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SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS AND
THE ENGLISH SPEAKERS

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English-speaking white South Africans have a curiously diffuse image in our society. South Africans enjoy stereotyping and classifying each other, but the English-speaking whites are seldom successfully labelled. Barroom, cocktail party, boardroom and even academic conversations about other South Africans fairly readily yield categorical descriptions of "typical" Afrikaners, coloured people, Zulus, Indians and the like, with or without insulting or flattering references. The "English", however have suffered or enjoyed little more than references to sun-sensitive skins (rooinekke or rednecks) or perhaps very cautious allusions to characteristic politeness to the point of hypocrisy or faintly suspect patriotism.

The reason for this is simply that the English-speaking whites include the widest spectrum of social, economic and political types imaginable in South Africa. Most leading businessmen are English-speaking, but then, as I discovered when I was once a social worker, so are most of the socially visible white tramps in the cities. English-speakers belong to a dozen or more religious denominations, have political views from far-right to far-left, seem to play all kinds of sport, and, what is more, frequently speak their home-language with an accent which makes everyone else think that they must be Afrikaans.

Over the past two to three decades, however, comment in the mass media has frequently raised one question about English-speaking whites which cannot simply be answered by referring to their variety or heterogeneity. Why, it is frequently asked, are English-speaking whites not more visible in political life? Why do they let Afrikaners run the country? Are English-speaking

whites so captivated by material concerns that they abdicate their civic responsibilities?

These questions are oversimple, indeed illegitimate. The questions themselves assume some kind of group response in politics which need not occur. Ethnic interests are by no means the only basis for political behaviour. Furthermore, in ethnic terms, the English are a minority among voters in South Africa and if the Afrikaners remain more or less ethnically organised then the English-speakers are at an obvious and permanent disadvantage.

These types of questions can lead to interesting avenues of exploration, however, and the remainder of this essay will be devoted to exploring the political role of the English-speakers in our changing politics.

POLITICAL TYPES AMONG ENGLISH-SPEAKERS

As a basis for discussion later in this essay, some attempt to identify the range of political types among English-speakers is necessary. The typology below is based partly on numerous attitude surveys conducted under the auspices of the Centre for Applied Social Sciences at the University of Natal over the past decade, and partly on observation of fellow South Africans in political situations. In the schema below the political types are presented from left to right on the political spectrum. In reality the types blend into one another but here they are presented discretely for the sake of illustration. Furthermore, many individuals are not easily typified, having made up their own minds independent of peer group influences and hence do not fit the scheme.

ENGLISH-SPEAKING POLITICAL TYPES

- I. University-based "Radicals", critical of capitalism and the state.
- II. Fervent liberals, critical of all conservative establishments, including the business establishment.
- III. Social liberals, emphasising modern cosmopolitanism and critical of the government and Afrikaner establishment for opposing it. Not hostile to capitalism - in fact tending to be rather affluent themselves.
- IV. Pragmatic reformers, who see abundant evidence of the need for change in order to promote both stability and social justice. Often regarded as liberals by conservatives and as conservatives by radicals and liberals.
- V. Apolitical types, a range of positions characterised by material interests, status and life-style concerns, religious commitments or recreational interests. Tend to be more or less critical of the governing establishment depending on whether or not their interests are interfered with. Essentially floating voters. Younger people in the "swinging set" tend to be hostile to the governing establishment because of things like censorship, prohibition on Sunday entertainment, etc.
- VI. Conservative realists, including many but not all in the business community. Not centrally concerned with reform or social justice, but willing to change established practices if situations or the economy require it. Critical of government inflexibility but not generally hostile to the government establishment.
- VII. Conservatives, find the established state of affairs entirely to their liking, but tend to be suspicious of the tendency among Afrikaans nationalists to become ideological and to devise political blueprints. They tend to be largely concerned with practical concerns connected with their privileges as whites.
- VIII. Anglo Saxon Chauvinists. A dwindling group of older people mainly in Natal and the Eastern Cape who probably dislike Afrikaners as much as they dislike foreigners, Jews and "non-whites". Rather colonial in attitude, they are the only group which would refer back to the glories of Britain in a past era.

- IX. Defensive, rigid conservatives. Less affluent English-speaking whites who feel their position threatened by upwardly mobile blacks and brown people, hence openly hostile to change. Attracted by right-wing opposition parties but feel socially alien in them because of their dominantly Afrikaans flavour.
- X. Authoritarian, tough-minded racists. A loose assemblage of people who are actively hostile to blacks and to liberals, reformers and radicals. They tend to glorify old Rhodesia and believe in an active programme to promote white interests at all costs. More extreme members like to carry guns and adopt a life-style signifying a kind of colonial toughness.

