

# “ONE OF THE ARCHITECTS OF OUR DEMOCRACY”: COLIN EGLIN, THE PROGRESSIVE FEDERAL PARTY AND THE LEADERSHIP OF THE OFFICIAL PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION, 1977-1979 AND 1986-1987

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## **Abstract**

*The political career of Colin Eglin, leader of the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) and the official parliamentary opposition between 1977-1979 and 1986-1987, is proof that personality matters in politics and can make a difference. Without his driving will and dogged commitment to the principles of liberalism, especially his willingness to fight on when all seemed lost for liberalism in the apartheid state, the Progressive Party would have floundered. He led the Progressives out of the political wilderness in 1974, turned the PFP into the official opposition in 1977, and picked up the pieces after Frederik van Zyl Slabbert's dramatic resignation as party leader in February 1986. As leader of the parliamentary opposition, despite the hounding of the National Party, he kept liberal democratic values alive, especially the ideal of incremental political change. Nelson Mandela described him as, “one of the architects of our democracy”.*

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**Keywords:** Colin Eglin; Progressive Party; Progressive Federal Party; liberalism; apartheid; National Party; Frederik van Zyl Slabbert; leader of the official parliamentary opposition.

**Slutelwoorde:** Colin Eglin; Progressiewe Party; Progressiewe Federale Party; liberalisme; apartheid; Nasionale Party; Frederik van Zyl Slabbert; leier van die amptelike parlementêre opposisie.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The National Party (NP) dominated parliamentary politics in the apartheid state as it convinced the majority of the white electorate that apartheid, despite the destruction of the rule of law, was a just and moral policy – a final solution for the racial situation in the country. In the process, the perception was created that only disloyal and unpatriotic whites opposed apartheid. Colin Eglin, a passionate liberal, realising that apartheid was an unjust, immoral and oppressive policy and that it would end in a bloody revolution, was not intimidated by these hostile circumstances. Making use of the parliamentary system, the small and

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liberal Progressive Federal Party under his leadership set out to save whites from themselves by trying to convince them of the necessity to reject apartheid, and that their future could only be secured through a democratic South Africa based on merit and not race. During Eglin's two turbulent terms in the 1970s and 1980s as leader of the official parliamentary opposition, in the darkest and bloodiest days in the history of the white supremacy, he defended the rule of law and exposed the brutality and corruption at the heart of the apartheid state. Despite numerous defeats and setbacks, he kept alive liberal democratic values and the ideal of a negotiated settlement with the black majority. In doing so, he helped to pave the way for the birth of the democratic South Africa in 1994. This led to President Nelson Mandela praising him as, "one of the architects of our democracy".

## 2. THE EARLY YEARS

Colin Wells Eglin was born in Sea Point, Cape Town on 14 April 1925, the son of Elsie May and Carl August Eglin, and grew up in Pinelands on the outskirts of Cape Town. In 1934, after his father's death and with his mother in financial straits, he went to live with an uncle, a farmer in Hobhouse in the Orange Free State. He received his secondary school education at the De Villiers Graaff High School, a boarding school in Villiersdorp, Cape Province. These years away from his parental home gave Eglin experience in handling personal problems, and a sense of self-confidence. In 1939 he started studying B.Sc. Quantity Surveying at the University of Cape Town. The Second World War (1939-1945) interrupted his studies and he joined the army in 1943, experiencing combat duty in Italy. The war was one of the most formative events of his life. He returned to South Africa with a deep revulsion for fascism, and for any political system based on discrimination and exclusion. This made him an outspoken opponent of the ruling National Party's apartheid policy. As a result he became active in the United Party (UP), the official parliamentary opposition. Between 1951 and 1953 he was also involved in the Torch Commando, a war veterans' organisation, to oppose the attempts by the NP to remove coloureds from the common voters roll in the Cape Province. As a deeply committed liberal, he was a member of the South African Liberal Association which evolved into the Liberal Party in 1953. After some considerable anguish, he refused to join the new party as he felt that the UP could be liberalised from within to oppose apartheid. As a UP candidate he became a councillor in the Pinelands Municipal Council in 1951, the Cape Provincial Council for Pinelands in 1954, and in 1958 he became the Member of Parliament (MP) for the same constituency.<sup>2</sup>

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2 C Eglin, *Crossing the borders of power. The memoirs of Colin Eglin* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007), pp. 12, 41, 51-54.

### 3. THE PROGRESSIVE PARTY AND THE WILDERNESS YEARS

In November 1959 Eglin played a leading role in the founding of the Progressive Party (PP) when the liberal wing of the UP, under the leadership of Jan Steytler, broke away in protest of the UP’s inability to provide an effective opposition to apartheid.<sup>3</sup> Being a Progressive signified the following for Eglin:

“It meant embracing a philosophy of non-racialism; of applying that philosophy in their personal relationships; and promoting it within the community and the society. The issue was one of persuading voters to adopt a new attitude towards their fellow South Africans, to judge individuals on their worth as human beings and not the colour of their skin: on merit and not on race.”<sup>4</sup>

The PP strove for a political system in which all South Africans could participate through a non-racial qualified franchise, a Bill of Rights and the dismantling of all racial discrimination. In 1960 the Progressives vigorously opposed the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in terms of the Unlawful Organisations Bill. Eglin expressed his opposition to the Bill in the following terms,

“We believe that once this Bill is passed we will be no nearer any solution to the problems of South Africa. All the problems which exists today will exist on the day that this Bill becomes law. But in addition, many of the outward manifestations of these problems will be driven underground, merely to explode or to emerge again in a more dangerous form than that in which we have seen them.”<sup>5</sup>

Against the background of black resistance to apartheid, violence in the rest of Africa in the wake of decolonisation, and a society in which the principal of a primary school in Tzaneen burned a school blazer because it had been worn by a black child,<sup>6</sup> the electorate was alienated by Progressive policies. As a result the PP suffered a crushing defeat in the parliamentary election of October 1961. Helen Suzman was the only successful PP candidate in Houghton, Johannesburg. Eglin’s constituents did not take kindly to his stance that coloureds and blacks should be free to live where ever they wanted to, including Pinelands.<sup>7</sup> He secured a paltry 30,7% of the vote.

Although disappointed by his defeat, Eglin was not despondent, feeling that the PP had laid the base for the concept of “merit and not race” as an alternative to apartheid. He was prepared to participate in the long haul to convince whites of

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3 SL Barnard and AH Marais, *Die Verenigde Party: Die groot eksperiment* (Durban: Butterworth, 1982), pp. 122-126.

4 Eglin, p. 97.

5 House of Assembly Debates, 4 April 1960, col. 4758-4759.

6 *Sunday Times*, 10 September 1961.

