

The Soul of Liberalism - a Swiss-South African Reply

James Buchanan recently held a lecture at St. Gallen University about the "soul of liberalism". I was quite disappointed - not to say devastated - to learn that obviously in the US it is quite acceptable to equal liberalism with Reaganism. And although the US is quite a far way off eastern Europe and has probably never experienced proper socialism, not even on a municipal level, Mr. Buchanan was constantly repeating the influence of the leftist movements in the seventies.

He attributed liberalism to "save the books" and "save the ideas", but regretted that "it was a bizarre fact that in a socialist upswing we failed to save the soul of classical liberalism". Liberalism consisted of "Science, Self-interest and Soul" plus Ronald Reagan's "Shining village on a hill" (That's when I shuddered for the first time, I grew up believing this was rather an American-Evangelicalist¹ idea). He explained that classical liberalism had a vision beyond science interest and that both classical liberalism and socialism had souls, although their principles were different. He told us that liberalism had been retreating since the mid 19th century. One of his main points, which I would subscribe to fully, was that "liberalism boils down to a logical understanding of a chain of human interaction", and that one of its main objectives were the "absence of exerting power over others" and the "exit option offered to each participant". He also admitted that "even classical liberals get their hands dirty by engaging in day-to-day politics".

We probably have a different view of what and why it is happening, living a couple of hours drive from the Polish or Czechoslovakian border (or say the Mozambican or Angolan border). Having been through umpteen socialist governments (in Switzerland) and having experienced national-socialist governments (in South Africa).

When Mr. Buchanan quoted that liberalism was devoid of any appeal, I was bound to agree with him. So far, the only subtypes of liberalism which managed to put a greater number of people in motion were centred on a individual, like Gaullism or the already cited Reaganism, all of them poor examples of liberalism as they included more directive measures than usual and were only marginally linked to liberalism, if at all.

Liberalism is like the old shagged Volvo that keeps working reliably and everyone knows more or less how it works, which is always driven out of the garage and put to good use when all the flashy cars have failed. Yet it is unattractive and boring. Socialism in turn is a shiny, flashy Alfa that appeals to many people but rarely manages to run far, whilst using up all the owner's financial resources. Fascism would thus be the same car in brown, without brakes and the accelerator locked in full speed and without third party insurance.

Does liberalism have a soul, and if yes, what would make it up? What is liberalism? In the American context, liberalism is quite obviously the absence of government control. In the Swiss-South African context, there is much more to it. Liberalism is a guarantee of the freedom of the individual, which could only be achieved through a network of checks and balances. Liberalism is one of the many elements that glue together a multi-ethnic state.

¹ What we used to call rather descriptively the "Clappy-clappy-churches"

If liberalism was reduced to granting complete freedom to entrepreneurs, it would be a oligocratic measure - those who are not entrepreneurs would be excluded. Thus Reaganism can impossibly be a good example of liberalism.

Professor Mastronardi defines the elements of liberalism as:

- Freedom
- The autonomous individual
- Self-preservation
- Achievement, Homo Faber
- Separation of state and society
- Legal basis of the state's actions
- Variations:
 - Neoliberalism
 - Ordoliberalism

Dr. Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, probably one of South Africa's most renowned parliamentarians during Apartheid, described his vision of liberalism (he did not call it liberalism, though, I just presumed it to be liberalism, as he was member of the PFP, the Progressive Federal Party, a liberal English-speaking successor of Jan Smut's South African Party) in his book "The Last White Parliament".² He saw himself as an accomplice to the former Apartheid government, although he was for years the only outspoken opposition politician. Nevertheless, when he felt he was reduced to a punch in the puppet show he left politics. He advocated a full and thorough liberalism, with equal opportunities for members of all race, religion and creed.³

Jan Christian Smuts, South Africa's former leader, was battling with the idea of liberalism in a society of people who on the one hand subscribed to the very principles of liberalism, but on the other hand renounced any open association with it.⁴ The Trekboere lived a completely individualistic life, making fullest use of the freedom of the individual, but politically subscribed to a system of "baaskap" which is best portrayed in Kruger's Transvaal Republic. Although the "Volksraad" had some legislative powers, the president's powers were so paramount, that he could overturn any decision taken by the Volksraad and in several instances, had to arbitrarily change the constitution to sack an attorney-general opposing unconstitutional laws. Jan Smuts – who got his first job as a Transvaal attorney-general just because of one of these sackings – managed, when he became prime minister in 1919, to install a kind of liberalism which was quite extraordinary in these days. He was open to talks with any group (although there was little chance for a minority to gain anything), but was heavily restricted by the fact that he had to please General Hertzog and his right-wing followers. And as Smuts was more interested in international politics, where he undoubtedly promoted liberal ideas - he was a founding member of the League of Nations and the UNO - he neglected the dangerous and treacherous South African home turf. Which he was to pay dearly for in the 1948 elections.

