

LAST STEPS TO THE

Republic

OF SOUTH AFRICA



Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, Prime Minister of South Africa

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THE REPUBLIC
of South Africa

SPEECH

(IN SUMMARISED FORM) BY

The Honourable Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, M.P.

PRIME MINISTER OF SOUTH AFRICA

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THE REPUBLIC . . .

DARK OUTLOOK OR NEW ERA ?

“Our aims are inspired by the hope that eventually we shall see the end of the disputes between the two language groups over our constitutional future, and thus become one united nation . . . a republic whose main feature will be the spirit of unity and peaceful co-existence among the White population.”

—Dr. H. F. Verwoerd.

In the foreseeable future the South African people will be asked to decide for or against a republic. Although there is a certain basic conflict of opinion on this issue, much of the opposition to the idea of a republic is due to lack of knowledge—particularly a lack of knowledge as to the form of republic envisaged by the Government.

In this brief pamphlet it is not possible to answer all the questions that could be asked about the republican issue. A number of the most important issues were, however, dealt with by the Prime Minister, Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, when he addressed Parliament on the 20th of January this year. **The Premier's arguments** are presented below in **summarised** form, in answer to the **typical questions and criticisms** voiced by opponents of the republic.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. **Dr. Verwoerd's views may be acceptable, but he is not speaking for the rest of the Government or the National Party!**

Dr. Verwoerd announced:

"Everything I propose to say (in this address) has the unanimous support of my Cabinet and of the National Party caucus . . . I believe that it will also receive the full support of all republican supporters in this country."

2. **I do not normally vote for the National Party and for that reason I think it would be wrong to vote for a Republic.**

"We do not want the casting of a vote (for or against a republic) to be done on party lines. The Government is putting the republican issue to the people of South Africa (in the form of a referendum) in the same way as certain matters are left to the free vote of Parliament. (In the referendum) the people will decide on their future, freely and genuinely. I do not believe that an election in which the parties inevitably oppose each other, and in which the personalities of members and of leaders play a role, is the right course."

3. **But it will still be a party election, because the Government will be compelled to resign if the vote goes against a republic.**

"I do not even want the question of confidence or no-confidence in a government to be linked up (with the republic referendum). **The Government is in power and will remain in power.** Nobody who is **not** anxious to vote for the Government, need have the feeling that he therefore cannot vote for the republic despite his personal inclinations in favour of it."

4. **How is the referendum to be organised?**

"We reject any method which introduces the personal factor. We have chosen the method of a direct decision on this matter of

principle: for or against a republic. The ordinary election machinery will be made available for such a referendum In order to be able to use this organisation in its present form, the votes will have to be counted according to constituencies.

5. Will the issue be decided on a majority of constituencies or a majority of votes?

“The figures in respect of every constituency will be made available, but the decision, in accordance with my Party’s constitution and in terms of the assurances which have always been given by my predecessors and myself, will depend on whether there is a majority of White voters in favour of the establishment of a republic. Majority will mean a bare majority, even if it is one vote.”

6. When will the referendum be held?

“The Government will choose what it considers to be the best time, in the interests of South Africa, to put this matter before the electorate. Everybody will, however, be notified in good time of the date on which the referendum will take place, so as to give people an opportunity to think over the matter.”

7. If there is to be a republic, it does not seem wise to give the president the same enormous powers that the presidents of the old republics possessed.

“Many republicans are personally attached to the old republican system and want the president to occupy the same venerable position as the presidents of the Free State and the Transvaal. But it is our duty to decide which form of government will be the best under present-day circumstances. With our much more heterogeneous population, with greatly increased State activities, with a much bigger and more widely distributed population, we cannot simply accept the system of the republics of Presidents Kruger or Steyn as far as the presidency is concerned. There will have to be a separation between the head of state and the head of the government.”

8. But it still seems that a powerful head of state will be a danger to the sovereignty of Parliament—and of the people!

“It is a basic principle that the sovereignty of Parliament exercised on behalf of the electorate is more important than any tradition **through Parliament the electorate retains the power in its hands.** When one introduces the other system under which the chief executive officer is at the same time President and Prime Minister, being chosen by the electorate in a certain way, while Parliament is also chosen by the same electorate but in a different

way . . . there is always the possibility of a clash between the executive authority and legislative authority. (Then) there is either divided sovereignty or the supreme authority is placed in the hands of an arbitrator (such as the judiciary in the United States).”

9. Will a president really serve any particular purpose ?

“A president will have a special function to perform. He will be the unifying factor in the nation’s life, whatever differences there may be in the political sphere. This is an important and exacting function. No person, however good or strong, will be able in this South Africa of ours to be on the one hand a Prime Minister waging a political struggle and on the other hand a President serving as a unifying symbol for the nation.”

10. If that is so, why not retain the monarchy ?

“It is inherent in the monarchies of the Commonwealth that the person serving as a monarch, however good and honourable he might be, is bound by the ties of birth to only one country (Britain). It is not possible in a country with a population like ours (however much one may respect the sovereign of that other country, honour him and fulfil ones obligations as long as that person is also sovereign of ones own country), to get away from the fact that the (present) head of state does not and cannot have the same unifying effect as a man coming from the midst of our own population, however heterogeneous it might be. We should remember, moreover, that more than 50 per cent of our White population have a heritage different from those people whose forbears came from the country of that monarch. That monarch does have a unifying effect in Britain, but the same person cannot fill that role in South Africa. If we want to develop a common national sentiment here we must have a head of state who comes from our own midst. But it would be ridiculous to select somebody here and create a monarch. The presidency is the obvious and logical fulfilment of our desire for national unity, under a head of state born in this country.

