

Colin Eglin served as member of parliament for thirty-three years (1958-1961, 1974-2004), under seven prime ministers or presidents (from Strijdom to Mbeki), and under five different constitutions (the Union Constitution, the Republican, the Tricameral, the 1994 Interim, and the final 1996 Constitution). Moreover during his parliamentary career he belonged to no less than six political parties (the United Party, the Progressive Party, the Progressive Reform Party, the Progressive Federal Party, the Democratic Party, and the Democratic Alliance). This is not to suggest at all that Eglin was one of those party-hopping opportunists that have come to bedevil South African politics in recent years. Far from it – Eglin only once switched parties, being one of the original “Prog” MPs who left the decaying, ever more conservative United Party in 1959 and became one of the founding MPs of the Progressive Party. Thereafter all his changing party affiliations would result from mergers and realignments in parliamentary opposition politics – realignments that always kept the “Progs” at the core.

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1. F.A. Mouton, “‘Staying within hearing distance’: Max du Preez, Schalk Pienaar and the Afrikaans press in the apartheid era”, *Joernaal vir Eietydse Geskiedenis*, 30, 1, Junie 2005.

During the 46-year span of his political life, Eglin was always in opposition, never even remotely close to the corridors of power. One of his more triumphant moments was the 1974 white election which increased Progressive representation in parliament from one MP to six – including Eglin himself, elected in the Sea Point constituency. Helen Suzman would now have company on the benches after her lone 13-year battle as sole Progressive Party MP since 1961. A party that was perceived to represent largely a small white, English-speaking, more or less liberal minority, was never going to have much growth potential. It had no appeal for white supremacists and Afrikaner nationalists during the apartheid era, and hardly any appeal for black Africans in the post-apartheid era. So in 1974 the Progressive Party would find itself with seven seats (after winning an additional seat at a by-election after the 1974 white election). Twenty years later, after the first democratic election in 1994, its successor, the Democratic Party (DP), would also find itself with seven seats. There would be further growth, through mergers, after both 1974 and 1994, but there was always a low ceiling for that growth.

White politics was Colin Eglin's domain, at least till 1994. That is very apparent from this autobiography. He was a superb, hard-working political organiser who excelled at election time. The sevenfold increase in Progressive parliamentary representation in 1974 was in no small measure due to his efforts as party leader, but he was not an astute political thinker or visionary. The book, for instance, reveals a limited awareness of trends and tendencies in black politics before 1990. The first mention of Steve Biko comes in 1977, when Eglin met him for the first time, a few months before he was murdered. Up to that time, the black consciousness movement, a powerful force in South Africa from the late 1960s, had merited hardly a mention in Eglin's account. Similarly, the formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983 is mentioned, but without any real consideration of its implications for opposition politics.

Before 1990, Eglin had a consistent view of the role of a liberal white opposition party – that “it should use the parliamentary system, for all its flaws, to persuade the government and the voters to abandon apartheid and start a process of negotiation – towards a new non-racial and democratic system”, while also reaching out to those compelled to act outside the system (p 220). This was always a vain hope – the National Party government was never likely to respond to persuasion, only to pressure. It indeed was a set of pressures, internal and external, that eventually brought about the end of apartheid, but one hopeful prediction that Eglin made back in 1978, would be realised: “I believe that we in South Africa will talk with one another before we will destroy one another. I don't think people go in for self-destruction ... they also adapt when they realise their position becomes untenable” (p 176).

Immersed in white politics, Eglin took time to reach out to the extraparliamentary opposition. He was taken aback in 1987 when two PFP MPs joined a delegation led by Van Zyl Slabbert, who had resigned from parliament and the party leadership the year before, to hold discussions in Dakar with the ANC-in-exile. Although Eglin, as leader of the party, later issued a statement supporting the participation of his two MPs, his autobiography outlines his discomfort at this particular turn of events.

It was only after the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 that Eglin and his DP colleagues “made considerable efforts to get to know the African National Congress, its philosophy, objectives, policies and personalities” (p 267). Eglin studied the Freedom Charter and other ANC documents, seemingly rather belatedly. However, this reaching out did indeed break down some old barriers. There is one telling memory revealed in the autobiography: “Particularly close to my political and private soul was Joe Slovo, most remarkable of them all. Charming and intelligent, he was a creative lateral thinker with a deep human understanding”. Eglin and Slovo were brought closer together when it was learnt that Slovo and Eglin’s wife, Joyce, were both suffering from terminal bone marrow cancer. Their closeness says much about the potential for the human dimension to transcend or bridge the sharp ideological divisions and political polarisation that bedevil arenas of conflict around the world.

Eglin also reveals his admiration for Mandela, highlighting his “warm and inclusive style”. Mandela made all parties feel that they had a role to play in parliament. Thus the DP was given a sense of belonging. When Mandela disagreed in parliament with Tony Leon, the DP leader, he would phone Leon and ask him to come around and discuss the matter – a political style not continued by Mandela’s successor.

Colin Eglin may have lacked the political shrewdness and vision of Van Zyl Slabbert, who took over the leadership of the PFP from him in 1979. Nor could he match the enormous reputation and stature of his friend and colleague, Helen Suzman, who had played a courageous lone role in the white parliament for thirteen years. However, Eglin’s autobiography reveals his own important, valuable contribution to South African life – serving in the country’s forces in Italy during the Second World War, striving hard to keep the faint flame of liberal white opposition alight during the apartheid years, and participating constructively and wholeheartedly in the transition to democracy during the 1990s.

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