THE ABC OF POLITICAL CHANGE: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL LITERACY IN THE DEMOCRATISATION PROCESS IN SOUTH AFRICA *

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ABSTRACT

This article emphasises the nature and possible role of political literacy in the process of democratisation in South Africa. The process of democratisation is analysed and secondly the concept of "political literacy" is elucidated. The need for political literacy is highlighted by focusing on the high level of political apathy especially among white school children. In conclusion it is suggested that political literacy is an essential element of constructive political and social change as incorporated in democratisation.

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"It is a complacent, perhaps even a self-satisfied society that ignores the political education of its growing generation of young citizens. Those countries like the USA, that strive for social cohesion; those, like the Federal German Republic, that need to construct a new political consciousness; and those, like the Soviet Union, that are built on an ideology which must be sustained - all recognise the weighty significance of political education" (Heater, 1978).

1. INTRODUCTION

It has become clear during recent years - especially since 1984 - that the South African Government had to speed up the process of political reform it had

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embarked upon. This was due to internal political pressure as well as external reaction against the system of apartheid. Refusal by Government to accept these realities can either result in the overthrow of the political system by means of violence or the preservation thereof by more authoritarian methods.

Government leaders have already some years ago declared their dedication to a process of reform, that according to them could be interpreted as an endeavour leading to the "creation of a democratic system in which everybody will have a voice in decision-making as far as their interests are concerned" (Heunis, 1981:2). In 1986 the then State President, Mr. P.W. Botha, stated: "We believe that a democratic system of government which must accommodate all legitimate political aspirations of all South Africa's communities must be negotiated. All South Africans must be placed in a position where they can participate in government through their elected representatives" (Debates, No. 1, 1986, Column 14).

These statements indicate a readiness to make the transition from the present authoritarian system to a more democratic regime. The reasons for such a transition are obviously manifold - as will be shown further on. A number of factors, however, also delay this transition. One such factor is the political illiteracy of the population. The purpose of this article is to emphasise the role and nature of political literacy in the process of democratisation in South Africa. Firstly, the process of democratisation will be analysed briefly. Secondly, an analysis of the concept political literacy will be made. The need for political literacy will be highlighted by focusing attention on the high level of political apathy especially among white school children. In conclusion it will be suggested that political literacy is an essential element of constructive political and social change as incorporated in democratisation. Certain suggestions with regard to the implementation of a programme of political literacy are also made.

2. AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES AND DEMOCRATISATION

Although it is convenient to talk about authoritarian regimes as groups that consist of neither polyarch (democratic) or totalitarian systems, the category is nevertheless a wide one. (For a definition of Polyarchy see Dahl 1971:7-8; For totalitarian, see Linz in Greenstein and Polsby, 1975:187-196). The reason

for this is that authoritarian regimes are in most cases a waste product of analytical definitions which are mostly negative.

Authoritarian regimes do not allow individuals unlimited participation in the political process but it is also not entirely monistic in nature. For this reason they do not proceed to a process of political mobilisation which is both intensive and extensive over a long period. In this context political mobilisation implies the involvement of the population in the political process. The extensive form of mobilisation can be found in totalitarian systems. These regimes also do not endorse highly articulate ideologies, especially not the type that professes scientific pretensions. Although Linz describes the above-mentioned characteristics, very little indication exists regarding which type of limited participation will be acceptable for a specific group. Classification of authoritarian systems give little indication regarding which groups are mobilised or demobilised and which will be co-opted or displaced. Even the concept mentalities which is given as a substitute for an ideology can cover a broad spectrum of political subjects, in formal style as well as substantive discussion.
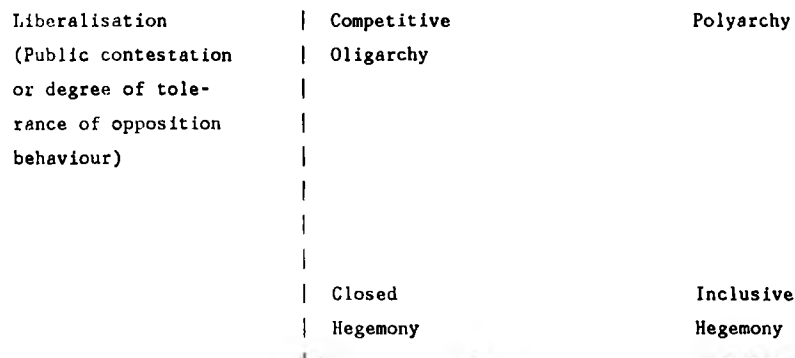
It is clear from the literature that the extent of variation between authoritarian regimes make the construction of analytical dimensions in which these regimes alternate and group, with reference to other regimes impossible. Linz (in Greenstein and Polsby, 1971:264-285) was even forced to offer a typology of authoritarian regimes which vary from very traditional to post-totalitarian systems.

