

PRIME MINISTER

8 May 1987

PERSONAL VIEW OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN ELECTIONS

The most immediate interpretation, echoed by most newspapers and political commentators, is that the electorate has moved to the right. The PFP vote has collapsed and the right-wing Conservative Party is now the official opposition with 22 seats against Botha's 123. I lived in South Africa from 1965 until 1973 and have just returned from a fortnight's visit over Easter. My perception about what is taking place is therefore highly subjective and may clash with 'official' views. It is, however, based on a 20 year familiarity with the country.

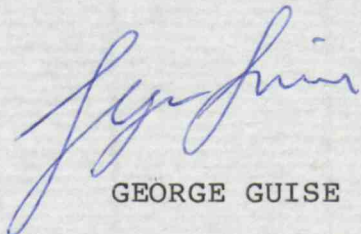
Today's National Party is marginally to the left of where the old United Party (the English voters' party) stood when I left South Africa in 1973. The emergent Conservative Party, which is dedicated to a continuance of separate development and different racial societies within one political superstructure, stands approximately where the old National Party under Verwoerd and Vorster used to be.

The Progressive Federal Party (PFP), always a hotchpotch of woolly minded 'do-gooders' and 'swimming pool reds', has been shattered with their share of the vote collapsing to 14%. Their parliamentary seats have fallen from 27 to 19 and they will be seen as a busted flush. At the other extreme, the crazier right-wing parties like the HNP and the AWB have made no effective showing, riven as they are by internal strife.

My overall reading of the election is therefore a vote of confidence in Botha's method of careful advance which he demonstrated up until the 'Rubicon' speech in August 1985.

The abrupt reversal thereafter clearly indicated that worries about the right had got to him. The Conservative Party success indicates that there is a strong, articulate body of his former colleagues who believe that he is moving too fast and even in the wrong direction. However this opposition is now concentrated into a single visible group to the right rather than a chorus of unfocussed grumbling from both left and right about whatever he did. Desmond Tutu put it well last year when he said that Botha had moved far enough left to alienate all to the right of him but not far enough to appease anyone on his left and had therefore become isolated. He is clearly no longer isolated and is now in a very strong position to advance the country on a pragmatic path.

In my view those who will tell you that South Africa has retreated into a right-wing laager and that you must now go for sanctions are hopelessly wrong. Many will argue this, motivated by malice or ignorance. The key point to take from the South African election results is that Botha has been shifted from a position of political impotence to one where he is now able to make things happen. Unfortunately, what we are going to see on television is every shred of circumstantial evidence, that the jack-boot is being slammed down on any manifestation of Black discontent. What may be on offer behind the scenes could be quite different and I hope our representatives will be alert for early signs that Botha has now accepted a mandate to continue the advance he was making.


GEORGE GUISE