7 *Cape Times*, 4 August 1961.

the necessity to reject apartheid.<sup>8</sup> For Eglin, his political career was never about self-glorification, but about the firm conviction of the necessity to implement liberal principles to bring about a just and democratic South Africa. It was a stance he articulated in the following terms after another heavy defeat for the Progressives in the 1987 parliamentary election,

“There will be people who will ask ‘What’s the use?’ Let me make three comments in response to this cry of frustration. The first is that certain things are worth fighting for. Justice is worth fighting for. And freedom is worth fighting for. And decency is worth fighting for. The commitment to fight for these things should never depend on the perceived prospect of electoral success.”<sup>9</sup>

Eglin’s tenacity was based on what Ray Swart, one of the founders of the PP, described as his integrity and “rock-like determination”.<sup>10</sup> In the 1966 general election Eglin stood in the Sea Point constituency, attracting only 29,5% of the vote. He once more contested Sea Point in the 1970 general election, again without any success.<sup>11</sup> In both elections Suzman was the only successful Progressive candidate. Ken Owen, editor of the *Sunday Times* had liberals like Eglin in mind when he declared that, “To be a liberal South African is to have been shaped by defeat”.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. LEADERSHIP OF THE PROGRESSIVE PARTY

By the end of 1970 Jan Steytler decided to retire from politics. Eglin’s organisational ability, tireless energy and dependability, or as Suzman described him, “he engenders a feeling of tremendous solidity”, made him the undisputed choice as the new party leader. A member of the party told the journalist, Marshall Lee, that Eglin was “the rock upon which I build my hopes”.<sup>13</sup> In February 1971 he was duly elected as leader of the PP. Eglin, however, had a number of flaws that would come to haunt his leadership. He was not a great or inspiring orator,<sup>14</sup> while he could be abrasive to friend and foe alike.<sup>15</sup> A personality trait Marlene Silbert, his Sea Point election manager in the 1960s and 1970s, describes in the following terms,

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8 Eglin, p. 97.

9 R Lee (ed.), *Values alive. A tribute to Helen Suzman* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1990), p. 80.

10 R Swart, *Progressive odyssey: Towards a democratic South Africa* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1991), p. 113.

11 *Cape Times*, 22 April 1970; 23 April 1970.

12 K Owen, *These times. A decade of South African politics* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1992), p. 292.

13 *The Star*, 20 February 1971.

14 Personal correspondence with D Gibson, 29 October 2013.

15 H Suzman, *In no uncertain terms* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1993), p. 173; Correspondence with Peter Soal, 6 November 2014.

“Colin has a brilliant mind and could never tolerate simplistic or facile thoughts or comments. He did not suffer fools lightly – and his classification of a fool was pretty harsh!! There were times when indeed he was gruff.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1975 Peter Soal, a friend and admirer of Eglin, told the young Tony Leon, a future leader of the Democratic Alliance and the parliamentary opposition, that Eglin had the “bedside manner of an angry crocodile”.<sup>17</sup> Silbert and Soal could see past Eglin’s irascibility, but others were less tolerant. Boris Wilson, one of the breakaway PP MPs did not take kindly to Eglin’s personality and used his memoirs, *A time of innocence*, to settle a personal score. Fortunately for Eglin, his wife Joyce was warm and gracious, compensating for his lack of people skills.<sup>18</sup>

In his acceptance speech as party leader, Eglin stated that he believed that the old political order was dying and that the PP should provide a political vehicle for all *verligtes* (enlightened ones). *Verligtes* were Afrikaners who were prepared to reform apartheid to make it more humane. They were in an emotional and bitter struggle with the ultra-conservative *verkrampes* (narrow minded) Afrikaners who opposed any changes to apartheid. Seeing potential support for the PP, Eglin was determined that the party had to focus on the “modern city Afrikaner”.<sup>19</sup> This was a challenging task as Afrikaners viewed liberalism as a legacy of British imperialism, an alien ideology, fuelled by hatred of the Afrikaner. The deeply rooted suspicion and loathing of liberalism was one aspect the feuding *verligtes* and *verkrampes* had in common. Schalk Pienaar, a prominent *verligte*, condemned liberalism as just another weapon by English-speaking jingoists and *Boerehaters* (haters of Afrikaners) to get at the Afrikaner.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the PP was seen as an instrument of big capital, the traditional enemy of Afrikaner nationalism. This perception was the result of the personal financial backing of Harry Oppenheimer, chairman of the Anglo American Corporation, which made possible the survival of the PP during the bleak 1960s. As a UP MP between 1948 and 1958, Oppenheimer associated himself with the liberals in the party and supported them when they founded the PP. He shared the beliefs and philosophy of the Progressives and had a close relationship with Eglin. The Afrikaans press claimed that PP policy was dictated by Oppenheimer in pursuit of the interests of Anglo-American, creating in the process a perception that the PP was an instrument of big capital and thus an enemy of the Afrikaner.<sup>21</sup>

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16 Personal correspondence with M Silbert, 21 November 2013.

17 Tribute to Colin Eglin, MP by Tony Leon at a gala banquet held in Cape Town, 14 June 1997, <Supportservices.ufs.ac.za/userfiles/documents/00004/3614-eng.pdf>, accessed 2 December 2013.

18 Personal correspondence with S Dubow, 4 November 2013.

19 *Sunday Times*, 21 February 1971.

20 *Rapport*, 11 March 1973.

21 B Hackland, “The economic and political context of the growth of the Progressive Federal Party in South Africa, 1959-1978”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 7(1), October 1980, p.

After three heavy parliamentary defeats Eglin injected new life, optimism and confidence into the PP. He overhauled and reorganised party structures by placing the party on a more professional basis and by creating a strong party coffer through fund raisings.<sup>22</sup> Eglin also energetically set out to convert Afrikaners to liberalism. Through *Deurbraak*, the party's Afrikaans journal, symposiums with intellectuals, and by visiting universities, he confronted Afrikaners with the realities facing the white minority.<sup>23</sup> Public meetings in NP strongholds such as Vereeniging, Nelspruit, Pietersburg and Pretoria were also held. He approached these encounters with a reasoned and philosophical appeal to the intellect, but did not pull his punches in condemning laws such as the Immorality Act and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act. These meetings were well attended and the audiences listened attentively to his views.<sup>24</sup> This was an indication that Afrikaners were increasingly unsure about their future, but it did not signify that Afrikaners would vote PP. In November 1972 the party suffered crushing defeats in by-elections in NP held seats. These defeats did not demoralise the Progressives as they saw themselves as political missionaries. In addition, Eglin's hard work started to pay off as the PP did reasonably well in the Johannesburg municipal election of March 1972. The party secured its first victory in any election, apart from Suzman's, with Dr Selma Browde's election to the Johannesburg City Council.<sup>25</sup>

In a snap parliamentary election of April 1974 the PP's effective organisation, combined with political divisions in the UP, led to Progressive victories in six UP held constituencies, including Eglin's victory in Sea Point. A few months later the PP won Pinelands from the UP in a by-election.<sup>26</sup> The NP was wary of Eglin's return to parliament and FW de Klerk, a young and rising star in the party, was ordered to shadow him in debates.<sup>27</sup> Eglin found De Klerk affable and sociable, but this did not apply to the other UP and NP MPs. The Progressives had to face a hostile House of Assembly. According to Van Zyl Slabbert, PP MP for Rondebosch and a protégé of Eglin, a hysterical anti-Progressive atmosphere prevailed in the chamber. The UP loathed the Progressives for dividing the opposition, while the NP viewed them as the thin end of the *rooi gevaar* (red peril) with leftist and revolutionary ideas.<sup>28</sup> For the NP, the MPs of the PP were not adversaries, but enemies of the

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11; ER McKenzie, "It's master's voice? The South African Progressive parties and business, 1959-1983", *Journal for Contemporary History* 21 (2), December 1996, pp. 90-107.

22 ER McKenzie, "From obscurity to official opposition: The Progressive Federal Party, 1959-1977", *Historia* 39(1), May 1994, p. 88.

23 Eglin, pp. 127-129.

24 *The Star*, 17 February 1972; *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 February 1972.

25 *The Star*, 2 March 1972.

26 Barnard and Marais, pp. 259-261.

27 Eglin, p. 254.

28 F van Zyl Slabbert, *Afrikaner Afrikaan. Anekdoties en analise* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1999), p. 18.

state. This perception was the result of Eglin’s vehement condemnation of the apartheid state’s erosion of civil rights, while pointing out that the only political solution was the sharing of power with the black majority.<sup>29</sup> The NP and its supporting press, especially *Die Burger*, did not take kindly to Eglin’s stance and vilified him as unpatriotic. In July 1974 the newspaper went as far as to claim that he and Slabbert, by visiting Zambia, condoned the actions of ANC guerrilla fighters based in that country.<sup>30</sup> Piet Cillié, editor of *Die Burger*, was especially outraged by Eglin’s criticism of South Africa’s military involvement in the Angolan civil war. On his instructions, the newspaper’s cartoonist, Fred Mouton, portrayed Eglin in his cartoons with a skunk as a symbol of his unpatriotic behaviour.<sup>31</sup> Eglin was, however, not intimidated. In a parliament which blamed communists and agitators for the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976, he made it clear that apartheid was the catalyst for the revolt.<sup>32</sup>

## 5. THE PROGRESSIVE FEDERAL PARTY AND THE LEADERSHIP OF THE OFFICIAL PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION, 1977

In the wake of Soweto, white parliamentary politics changed beyond recognition. Since 1974 the UP had been falling apart. Impatient with the conservatism of the party, a group of reformists under the leadership of Harry Schwarz broke away to form the Reform Party. On 27 July 1975 the Reformists, with Eglin’s encouragement, accepted the principles of the Progressives and merged with the PP to form the Progressive Reform Party (PRP).<sup>33</sup> In May 1976 the PRP won a crucial by-election in Durban North, a former UP stronghold. The leadership of the UP, realising that the party was dying, attempted to create a new unified opposition party. The result was the disbanding of the UP on 28 June 1977 and the founding of the New Republic Party (NRP). Some ultra-conservative former UP MPs broke away to form the South African Party (SAP), while five enlightened MPs under the leadership of Japie Basson merged with the PRP to form on 5 September 1977 the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) with Eglin as party leader. The core principles of the new party were full citizenship for all South Africans, and a constitution negotiated and agreed upon by representatives of all South Africans.<sup>34</sup>

29 House of Assembly Debates, 6 August 1974, col. 126, 135.

30 JC Steyn, *Penvegter. Piet Cillié van “Die Burger”* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2002), p. 257.

31 WD Beukes, *Oor grense heen. Op pad na ’n nasionale pers 1948- 1990* (Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel, 1992), pp. 143-145.

32 House of Assembly Debates, 17 June 1976, col. 9631-9637.

33 McKenzie, “From obscurity to official opposition”, p. 89.

34 J Basson, *Sieeds op die parlementêre kofblad. Met insigte oor die Afrikaner en Afrikaans* (Cape Town: Politika, 2008), pp. 96-99.

On 20 September 1977 Vorster announced a snap general election for 30 November. Of the new opposition parties, the PFP was organisationally in the best state to fight an election. The Progressives also had the bonus that the English-medium newspapers, freed of their traditional loyalty to the UP, supported the PFP. Eglin campaigned with the message that the country was heading for a siege and conflict if it did not eliminate discrimination based on colour. Apartheid had to be replaced by an open society, free from either compulsory integration or separation, and this could only be achieved by negotiating with the black majority.<sup>35</sup> The NP focused on the anti-apartheid stance of President Jimmy Carter of the United States of America and averred that he had no right to interfere in South Africa, or to prescribe to the government. This was accompanied with emotional rhetoric of fighting to the last man, or last drop of blood, to defend South Africa. In this, the NP was supported by the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) new television service which leaned over backwards to support the government's agenda. As part of the anti-Carter campaign, Vorster accused the PFP of a lack of patriotism, declaring that it was an ugly and un-South African party and that it had no right to exist.<sup>36</sup> This message was reiterated by government ministers. SL Muller, the Minister of Transport, declared that, "We must kill this party. We must annihilate it and weed it out like we would weed a garden. They are a danger to South Africa."<sup>37</sup> Hendrik Schoeman, Minister of Agriculture, again warned that South Africa would experience the biggest bloodbath ever if the PFP policy was implemented.<sup>38</sup> Alwyn Schlebusch, the Minister of Public Works, claimed that the PFP was a danger to South Africa and that radicals would use the Progressives to attain their objectives and then cast them aside like ordinary rubbish.<sup>39</sup> In an enthusiastic mass meeting in Sea Point, Pik Botha, the charismatic and popular Minister of Foreign Affairs, viciously attacked Progressive policies as dangerous.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Fred Mouton in his *Die Burger* cartoons portrayed Eglin as in cahoots with Carter.<sup>41</sup>

The NP secured a massive victory with an overwhelming majority of 135 seats and 64,8% of the vote. The PFP, with 16,71% support, secured 17 seats. These constituencies were concentrated in the affluent and predominately English-speaking suburbs of Cape Town and Johannesburg. As the NRP was reduced to ten seats, the PFP became the official parliamentary opposition. Eglin was determined to use this

35 *Cape Times*, 24 November 1977; *Sunday Times*, 13 November 1977.

36 *Cape Times*, 28 October 1977 and 17 November 1977.

37 *Ibid.*, 19 November 1977.

38 *Ibid.*, 18 November 1977.

39 *The Natal Mercury*, 29 October 1977.

