

An intriguing, but incomplete account

The publication of Colin Eglin's memoirs is a major contribution to our understanding of South Africa's tumultuous history in the second half of the twentieth century. Eglin's autobiography reflects the political and intellectual development of South African liberalism in the age of Apartheid. Eglin served in parliament through the terms of seven successive prime ministers and presidents (from J.G. Strijdom to Thabo Mbeki), and under five constitutions, from the Union Constitution to the Constitution of 1996. Nelson Mandela once praised Eglin as one of the architects of South Africa's democracy. Eglin continued his parliamentary work over the first decade of South Africa's transition to democracy, before finally resigning from office in 2004. In *Crossing the Borders of Power*, an active life lived well is recalled, from the years of depression to the Second World War, from the establishment of apartheid to non-racial democracy.

Born in 1925 in a white, English-speaking, middle-class family, Colin Eglin graduated from the University of Cape Town with a degree in quantity surveying. During the Second World War, he joined the army and fought with the Allied forces in Northern Italy. He returned from the war in Europe, fully convinced that racial prejudice and discrimination were fundamentally evil. His personal experience of war would remain a lasting source of inspiration for the rest of his adult life, during which he would fight to establish a society in which the rights and dignity of every individual human being would be respected and constitutionally entrenched in a Bill of Rights. This was an insight, however, that would only gradually grow, even within the community of non-Nationalist voters. A political commitment, based on the conception of universal human rights, could only attract a very limited spectrum within the white community. Eglin started his political career in the early fifties as a supporter of the United Party that would face rapid disintegration after the victory of the National Party (NP).

What follows is an intriguing account of the breakaway of the Progressives from the United Party, their role during the emergency of 1960 and their steady growth, as the United Party and eventually also the Nationalists faded from the scene. Together with equally notable people like Helen Suzmann, Zach de Beer and Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, Eglin would soon form the backbone of the liberal parliamentary opposition against successive NP-governments. The legacy of Progressive liberalism would soon serve as a powerful source of inspiration for future developments of the country after apartheid. The perspective of inevitable change and the recognition of basic human rights paved the way for the transformation process of the early 1990s. It was a long, slow process, but the original Progressive Party-platform of the late 1950s – calling for a Bill of Rights, a non-racial franchise on a common role and the scrapping of racial discrimination – was to be incorporated in all essentials in the Constitution of 1996. The Progressives and their various successive party formations would serve as the forerunners of what would later become the Democratic Alliance (DA).

Eglin's autobiography reflects the intellectual development of South African liberalism. These memoirs however will not meet the expectations of the reader with a keen interest in the history of political theory and ideas. It is a narrative of the many events and experiences by a practically oriented politician. A deeper insight into the

ideological background of Eglin is not provided. The reader needs at least a passive knowledge of South African liberalism in order to understand the political role that the author was playing.

Progressive liberalism exercised a key mediating role in the transformation process and the constitutional negotiations in the early nineties. This was a huge achievement, particularly when it is considered that neither the NP, nor the ANC had any historical or other attachment to the idea of a Bill of Rights. Such constitutional provisions had been expressly rejected by the Nationalists, in fact, when they declined to become signatories to the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. The ANC, for its part, had been under the influence of left-wing revolutionary ideology at the height of the armed liberation struggle and firmly rejected a Bill of Rights which it saw as a vehicle of "illusory bourgeois freedoms". It was not until the late 1980s that both the NP and ANC found themselves in favour of the constitutional protection of individual human rights on the lines long championed by the Progressives and their successors. This was the legacy of the political and intellectual tradition to which Eglin was firmly connected. Notwithstanding its limited parliamentary representation, the tradition of progressive liberalism played a pivotal role in the constitutional debates during the years of transformation.

Eglin not only personalises intellectual and ideological bridges, but often served as personal mediator in complex political cleavages. His account of the constitutional negotiations is of special interest. His close friendships with figures politically as far apart as communist Joe Slovo and Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi of the IFP, indicate the extent to which Eglin was trusted and respected across the political spectrum. He dealt in the same way with contrasting personalities such as F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela. At a later stage it would become clear that Eglin, having obtained the status as elder statesman of the party, would become unhappy with Tony Leon's leadership and his more aggressive political style. In 2004 Eglin resigned from parliament and immediately started writing his memoirs. As critical observer of the political developments in his country, he remains a strong proponent of liberal democratic values. Resonating elderly Jan Smuts' observations in 1949 – "The whole world is moving into a Color phase of history, which results none can foresee and South Africa should dread most. Still, the worst, like the best, never happens" – Eglin reaffirms his political instincts and optimistic spirit: "While I have learned to take nothing for granted, I believe we South Africans have the ability to overcome our problems. I remain quietly confident that the democracy for which so many have worked and fought is going to prevail". He remains critical however of various recent developments as consequences of the transformation process, such as the high level of violent crime, and the growing gap between a new rich elite and millions of impoverished South Africans.

Eglin tells his story in modest, understated terms and in easily readable, accessible style, which will certainly win a wide popular readership. Eglin's style is both inclusive and reconciliatory, and this reflects the modest way in which he describes the many encounters he had with various personalities, both nationally and internationally. This book is more about personal encounters than his own personal role, but the reader gets an insight into the position of a widely accepted mediator between political adversaries. The historian should use this testimony as a valuable source for the understanding of a pivotal chapter in the history of South Africa. As a

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personal testimony however, this source should be used with necessary caution. Personal views often tend to interfere heavily, but unavoidably, with the establishment of political facts and developments. One should read *Crossing the Borders of Power* as a first-hand account and not as a scholarly piece of history writing. Some of Eglin's observations, particularly while referring to facts and events outside South Africa, lack accuracy. The author for example completely confuses the respective role of postwar Italian politicians Pietro Nenni and Palmiro Tagliotti. The critical reader may question the sources that the author must have used for the writing of such a detailed and meticulously reconstructed autobiography. The reader should read this book within the framework of its own ambitions: as a personal testimony, rather than an exercise in academic historiography. It may encourage the further study of the history of liberal politics in South Africa.

Georgi Verbeeck
Maastricht University /
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven