

Book Feature

Boekbeskouing

Colin Eglin, *Crossing the Borders of Power: The Memoirs of Colin Eglin*
Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2007
374 pp
ISBN 13: 978-1-86842-253-1
R225.00

View from a contemporary

It is not often that the memoirs of a politician who was never in the governing party of a country can be of such historical interest as those of Colin Eglin. He has been close to virtually all the important political events in South Africa since the Nationalists came to power in 1948. His story includes in particular the formation of the Progressive Party in 1959, after the introduction of H.F. Verwoerd's Bantustan policy had obliged the United Party to define its alternative proposals. At its national congress in Bloemfontein, the United Party supported reactionary resolutions put forward by Douglas Mitchell and others, partly against the recommendation of its leader, Sir De Villiers Graaff, and 12 of its members of parliament resigned from the party, including Eglin, Helen Suzman, Doctor Steyler and Zach de Beer. They were followed soon after by Harry Lawrence, who had been a minister in General Smuts' cabinet.

More than thirty years later, Eglin was to play a noteworthy role in the negotiations which led to the adoption of the current South African Constitution. The principles upon which it was based, were essentially those which the Molteno Commission had developed for the Progressive Party at its inception and which had been advocated by its representatives throughout the intervening apartheid years. For thirteen of those years, Helen Suzman was the only Progressive Party representative in parliament, but in 1974, after Eglin had taken over the leadership of the party from Doctor Steyler, she was joined by six others, including Eglin in the Sea Point constituency and Frederik van Zyl Slabbert in Rondebosch. In 1977 the party, by now called the Progressive Federal Party after taking in Harry Schwarz and Japie Basson, ousted the United Party as official opposition.

For a while Eglin gave way to Van Zyl Slabbert as leader of the party, but he took over the reins again when Slabbert abruptly resigned from parliament in 1986. After the party lost its position as official opposition to the Conservative Party, he gave notice that he did not believe that he was the person to lead the party into the next election. De Beer became the leader of the party and Eglin its chairman. In the following year the party merged with Wynand Malan's National Democratic Movement and Worrall's Independent Party to form the Democratic Party.

Momentous changes were about to take place on the government side. On 2 February 1990, F.W. de Klerk made his unexpected announcement that the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) were to be unbanned with immediate effect. Eglin describes the furious reaction from the Conservative Party and the stunned silence in the ranks of De Klerk's own party. Nelson Mandela was released from detention within days.

Eglin's description of the negotiations to frame a new constitution is of special interest. Though understated in the book, it is clear that he made a significant contribution. He was well-placed to do this: politically he stood between the two main negotiating parties, the ANC and the National Party; he had the benefit of having considered for more than thirty years the kind of constitution which was necessary for the new South Africa; he had gotten to know a number of senior ANC people at meetings in Lusaka and elsewhere; and he was respected by them for the role his party had played in the apartheid years. On one occasion, Chris Hani said to him expressly: "I have a high regard for the role you Progressives played in opposing apartheid".

Early in the negotiations, Eglin was appointed convenor of a six person sub-committee mandated to produce a draft Declaration of Intent, the founding document of the negotiation process. He and Valli Moosa produced the final draft, which was accepted by the main players at a plenary session in December 1991. The course of the negotiations went through various stages: the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa); the Multi-Party Negotiating Process; the Record of Understanding; the Transitional Executive Council; and the Constituent Assembly. Negotiations stalled, but got back on track. Eglin's account is enriched by his personal experiences with many of the leading personalities: Nelson Mandela, F.W. de Klerk, Joe Slovo, Cyril Ramaphosa, Roelf Meyer, Pravin Gordhan and many others. The book's blurb states that Mandela described Eglin as "one of the architects of our democracy".

The early part of Eglin's memoirs includes accounts of his Standard 6 school year, living on the farm of his mother's sister and brother-in-law at Hobhouse in the Orange Free State, and going to school there; matriculating at the age of 14 at the De Villiers Graaff High School at Villiersdorp; serving with the Cape Town Highlanders in the assault on Monte Sole on his twentieth birthday; marrying Joyce Cortes in 1949; and his early political life. At the formation of the Liberal Party in 1953, he voted against the conversion of what was then the Liberal Association into a political party, arguing that an attempt should be made to move the United Party in a liberal direction. This he and others tried to do until the Bloemfontein Congress in 1959.

The book is of course of particular interest to the many Progressives who worked with and for him in the tough early years of the party, but it will be of interest to a much wider readership. It is eminently readable.

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