

*Sub Fred*



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

*MF*

11 June 1981

(4)

*Dear Michael,* *h.s. Ant* *Prime Minister*

South Africa: Elections

*Ant*

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary thought that the Prime Minister might wish to read Mr Leahy's despatch on the recent General Election in South Africa, a copy of which is enclosed.

*yours ever*  
*Roderic Lyne*

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BRITISH EMBASSY  
PRETORIA

15 May 1981

SOUTH AFRICA'S GENERAL ELECTION: WHY THE EASY WINNER  
CANNOT TAKE ALL

## SUMMARY

1. South Africa's recent General Election (whites only) was no more than a qualified success for P W Botha. The governing National Party (NP) fought a confused campaign and although it predictably won an overwhelming majority of seats it shed support to left and right, particularly to the extreme right Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP). Mr Botha can claim to have won a personal mandate for himself, but he did not do as well as he must have hoped. (Paragraphs 1-7)

2. Mr Botha apparently intends to proceed with reform designed to strengthen the system of separate development (in particular new constitutional structures for coloureds and Asians, benefits for urban blacks, and economic development linking South Africa and the internal black "national states"). But he needs to proceed with caution in order to take his party with him. (Paragraphs 8-10)

3. The opposition Progressive Federal Party (PFP) picked up a few seats, but won no substantial support from Afrikaners. The NP alone will decide the pace and extent of reform. (Paragraph 11)

4. Blacks will have taken little comfort from the election. (Paragraph 12)

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5. The basic elements of the Namibia problem have not been changed and the Prime Minister will not want to expend his political capital on it. (Paragraph 13)

6. The future is difficult to predict. It is hard to believe that P W Botha can meet the rising expectations of the blacks on the one hand and overcome reactionary white resistance on the other. (Paragraph 14)

BRITISH EMBASSY  
PRETORIA

15 May 1981

The Rt Hon The Lord Carrington KCMG MC  
LONDON

My Lord

SOUTH AFRICA'S GENERAL ELECTION: WHY THE EASY WINNER  
CANNOT TAKE ALL

1. In the South African General Election on 29 April the National Party (NP) led by Mr P W Botha won 131 out of 165 seats. (details at annex). In British politics that would be a crushing victory of unheard of proportions. But in the strange world of South African politics it was a somewhat qualified success. Why? What will it mean for P W Botha's policies?
2. P W Botha called an early election partly because a large number of by-elections were pending in which the Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP) and other right extremists, were likely to do particularly well in low polls, and partly because he wanted to cash in on the economic boom before the downturn later in the year. Having succeeded Mr John Vorster a year after the 1977 election, P W Botha also wanted to secure a personal mandate to implement his policies of pragmatic reform. These policies are designed not to abolish but to strengthen the system of separate development by extending the political independence of the black homelands and uniting them eventually with the rest of South Africa in a confederation; by promoting the economic development of the whole country as a single economic unit and improving the conditions of the urban blacks; by reaching a constitutional accommodation with the coloureds and Asians; and by removing



"unnecessary" discrimination (ie petty apartheid).

3. The fact that so far there has been little to show for P W Botha's reforms has been mainly due to opposition from within his own party. The establishment in January 1981 of the President's Council, including coloureds and Asians but excluding blacks, was meant to help him overcome this opposition. But it looks as if he also calculated that he could best outflank the opponents within his own party by calling a snap election before the President's Council had made any recommendations and before he had decided on the detail of his own policies towards the blacks. Thus he would be able to win a mandate on the shadowy principle of reform without exposing surface with specific proposals.

4. Mr Botha won his mandate in terms of seats, but the election revealed ominous trends for him and his party. The NP shed support to left and to right. The opposition Progressive Federal Party (PFP), under their blossoming young Afrikaner leader Dr F van Zyl Slabbert, took most of the dozen seats that changed hands. But more disturbing for P W Botha was a haemorrhage of Afrikaner support to the HNP, which preaches a creed of uncompromising white supremacy, Afrikaner nationalism and emotive racism. The HNP failed - narrowly - to win a seat but took 14% of the votes cast, more than quadrupling the support it gained in the 1977 general election.

5. P W Botha and the NP lost ground because the snap election apparently caught his own much vaunted party machine unprepared, and because the NP campaign was confused. An attempt to re-create the atmosphere of the 1977 landslide by harping on a Soviet-

/inspired



inspired "total onslaught" against South Africa flopped. As opinion polls more and more revealed the strength of the HNP challenge, Ministers avoided mention of reform and fell back on traditional apartheid themes in order to refute HNP claims that they were "selling out to the blacks".

6. The NP's concern with the HNP threat left the PFP free to develop a well-researched campaign on economic issues, particularly inflation. A last minute government attempt to counter this threat was largely torpedoed by a much exploited gaffe by the Minister of Health who claimed in a press conference that white pensioners could live on a diet costing £11.30 a month.

7. By trying to be all things to all men the NP presented no clear message to the electorate. In contrast, the HNP's reassuring and simple policy of continued white "baaskap" (domination) appealed to confused and apprehensive Afrikaners. Tens of thousands defected to the HNP. Many others spoiled their ballot papers, or abstained. At the same time, many English-speakers, alienated by the reactionary tone of the government campaign and worried over economic issues, turned to the PFP when they might otherwise have voted for the NP.

8. What are the implications? First of all for the prospects of reform in this country. In February P W Botha said in Parliament:

"..... I have undertaken to do nothing that I do not intend to carry out.....What I said in public I would do I shall carry out as leader of this party, as long as I receive the grace and strength to lead."

/Following



Following the election, Mr Botha is apparently letting it be known that he does not intend to be deflected from this course. On 30 April he claimed that the election result was an endorsement of the Government's intention to "proceed with the President's Council" and to bring into being a constellation of southern African states. Within the next few months we may see proposals for new constitutional structures for coloureds and Asians, legislation improving the lot of urban blacks, and the establishment of a Southern Africa Development Bank linking South Africa and the internal black "national states".

9. It remains, however, uncertain whether P W Botha will be able to carry the NP with him along the road of reform. While there has been no split in the party, Afrikanerdom itself has been split. The HNP has become respectable and is no longer a refuge for the lunatic fringe. The election has not strengthened P W Botha's position as he hoped it would. His autocratic style and uncontrolled temper have left him with few friends - indeed if he were to slip up no one would reach out a hand to help. Many Afrikaners suspect his ultimate policy objectives. Other Afrikaner centres of power - the Broederbond, the civil service, the church - all have reservations about him. As a Cape Nationalist he is still mistrusted in conservative Transvaal, the NP's heartland. The composition of the NP caucus is largely unchanged by the election. Many of its members will now be looking over their shoulders at the threat from the HNP to their seats and thus their livelihood. There is already much talk of what will happen at the next General Election. Afrikaner politicians have vivid memories of earlier South African

/Governments



Governments overturned from their flanks. Only 10 years before D F Malan came to power in 1948 he and his small band of followers had been far out in a political wilderness on the right.

10. Meanwhile P W Botha is still in command. He leads a strong and apparently united Cabinet with all the resources of the state at his disposal and with powerful media support. For all that he will need to take care. If he moves too fast or rides roughshod over established NP procedures, his own position could be at risk. And he has not yet demonstrated that he can get his way in a trial of strength with his caucus. There is some speculation in the press and among politicians that P W Botha might create, and assume, the role of Executive President in an attempt to get round this problem. But it is too early to judge how much credence to give this.

#### The Opposition

11. Despite the increase in its Parliamentary representation the PFP still has only a fifth of the number of seats held by the NP, and remains primarily an urban, middle class, English-speaking party. It has no prospect of forming an alternative government unless it picks up substantial support from Afrikaners, which it has shown no sign of doing. The PFP will be a more effective opposition than before and will continue to press for what it regards as real reform. But the pace and extent of change will be decided by the NP alone and the Government will be less worried by the aggression of their opponents than by the threat of defection of their supporters.

#### The Blacks

12. Articulate politically-conscious black opinion viewed the





election with a mixture of resentment and indifference. To them it was not about the real issue, namely consultation with valid representative blacks leading to a genuine sharing of power. They know that this is the one thing that cannot be expected from P W Botha. Among less politically-minded blacks there may still be some residual goodwill towards him, in that they may expect some benefits from him even if only economic. But they will have taken little comfort from the reversion to old apartheid themes in the election. P W Botha will have to move quickly if he is to maintain or increase this goodwill.

#### Namibia

13. The election changes none of the basic elements of the Namibia problem. I believe that P W Botha would like to get the matter settled but, unless the Americans can persuade him otherwise, he is unlikely to give it a high priority for the expenditure of his scarce political capital.

#### The Future

14. Prediction is exceptionally hazardous. My guess is that P W Botha is heartily glad to have got the General Election out of the way and will now press ahead with his characteristic energy and enthusiasm. He might - just - succeed in constructing a confederation and in getting coloured and Asian Parliamentary representation. He is likely to carry through reforms designed to benefit the urban blacks. But it is hard to believe that he will succeed in meeting the rising expectations of the black community on the one hand, and overcoming the resistance of deeply entrenched reactionary white opinion on the other. The General Election has not significantly affected the march of



events. The realities are growing black power and increasing disunity and apprehension among the whites.

15. I am copying this despatch to the British High Commissioners at Maseru, Mbabane, Gaborone, Salisbury and Lusaka; to HM Ambassadors at Maputo, Luanda, Washington, Paris, Bonn and Ottawa; and to the United Kingdom Permanent Representative at New York.

I am, My Lord,  
yours faithfully

*John Leakey*



## ANNEX

## SOUTH AFRICAN GENERAL ELECTION - 29 APRIL 1981

## RESULTS

Party	Total number of seats <sup>(1)</sup>	Total number of votes	% of total votes <sup>(2)</sup>
National Party (NP)	131 (122)	771,925	57
Progressive Federal Party (PFP)	26 (17)	256,578	19
New Republic Party (NRP)	8 (8)	105,933	8
Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP)	- (-)	191,456	14
National Conservative Party (NCP)	- (-)	16,691	1
Independent	- (-)	3,895	1
TOTAL	165 (148)	1,346,478	100

NOTES: (1) Figures in brackets indicate number of seats held by each party at dissolution of Parliament (26 February 1981). There were also 17 vacant seats. Figures do not include nominated MPs.

(2) Percentage figures rounded.