effect reflective of the contradictions of the Apartheid system itself. Ed., K.M.

However, it was the formation of the Coloured Advisory Council (C.A.C.) in 1943 by the Union Government which created the distinctive arena of 'coloured politics' as a political sphere formulated by successive White governments, as well as formenting the growth of vociferous opposition to such racially segregated politics among the disenfranchised. Thus, while some of the African Peoples Organization (A.P.O.)⁵ decided to split off and form the Coloured Peoples National Union in order to cooperate fully with the C.A.C. proposals as a means of "securing improved conditions for Coloureds,"⁶ the other major faction of the A.P.O. formed the famous Anti-C.A.C. Movement "to canalize all non-European sentiment and endeavour... into one mighty stream that would expunge from the statute book all discriminatory legislation."⁷ The battle lines were drawn and 'coloured politics' was irrevocably defined as collaborationist involving quislings⁸ who for whatever narrow personal, short-sighted or racial political aspirations, were seen as (political) 'sell-outs' by most of the disenfranchised. Their opposition thus mobilized on a non-racial, non-collaborationist platform, rejecting segregated political institutions and used the boycott of these institutions as their primary political weapon.

The success of the Anti-C.A.C. movement and the patently fraudulent and racist intentions of the white government resulted in the resignation en bloc in 1950 of even those quislings who had earlier seen themselves fit to participate in the C.A.C. The Nationalist Party which had obtained a narrow victory in the 1948 general elections, wasted no time in implementing its version of racial segregation. Legislation such as the Separate Representation of Voters Act, which provided for, among others, a separate voters' roll for "coloureds" in the Cape and Natal, was clearly bent on removing "coloured" input from White politics. Similarly, the decision in 1959 to create a Union Council for Coloured Affairs (U.C.C.A. consisting of 15 government nominees and 12 elected officials) as an advisory body, sought to retain 'coloured politics' as an arena discrete from the politics of the rest of the disenfranchised people of South Africa. Once again the strength of the Anti-C.A.C. movement frustrated these political designs of the Pretoria regime. Anti-U.C.C.A. and anti-government opposition caused the cancellation of elections forcing the Union government to appoint all the members of the U.C.C.A.

Notwithstanding these setbacks, Pretoria pursued its strategy for the "coloureds" with increasing vigour. Besides the more general forms of political repression, such as the infamous Repression of Communism Act, introduced at this time, Legislation such as the Prohibition of Political Interference Act of 1968 (prohibiting non-racial political parties), the Separate Representation of Voters' Amendment Act of 1968

(abolishing "coloured" representatives in the White parliament) and the Coloured Persons Representative Council Act of 1968, was designed to remove the "coloured" presence in White politics, as well as demarcating novel forms of segregated political activity. The creation of the CPRC and the CPRC offices (locally known as 'Uncle Tom's Cabin')⁹, once again aroused a massive anti-collaborationist movement among the very people the CPRC was suppose to serve.

While some parties and personalities who participated in the CPRC at its inception were closely aligned to previous quisling factions in 'coloured politics', the first CPRC election in 1969 was somewhat different, in that it included the Labour Party, whose avowed claim was the dismantling of the discriminatory racial order in South Africa (or at least in so far as it applied to the "Coloureds"). Despite the CPRC possessing some limited executive and legislative powers and notwithstanding the media and government-sponsored fanfare introducing the 1969 elections, the CPRC failed dismally in attracting popular support.¹⁰

The actual history of what locally in Cape Town became known as the 'Circus in Uncle Tom's Cabin' can only be described as a tragi-comedy. While the White government was forced to intervene in the 1969 elections via appointments to guarantee a pro-government majority in the CPRC, the Labour Party 'victory' in 1975 appeared increasingly hollow. And this was only logical, given the party's contradictory position of supposedly opposing Apartheid while de facto practicing segregated politics. The L. P. ultimately bogged down in a political morass of its own making, and, faced with an increasingly radicalized popular revolt in South Africa, decided to sabotage the CPRC and bring its operations to a halt. The L.P. leadership thus increasingly engaged in vicious attacks on the Apartheid government from the chambers of the CPRC of an order which many popular political figures in the community were certainly not free to do.

