

Discussion

PIETERMARITZBURG: A LIBERAL CITY IN THE APARTHEID ERA?

by Christopher Merrett

THE answer to this question is straightforward: no, Pietermaritzburg was never a liberal city. For decades its white citizens, the holders of political, economic and cultural power, devotedly supported conservative causes and its city council and municipal structures at best co-existed with some of the worst features of colonial and apartheid rule. But a consideration of organisations, citizens and some local practice does support the idea that it was one of South Africa's more liberal cities; perhaps the most liberal of all.

Liberal political philosophy centres on the control and accountability of power, which in turn hinges on consent. A key test is the exercise of liberty within the rule of (not *by*) law. This implies

equality and support for plurality and diversity. Liberalism promotes positive liberty but on the understanding that this involves social acts that cannot be compromised by harm. Internationalism and the human rights practices that it has encouraged are fundamental. Liberals do not believe in utopias and they emphatically reject the dehumanising consequences of group thinking. A high premium is placed on the rationality and conscience of individuals.¹ It is plain from this basic description of classic liberalism that it was anathema and a fundamental challenge to both British imperialists and National Party (NP) apartheid ideologues whose ambition was classification and categorisation with a view to racially based control.

Organisations

The Liberal Party grew out of independent liberal groups in each of the major urban centres of South Africa in response to the threat by the NP to the rule of law. The opposition United Party (UP) offered nothing more than compromise and the Torch Commando had failed to live up to its radical post-war promise. In June 1952, Peter and Phoebe Brown arranged a meeting in Pietermaritzburg that attracted former ANC secretary-general Selby Msimang. On 8 December that year a small meeting at Pietermaritzburg's city hall called for equality; freedom of speech, the press, movement, religion and assembly; and consideration of the needs of traditional rural communities. It expressed opposition to laws based on race or colour and to enforced segregation.

By March 1953 the Pietermaritzburg and Durban liberal groups had become the Natal region of the South African Liberal Association with Alan Paton as chair and Peter Brown as secretary, the beginning of a long, famous and productive political association. On 9 May 1953, the national Liberal Party (LP) came into being shortly after the general election won by the NP and the clear rejection of liberalism by De Villiers Graaff's UP. The LP was, after the African Political Organisation and the banned Communist Party, the third non-racial political party in South African history.²

Msimang supported dual membership with the ANC, confirmed that LP policies were consistent with black liberation, and addressed the inaugural Pietermaritzburg meeting of the LP.³ Paton and B.A. Maharaj were the other speakers, on the franchise among other matters. In 1954 Brown unsuccessfully stood as a candidate for the provincial

council, but white electoral politics were always a major weakness. Far more significant was the link forged with a rural membership, particularly in northern Natal, over the issue of forced removal. There was a LP branch in Edendale and members were to be found at Greytown, Centocow and Nongoma. As in the Transvaal, Natal liberals formed the radical wing of the party nationally.

Meetings were held with organisers of the Congress of the People (COP) in 1955 and despite the party's decision not to attend the COP, relations with the ANC remained cordial: nationalisation aside, LP policies were consistent with the Freedom Charter. In May 1956, the party participated in a march in protest at the extension of passes to African women and members Violaine Junod and Ruth Lundie were arrested. In June 1956 its headquarters was relocated to 268 Longmarket Street with Paton and Brown as chairperson and deputy. Albert Luthuli, ANC president, addressed the 1958 Natal congress and throughout the Natal Midlands well-attended non-racial meetings took place with Msimang, Luthuli and Jordan Ngubane as speakers. When Luthuli was banned in 1960, a protest organised by the LP in Pietermaritzburg attracted 2 000 people. The All-In Conference at Edendale in March 1961 was, however, hijacked by the ANC and neither the LP nor the Pan Africanist Congress attended.

The March 1960 strike was supported by liberals in Pietermaritzburg and Brown was distributing leaflets the day before he, Hans Meidner, Derick Marsh, Elliot Mngadi and LP members from Bergville were detained under the Emergency. An anti-Verwoerd rally at the city hall in November chaired by Jack Spence and addressed by ex-detainees was supported by a multiracial audience

of over one thousand who endorsed the upcoming Natal Convention at the university in April 1961. This promoted a non-racial franchise on a common roll, but the proposed national campaign succumbed to events elsewhere. A further major meeting took place in 1962 against the Sabotage Act, which allowed for 90-day detention.