Any effort to create a general theory of transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system has the inherent danger of becoming so diffuse as to have no explanatory value. The different routes that authoritarian regimes follow towards polyarchy exist not only because of the different types of authoritarian regimes but also because of the different ways of transition that exist. Gillespie (1985:2) suggests a possibility of ten different forms of transition. In this case we are also confronted with a choice of being rigidly analytical with resultant over-abstraction, or having a much more sensitive approach towards historical, contextual and configurative typologies with a possibility of under-theorising. The best choice probably lies between two options, i.e. to forfeit a measure of elegance to gain more depth. (See also Gillespie, 1985:3.)

The analytical dimensions provided by Dahl (1971) and in Greenstein and Polsby (1975) facilitates the classification of the authoritarian/ polyarchic transition. On the one hand he distinguishes the degree of public contestation which a regime allows its citizens and opponents. On the other hand he deals with the question of inclusiveness of a regime vis-a-vis the masses - an aspect which can also be seen as the accountability of the government. The measurement of democratisation is constructed by two dimensions, namely, public contestation and the right to participate (inclusiveness).

If regimes are arranged with regard to these two analytical dimensions a feature field can be constructed with four regime-types on the pulse. The following is an example of such a construction:

Diagram 1: Analytical Regime Types

Liberalisation		Competitive	Polyarchy
(Public contestation		Oligarchy	
or degree of tole-			
rance of opposition			
behaviour)			
		Closed	Inclusive
		Hegemony	Hegemony

Inclusiveness or Responsiveness:
(Right to participate or extend the
level of responsibility to
citizens' demands)

From diagram 1 one can infer that three separate types of regime transitions exist apart from a closed hegemony. Firstly, a greater tolerance towards contestation and expression of opposition demands, as well as acceptance of autonomous organisation in social and political groups can set in. This

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movement on the vertical axis can, according to Dahl, be described as liberalisation. Secondly, a closed hegemony can also become more inclusive without any increase in public contestation. This means an increase on the vertical axis - to a more inclusive state. Greater inclusiveness does not necessarily mean that public contestation will be allowed - totalitarian states are an example. Lastly, there can be upward movement to the right which would comprise a degree of democratisation. There is thus an evolution towards polyarchy. According to Dahl this system is highly inclusive but also open to public contestation.

In any system where one or more of the following arbitrary limitations exist, the conditions for the existence of a polyarchy is violated (Gillespie, 1975:4):

(a)   Non-universal franchise with qualifications based on literacy, race, tax, property, etc.

(b)   Limitations on the participation of certain candidates and parties in elections.

(c)   The existence of decision-making structures which exercise power while no account is given to elected representatives.

(d)   The existence of limitations which prevent elected representatives exercising a mandate for specific change.

(e)   Limitations on the forming of interest associations and the pursuit of collective benefits.

(f)   Limitations on freedom of expression;   and

(g)   any of the above limitations, even if these do not exist in a formal or localised form but are only appropriate because of certain patterns of socialisation, distribution of resources, the existing power structure and which render it non-susceptible in the long run to erosion by democratic patterns.

Measured against these requirements it is clear that South Africa is a far cry from a polyarchy. But it cannot be denied that South Africa is in a transitionary phase. Various types of analytical frameworks have already been developed to show why a political transition is in process.

The most important of these frameworks are:

(a)   Political economy.

(b)   Legitimation and legitimacy crises.

(c)   Corporate interests of power structures such as the military.

(d)   Opposition and/or alliance strategies of political parties and

(e)   mobilisation strength and ideology of trade unions and other political movements.

These analytical frameworks can have a single format or appear in combinations. There is a difference in opinion about how a transition to a democratic political system should be instigated. This debate largely centres on what balance should be maintained between liberalisation and inclusiveness.

Certain factors are seen as inhibitory to the transition process in South Africa (see Olivier, 1981:60-63; Heunis, 1981:4-6 and Schlemmer, 1988:37-40). The following are some of the most important factors mentioned in this regard:

(a)   The increasing radicalisation of those people who are excluded from political participation in the present political system.

(b)   Instrumental limitations such as the reluctance of bureaucracy to adapt.

(c)   The spiral of rising expectations amongst those that are excluded from the system.

(d)   Confusion about the goals of reform. The latter is preferred by the government without indicating the type of system they have in mind

(even if only with regard to liberalisation); vague generalities such as self-determination within group context and co-responsibility for common interests has practically no meaning for the man in the street and,

(e)   a generally negative attitude among Whites to the reasons given for the necessity of a directed transition to a democratic system.

In the next section it is argued that a lack of political literacy is probably also partially responsible for, on the one hand, the reluctance to accept the transition from the present authoritarian system to a more inclusive and liberal system, and on the other hand, the speed demanded for the transition.

3. POLITICAL LITERACY

By political literacy is meant a compound of knowledge, skills and attitudes which will enable an individual to be politically effective (Brennan, 1981:135). On the most fundamental level a politically literate person possesses the basic information needed to understand political problems. Such a person will also have the self-confidence and the ability to make a contribution to the solution of such problems should he/she wish to. He/she will be capable of more than informed interest, because he/she will understand the effect of his or her behaviour on others and understand their views which differ from his/her own.

In a more precise prescription, political literacy is characterised by:

(a)   A critical knowledge and understanding of the political system.

(b)   A solid knowledge of the most important political issues.

(c)   The ability of individuals to participate in the political process.

(d)   The general acceptance of the legitimacy of other people's political views, that may differ from one's own, and their right to pursue these and

(e)   the acknowledgement that in an independent society, political problems can be solved by rational debate within the boundaries of the law (for

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a discussion of these aspects see Brennan, 1981:135; Crick and Porter, 1978:12-14 and Porter in Heater and Gillespie, 1981:181-210).

Political literacy is in many cases equated with political education. Political education, however, refers to the process where schoolchildren, but also adults, are taught about the political system of which they are part. It concentrates on making people more aware of politics and persuading them to participate more effectively and willingly in the political process (see also Schmidt-Sinns in Heater and Gillespie, 1981:119). In the words of Milbrath (in Milbrath and Geol, 1977:16) political education is therefore an effort "to turn spectators and apathetic into gladiators."

Any false optimism regarding the level of political literacy among young people and adults in South Africa, was dispelled in some recent studies (Kotzé and Norval, 1983; Booysen & Kotzé, 1985; Kotzé, 1986). These studies clearly show that the largest group of young school leavers (especially Whites) has limited knowledge of, ability in and attitudes relating to politics. As such they are badly equipped to make a contribution to political life and also to protect their basic civil rights (Strandling, 1977:51, found similar trends in a group of adolescents in Britain).

Blumer (1974) reasoned that it is wrong to think that people with an interim knowledge of politics hold a lesser opinion than the better informed person. He suggests that the person with a more limited perspective shows a preference for efforts to exercise pressure by means of simple solutions for complex problems (see in this regard McKenzie and Silver, 1978 and Nordlinger, 1967). Stradling (1977:58) is convinced that a democratically relevant reason for improving the general level of political knowledge and involvement is a well informed voters corps. He furthermore feels that such voters will tend "to make governments more accountable to it and consequently more representative".

4. A PROGRAMME FOR POLITICAL LITERACY

Fundamental to the suggestion that a programme of political literacy should be instigated in South Africa, is the suggestion that it would have a positive influence on the transition process. The close relationship that can exist

between changed political orientations and political literacy is clearly illustrated in the remade political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany (see Schmidt-Sinns in Heater and Gillespie, 1981 and George, 1981).

It is not necessary to describe how courses on political literacy can be developed in schools and for adults - it is an established practice in such countries as Canada, Britain, the USA and the Federal Republic of Germany (for a more elaborate discussion about the detail of political literacy programmes, see the special issue of Educational Review, 1984, and Heater and Gillespie, 1981). What we will give here is a broad framework to give an indication of the contents of such political literacy courses.

In the "Programme for Political Education, 1974" (Lister, 1984-1985) that was introduced in Britain, the following aspects were emphasised:

(a)   Politics is to a large extent concerned with issues, therefore political education should be issue-orientated.

(b)   A broad concept of politics which included the politics of institutions (such as schools, factories, environment, central and local government management, etc.) should be used as a point of departure and

(c)   certain procedures should be fundamental to political education - "The teacher should not seek to influence basic substantive values ... but it is both proper and possible to mature and strengthen certain procedural values. These values are freedom, tolerance, fairness, respect for truth and respect for reasoning".

Of special interest in political literacy is a knowledge of political concepts. A politically literate person will manifest a certain compatibility and subtlety in the use of basic political concepts.

Political literacy does not pretend to be valuefree, but is based on a specific set of attitudes, the most important of which is the acceptance of the existence of political conflict. Values which are seen as inherent to the Western capitalist tradition, should be subject to the same critical discussion as that of other traditions such as Marxism (Porter in Heater & Gillespie, 1981:190-191).