40 T Papenfus, *Pik Botha en sy tyd* (Pretoria: Litra, 2010), pp. 207, 213; *Sunday Times*, 13 November 1977.

41 See, for example, *Die Burger*, 24 November 1977.



political base to present an alternative to apartheid.<sup>42</sup> To do so Progressive policies had to adapt to a changing South Africa. He appointed Slabbert as chairman of a commission to examine the party’s policies, especially the principle of a qualified franchise. On Slabbert’s recommendation, the PFP in November 1978 adopted the principle of universal suffrage on the basis of proportional representation in a federal form of government. This political system would be based on a Bill of Rights, an independent judiciary, and the protection of minority rights through a form of consociational democracy, power sharing by reconciling the need for majority rule with minority protection.<sup>43</sup>

As the official opposition the PFP, in sharp contrast to the timid and cautious attitude of the UP which gave the NP a free run on the destruction of the rule of law, relentlessly attacked apartheid. On 30 January 1978 in a motion of censure, Eglin condemned the government for aggravating race tensions, escalating violence, and for increasing authoritarian and repressive measures, all of which threatened the security and stability of South Africa. He especially castigated the government for the death of the anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko who died as a result of injuries he received at the hands of the security police while in detention without trial.<sup>44</sup> Eglin’s attack set the tone for the rest of the parliamentary session. According to Alex Boraine, PFP MP for Pinelands, it did not matter what the subject was, for example water affairs, the Progressives brought it back to apartheid. They hammered on the point that all South Africans should enjoy full political rights, or the growing black resentment would lead to a revolutionary situation. The only way forward was a national convention to bring all South Africans together so that a new constitution could be drawn up to secure freedom and justice for all.<sup>45</sup>

The NP resented the PFP’s criticism; especially the morally superior attitude of the Progressives grated as it was seen as sanctimonious. Loathing of the PFP was the only factor that unified a NP divided between ultra-conservatives who opposed any tinkering with apartheid, and *verligtes* who, since Soweto, realised that changes had to be made. Progressives were seen as hypocrites who could escape the consequences of their integrationist policies. Affluent English-speaking PFP supporters lived in secluded upmarket suburbs, buying their own apartheid, or they could leave the country at any time. The PFP was sneeringly referred to as the acronym for “Packing for Perth”.<sup>46</sup>

The volatile atmosphere in the House of Assembly was aggravated by the Information Scandal. In 1978 allegations became public about the Department

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42 *Cape Times*, 2 December 1977.

43 Swart, p. 149.

44 House of Assembly Debates, 30 January 1978, col. 19-41.

45 A Boraine, *A life in transition* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2008), pp. 96, 105, 111-114.

46 T Leon, *On the contrary* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2008), pp. 66, 100.

of Information's extravagance and misappropriation of public funds, and that the government was funding *The Citizen*, a pro-NP English-medium tabloid, with taxpayer money. Eglin doggedly led the attacks on the government, causing the NP embarrassment. Desperate to regain the initiative, the NP launched vicious personal attacks on Progressive MPs, accusing them of encouraging black resistance to apartheid. Eglin's speeches in the House of Assembly were delivered in a hostile atmosphere with a wall of noise. His task as leader of the opposition was made more challenging by the fact that he was no great orator or parliamentary debater;<sup>47</sup> a shortcoming Vorster, as an outstanding parliamentary performer and a bully, ruthlessly exploited and trumpeted.<sup>48</sup> Some PFP MPs felt that Vorster ran circles around Eglin.<sup>49</sup> The growing unease in the PFP with Eglin's leadership intensified after September 1978 when Vorster was replaced as Prime Minister by the even tougher and more combative PW Botha. In addition, a growing number of Progressives felt that Eglin lacked the necessary charisma to lead the party.<sup>50</sup> Schwarz and his supporters had no particular love for Eglin as they perceived him as too rough and arrogant.<sup>51</sup> Eglin could be so abrasive that Helen Zille, a young liberal journalist and a future leader of the Democratic Alliance, found it easier to interview the notoriously cantankerous PW Botha.<sup>52</sup> Gordon Waddell, the former PP MP for Johannesburg North and an influential figure as chairman of the party's finance committee, wanted Slabbert as party leader.<sup>53</sup> Compared to the tall, trim, handsome and charismatic Slabbert, a star parliamentary performer and an outstanding orator, a bald and chubby Eglin came over as uninspiring, dull, plodding and gruff. Discontentment with Eglin's leadership reached boiling point with the McHenry affair.

## 6. STANDING BACK FOR VAN ZYL SLABBERT, 1979

On 3 April 1979 Pik Botha, in a melodramatic speech during the Appropriation Bill debate, accused Eglin of leaking to Don McHenry, an envoy of the United States to the United Nations (UN), information the government had shared in confidence with him as leader of the opposition. Botha demanded that Eglin, apart from crawling into a hole in the ground and staying there, had to resign as leader of the opposition. This was against the background of outraged NP MPs baying for

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47 Basson, *Steeds op die parlementêre kofblad*, p 106; GF Jacobs, *Beckoning horizons* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1985), p. 247; *Rapport*, 11 August 1974.

48 J D'Oliveira, *Vorster – the man* (Johannesburg: Perskor, 1978), p. 247.

49 *Sunday Times*, 5 August 1979.

50 *Financial Mail*, 4 May 1979.

51 Swart, p. 129.

52 *Beeld*, 10 December 2013.

53 Swart, p. 155.

Eglin’s blood. In an interjection PZJ van Vuuren, NP MP for Edenvale, accused him of being a traitor.<sup>54</sup> The background to the attack was that on 26 February 1979 the UN had released a report on a possible settlement on South African controlled Namibia. Pik Botha discussed the report with the leaders of the opposition parties and their respective spokesmen on foreign affairs to give the government’s side of affairs. Eglin and Japie Basson, the PFP’s foreign spokesman, then met with Western diplomats to discuss the UN report, while Eglin had a telephonic conversation with McHenry. Eglin informed Pik Botha of these contacts.<sup>55</sup> As Eglin had already exhausted his speaking opportunity earlier in the Appropriation Debate the Speaker allowed him a few minutes to respond with a personal explanation. A stunned and wrong-footed Eglin was hesitant and uncertain in his reaction. Slabbert was of the opinion that Eglin should have metaphorically leaped across the floor and kicked Botha into a heap into the back bench.<sup>56</sup> But then he did not have to face a hysterical chamber with PW Botha in the lead, howling to know whether he had spoken with McHenry. Pik Botha never provided proof that any confidential information was leaked, but it did not prevent a sustained assault on Eglin’s alleged lack of patriotism by NP MPs. Daantjie Scott, the MP for Winburg, demanded that his passport be confiscated,<sup>57</sup> while his colleagues would interrupt Eglin’s speeches by mimicking the sound of a ringing telephone, or shouting that there was a telephone call for him.<sup>58</sup> The Afrikaans press went to extreme lengths to portray Eglin as colluding with the country’s enemies. *Beeld* published a cartoon (5 April 1979) in which the information provided by Botha found its way through Eglin to a heavily armed Swapo guerrilla fighter.

The McHenry affair was a cynical attempt to distract attention from the Information Scandal. In this the NP succeeded as the scandal was pushed to the background. The NP had the added bonus that the controversy dented Eglin’s confidence. He felt that his initial response had let the PFP down.<sup>59</sup> He had reason to be concerned, as the affair had damaged his reputation and that of the party. Amongst Afrikaners it bolstered the perception of Progressives as being unpatriotic. In May 1979 they showed their disapproval when the PFP attracted a paltry 378 votes out of a 9 723 cast in a provincial by-election in Swellendam, a predominately Afrikaner rural constituency in the Western Cape. In June 1979 the party could only secure 681 votes of 10 415 cast in a parliamentary by-election in

54 House of Assembly Debates, 3 April 1979, col. 3910-3919.

55 Diary of Japie Basson, 4 April 1979. (In the possession of Mrs Caro Wiese.)

56 F van Zyl Slabbert, *The last white parliament* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, s.a.), p. 62.

57 House of Assembly Debates, 5 April 1979, col. 4150.

58 *Ibid.*, col. 4096; B Pottinger, *The imperial presidency. P.W. Botha: The first ten years* (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1988), p. 30.

59 Eglin, p. 184.

Randfontein, a Transvaal mining town.<sup>60</sup> Conservative disgust with Eglin was not just limited to the ballot box as Scorpio, a shadowy right wing organisation, fired shots into Eglin's home on the night of 12 April 1979.<sup>61</sup>

The poor by-election performance of the PFP convinced many Progressives that, if the party wanted to attract Afrikaner support, Slabbert had to become party leader. Eglin, aware of the growing discontent with his leadership, raised the issue at a Federal Executive meeting in Johannesburg on 27 July 1979. He urged members to be frank and truthful. The discussion took place in a tense atmosphere, without acrimony and mudslinging,<sup>62</sup> but it was still a harrowing experience for Eglin to listen to speakers expressing doubts about his leadership abilities. At 17h00, after a marathon eight-hour meeting, the Federal Executive voted by 25 votes to 19 that it wanted a new leader.<sup>63</sup> The vote of the Federal Executive was a bitter blow for Eglin, but he handled the situation with dignity and grace. Although hurt, he did not allow his personal feelings to harm his relationship with the party. He made a point of never discussing his forced resignation.<sup>64</sup> On 6 August in Sea Point, at a report back meeting to his constituents, he announced his retirement as leader and recommended Slabbert as his successor as they shared the same political principles. At a special congress on 3 September 1979 Slabbert, who had joined the party in 1974, was elected party leader.

Eglin's tenure as leader of the opposition, despite the occasional inept performance in the House of Assembly, was a success. He had created a well organised and confident party that punched way above its weight and had the NP on the back foot. As a result of Progressive pressure, the government could not sweep the Information Scandal under the carpet, while the PFP relentlessly confronted the NP with the brutal realities of apartheid.

## 7. MORAL COMPASS OF THE PROGRESSIVE FEDERAL PARTY

In his resignation speech Eglin made it clear that he would remain in parliament to fight for the ideal of a South Africa free of apartheid and discrimination. He did so with gusto, especially in his opposition to the proposed tricameral constitution in an attempt by the apartheid government to extend political rights to coloureds and Indians. He argued that it was a deeply flawed constitution as it would entrench apartheid, making it more difficult to find a peaceful solution to the country's

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60 *Beeld*, 11 May 1979; 7 June 1979.

61 *Cape Times*, 12 April 1979.

62 Interview with D Moss, 24 October 2013.

63 University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits), Progressive Federal Party Papers (hereafter PFP), Ab 2.2.10, Minutes of the Federal Executive meeting, Johannesburg 27-28 July 1979; Eglin, p. 189; *Sunday Times*, 5 August 1979.

64 Personal correspondence with M Silbert, 21 November 2013 and Peter Soal, 6 November 2014.

problems.<sup>65</sup> Eglin also gave his full support to Slabbert.<sup>66</sup> The new party leader needed all the support he could get as the PFP, after winning 26 seats in the parliamentary election of 1981, became increasingly marginalised. PW Botha’s attempts to reform apartheid altered parliamentary politics as it led to the founding of the fast growing ultra-conservative (CP) in 1982, and the rise of the neo-fascist Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB). Most enlightened whites, including a significant number of PFP supporters, felt that the NP’s reforms were a step in the right direction and that they had to support Botha against the reactionary CP and AWB.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Afrikaners remained reluctant to support the Progressives; in the 1981 parliamentary election only about 5% of them voted for the PFP.<sup>68</sup> As a result the party fared poorly in parliamentary by-elections and the 1982 municipal election. In the 1983 referendum the PFP failed dismally to convince whites, including most Progressives, that the proposed tricameral parliament should be rejected. The proposed constitution was accepted with an over-whelming majority of 66% to the 34% of no votes, of who about only 10% were liberal protest votes.<sup>69</sup> This was a devastating blow for Slabbert. He increasingly felt that parliamentary politics was a waste of time as the country had become a stalemate between the politics of repression and the politics of revolt, and that PFP MPs had become passive spectators.<sup>70</sup>

In this period Eglin was a source of strength and a moral compass for the PFP. To counter the deep gloom in the party after the failure to secure control of the Johannesburg City Council in the municipal election of 1982, he warned the party against pursuing “machine politics”, focusing on electoral gains because it would be to the benefit of the party. With this approach the PFP would follow the self-destructive path of the UP. The focus had to be on “issue and ideal” politics.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, he was convinced that the PFP’s presence in parliament helped to destroy the credibility of apartheid and helped to create an environment to accelerate reform.<sup>72</sup> In addition, the PFP’s parliamentary status made it easier for the party to assist the victims of apartheid. For example, Helen Suzman’s visits to prisons improved the conditions of political prisoners and detainees.<sup>73</sup>

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65 *The Argus*, 26 October 1983.

66 Slabbert, *The last white parliament*, pp. 61-63.

67 Slabbert, *Afrikaner Afrikaan*, pp. 23-24.

68 H Giliomee, “Demokratiese Party se werklike rol”, *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, June/July 1988, p. 7.

69 *The Star*, 2 November 1983.

70 F van Zyl Slabbert, *The other side of history. An anecdotal reflection on political transition in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2006), p. 45.

71 Wits, PFP, Ab 2.2.10, Transcript of Eglin’s speech to the Federal Executive, 20 March 1982.

72 Eglin, p. 214.

73 Lee, pp. 63-68.

Eglin's belief that apartheid could be brought to an end through negotiations was bolstered in October 1985 when as part of a PFP delegation to meet ANC leaders in Lusaka, Zambia, he was struck by their moderation. He also found younger and more enlightened NP MPs were receptive to Progressive ideas.<sup>74</sup> Slabbert, however, became increasingly pessimistic. By the end of 1985 he informed Eglin that the PFP could not carry on with its old parliamentary ways. He wanted the PFP MPs to resign their seats, contest the subsequent by-elections, and those re-elected should refuse to return to parliament unless Botha brought about fundamental political changes. As this strategy would achieve nothing of value, Eglin rejected it outright. Despite being aware of Slabbert's frustrations, he was taken by surprise when the PFP leader announced his resignation from parliament on the morning of 7 February 1986.<sup>75</sup> A few days later Boraine followed Slabbert's lead.