In a South African context, the main question asked over and over again is the one about racial equality. Typical for South African liberals is to preach racial equality whilst at the

² Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, *The Last White Parliament*, Jonathan Ball Publishers/Hans Strydom Publishers, Johannesburg, 1985

³ Original PFP election slogan

⁴ John Fisher, *The Afrikaners*, Cassell, London 1969

same employing every possible legal way to prevent a black couple to move into the house next door. Liberalism is derogated to pure lip service.

Jan Smuts at least had the - typical Afrikaans - honesty never to pretend to be a supporter of racial equality, although he always agreed with it in principle. Being in the midst of South African politics and heavily dependent on the Afrikaner vote, he was quite aware that there are and will always be differences which have to be taken into account. His idea was a typical English idea of patronage – the better earning, better educated parts of the population look after the less fortunate part. Of course, this stands in contradiction to liberalism, trading the personal freedom of the non-white population against government-controlled social welfare. Not surprisingly, this was never appreciated by the "beneficiaries" and, although it obviously did much to ease the burden of the impoverished, it has always been blamed on Smuts.

His patronizing ways came to a head 1919 when he - in an attempt to appease General Hertzog - started revoking the few non-white franchise rights left and passed discriminating legislation. Sol Plaatje, the later writer of the South African National Anthem, "Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika", tried to convince the British government to stop discriminating legislation:

"Plaatje returned to South Africa but went once again to England after the war's end, to lead a second SANNC⁵ delegation keen to make its mark on the peace negotiations in 1919. This time Plaatje managed to get as far as the prime minister, Lloyd George, "the Welsh wizard".

Lloyd George was duly impressed with Plaatje and undertook to present his case to General Jan Smuts in the South African government, a supposedly liberal fellow-traveller. But Smuts, whose notions of liberalism were patronizingly segregationist, fobbed off Lloyd George with an ingenuous reply. Disillusioned with the flabby friendship of British liberals,

Plaatje was increasingly drawn to the pan-Africanism of W. E. B. Du Bois, president of the NAACP in the United States.⁶"

Sol Plaatje is said to have remained a liberal all his life, but he never engaged in politics again. It is thus that the African population of South Africa has been driven from liberalism to extremism.

Let's make a big jump in time - 1980ies. Liberal ideas all over South Africa, particularly around Wits University. Some of the key thinkers are Leon Louw and his wife Frances Kendall, died-in-the-wool liberals. Their two books, "The Solution"⁷ and "Let the People Govern"⁸ were bestsellers. They advocated a liberal, Swiss-style federal system to govern South Africa. One of their most innovative and interesting aspects was the "freedom to disassociate"⁹, a very South African conclusion from affirmative action in the USA which they had studied intensively and the existing racial tensions in South Africa. With a view of unsuccessful integration of segregated schools in the USA, affirmative action curtailing the employer's rights to make a choice of the most suitable candidate, and forced togetherness, they concluded this would create a dangerous political climate in South Africa (how right they were...) and be no part of liberal ideas. Very interesting also their following conclusion: "The

⁵ a predecessor of the ANC.

⁶ <http://www.usastores.com/gdl/text/nlisa10.txt>; native life in South Africa by Sol Plaatje, Mafeking, 1906.

⁷ Leon Louw, Frances Kendall, The Solution, Amagi Publications (Pvt) Ltd, Bisho, Ciskei, 1986.

⁸ Leon Louw, Frances Kendall, Let the People Govern, Amagi Publications (Pvt) Ltd, Bisho, Ciskei, 1989.

⁹ Louw/Kendall, The Solution, page 105

Market is colour blind". Nothing proved it better than the short-lived prosperous period after 1994. Unfortunately, the market had to take into account the political realities and quickly adapted.

Leon Louw and Frances Kendall, probably the most uncompromising defenders of liberalism, were right all along. I remember fighting alongside Frances Kendall at the IDASA conference on democracy in Johannesburg in 1986 against a angry mass of black "liberals". It was us two against the rest of the world. While we were maintaining that freedom and democracy requires a complex democratic structure with checks and balances, they insisted that "democracy = the absence of apartheid". There was no way around that and we left very disappointed. Quite remarkable, that Dr. Van Zyl Slabbert, who attended the conference, did nothing to bail us out. It was then when I lost the first little bit of confidence in liberalism. The statesman who said, that it was a dull, unattractive scheme was probably right. I for my part failed to sell it to the South African blacks and I never tried again, except through the backdoor with the "Instruction Manual for Democracy in Southern Africa" which was first published on the web around 1994 and never had the slightest influence on the present constitution.

Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa, one of the most interesting and learned defenders of liberalism in South Africa (unfortunately, I never met him) made himself the focus of black activists when he wrote his book "Let not my Country die"¹⁰ and had to go into hiding when his life was threatened. Liberal ideas were never very popular with black activists and some of them regarded them as the greatest political danger at all. Mutwa's house in Soweto was set alight, but he managed to escape and lived until 1994 in Bophutatswana under the protection of president Mangope, who was one of the first - because of his right-wing political ideas - to fall when the ANC swept the country. Mutwa is said to be still alive and practising as a witchdoctor and artist.

Once again, it was clear that a complex system is hard to sell, but a simple system sells very well. Winnie Mandela promising the squatters redistribution of wealth (this is to be taken literally) or Nelson Mandela selling his political ideas along the line "has been in the struggle" against those who "have not been part of the struggle", segregating the society anew, only with different criteria and being light-years from liberalism.

Europe is not that much different. How easily swept fascism over Europe. How easily did communism the same some fifteen years later. Socialist follow upon catholic governments in Italy. Only the US were mainly untouched by all this and kept nurturing their two mainly conservative parties - the Democrats a bit more to the left and the Republicans a bit more to the right, but both basically agreeing on main topics.

Is it the widespread ownership of real estate that makes the US so stable? My hypothesis is that countries with a widespread ownership of property are generally more stable and agree much easier on liberal ideas, whilst countries with a large part of disenfranchised, impoverished population prefer experimenting with "simple measures" e.g. political extremes. If poverty is very common and land has thus little value, they would also be inclined towards extreme governments.

¹⁰ Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa, Let not my Country die, United Publishers International, Pretoria, 1986



There could be a kind of a "Maslow's pyramid" depicting the needs that have to be satisfied first before being able to talk about liberalism and individual freedom. In that respect, the East Block's opening up would have to be subscribed to the need for property and luxury items (below shown as "cars"), but not at all to a desire for freedom. One dictator is shaken off, but easily replaced with another one. This could be witnessed in many west African countries, but also - particularly visible - in Croatia, and in Bulgaria. There is little doubt that ideas of liberalism find no open ears there - the Croatians and the Bulgarians are yet too busy building up a portfolio of wealth. Should the property never be evenly distributed amongst

the population of the country, should a few ones have ownership of most of the assets of the country, the chances are good that the population will for that fact continue electing extremist governments. It is thus that dictators keep their people happy. So the golden governing rule for a dictator must be: **Create bleak prospectives, control the assets**. The late Zairian dictator Mobutu Sese Seko was a master in this trade. He owned practically everything in the country (I travelled on his lorries, stayed in his rest houses). His people were too preoccupied with daily life, they lacked the time for political awareness (of course, there are always a few political opponents in the dungeons of a dictator).

Quite important is the third level. A society that cannot shed its religious ties will only subscribe to liberal ideas if their religious leader allows it - very unlikely. Much more common are massive interference of religion and politics. Italy is drawn between its two extremes socialism and religion, only recently has the wealthy north found its not-so-liberal but basically liberalism-based political identity. Most of South America is very much influenced by Catholicism und thus not open to liberal ideas. Not surprising that liberation theology has its roots in socialism rather than in liberalism and would - if implemented - bring at best a qualitative difference, but by no means personal freedom. Pakistani politics as well as Afghani or Iranian politics are dominated by the Islam. Even worse in Saudi Arabia, where the political exponents pose as religious leaders at the same time. Only Turkey has managed to shed its religious domination (Atatürk's laicist state), a fact that brought Turkey a much higher development standard than that of most of her neighbours. Liberalism, though, can only grow and prosper where religious ties have been loosened (by no means cut) and the religious authorities have renounced any aspiration to political power.

