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LIBERALISM IN
SOUTH AFRICA
1948-1963

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equally reluctant to abandon the U.P. prior to the election.¹ Since Hofmeyr had chosen to remain within the U.P. in the thirties, such liberals had continued to debate about the most effective way of advancing their principles.² Constitutional methods and parliamentary means were not at issue.³ Rather, it was a question of forming the best kind of pressure group to influence the existing Opposition or, as a much more desperate measure, of creating a new party. Significantly, the Torch Commando opted for the more conservative of these alternatives. They hoped to become a 'new democratic spark in the political life of South Africa' but a new spark, they acknowledged, would be useless unless it was 'harnessed to the proper machinery' of the existing opposition parties in the House of Assembly.⁴

The formation of the United Democratic Front was announced in Cape Town on 16 April 1952.⁵ The alliance created was one between the United Party, the Labour Party, and the Torch Commando.⁶ Their common, overriding interest was to oust the Government at the election scheduled for a year's time.⁷ The joint declaration which they

¹ See below, p. 62.

² See above, p. 15. The impact of Hofmeyr's decision was suggested by the National Chairman of Torch, Kane-Berman, who subsequently spoke in glowing terms of the way in which Hofmeyr had inspired liberals. He himself would have been willing 'to follow Hofmeyr to the end of the earth'. (Author's interview Johannesburg, 22 Nov. 1965.)

³ Just how deep-rooted this commitment to constitutional action was is indicated by a story recounted by John Lang, a member of the Torch Commando's National Executive and later active in the Liberal Party. According to Lang, Jock Isacowitz, a leading figure in the left-wing Springbok Legion, another smaller, ex-servicemen's organization, approached the National Executive of the Torch Commando with a plan for the Torchmen to capitalize on their popular support by marching on the Houses of Parliament and assuming control from the Nationalists, through a show of force. One of the older members objected to the scheme on the grounds that such an 'invasion' would involve marching against the traffic in a one-way street, and that would mean the Torchmen would be breaking the law. (Author's interview, London, 14 Sept. 1965.)

⁴ *Star*, 26 Feb. 1952. Quoted in Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, p. 315.

⁵ *Cape Times*, 17 Apr. 1952. The protracted negotiations which preceded this move and the crises which marked the United Front's brief life are detailed in Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, pp. 315-27.

⁶ The Labour Party made a natural third partner; long-since stripped of its artisan colour-bar character, it now stood to the left of the U.P., especially in its views on *apartheid*. It was a move likely to pay both parties political dividends, since both the United Party and the Labour Party were anxious to avoid splitting the anti-Nationalist vote.

⁷ It is also true that the United Party was much in need of the finances which Harry Oppenheimer and others had chosen to put at the disposal of the Torch Commando rather than the U.P. as they had done in the past. Hatch, *The Dilemma of South Africa*, p. 120.

issued made clear the highest common factor of their liberalism. Stress was laid on free institutions, the equality of the white races, the rule of law, the 'sacred heritage' of the Constitution and the importance of restoring South Africa 'to her rightful place as an honoured member of Western society'.¹ The one reference to the colour question was basically conservative. It said: 'We shall see to it that . . . rights as they extended to the less fortunate shall be defended and that the word of the white man . . . shall be honoured.'²

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It is significant that it was a group such as the Torch Commando, rather than a separate Liberal Party which emerged in this period. The political issue of immediate importance to all non-Nationalist whites was not the colour question, but that of defeating the Government. This short-term aim took precedence with white liberals and prevented them from forming a Liberal Party prior to the 1953 election.

Meanwhile, liberals played a prominent part in attempting to combat Nationalist moves which involved infringement of liberal principles. For example, part of Edgar Brookes's objection to the Group Areas Bill when it reached the Senate (where he was a Native Representative) was that its administration depended on excessive Ministerial power,³ a point made frequently by U.P. parliamentarians.⁴ In the debate on the Suppression of Communism Bill, the Native Representatives and the Labour Party adopted a stronger line than the U.P.⁵ Margaret Ballinger, for example, shared the Opposition's misgivings. But her line of attack diverged significantly from that of the U.P. She stressed that the whites had left the field of race relations open to the communists, and she forecast that the new law would be used against the leaders of non-white political organizations.⁶ On the major issue of the future of Coloured voting rights, those with liberal views on the non-white question had no choice but to back firmly the U.P. protests against the Government's proposals. The Institute of Race Relations, for instance, made clear

¹ Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, pp. 316-17.

² *Cape Times*, 17 Apr. 1952.

³ *Senate Debates*, IV, 19 June 1950, col. 5560.

⁴ See above, p. 47.

⁵ e.g. the Native Representatives supported the amendments which the Labour Party moved unsuccessfully. (Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, p. 68.)

⁶ *Ass. Debates*, vol. 73, 14 June, 1950, col. 8999.

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