## 8. SECOND TERM AS LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, FEBRUARY 1986

Desperate for stability, a badly shaken and demoralised Progressive parliamentary caucus asked Eglin to step in. Eglin, who wanted to reduce his political workload to travel with his wife, felt that he had no choice but to accept the challenge as there was the possibility that the PFP could unravel. Although aghast by Slabbert's behaviour, he refused to join in any public recriminations. In parliament he pointed out the anguish that Slabbert had gone through, and expressed his appreciation for his contribution to the political debate. He made it clear that he would not mind the hurt done to him and the PFP, if Slabbert's resignation drove home the desperate seriousness of the situation in the country to the government.<sup>76</sup> At the Federal Council meeting of 16 February 1986 Eglin was unanimously elected party leader. Harry Oppenheimer hailed Eglin, "as a man of courage, whose reliability and loyalty to his party has been tried in fire".<sup>77</sup> Many grassroots supporters of the PFP did not share Oppenheimer's enthusiasm. For them, Eglin was an abrasive political retreat that could not fill the gap left by the glamorous Slabbert.<sup>78</sup> Tony Leon was told by core supporters of the party that they wanted "something new" and "something different".<sup>79</sup>

Eglin did his utmost to revive the spirits of the devastated and bewildered party activists who found it difficult to come to terms with a much loved and admired leader leaving them in the lurch. He emphasised that the party's principles and objectives remained the removal of apartheid and the creation of a free

74 Eglin, pp. 203-205, 210-211.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 216; Slabbert, *Afrikaner Afrikaan*, pp. 24-29.

76 House of Assembly Debates, 13 February 1986, col. 665-666.

77 *Sunday Times*, 16 February 1986.

78 Swart, p. 183.

79 Leon, p. 153.

and open society, and that parliament could bring this about.<sup>80</sup> Under difficult circumstances the Progressives performed well in the 1986 parliamentary session. The party continued to urge substantial reforms and to expose the brutality of the apartheid state. Jan van Eck, who replaced Slabbert as the MP for Claremont, played a prominent role in monitoring police tactics in dealing with black protest.<sup>81</sup> Despite the trauma of Slabbert’s resignation, Eglin felt that the tide was turning in parliamentary politics. A public survey in June 1986 indicated that 37% of whites chose as their preferred option for a future political system a policy close to that of the PFP. The survey, however, also showed that nearly twice the number of electors agreed with Progressive policies than the number who were prepared to vote for the party.<sup>82</sup> When an election was announced for 6 May 1987, Eglin decided to form a “reform-minded alliance” with the NRP which, under the leadership of Bill Sutton, had become more enlightened in its policies, in an attempt to counter the negative perceptions of the PFP. A confident Eglin felt that the Progressives would be able to win between 40 and 50 seats.<sup>83</sup> As a result, the party decided to contest 81 constituencies in a campaign dubbed, “Operation Turbocharge”.

## 9. THE 1987 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

The PFP furthermore decided not to oppose the candidates of the Independent Movement. This group consisted of three breakaway NP supporters. Dennis Worrall, South Africa’s ambassador in Britain, had resigned in protest to the government’s policies and decided to oppose Chris Heunis, the cabinet minister responsible for constitutional matters, in the Helderberg constituency. Wynand Malan, the *verligte* MP for Randburg had left the NP for the same reason, while Esther Lategan had set out to oppose the NP in Stellenbosch. Eglin, by standing back for the Independents, hoped to gain credit for placing the country ahead of his party, and that the PFP would be seen as a catalyst for reform.<sup>84</sup> The PFP’s election manifesto set out a policy of negotiations with the liberation movements, and the calling of a national convention to create a new constitution in which all South Africans would have equal rights. The constitution would be based on a decentralised federal system, proportional representation, a Bill of Rights and the promise of consensus government.<sup>85</sup> As a prerequisite for negotiations, Nelson Mandela had to be released from prison and the

80 Eglin, p. 214; *Weekly Mail*, 21 – 27 February 1986.

81 J van Eck, *Eyewitness to “unrest”* (Pretoria: Taurus, 1989).

82 DJ van Vuuren, L Schlemmer, HC Marais and J Latakomo (eds), *South African election 1987* (Pinetown: Owen Burgess, 1987), pp. 92-94.

83 *Die Burger*, 15 April 1987.

84 *Ibid.*

85 “A life without hate. Isn’t this what we all want?” (PFP election pamphlet in possession of the author.)

ban on the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the PAC had to be lifted.

Even before parliament dissolved for the election, Eglin's hopes of a significant electoral breakthrough suffered a severe blow when Horace van Rensburg, MP for Bryanston, resigned in a huff from the PFP. After years of neglecting his constituency he was rejected as a candidate by his local committee. This led to an emotional outburst that as an Afrikaner, and a moderate, he was the victim of radical leftists running the PFP. Van Rensburg's accusations were baseless and Eglin rightly rejected them as nonsense.<sup>86</sup> On 17 February 1987 a revengeful Van Rensburg accused the PFP in a parliamentary speech of being soft on security with its policy of unbanning the ANC and the SACP, and that the party disguised the consequence of its policies – a black majority government.<sup>87</sup> His resignation letter, as well as his memos on the PFP's alleged far-left leanings, ended in PW Botha's possession.<sup>88</sup>

For the NP, desperate to retain the support of all enlightened voters to counter the ultra-conservative challenge of the CP, Van Rensburg's claims were a gift, as they could be used as proof that the PFP was anti-Afrikaner and its radicalism was a threat to white survival. In March 1987 *The Star* newspaper published a series of reports on selected constituencies based on the survey of Market & Media Research. The survey reflected that, although enlightened voters felt that apartheid had to be reformed, the majority of them did not want the ANC unbanned. In Waterkloof, an affluent Pretoria constituency which the PFP had targeted as a possible win, an overwhelming 79,6% of the voters wanted the ANC to remain prohibited.<sup>89</sup> Against this background the NP used the accusations of Van Rensburg with great effect, claiming that a vote for the PFP would serve the interests of the ANC and communists.<sup>90</sup> In a number of newspaper advertisements, with headlines such as "Over my dead body would I vote for the ANC. So why vote PFP?", the Progressives were painted, in the words of Lenin, as "useful idiots" for the revolution.<sup>91</sup> The NP supporting Afrikaans press furthermore hammered on the PFP's alleged links with radicalism. As proof of the PFP's close relations with the ANC, and an approval of revolutionary violence, the NP distributed a photo of Helen Suzman embracing Winnie Mandela with the caption of Mandela's controversial statement, "With our boxes of matches and our necklaces, we shall

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86 University of South Africa, Horace van Rensburg Papers (unsorted), Van Rensburg – Eglin, 3 February 1987 and Eglin – Van Rensburg, 5 February 1987.

87 House of Assembly Debates, 17 February 1987, col. 946-950.

88 The documents can be found in File PS 3/1/5 of the PW Botha Collection in the Archives for Contemporary Affairs (ACA) at the University of the Free State.

89 *The Star*, 26 March 1987.

90 *Die Burger*, 25 March 1987; 21 April 1987; 28 April 1987.