The LP was killed off by legislation, the Prohibition of Political Interference Act, but for several years it had been in decline as a result of bannings: Mngadi and Brown were banned within three months in 1964; while Heather Morkill, who had close links with branches in African areas, was similarly restricted in April 1966. Harassment and intimidation were widespread in what Paton described at the July 1965 conference in Pietermaritzburg as a 'fear-ridden land'. When the party went into liquidation in 1968, Jacques Berthoud wrote in *The Times* (London) that its main characteristic was its humanity. It is not insignificant that even in its dying days it was at its most vibrant in Pietermaritzburg; 'a flickering flame of non-racial defiance and collaboration'. As Edgar Brookes, national chairperson based in Pietermaritzburg, put it: 'on the tombstone of the official Liberal Party must be placed the simple inscription "resurgam"'.⁴

In its closing message, ambitiously termed a temporary farewell, the LP predicted that apartheid could not last and appealed to individuals to continue fighting for 'freedom and equal opportunity ... for every South African and [a] non-racial society'. This was doubly perceptive. The party had made little impression on mainstream South African politics, but its imprint in Pietermaritzburg lived on in the journal *Reality* and through strong liberal in-

fluence on other organisations. For example, work in rural areas carried on through AFRA (Association for Rural Advancement), which challenged the forced resettlement of black communities.⁵ The Black Sash was already well-established in Pietermaritzburg and the Natal Midlands branch ran a particularly effective advice office.⁶ Self-confessed liberals and other left-wingers who implicitly subscribed to liberal values were active in the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness,⁷ Lawyers for Human Rights and in the many alternative organisations that sprang up in the 1980s as anti-apartheid activity blossomed. During the emergency years from 1986 onwards, the LDA (Liberal Democratic Alliance) and FFF (Five Freedoms Forum) were active in Pietermaritzburg.⁸

One influential institution that can be broadly characterised as liberal was the *Natal Witness*; both in its editors and its editorial line. G.H. Calpin (editor, 1936–1943) predated apartheid, but had championed the cause of the Indian community. Under Stan Eldridge (1961–1974) the *Witness* gained a reputation as Natal's most liberal newspaper and backed the Progressive Party; reinforced under Richard Steyn (1974–1990). Nalini Naidoo described the paper of the 1970s and 1980s as an 'oasis of non-racism'. One of its strengths was a willingness to employ mavericks and outsiders such as Tom Sharpe, Strini Moodley, Khaba Mkhize and Selby Msimang (as a columnist) in order to reflect a variety of opinion. In general, it strove to meet the public's right to know and it was prepared to take a principled, but unpopular editorial line: for instance, advocating a negative vote in the 1983 referendum on the tricameral parliament.⁹

People

When nineteen streets in Pietermaritzburg were renamed early this century, three of them commemorated members of the LP: Selby Msimang, Peter Brown and Alan Paton.¹⁰ Brown and Paton feature in a photograph taken at a workshop of former party members held in Grahamstown in 1985 together with Patrick McKenzie, Norman Bromberger, Phoebe Brown, Marie Dyer, John Aitchison, Tony Mathews and Anton Davis, all with city connections.¹¹ Other prominent Pietermaritzburg party members were Edgar Brookes, Maimie Corrigan, Deneys Schreiner and Geoffrey Durrant; while Elliot Mngadi, Roy Coventry, Mike Ndlovu and Neil Alcock operated in the rural areas of the Midlands and northern Natal. And Colin Gardner chaired the final meeting of the national LP held in Johannesburg in March 1968, a couple of months before multiracial political parties were outlawed.

Peter Brown stands out. Paton describes him as a man with a 'social con-

science about things like justice, equality and the rule of law, a conscience that was going to cost him dear.' After war service he had worked in Edendale for the Local Health Commission, a liberal institution that promoted community development, and the YMCA.¹² His exemplary refusal to accept early release from his 98-day detention during the State of Emergency of 1960 made a favourable impression and gave liberalism the flavour of a crusade.¹³ His banning on 25 July 1964 and its renewal took a dangerous opponent of the regime out of the public sphere for ten years.¹⁴

Liberals were quietly influential and the reach of their ideas over the next two decades had a significant impact on the framing of the post-liberation constitution. They also reached across the racial boundaries endorsed by apartheid, although this arguably did not extend far beyond strong personal friendship such as that between the Motalas and the Weinbergs.¹⁵

Alan Paton's link with Pietermaritzburg was primarily that of adolescence and early adulthood and his influence was of a somewhat distant nature. Edgar Brookes taught at St John's School and on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal and was ordained in the Anglican Church in 1973. The campus liberals led by Deneys Schreiner, Colin Gardner and Colin Webb vigorously and successfully defended academic freedom and university autonomy, leading from the front.¹⁶ John Aitchison, who had been banned from 1965 to 1975, developed in the emergency years of the 1980s a world-class human rights monitoring organisation whose work fed into the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Maimie Corrigan and Marie Dyer and their Black Sash colleagues carried