11. Would a president not merely be the Governor-General called BY ANOTHER NAME ?

“It would be a mistake to say that becoming a republic merely means that the Governor-General is now called the President. What will happen is that a person will be appointed head of the state and as such will enjoy the same high regard as that enjoyed by the presidents, heads of state or monarchs of other states. It will mean the disappearance of the Governor-General as the **representative** of a monarch, and the substitution of a president for the monarch,

with the president enjoying all the privileges a monarch enjoys. The monarchy is being replaced by a republic—the monarch by a president.”

12. How will the president be appointed?

“Parliament will have to decide on this matter. Among the possible methods are the following. The Government could appoint the president; but this method may be open to certain objections. Or the president could be appointed by an electoral college consisting of both Houses of Parliament—by the representatives of the people. Or there could be an even larger electoral college including Parliament and the Provincial Councils. Whatever may be decided, it is my ambition to ensure that the President will enjoy the highest possible measure of acceptance and the highest status.

13. What position will the Prime Minister occupy?

“The Prime Minister will be the chief executive officer of the republic. His roots must remain in Parliament and he will always be responsible to Parliament. There he will give a lead to his Government and he will always remain fully responsible to the electorate.”

14. Opponents of the republic often suggest that a republic will mean the end of freedom and democracy.

“The republic will be, firstly, a Christian republic. Secondly it will be a democratic state. Thirdly it will be a republic in which the language and other rights of our English-speaking friends as well as of the Afrikaans-speaking people will be fully protected.”

15. South Africa is not yet prepared for a republic, and yet it will be introduced by a legislative act.

“The development of the Union of South Africa up to now has been a continuous change of our original constitution and our other legislation, in the direction of a republic. From the outset, (republican supporters) said we were following the road adopted by Ireland, the road of gradual development. Among the legislative changes that we can point to are the Status Acts, the Flag Act, the abolition of appeals to the Privy Council, the change of practices such as that concerning our National Anthem, and the Citizenship Act. The National Party and I regard our Union legislation, as it exists today, as amounting almost completely to the legislation required for a republican constitution, excepting in so far as the changeover from a monarchy to a republic has not been done yet.”

16. Is it the intention to abolish Parliament as we know it now, or to bring in other drastic changes under a republic ?

“There will be no radical changes in our Parliamentary institutions or constitutional practices. There will only be the ordinary continuation of constitutional development which has always taken place on our path to freedom. Certain changes will of course be necessary (at the time of becoming a republic), including legislative changes. In the new republican constitution all the changes that have been made over the past years will have to be consolidated. In practice, however, most of these changes will be required in administrative practices and formulae.”

17. What about the problem of Commonwealth membership ?

“The National Party’s programme of principles is very clear on this point: membership of the Commonwealth and the change-over from a monarchy to a republic are two separate matters, and separate replies must be given to these two questions. In view of the changing situation (in the Commonwealth and in Britain, vis a vis South Africa), a reply to this question can only be given shortly before the referendum on the republic is held. I will make a clear and unequivocal promise that before the referendum is held the country will be told whether it is the policy of the Government to remain a member of the Commonwealth or not.”

18. On what grounds will the Government decide whether it wishes to remain in the Commonwealth or not ?

“The matter will be decided particularly on the basis of three decisive considerations.

Firstly, what the position is in the other countries in the group or club or society of nations known as the Commonwealth, and especially in Britain, because of its leading role in this alliance. Frankly, if the Labour Party in Britain were to come into power and form a socialist government **revealing all the characteristics which it now reveals in opposition** (e.g. wanting to interfere in our domestic colour policy, opposing us economically and boycotting us, and even talking about forcing us out of the Commonwealth), I would seriously consider advising South Africa not to remain a member of the Commonwealth, because then the benefits of such membership as well as the friendly relations would have disappeared.

Secondly, what the position is within the Commonwealth, which is still developing and obtaining new members. We do not know how the other members of the Common-

wealth will influence its nature—to our benefit or our detriment. **But we do know that it will be in South Africa's interest to remain friends with Britain and also with the other countries in Africa.** If a situation were to develop (within the Commonwealth) in which we could best retain our friendship with Britain and the African countries by leaving the Commonwealth and negotiating (separately) with each of these countries on a suitable basis and without quarrelling, then we would act accordingly. (Our actions would alter accordingly) if, on the other hand, the contrary situation were to develop.

Thirdly, what would be in South Africa's best interest. There may be other considerations than those described above, which might make it preferable for South Africa to be a member or not a member of the Commonwealth. But the decision will be announced before the referendum takes place."

19. Will a republic not lead to the breaking off of our ties of friendship with Britain?

"Our policy is one of friendship with Britain and all other nations. I further stress that our friendship with Britain—the good relations between our countries which at the moment are fortunately very satisfactory and to our mutual benefit—can only be strengthened if in our country we can eliminate anything which irritates because of our past history. I believe that a republic of South Africa and the United Kingdom will be good friends and will co-operate smoothly in the economic and other spheres.

20. What are your ultimate aims in this matter?

"Our aims are inspired by the hope that eventually we shall see the end of the dispute between the two language groups over our constitutional future, and thus become one united nation. Our endeavour will be to gain the confidence of the South African people in everything we do, and above all, to establish a republic whose main feature will be the spirit of unity and peaceful co-existence which it engenders among the White population."

Dr. Verwoerd concluded:

" I can therefore see no reason why we cannot and should not ask for the full support of all people calling themselves republicans, including those who do so under the pro-republican clause in the constitution of the United Party"



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