Cut. We are back in Switzerland, in the midst of Swiss day-to-day politics. Two major political parties have liberal roots: The Free Democratic Party and the Socialist Party. The others partially subscribe to liberalism but have no direct historical roots in liberalism. The parties to the far right have an ideal of a state of complete law and order, trading personal freedom for the economic freedom. The far left idolizes a state in total control of all assets and restricting personal freedom to a necessary minimum. So far, their ideas show little difference. We have two religious parties, the catholic CVP and the reformed EVP. Both of them can be said to be quite liberal and far from their restorationist roots. Both liberal parties have problems to preserve their liberalism: The Socialists have gobbled up the far-left in the

nineties and thus acquired a fair number of members who renounce the idea of individual freedom. The Free Democrats have witnessed the SVP forming a powerful rightist alliance, thus influencing the Free Democrat's decision-making. Nevertheless, Switzerland can generally be seen as the homeland of liberalism, as most political parties and exponents to some greater or lesser extent subscribe to it.

Quite interestingly, some of the most colourful figures in Swiss politics can easily be determined as subscribing to a greater or lesser extent to the principles of liberalism. For instance, Jean Ziegler, the notorious critic of Swiss politics and business habits, has - surprisingly enough - thoroughly democratic ideas and would subscribe to at least two out of the three test questions below. Even Peter Bodenmann, the much-feared former lead of the Swiss Socialist Party reveals his sound liberal roots in a recent essay in the *Tages-Anzeiger-Magazin*.¹¹ But the same applies to the far right represented by the likes of Ernst Cincera or Ulrich Schlüer who are, in their hearts, quite ready to accept the basic principles of liberalism, even though they probably prefer the purely economically-orientated neo-liberalism. This is one of the main differences between Swiss politics and South African politics and probably one of the major achievements of liberalism. Liberalism brings together main opponents (the cross-cutting cleavances as some American professor put it) and it facilitates amicable agreement as there is a common base between political opponents. This might one reason why the present dominance of the Zurich-based SVP is causing so much uproar and fears – they are attempting to break up exactly this common base we had for so many decades.

If there was any such understanding in South Africa, if there was any common ground of South African politicians, there could be a chance for the survival of democracy in Southern Africa. Unfortunately, although liberalism was born in England, it never achieved the same status as it did in Europe (paired with Rousseau's Republicanism) and was and is probably constantly weakened by the remaining feudal structures in England. It was no surprise, thus, that the same distorted form of lip-service liberalism reached the shores of South Africa and never really prospered here.¹² An attempt to introduce liberalism to South Africa is stated on my website¹³. At present, I neither favour nor support the continuing existence of democracy in Southern Africa. The present state of society requires an undemocratic intervention such as a strong, army-based government until the evils of paramount crime and disregard for human life are rooted out. Liberalism was never meant to be a excuse for anarchy.

The liberalism test. Here it comes. We were always looking for an easy, cheap way to find out whether somebody or an organization was a true liberal. For the lack of better facilities I advocate the following questions:

1. Do you support individual freedom?
2. Are you in favour of checks and balances?
3. Do you regard it as the state's duty to form and shape society?

With the aid of these three questions (freely quoted from Mastronardi) one should easily be able to determine the true colours of any politician.

One of the main points Mr. Buchanan was making was the "absence of exerting power over others". This is not usually openly quoted when defining liberalism. There is no mention of it

¹¹ Das Magazin, Nr. 52, 1.-7.1.2000, Tages-Anzeiger

¹² "Here" obviously means South Africa *or* Switzerland, depending on the context

¹³ www.swisskiosk.com/peet

in Mr. Mastronardi's definition of liberalism. Yet there is a certain importance to it, particularly when viewed in South Africa.

So far, South Africans have played the game "while I am on top I castigate you" very well. No wonder that it is now happening the other way round. I often tried to explain liberal and democratic ideas to South Africans, but they are usually so taken up by their own ideas that they have great difficulty understanding them. I was not even able to organize the local block watch committee democratically - they lacked the understanding for basic democratic institutions. They elected a chairman, who was neither controlled by nor accountable to anybody. Should he prove to be no good, another one is elected.. The committees of the shanty towns now popping up all over Johannesburg were organized in a similar way.

But if South Africans of all races would understand that their leaders should not be allowed to exert power, but be servants to their society and accountable to their electorate, liberalism would slowly but steadily find its way into South African society.

"I have faith in the human race and in a return of sanity and balance...so don't think that South Africa has an undue share of the world's troubles and the world's dangers..."

Jan Christiaan Smuts, 1946¹⁴

¹⁴ Trehwella Cameron, Jan Smuts, an illustrated biography, Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria 1994