Peter Brown

on demonstrating in the street against unjust legislation and government brutality and maintained a stream of letter writing to the press. Lawyers like Tony Mathews and other members of Lawyers for Human Rights kept alive through academic work and professional practice the concept of the rule of law that would form the bedrock of the final Constitution accepted in 1996.¹⁷

Outcomes

After a decade of stressful uncertainty and a variety of proposals, the Group Areas Act (1950) was finally proclaimed in Pietermaritzburg.¹⁸ Its impact was relatively short-lived as it began to unravel in the early 1980s, but it did enormous damage to the social fabric of the city. Initially intended to enforce residential segregation, it mutated into a plan to set up racially defined satellite cities for the Indian and coloured groups that would to an extent be self-governing: thus the imposition of local affairs committees.¹⁹

In the meantime, liberal influence was exerted through the joint council movement.²⁰ A number of Pietermaritzburg's liberals such as Marie Dyer were involved with the Indo-European Joint Council. It concerned itself, for instance, with a public health issue – the provision of swimming baths since black children regularly drowned in the Msunduzi River and contracted bilharzia from the Dorpspruit. Efforts to provide a shared pool were not welcomed by conservative elements of the coloured community who endorsed apartheid policy. The Black Sash was also involved in this issue.

In 1973 the city council set up a committee to look into the feasibility of desegregating certain facilities. The original impetus for this is unknown, but early in the year there were moves

to affiliate a multiracial cricket team to the local league. The argument was that with careful navigation around the law such a team would not be doing anything illegal. Recreation was a weak spot in spatial segregation that revolved around the legal definition of occupation of land. Whether it could be applied to the duration of a cricket match was duly tested on 13 October 1973 in Alexandra Park when in spite of government bluster Aurora played the first of many matches as a mixed team. The reaction of the city council was instructive: it declared that it was not in the business of promoting National Party policy, only the law; would not be pushed around; and argued that sport should be left to administer itself.²¹ This was a classic liberal stance. Two years later the Indian players of Lotus Hockey Club were given the go-ahead to use pitches in Alexandra Park and the Standard ground. Similarly, in May 1974 an Indian athletics meeting was held at Sax Young track in Alexandra Park, although portable toilets had to be provided. Cyclists were to follow.²²

Meanwhile the council was investigating what was termed petty apartheid, although it was anything but trivial to those at its receiving end. This began in August 1973 and involved parks, gardens and public space, transport including bus shelters and benches, counters at municipal offices, and use of the city hall and market. Council publicly acknowledged it catered for all sections of the community. After a process of investigation and opinion sharing, the results were neither earth-shattering nor insignificant. Most departmental heads gave the green light to removal of separate counter facilities. The outcome is not entirely clear, but discriminatory signs were removed from

Alexandra Park and refused at a Cleland playground (as early as October 1972) and segregation was abolished at bus stops and shelters.²³ This represented merely a small crack in the granite edifice of apartheid.

More significant was the move of the Natal Society Library from Longmarket (Langalibalele) Street to its new building in Market Square in June 1975. The opening up of the reference and legal deposit collections to all the people of greater Pietermaritzburg was a bold move that, judged by the failure of noisy opposition to prevent it, was supported by most of the people of Pietermaritzburg. For a while borrowing by black patrons was confined to the nearby Market Square branch, but this was soon to end and a fully integrated library emerged.²⁴

Overview

There can be no doubt that Pietermaritzburg was a major centre for South Africa's liberal movement and that it was home to a disproportionate number of liberal individuals. In the mid-1970s it was the venue for a number of multi-racial developments that were unusual for the South Africa of that pre-Soweto era when apartheid's supporters were at their most confident. Much, quite rightly, is made of the Durban Moment of 1973 and beyond with the revival of the black trade union movement and the intellectual excitement around the teaching of political philosopher Rick Turner. But there was, arguably, also a Maritzburg Moment based on sport and culture backed by decisions taken by the city council. This was more diffuse than the Durban experience and lacked its national significance, but locally it was not unimportant. Significantly, it carried strong traces of liberal influence; but the

exact nature of any connection between liberals and the former Liberal Party and these outcomes is hard to substantiate.