The Pretoria regime responded in its characteristically high-handed manner to such a "crisis" in 'coloured politics'. It simply appointed a political non-entity, Alethea Jansen, to administer the CPRC via the powers provided in the CPRC Amendment Act of 1975, while the L.P. opportunistically tried to sneak out of the back door of Uncle Tom's Cabin and rid itself of the odor of collaborationism which they had so strongly acquired during their sojourn in the CPRC. In fact, a number of L.P. members leapt bandwagon-fashion onto the groundswell of popular resistance which swept South Africa at this time, often incurring the wrath of the notorious South Africa Security Police. Police harassment, detentions and other brands of repression were soon used as an absolution for their

collaborationist sins. For example, lashing out at critics of his party's decision to embrace the P.C. proposals, David Curry, the National Chairman of the L.P., responded that "his party was not a sell-out one because, by way of example, the Rev. Allen Hendrickse ¹¹ had spent 60 days in detention in 1976."*

The constitutional proposals of Prime Minister P.W. Botha should thus be seen both in the context of the history of collaborationist/anti-collaborationist struggles around 'coloured politics' and the current political and economic crises facing the Pretoria regime. Politically the crisis has manifested itself in an ever-increasing unity and militancy among all the oppressed people in South Africa, particularly since the 1976 revolt. It has also been characterized by an unparalleled clarity of vision in the demands emanating from diverse sections of the disenfranchised, as Rev. Allen Boesak, echoing so many other Black leaders recently stated:

*The Black people of this country know what they want, and it is not this [P.C. proposals]. We shall not be satisfied until we have our full human rights... [which will be fought for] right here in this land by the suffering, struggling oppressed whose determination to be free shall not be undermined by the violence of Pretoria, nor by the thinly veiled cynicism of Washington.***

The decision of a faction of the L.P., ¹² led by Messrs David Curry and Allen Hendrickse, to accept the P.C. proposals does not even enjoy unanimous support within the L.P. Unless we assume this rediscovery of affection for Pretoria-defined 'coloured politics' to be solely motivated by opportunistic personal ambitions, we can only fully understand the seemingly absurd position ¹³ of the L.P. by recognizing that the very phenomenon of 'coloured politics' in South Africa is in crisis, a crisis it shares with its architects, the Pretoria minority regime. As Dr. Mohamed, chairman of the Ad-Hoc Anti-P.C. Committee stated.

I think that the Labour Party was faced with a problem at Eshowe. It was not sufficient just to reject the proposals. To gain credibility within the country it would have to throw its lot with the whole democratic struggle. And I think it has not got the stomach for

*Cape Herald, 2/5/83

**New York Times, 2/3/83

*that difficult struggle ahead. The easiest way out was to go in, to delude people and to say we are going in, in an attempt to produce changes from within.**

Thus in breath-taking about face, the L.P. has not only embarked on a discredited political course but clearly contradicts earlier positions on the P.C. proposals adopted by the L.P. For example, Rev. Hendrickse, referring to the P.C. proposals announced in 1980 stated that, "We would certainly reject such an arrangement. We would not accept any parliamentary system which excludes blacks. We want full and equal citizenship and nothing less will satisfy us."** He had also earlier said that the L.P. will all "remain loyal to the party executive's decision not to take part in the President Council unless certain conditions are met. Among these were that blacks be included and that such laws such as the Group Areas Act and Mixed Marriages Act be scrapped." David Curry's comment in the same report is even more damning, "I have no hesitation in saying that we will keep our word on this."***

Caught in the political quicksands stemming from their participation in the CPRC in the 1970's, the L.P. sought parasitically to attach itself to the popular uprisings which swept South Africa. It also attempted to participate in the extra-parliamentary South African Black Alliance, in order to retain its authenticity and credibility, producing, for the purpose, evidence of harassment of the party leaders by the Security police. The fickleness of this attachment to the popular causes could not, however, tide the L.P. over the current political crisis engulfing South Africa. That is, the very ground for 'coloured politics' has been increasingly carved away as the oppressed and disenfranchised people of South Africa see themselves struggling for a united and non-racial society. As the Rev. Allen Boesak addressing a congress called to form a United Democratic Front, to fight the government's reform initiatives declared,

*Most of the churches and all democratically minded organizations in our communities have unequivocally rejected the proposals, because we are all committed to a non-racial, unitary and democratic South Africa, these organizations must unite on this issue... and inform the people of the fraud that is to be perpetuated in their name.****

*Speak, March, 1983

**Argus, 9/22/80.

***Ibid.

****SASPU National, March, 1983

Ethnic or racially based politics has thus become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant to the contemporary struggle in South Africa.