91 *Sunday Times*, 5 April 1987; 26 April 1987; 3 May 1987.



liberate our country.”<sup>92</sup> (Ironically, while the NP bashed the PFP for being too radical, the anti-apartheid United Democratic Front accused the Progressives of being just a different shade of the NP for participating in the apartheid parliament.)<sup>93</sup> The NP was assisted in this onslaught by the SABC which degenerated in the words of the journalist Fleur de Villiers into “statutory praise singing” of the government.<sup>94</sup> According to the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University the NP received 75% of all time allocated to political parties.<sup>95</sup>

The PFP fought back by pointing out that apartheid created an environment for communism to flourish, and that to restore peace the ANC had to be unbanned and brought to the negotiation table.<sup>96</sup> Eglin, despite the fierce onslaught of the NP, remained confident that the party would increase its parliamentary representation and retain its status as the parliamentary opposition.<sup>97</sup> The PFP viewed the NP’s communist smear tactics as acts of desperation, and it was accepted that the electorate had outgrown such fear politics.<sup>98</sup> The feeling furthermore was that with the economy in a mess, the government, unable to restore law and order and with apartheid as the root of all the problems in the country, the PFP would attract *verligte* voters. The election result was a shock for the Progressives. Of the votes cast, the NP captured 52,29% (123 seats), the CP 26,62% (22 seats), the PFP 14,03% (19 seats) and the NRP 1,97% (1 seat). The PFP-NRP alliance lost 11 seats to the NP, seven to the Progressives and four to the NRP. Even in Helen Suzman’s Houghton, a Progressive fortress, her majority was reduced. In contrast to the PFP’s poor performance, the Independents attracted significant support. Malan won in Randburg, Worrall lost with 39 votes, while Lategan did well in Stellenbosch where the Progressives traditionally performed badly.<sup>99</sup>

In a stunned PFP some Progressives held Eglin responsible for the loss of seats.<sup>100</sup> Ray Swart, MP for Berea and a close ally of Eglin, argues in his memoirs that “Operation Turbocharge” was “ill-conceived, ill-directed and ineffective” and that it led to the party fighting too many seats, wasting money and energy.<sup>101</sup> This is, however, wisdom with hindsight. On the eve of the election with opinion polls, as well as the founding of the Independent Movement reflecting a strong desire

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92 *Die Burger*, 5 May 1987.

93 *Cape Times*, 30 April 1987.

94 *Sunday Times*, 29 March 1987.

95 *Ibid.*, 3 May 1978.

96 “Progressive Federal Party Bryanston”. Newspaper distributed by Rupert Lorimer, the PFP candidate; “Open letter by Rowan Haarhoff, PFP candidate, to the voters of Sunnyside”. (Both documents in possession of the author.)

97 Eglin, p. 232.

98 *Sunday Tribune*, 12 April 1987.

99 *Sunday Times*, 10 May 1987.

100 M Barnard, *Defining moments: An autobiography* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2011), p. 297.

101 Swart, p. 190.

for political reform, “Operation Turbocharge” made sense. Eglin’s optimism was furthermore fuelled by the split in the Afrikaner vote between the NP and the CP, creating the possibility for the PFP to win affluent urban Afrikaner seats such as Waterkloof in Pretoria. The high hopes for “Operation Turbocharge” were dashed on factors beyond Eglin’s control, namely the legacy of Slabbert’s resignation and the high level of political violence in the country.

Although Eglin managed to steady the party, he could not repair the damage done by Slabbert. By leaving his post Slabbert did what the NP’s demonisation of the Progressives could never achieve, undermining their belief in liberalism. His resignation implied a rejection of incremental change, the mainstay of liberal politics, and many Progressives lost heart. In contrast to previous elections the PFP found it difficult to attract volunteers to canvass voters and to put up election posters. Especially English-speaking university students refused to be involved as they viewed the elections as irrelevant. Their boycotting of the elections cost the PFP at least two seats. As Suzman puts it in her memoirs – who wants to vote or work for a party in which the leader declared parliament irrelevant.<sup>102</sup> Even those Progressives who were involved in the election lacked the missionary zeal of earlier campaigns. What struck the South African born novelist Christopher Hope on his first visit to the country in 12 years, was the atmosphere of sadness, the sense of failure and fear among the Progressives. The realisation that liberals could be compared with the more distant particles of the tail of a comet and that they had about as much chance of influencing the giant, icy head rushing into the unknown.<sup>103</sup> Despite Eglin’s best efforts, addressing 28 public meetings,<sup>104</sup> the Progressive campaign lacked enthusiasm and failed to gain momentum. This was reflected in Simonstown, one of the seats the PFP had hoped to win from the NP. The Progressive candidate John Scott experienced, while canvassing voters, that he was jeered that even Slabbert had given up on the Progressives.<sup>105</sup>

What really harmed the PFP electorally was the cycle of violence in the country. Against a background of ANC guerrilla activity with bomb blasts rocking Johannesburg, stay away actions, strikes and protests by students, the *Weekly Mail* called it, “The skop, skiet en donner election” (kick, shoot and fisticuffs).<sup>106</sup> NP propaganda created a perception of the Botha government as the only bulwark against revolutionary forces. Three days before polling day this perception was bolstered by the unveiling of a new South African designed and built helicopter

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102 Suzman, p. 357.

103 C Hope, *White boy running* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987), p. 201.

104 *Sunday Tribune*, 12 April 1987.

105 The last message Colin Eglin left on our answering machine-1.1616452, <<http://www.iol.co.za/blogs/john-scott-1.2499/>>, accessed 9 December 2013.

106 *Weekly Mail*, 30 April – 7 June 1987.

gunship.<sup>107</sup> At the same time the NP’s attacks on the PFP convinced many that the party was soft on security, disloyal and unpatriotic, and that it could not be trusted with the reform process. The NP’s propaganda did much to undermine the alliance with the NRP and to deny the Progressives any benefits from the Independent Movement. From the first day there was unease amongst NRP members about the election agreement with the Progressives. Viewing the alliance as an “unholy matrimony”, Vause Raw, the conservative leader of the party between 1978 and 1984, as well as Brian Page, MP for Umhlanga, felt they had no choice but to retire from politics.<sup>108</sup> Many conservative English-speaking supporters followed their lead as they refused to be associated with the Progressives.<sup>109</sup> At least 75% of former NRP supporters in Natal voted for the NP.<sup>110</sup> Worrall, Malan and Lategan, fearful of alienating voters, also went out of their way to disown any links with the Progressives.<sup>111</sup>

The NP furthermore effectively plugged into the feeling of many whites that there had to be political reform as white survival could not just be secured through repression. Reform, however, had to be slow and controlled and not at the cost of the white minority. As Craig Williamson, the NP candidate in Bryanston, stated in his election pamphlet, “The National Party will reform. The National Party will not surrender”.<sup>112</sup> At the same time a perception was created of the PFP as a hindrance to orderly reform because of the party’s unreasonable opposition to Botha’s reforms.<sup>113</sup> Audrey Blygnaut, the highly respected enlightened Afrikaner author and a Sea Point constituent of Eglin, was so disgusted with what she perceived as the PFP leader’s abusiveness to Botha that she got out of her sick bed to vote against him.<sup>114</sup> NP propaganda not only prevented enlightened Afrikaners from supporting the PFP, but also convinced some Progressives to vote NP. Here the concern about the level of violence in the country, especially the behaviour of the thuggish AWB, was a crucial factor. This extreme right wing group propagated a race war to maintain Afrikaner supremacy, and did not hesitate to use strong arm tactic to disrupt NP meetings. Fearful of the AWB and the reactionary policies of the CP, and feeling that only the Botha government could bring about reform, some Progressive supporters voted for the NP.<sup>115</sup>

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107 *Beeld*, 4 May 1987.