NOTES

- 1 Conrad Russell, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism* (London: Duckworth, 1999).
- 2 The United Democratic Front became the fourth in 1983 while the ANC opened up fully to all race groups only in 1985 at its Kabwe conference.
- 3 The ANC already had a precedent with the Communist Party of South Africa.
- 4 Rob Haswell, 'Recasting Maritzburg's heritage' *Witness*, 13 April 2021, p. 5; Edgar Brookes, *A South African Pilgrimage* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1977), p. 142.
- 5 Anne Harley and Romy Fotheringham, *AFRA: 20 Years in the Land Rights Struggle, 1979–1999* (Pietermaritzburg: Association for Rural Advancement, 1999).
- 6 Mary Kleinenberg and Christopher Merrett, *Standing on Street Corners: A History of the Natal Midlands Region of the Black Sash* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Society Foundation Trust, 2015), pp. 175–260.
- 7 Lou Levine (ed.), *Hope Beyond Apartheid: The Peter Kerckhoff Years of PACSA, 1977–1999* (Pietermaritzburg: PACSA, 2002); PACSA 30th Anniversary Collective, *Journeying for Justice: Stories of an Ongoing Faith-Based Struggle* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2009).
- 8 Michael Cardo, *Opening Men's Eyes: Peter Brown and the Liberal Struggle for South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2010), pp. 303–316.
- 9 Simon Haw, *Bearing Witness: The Natal Witness, 1846–1996* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Witness, 1996). Nalini Naidoo, 'The Natal Witness: an oasis of non-racism'; Richard Steyn, 'A time for change'; John Conyngham, 'Seekers of the truth' all in *Witness*, 26 February 2021.
- 10 Adrian Koopman and John Deane, 'New names for old: transformation in the streets of Pietermaritzburg' *Natalia* 35 (2005), pp. 85–90.
- 11 Randolph Vigne, *Liberals against Apartheid: A History of the Liberal Party of South Africa, 1953–68* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), plate 17.
- 12 Cardo, *Opening Men's Eyes*, pp. 59–63; Marc Epprecht, *Welcome to Greater Edendale: Histories of Environment, Health, and Gender in an African City* (Montreal: McGill-Queens

- University Press, 2016).
- 13 Vigne, *Liberals against Apartheid*, pp. 14–15, 129, 130.
- 14 Cardo, *Opening Men's Eyes*, p. 184.
- 15 Goolam Vahed, *Chota Motala: A Biography of Political Activism in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2018), pp. 61, 74.
- 16 Graham Dominy, *The Man Behind the Beard: Deneys Schreiner, a South African Liberal Life* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2020). A biography of Colin Gardner is in preparation, but there is no source for the life of Colin Webb.
- 17 Marita Carnelley and Shannon Hoxtor (eds), *Law, Order and Liberty: Essays in Honour of Tony Mathews* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011), pp. vii–viii.
- 18 The various proposals are outlined in Christopher Merrett (comp. and ed.), *Born out of Sorrow: Essays on Pietermaritzburg and the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands under Apartheid, 1948–1994* (Pietermaritzburg: Natal Society Foundation Trust, 2021), pp. 14–21.
- 19 ILAC and CLAC. Africans were not part of this equation as it was assumed they would live in areas falling under the KwaZulu bantustan.
- 20 This had its origins on the Reef in the 1920s influenced by the South African Institute of Race Relations. See Paul B. Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism, 1921–60* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984), pp. 10–32.
- 21 *Natal Witness*, 19 December 1973. Councilors Mike Woollam and Cecil Wood were particularly outspoken. Chris Nicholson and Mike Hickson, *The Level Playing Field: How the Aurora Cricket Club Stumped Apartheid* (Durban: KwaZulu-Natal Cricket Union, 2015); Christopher Merrett, “‘Bowl brilliantly, bat badly – and don’t stay for tea’: Aurora Cricket Club and political activism” in *Sport and Liberation in South Africa: Reflections and Suggestions* edited by Cornelius Thomas (Alice: National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre, 2006), pp. 49–65.
- 22 Pietermaritzburg Archives (PMA), 3/PMB, TC4/5/607, file 242/201; 3/PMB, TC4/5/612, file 242/309 (Sports grounds in Alexandra Park); 3/PMB, TC4/5/607, file 242/202 (Sax Young track ground, Alexandra Park). *Natal Mercury*, 20 May 1974.
- 23 PMA, 3/PMB, TC4/5/502, file 186/221 (Petty apartheid in Pietermaritzburg); 3/PMB, TC4/5/576, file 215/211 (Children’s playgrounds). Some of these measures may not have been entirely altruistic: black nannies were required to look after white children in public spaces.
- 24 Tony Hooper, ‘The Natal Society Library from 1974 to 1980: recollections of a chief librarian’ *Natalia* 50 (2020): 39–42; Tony Hooper, ‘The Natal Society Library from 1977 to 1980: recollections of a chief librarian: part 2 national and international exposure’ *Natalia* 51 (2021), pp. 27–36; Christopher Merrett and Tony Hooper, ‘When professional ethics and politics collide: libraries in a time of apartheid, part 1’ *Innovation* 62 (2021), pp. 16–32.