However, it should come as no surprise that at this very moment when confronted with the demise of the terrain which in the past had constituted their stomping grounds, that the L.P. has now shed its radical veneer and exposed their anachronistic opportunism and racial political leanings. Personal ambition and opportunism have long been a part of the tradition of collaborationist politics and no doubt this stigma is as strong as ever in the L.P.'s decision. However, it can also be argued that the present course of Black opposition has increasingly sounded the death knell for 'coloured politics' per se, triggering the desperate scramble by these quislings for the latest offer the Massah in Pretoria has designed to frustrate the overthrow of the Apartheid regime.

The popular response to the L.P. decision has produced an unparalleled outburst of condemnation from a broad spectrum of the disenfranchised communities. As the SASPU National, reported in March, 1983,

The Labour Party is on the run. After the decision in Eshowe to "go inside", they have met with condemnation from all sides. The people's message has been blunt - you are sell-outs and stooges and you are not our leaders.

For example, the president of the Islamic Council of South Africa issued a statement that "Muslims would not allow themselves to be stampeded into organizing themselves on an ethnic basis. We stand for the abolition of privileges of any kind that are discriminatory. We demand full rights for everyone."* The Cape Areas Housing Association also condemned the L.P., stating that, "we believe this decision does not represent the views of the majority but only a small fraction of the so-called coloured community,"** while the Western Cape Civic Association was more scathing in its statement that "it came as no surprise that the L.P. reached the decision it did. It smacks of the opportunism that has characterized the L.P. and its allies."*** Similar statements have come from a vast range of

*Argus, 2/25/83.

**Cape Herald, 1/15/83.

***Ibid.

community organizations such as the Azanian Peoples Organization, the South African Council of Sport, the South African Black Alliance, the Federation of Cape Civics, the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association, etc. Not only has the negative response to the L.P.'s decision been widespread among community organizations, but the most dramatic development in South African politics, the growth of organized Black labour¹⁴ has produced unrelenting condemnation of the L.P. Most of organized Black labour has publically denounced the L.P. decision. For instance, a report in the Cape Times, titled "Row Between L.P. and Unions" reported that the Food and Canning Workers Union, which claims more than 100,000 "coloured" members, states that it was, "resolved to resist any attempt to mislead the people into accepting the government's constitutional proposals. We can't fight for the unity of all the workers on the factory floor and at the same time allow a constitutional dispensation which discriminates against people of different races and excludes the majority."*

More striking than these stated condemnations, has been the pattern of L.P. "report-back" meetings with its "constituents" conducted to sell the P.C. proposals. These meetings have been characterized by violent confrontations between L.P. members and anti-P.C. groups, often resulting in the L.P. summoning the South African Police to disperse their 'dissident constituents'. One group in the Transvaal, the Ad-Hoc Anti-P.C. Committee stated after the Police was called in that, "The L.P. now stands condemned for calling in the police to harass and disperse those opposing the constitutional proposals." As a local newspaper reported,

*The Labour Party could only hold such meetings with the backing of the South African Police...at the Eldorado Park meeting the police were out in force. Plain clothes, uniformed riot police, teargas - holding the community at bay.***

It also accused the L.P. of "encouraging racial hostility by advocating coloured nationalism" and claimed "it is ridiculous for the L.P. to claim it has the community's support when less than 150 people out of a population of approximately 90,000 in the Eldorado Park complex passed a vote of confidence in them."***

*Cape Times, 2/1/83.