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These are the main orientations to be encountered among core English-speaking whites. We must add to this range certain orientations among groups marginal to the English-speaking group who are nevertheless associated with it in the South African context. Hence we find:

- people from mixed English and Afrikaans-speaking backgrounds who unlike most do not become one or the other but preserve a dual identity. In attitude surveys we have found their orientations to be more conservative than those of the "average" English-speaking white;
- non English-speaking immigrants whose children will become English-speaking South Africans (Portuguese, Germans, some Dutch, Italians, Greeks, etc.). Once again attitude surveys suggest that they are typically more conservative than the average English-speaking South African, and indeed this is the common view held of them.

This rough typology of English-speakers is presented simply to demonstrate the range and variety of political outlooks and to show how difficult it is to typify the English-speaking white.

THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WHITE AND PARTY POLITICAL CHOICE

English-speaking whites are normally associated with white opposition politics, at least since 1948. Before that, of course, they together with non Nationalist Afrikaners in the old United Party had enjoyed the status of being the governing political establishment. The shock of exclusion from political influence in 1948 was very great, and it was felt particularly by those who returned from active service in the second world war. Opposition sentiments were intense for a few years after 1948, with ex-servicemen forming the Torch Commando to mobilise against what they saw as sectional Afrikaans dominance. The Torch Commando grew to a strength of some quarter of a million members, and in 1953 supported a stand against the Nationalist Party government by Natal, with the possibility of secession.

Since then much of the intensity of opposition has abated and political views are generally more calmly held in the ranks of English-speaking opposition supporters.

In the 1966 general election a tendency in English-speaking political behaviour emerged which has subsequently reappeared. The 1966 election followed the Rhodesian UDI and Britain's imposition of sanctions, the granting of independence to a number of black states to the North and a period of violence and sabotage by underground black formations like Umkonto we Siziwe and Poqo up to 1964. It was also a period when world opinion became increasingly critical of South African policies. In the election campaign the National Party wooed English-speaking voters vigorously.

Outside pressure and racial anxieties, coupled with accommodating gestures by the National Party swung a good proportion of the English-speaking voters over to support for the government.

A degree of white solidarity emerged for the first time since the middle to late forties.

More recently comparable representative nation-wide polls by the organisation Market and Opinion Surveys (Pty) Ltd., published inter-alia in *Rapport*, as well as similar polls by the Centre for Applied Social Sciences reveal elements of the same pattern.

In 1970 English-speaking support for the National Party was estimated at 21 percent of the English voter group. By mid 1972, this figure had dropped to some 11 percent, due probably to earlier "exposés" of the Broederbond in the English press and to numerous accusations of English disloyalty in parliament.

By late 1973, after a wave of black strikes and unrest at black universities the National Party support among English-speakers climbed to some 16 percent. The June 1976 riots in Soweto and other black townships, strongly critical policies by the Carter Administration and the call by the United Nations Security Council for arms sanctions against South Africa raised the proportion of support for the National Party to an all-time high of over 30 percent.

By 1979 this proportion dropped back to 20 percent under the impact of the "Information Scandal" and Prime Minister John Vorster's resignation. However, Zimbabwean independence in early 1980, and the escalation of border conflict seemed to stimulate a resurgence of English support for the National Party, to a proportion of some 27 percent in mid 1980.

Disunity in the National Party seemed to cause the level of English support to drop in 1981 and 1982 to 20 percent. Now, however, with strong attacks on the National Party from the right it has risen again to nearly 30 percent. ¹⁾

1) The latest poll by Market and Opinion Surveys in July 1983 puts the proportion of English-speaking voters supporting the National Party at 28 percent.

Hence it seems that up to nearly one-third of English-speaking voters tend to float towards and away from the government. The greater the pressures on South Africa and the anxieties of voters the more English-speaking voters tend to seek solidarity with Afrikaans whites in the National Party. The more reform oriented the National Party seems to appear, and the greater the pressure on it from the right, the more English-speakers are inclined to rally to its support. ¹⁾

ENGLISH-SPEAKING OPPOSITION VIEWS

Over the past three years, however, nearly one half of the English-speaking voters (45 percent plus) have moved behind the Progressive Federal Party. This party then represents the largest single collectivity of English-speaking voters. The attitudes of these voters reflect an interesting mixture of views but together this collectivity is the most forward-looking influence of significant size in white South African politics. It has become the English political "establishment".