108 Personal correspondence with B Page, 28 February 1994; Telephone interview with V Raw, 13 February 1994.

109 *Die Burger*, 23 April 1987.

110 *Ibid.*, 13 May 1987.

111 *Pretoria News*, 28 March 1987.

112 Pamphlet in the possession of the author.

113 *Die Burger*, 4 and 13 May 1987.

114 L Fourie, M Brink and P Metelerkamp, *‘n Blywende vreugde. Briewe van Audrey Blygnaut* (Hermanus: Hemel & See Boeke, 2008), p. 265.

115 For an analysis of the PFP campaign, see D Welsh, “The ideology, aims, role and strategy of the PFP and NRP”. In: Van Vuuren, Schlemmer, Marais and Latakomo, *South African election*

## 10. RESIGNATION AS PARTY LEADER, 1988

Losing its status as the official parliamentary opposition to the CP shattered the PFP's morale, leaving the party in a state of despair and opening latent fault lines amongst liberals. The divide was whether the focus had to be on maintaining liberal democratic values, with vote-catching as a secondary emphasis, or to focus on power-politics, to create a united opposition which could position itself to be an effective challenge to the NP.<sup>116</sup> Eglin emphasised that the purpose of the party was to persuade white South Africans to get rid of apartheid, and to convince all South Africans to start negotiations on a new constitution to bring peace and stability. He was adamant that the PFP had to be a third option in South African politics – that of negotiation between the forces of repression and revolution.<sup>117</sup>

The morale of the PFP took another blow with Jan van Eck's resignation from the party in August 1987, claiming that the parliamentary caucus was too conservative. This creating, to Eglin's anger, a perception that the party was unable to provide a bold lead in the struggle against apartheid and that it did not support the pursuit of justice.<sup>118</sup> There was no respite for Eglin as in October 1987 another two MPs, Peter Gastrow and Pierre Cronje, claiming that the PFP had ceased to be a viable political factor, joined Wynand Malan to form a new political party, the National Democratic Movement (NDM).<sup>119</sup> For the *Sunday Times* of 11 October 1987 the absence of a truly inspiring leader was to blame for the problems in the PFP. This perception was shared by many in the party and Eglin's life was made a misery by continuous public back-biting and disloyalty.<sup>120</sup> Eglin concedes in his memoirs that the years between 1986 and 1988 were tough and unrelenting, leaving him battered and bruised.<sup>121</sup> Feeling that he had done his bit, and knowing that Zach de Beer, a close friend and ally since the early 1950s, was willing to succeed him, Eglin announced in June 1988 that he was not available for re-election as party leader.<sup>122</sup>

Eglin's second term as leader of the official parliamentary opposition was a harrowing experience, but cannot, despite the PFP's poor performance in the 1987 election and the subsequent turmoil in the party, be seen as a failure. That he, after Slabbert's dramatic departure and the fierce onslaught of the NP, succeeded in holding a shattered and traumatised party together, deserves respect. Eglin

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1987, pp. 81-100.

116 *Sunday Times*, 2 August 1987; 9 August 1987; 27 March 1988.

117 *Ibid.*, 23 August 1987.

118 *Die Burger*, 17 August 1987; 18 August 1987.

119 *Ibid.*, 8 October 1987.

120 Personal correspondence with D Gibson, 29 October 2013.

121 Eglin, pp. 242-243.

122 Wits, PFP, File D3, Eglin – Andrews, 15 June 1988.

remained active in the PFP and in August 1988 was elected party chairman. In this capacity he gave his full support to De Beer. The 1987 election convinced the new party leader that many South Africans favoured liberal values, but were not prepared to vote for the PFP. He was determined to form a new party, based on Progressive values, to bring enlightened South Africans together.<sup>123</sup> Eglin played a leading role in the negotiations on a possible merger with Worrall’s Independent Party and Malan’s NDM. In April 1989 the PFP merged with the two parties to form the Democratic Party (DP). Eglin was satisfied that the core values of the new party were those of the PFP.<sup>124</sup>

In the general election of September 1989 the DP, without the Progressive tag of being anti-Afrikaner and unpatriotic, won 33 seats. Eglin was in parliament on 2 February 1990 when FW de Klerk, who succeeded Botha as president in 1989, embraced Progressive policies to unban the ANC as a first step to start the negotiations process. For Eglin the announcement was a vindication of his years of opposition to apartheid and the authoritarianism of the NP.<sup>125</sup> After 1990 he played a leading role in negotiations to bring about a democratic South Africa, and in the writing of a new constitution. Elected to the first parliament of a democratic South Africa in April 1994, he was the liberal conscience of the DP and later the Democratic Alliance until his retirement in 2004. In the new South Africa his role in opposing apartheid was acknowledged. Nelson Mandela described him as, “one of the architects of our democracy”<sup>126</sup> In April 2013 he received the Order of the Baobab, “for serving the country with excellence and for his dedication and courage in standing up for the principles of equality for all South Africans against the unjust laws of the past”.<sup>127</sup> Eglin died on 29 November 2013 in Cape Town. President Jacob Zuma ordered a special provincial funeral at which all flags at Western Cape Provincial buildings had to fly half-mast.<sup>128</sup>

## 11. CONCLUSION

The political career of Colin Eglin is proof that personality matters in politics, and can make a difference. Although not always appreciated by Progressives, the PP and PFP would have floundered without his driving will and dogged commitment to the principles of liberalism, especially his willingness to fight on when all seemed lost for liberalism. He led the Progressives out of the political wilderness, turned the PFP into the official opposition, and picked up the pieces after Slabbert’s

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123 *Sunday Times*, 2 April 1989.

124 *The Star*, 8 April 1989.

125 Eglin, p. 259.

126 *The Sunday Independent*, 1 December 2013.

127 *The Star*, 3 December 2013.

128 *Beeld*, 6 December 2012.

resignation. As leader of the parliamentary opposition during the darkest and bloodiest days in the history of the apartheid state, he exposed the brutality of the security forces, and kept alive the ideal of a negotiated settlement to bring peace to South Africa. According to former President FW de Klerk, who respected Eglin's integrity and the role he played in the political debate, his criticism contributed by the late 1980s, in an indirect way, to the NP's intense soul-searching on apartheid.<sup>129</sup> In doing so, he played a crucial role in bringing about a democratic South Africa. Eglin was indeed "one of the architects of our democracy".

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129 Personal correspondence with FW de Klerk, 7 February 2014.