**Speak, March, 1983.

***Star, 2/22/83.

In fact the violence accompanying the L.P.'s spreading the word of the new political dispensation has reached such levels that some of the planned meetings had to be cancelled and even more sinister, the Minister of Law and Order, Mr. Le Grange, in response to a suggestion by Mr. Jac Rabie, Transvaal leader of the Labour Party, has authorized the L.P. to form its own "military wing" to contain such violence during its campaign to sell the P.C. proposals. Not only does the L.P.'s resort to these tactics reflect the total bankruptcy of its program, but the introduction of such a coercive element as a vehicle for intimidation will probably alienate the Labour Party even further. The Labour Party has clearly set a course which inevitably will plunge it into the Abyss of infamy in South African politics. The sun is rapidly setting on the realm of 'coloured politics' and, like Bishop Muzorewa in Zimbabwe before independence, the L.P.'s efforts to carve out a slice of power and privilege which White South Africa has now decided to offer it, clearly identifies the L.P. with its Pretoria Massah and most certainly will relegate it to the "trash heap" of South African history.

NOTES

¹The president's council proposals would be based on a new constitution which would provide for a three chambered parliament - one for whites, one for coloureds and one for Indians, with representation at the ratio of 4:2:1 to ensure that the white vote is always decisive. The coloured and Indian chambers would deal only with 'matters of segmental concern'; the budget, foreign policy, defence and so on would be handled by joint sittings of the three chambers. Because of their numerical majority in this tricarmel government, the white chamber would always have the final say in decisions. But the real power would lie in an executive president, voted in by an electoral college representing the major parties in each parliamentary chamber. In effect this means the president will be elected by the National Party. A deadlock in parliament would be resolved by the president's council, of which 45 out of the 60 members will be white. As one speaker at a recent anti-P.C. meeting said, "these features ensure white domination and give coloureds and indians a mere spectator role in propping up the decisions of white executives. Together with other reforms disguised as meaningful change, this is the old, discredited and hated man called racial discrimination, Separate Development, Apartheid and Self Determination, washed, shaved and fitted out in new clothes." (SASPU National, Mach, 1983).

²The term 'coloured' in the South African context is widely viewed as derogatory or a white government-imposed system

of classifying and dividing the disenfranchised. We have thus placed it in quotation marks to draw attention to this connotation. However, the phrase 'coloured politics' is used here to refer specifically to that body of South African politics which implicitly or explicitly accepts the prevailing government system of classifying South Africa's population and actively pursues its political aspirations along these racial or ethnic lines.

³The Labour Party was formed in 1965 to contest the Coloured Peoples Representative Council elections. The founding constitution stated that the party would "strive for the effective participation of all workers (later amended to 'people' in the government of the country, by participation in the councils of the nations". A clause saying the party would strengthen the Trade Union movement was also later removed. A clause which still remains reads: "The party is dedicated to vigorously opposing communism in all its forms." (SASPU National, March, 1983.)

⁴Both Boer republics did not have any such qualified franchise applicable to non-whites and were allowed to retain their purely racial franchise at the formation of Union.

⁵The A.P.O. was formed in 1902 to "champion coloured political opposition" (Hugo, P. Quislings or Realists: A documentary study of 'Coloured' politics in South Africa, 1978, p.44.)

⁶P. Hugo, op. cit., p. 44.

⁷The Sun, 3/2/43, cited in P. Hugo.

⁸A derogatory term commonly applied around the 'coloured politics' debates, referring to the Norwegian leader, Quisling who cooperated with the Nazis during WW II.

⁹This was both in reference to Tom Swartz, the first chairman of the CPRC appointed to this position after having lost at the polls in 1969, and to 'Uncle Tom' as a sell-out to the Whites.

¹⁰The CPRC elections only attracted 48.7% of the registered voters in 1969 and 37.5% in 1975 (estimated to