With reference to marginal groups in society, educationalists who are interested in adult education have turned to the work of Freire (1974). Freire sees political education a by-product of literacy education. According to him the oppressed do not need knowledge that enables them to make contact with political institutions. What they need, is the cultivation of the ability to understand their own unique problems. Freire emphasises three important conditions for adult education, which also hold implications for political education (Freire as quoted by Entwistle in Heater and Gillespie, 1981:240-245):

(a) The fundamental importance of language in political education. An approach to literacy which is based on the identification "of a culturally realistic vocabulary aimed at the problem of leading adults how to read in relation to the awakening of their consciousness" (Entwistle, 1981:241). His pedagogy (theory of education) for the oppressed was an effort to also cultivate a cultural (also political) consciousness through the word;

(b) the learning process must be a dialogue between teacher and pupil and

(c) the adult pupil's own experience must be used in the learning process.

Freire feels that the oppressed only gain relevant empirical experience in politics on the micro-level. He writes: "I was convinced that the Brazilian people could learn social and political responsibility only by experiencing that responsibility through intervention in the destiny of their children's schools, in the destinies of their trade unions and places of employment through associations, clubs and councils, and life in their neighbourhoods, churches and rural communities by actively participating in associations, clubs and charitable societies" (quoted by Entwistle, 1981:245). This is thus a accentuation of association democracy". The implication is that adult political education must begin with a study of the institutions which have a potential for sympathising with the citizens.

It appears as if a programme of political literacy for the injured and the oppressed cannot be an ideologically neutral activity.

Adult political literacy programmes can be instituted by using voluntary associations and the mass media.

The idea of political literacy has received strong criticism (see in this regard White & White, 1976; Minogue, 1979 and Beridge, 1978). Despite the strong arguments against the implementation of a programme of political literacy, the advantages overshadow the possible disadvantages - as is shown in this article.

The views expounded in this article are admittedly populist in nature. It has to be remembered that an alternative elitist school of thought relating to political education theory is that political learning's major impact is not on society as a whole but on certain influential groups in society. In other words political learning will only acquire real meaning when experienced by members of political elites while its impact on the broader population is somewhat blunted. The views of Antonio Gramsci must also be mentioned in this regard. According to Italian neo-Marxist, Gramsci, the focus as far as political learning is concerned must necessarily be on so-called intellectuals - especially that category he termed organic intellectuals (see Gramsci, 1971:5-43).

5. CONCLUSION

The main argument in this article is that action for the implementation of a programme of political literacy is a necessity in South Africa. Any authoritarian system in a position of transition can use political literacy as a positive force among the population.

Although political literacy as a concept does not yet enjoy recognition in South Africa, the government may find the experience of other states useful. A few suggestions in this regard can be based on the recommendations of the National Conference of the Political Association of Britain, 1980 (see Appendix A).

APPENDIX A: POLICY STATEMENT ON POLITICAL EDUCATION
RECOMMENDATIONS[1]

1. The Politics Association believes that the need for political education must
    be recognised by the government, political parties and educational
    authorities and institutions as a key priority.

2. The Association welcomes the DES initiative on moves towards reaching an
    agreement on a common-core curriculum and believes strongly that political
    education must be accorded a distinctive role within it. Moreover, the
    Association believes that politics as an academic subject should be available
    as a series of optional studies beyond the core curriculum in all secondary
    schools.

3. The Association also takes the view that schools which are genuinely
    concerned to prepare citizens for life in a democratic society should be
    encouraged to examine the educational possibilities inherent in their own
    organisations in an effort to realise this end.

4. The Association recognises that the implementation of a through-going
    development in political education will have important repercussions on
    teacher training institutions. It recommends that urgent consideration be
    given to the need to establish relevant courses of academic and professional
    study both at the initial and inservice levels.

5. Whilst highly appreciative of funds so far provided by the DES and certain
    other bodies, the Association recommends that finance should be provided
    for further research to improve the possibilities of effective political
    learning. It also recommends that the fullest consideration should be given
    to research and experiments in political education conducted in youth
    organisations and informal settings.

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[1] Extract from: "The need for political education in Britain". A policy
     statement discussed and endorsed by the National Conference of the Political
     Association, 1980 (Brennan, 1981:136).

6. The Politics Association recognises that the spread of political literacy cannot be achieved by the schools alone. If this aim is taken seriously it will require the co-operation of a whole range of governmental institutions and voluntary organisations. It recommends that, wherever possible, government bodies should follow the example of the House of Commons in appointing a full or part-time education officer responsible for liaison with schools and the dissemination of appropriate information to young people. Political parties, trade unions, the CBI and other voluntary public bodies are urged to extend and improve internal education in politics for their own members and for the rest of society.

7. Television and radio have made substantial contributions to the advancement of political education. However, high-quality programmes apart, there is a tendency to personalise important political issues or to offer programmes which are too specialised to advance the political literacy of the majority. The Association strongly recommends programme planners and makers to use their expertise and flair to produce programmes which explain the political system and show how it can be made to respond to the needs and interests of all groups in society.

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