Government supporting media often suggest that the typical PFP supporter is a convinced "liberal". During political campaigns they may even be stereotyped as "leftists", as we see in the current referendum campaign. On average, by West European standards, however, they are probably middle of the road conservatives.

The most recent nation-wide political poll by the Centre for Applied Social Sciences, in co-operation with Market and Opinion Research (Pty) Ltd., in May 1982, allows some attitude comparison to be made which situates the English-speaking PFP and National Party voters in the overall context of white political views in South Africa. In the table below, in the interests of brevity, results on attitude items are given only for the English party-support groups and Afrikaans supporters of the National Party. The NP and the PFP between them have the allegiance

1) For a more detailed analysis of voter support by language see "Data Trendline" *INDICATOR SA.*, Durban, Centre for Applied Social Sciences, Vol. 1. No. 2, 1983.

of nearly 80 percent of white voters who are committed supporters of a political party.

POLITICAL ATTITUDES AMONG ENGLISH-SPEAKING PFP, NRP AND NATIONAL PARTY SUPPORTERS COMPARED WITH AFRIKAANS NATIONAL PARTY VOTERS
(Sample, 1990 nation-wide).

Proportions willing to <u>accept</u> or in full <u>or</u> partial <u>agreement</u> with hypothetical <u>government</u> initiated reforms* or policy positions	Percentage Support			
	English PFP	English NP	English NRP	Afrikaans NP
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
Certain "non-whites" in white suburbs	71	55	31	32
Repeal of Immorality Act	77	60	52	40
Opening of all Cinemas and Theatres	83	67	59	48
Non-whites attending certain white schools	86	62	48	26
Power-sharing with coloureds and Indians	92	82	60	62
Power-sharing with <u>all</u> groups with safeguards against domination	88	75	78	67
South Africa should ignore world opinion and follow its own course	65	80	92	94
Basic differences exist whites and blacks which will not change	72	87	91	93

* Items are paraphrased and shortened for presentation.

The results in the table show a considerable degree of enlightenment. One has to bear in mind that the statements about policy changes were all worded as reforms introduced by the present government. The main interest lies in the comparisons between groups.

With the exception of one item on power-sharing with all groups, the results suggest that the English-speaking National Party supporters are the second-most reform oriented group of significance after the English PFP supporters. (Afrikaans PFP supporters are a small proportion of some 5-7 percent of Afrikaans voters.) These results and many others from the same poll and other studies dispel the notion that the English National Party voter is a narrow minded bigot. This voter is more reform oriented than the typical English NRP voter or the Afrikaans National Party supporter.

The results on the last two items also suggest that the English PFP supporter, while thoroughly convinced about the need for reform in race policies, has some very typically conservative basic sentiments, like a substantial rejection of world opinion and the notion that very basic differences exist between black and white people.

Similar evidence of a "white consensus" on basic issues of security is provided by Deon Geldenhuys of the Rand Afrikaans University in his study of voter attitudes to foreign policy issues.¹⁾ He found, for example, that 76 percent of English-speaking whites and 73 percent of PFP supporters agreed that "*South Africa should militarily attack terrorist bases in its neighbouring states*".

1) Deon Geldenhuys, *What do we think: A Survey of White Opinion on Foreign Policy Issues*, Johannesburg, South Africa Institute of International Affairs, November, 1982.

English-speaking supporters of the PFP and to a considerable extent English-speaking National Party supporters as well clearly take the clearest and boldest line on race reform among all significant voter groups. It is also clear, however, that the typical English-speaking voter is not progressive or liberal in all respects. Very conservative, indeed parochial sentiments co-exist with progressive thinking. English voters, by and large, are by no means consistent liberals in their world views. This raises the question of why such clear differences in policy attitudes should exist between the majority of English and Afrikaans-speaking voters as are reflected in the table of attitudes.

THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING VOTER AND PERCEPTIONS OF SURVIVAL

Deon Geldenhuys (referred to earlier) puts forward survey evidence which gives a clue to one important factor. He presented the subjects in his poll with the statement: "*South Africa's blacks have good reason to take up arms against the government*". Some 45 percent of English-speakers agreed, compared with only 14 percent of Afrikaners. Seven out of ten PFP supporters supported the view in the statement.