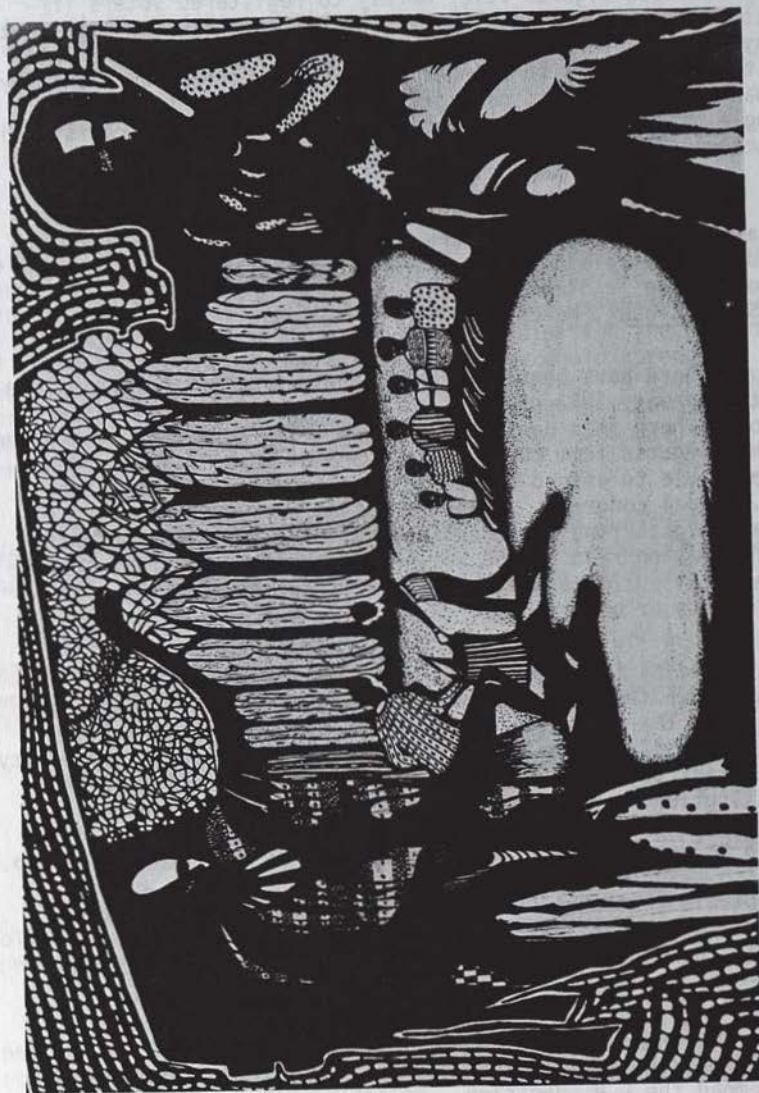
constitute less than 10% of the "coloured" population). Not only do these figures refer merely to registered voters (registered voters declined by 116,030 between 1969 and 1975) but many of the voters in the rural areas were bused to the polls by their employers to counter anti-CPRC mobilization. In many urban constituencies, candidates were only able to attract single digit percentages (some as low as 3%) of the registered electorate.

¹¹Hendrickse was released before the majority of other detainees after he had apparently given a written undertaking to dissociate himself from extra-constitutional agitation and denounce the 'violence' unleashed by the Sowetan youth. (SASPU National, March, 1983).

¹²There have been numerous questions raised by the nature of the January 1983 congress of the Labour Party held at Eshowe, where this decision was made. The congress was "loaded" with delegates from rural areas, many of whom in former years were unable to afford the costs of sending delegates to the L.P. annual congress. Even the voting procedure at this infamous gathering was questioned by virtue of the ambiguity of the motion read by the Rev. Hendrickse and the fact that he merely called for a show of hands without first calling for amendments or objections.

¹³The party rejected the government's constitutional proposals when they were first introduced in 1977. Hendrickse described the proposals which do not differ fundamentally from the 1982 proposals as indicative of "decadence, immorality and a sick society and an attempt to entrench racism in the constitution." When the second report of the President's Council constitutional committee was released, Curry said it was a "clever and sophisticated scheme for entrenching baaskap." He also said that he did not believe the proposals would be acceptable to the coloured community. This from the same Curry who 42 days later rose at the Eshowe Congress and said "we in the Labour Party have decided we are going inside [the president's council]" (SASPU National, March, 1983).

¹⁴Major sections of organized Black labour such as FOSATU and the African Food and Canning Workers Unions have condemned the L.P. decision. Relations between FOSATU and the L.P. have "deteriorated since Rev. Hendrickse came out against a FOSATU strike last year. Membership of his Uitenhage congregation has [also] since declined." (SASPU National, March, 1983).



"SACRED WOOD"