Similar results emerged from the poll in 1982 by the Centre for Applied Social Sciences. While 37 percent of English-speakers felt that blacks were "very dissatisfied" with their conditions, only 13 percent of Afrikaners held this view. Nearly 60 percent of English PFP supporters saw blacks as very dissatisfied.

One important factor shaping English-speaking policy attitudes, then, is a much greater awareness or acceptance of the fact that the present order in our society is generating hostility and bitterness among blacks. Here the English language press is an important factor. The English press has consistently taken pains to expose the conditions of blacks. While Afrikaners also read the English press, this author's impression is that they are more sceptical of the validity of reporting on black conditions than English-speaking whites.

The English-speaking white, then, is more likely to seek reform as a means of alleviating black hostility and bitterness. Reform, for the majority, is perhaps a conservative strategy but mixed with genuine concern about the conditions of fellow South Africans of a different colour.

THE ENGLISH-SPEAKERS AND FREEDOM TO REFORM

Over the past 5 years of National Party government under Prime Minister P.W. Botha, very similar sentiments have crept into National Party rhetoric. Reform is also becoming a strategy for survival among Afrikaans nationalists.

There are constraints on Afrikaners which do not exist for English-speakers, however. English-speakers do not have a self-consciously ethnic tradition. They have a background of "metropolitan" culture in which status distinctions and life-style differences are well-developed and quite as important as ethnic or language differences. Afrikaners, on the other hand, are still historically close to what can be called a "folk" tradition (volksgemeenskap) which emphasises greater identification and less differentiation within the community.

The English-speaking metropolitan tradition with its full acceptance of status and class differences allows a formal definition of nationhood. Nationality is a legal category which, even though it may have strong patriotic meaning, can accommodate social differences.

Afrikaners, on the other hand, are still partly affected by the notion that a nation should also be a community of identity (a volk) with emphasis on similarity and common values. By now Afrikaans class differentiation is well-advanced and a metropolitan spirit has emerged, but Afrikaans cultural organisations, schools, teachers and churches tend implicitly to emphasise the earlier ideal.

The net result, as it were, tends to be that English-speaking whites find it easier to accept the full implications of racial reform, social integration of black people, than a substantial proportion of Afrikaners. Many Afrikaners are inclined to resist perceiving black needs and demands because of unease about the implications of a varied and polyglot nation of South Africans. In the results of a survey which we conducted in 1974, 65 percent of English saw Africans as South Africans compared with only 40 percent among Afrikaners.¹⁾

Afrikaners are also more concerned about the survival of their language than English-speakers. Quite obviously, nothing can displace English as the Lingua Franca in South Africa, but a completely open democracy will soon reduce Afrikaans to the status of a private minority language, even if it remains nominally one of the official languages.

A ROLE FOR ENGLISH-SPEAKING WHITE LEADERS

Peaceful change, greater social justice and steady reform in race policies are undoubtedly the best strategies which English-speaking whites can adopt in seeking to preserve their material well-being and style of living. This political viewpoint is widely-shared among them and draws together most of the otherwise politically disparate social types listed in the beginning of this essay. It is even a view which in considerable measure unites the views of government and opposition-supporting English-speakers. At a time of great political disunity among Afrikaners, it is the English who seem to enjoy the greatest commonality of views among whites.

English-speakers are also well-placed, it seems, to be informed about and to be open to the serious political alienation which current policies have created for black people.

1) L. Schlemmer, "English-speaking South Africans Today: Identity and Integration into the Broader National Community", in André de Villiers (Ed) *English-Speaking South Africa Today*, Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1976.

Indeed, the English strategy of survival demands that they pay full attention to the conditions and problems of black people, despite some very basic anti-liberal views.

Furthermore, by now Afrikaners are beginning to trust the English-speakers. Over nearly two decades of party politics the English floating voter has moved in to support the government when it has been under pressure, and they will do so again. English commitment to basic national security is not likely to be questioned any longer by Afrikaners.

All these factors place the English-speaking leader in a very favourable position to play the role of honest broker between the government and blacks in regard to urgently-needed reforms. Organisations like the Urban Foundation have already taken up this role. More English-speaking leaders might perhaps consider this challenge. The relatively new but strengthening links between English and Afrikaans in the business world can facilitate the communication which is necessary.

As I have implied above, English-speakers are perhaps the group which is most "liberated" from traditional anxieties and from socio-economic disadvantage. This liberty, while it brings with it a great degree of political rationality, can create some insensitivity to political needs and feelings among both black people and Afrikaners. If the role I have suggested is to be played successfully it will require more than the lip-service of liberal rhetoric and moral injunction.

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