

## **‘Liberal crusader’: Zach de Beer, apartheid and liberalism 1950–1990**

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### **Abstract**

Zach de Beer’s political career began in 1950 when as a student leader and a member of the Civil Rights League he addressed a public meeting in the Cape Town City Hall to protest the banning of the Communist Party. Forty years later, in February 1990, he was in parliament when President F.W. de Klerk announced the unbanning of the Communist Party, the African National Congress, and the Pan Africanist Congress. During the darkest years of the apartheid state he, along with others, kept liberal democratic ideals alive. In 1959 he helped to form the liberal Progressive Party, and in 1960 he opposed the banning of the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress. This was a courageous action that would cost him his parliamentary seat in the 1961 general election and led to years in the political wilderness. Outside of parliament, as a prominent figure in the financial world, he continued to encourage constitutional and political reform. In 1988, he became leader of the Progressive Federal Party and played a leading role in the founding of the Democratic Party in 1989. This article shows that the party’s good performance in the general election of that year was a crucial factor in pushing De Klerk to initiate the dismantling of the apartheid state in 1990. In recognition of his contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle, President Nelson Mandela appointed him as South Africa’s ambassador to the Netherlands in 1994.

**Keywords:** Zach de Beer; liberalism; parliament; rule of law; apartheid; constitutional reform; African National Congress; Progressive Party; Progressive Federal Party, Democratic Party.

### **Opsomming**

Zach de Beer se politieke loopbaan het in 1950 begin toe hy as ’n studenteleier en as ’n lid van die Civil Rights League ’n protesvergadering teen die verbanning van die

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Kommunistiese Party in die stadsaal van Kaapstad toegesprek het. Veertig jaar later in Februarie 1990 was hy in die parlement toe president F.W. de Klerk die Kommunistiese Party, die African National Congress en die Pan Africanist Congress wettig verklaar het. Gedurende die donkerste dae van die apartheidstaat het hy saam met ander liberale die ideal van 'n liberale-demokratiese bestel lewendig gehou. In 1959 het hy gehelp om die liberale Progressiewe Party te stig, en in 1960 het hy die onwettig verklaring van die African National Congress en die Pan Africanist Congress teengestaan. Dit was 'n dapper daad wat hom sy parlementêre setel in die algemene verkiesing van 1961 gekos het, en jare in die politieke wildernis tot gevolg gehad het. Buite die parlement het hy as 'n leidende figuur in die sakewêreld deurentyd op grondwetlike en politieke hervorminge aangedring. In 1988 het hy die leier van die Progressiewe Federale Party geword, en die volgende jaar 'n leidende rol gespeel in die stigting van die Demokratiese Party. Hierdie artikel toon dat die Demokratiese Party se goeie vertoning in die algemene verkiesing van 1989 'n belangrike faktor was om De Klerk te oortuig om met die aftakeling van apartheidstaat in 1990 te begin. In waardering van sy bydrae in die stryd teen apartheid het president Nelson Mandela hom in 1994 as Suid-Afrika se ambassadeur in Nederland aangestel.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Zach de Beer: liberalisme; parlement; oppergesag van die reg; grondwetlike hervorming; African National Congress; Progressiewe Party; Progressiewe Federale Party; Demokratiese Party.

Zach de Beer, former leader of the liberal Progressive Federal Party (1988–1989) and the Democratic Party (1989–1994) is one of the forgotten men of South African history. Researchers of the history of the apartheid state will not find him mentioned in studies such as T.R.H. Davenport's, *The Transfer of Power in South Africa* (1998), Patti Waldmeir's *Anatomy of a Miracle* (1997), or Herman Giliomee's *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (2003), and his *The Last Afrikaner Leaders: A Supreme Test of Power* (2012). At most De Beer is mentioned in passing as in David Welsh's *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (2009). A reason for this is that the liberal Progressive parties were small and marginalised in the apartheid era. Between 1990 and 1994 the negotiating process was dominated by the National Party (NP) and the African National Congress (ANC), as well as by attempts to pull the Inkatha Freedom Party and the Conservative Party into the negotiating process. During the election of April 1994 De Beer, as the Democratic Party (DP) leader, had to compete with F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela, both Nobel Peace Prize winners. He furthermore had to face a coordinated attempt by the NP and ANC to deny liberalism any credit for bringing apartheid to an end. For the NP to secure black African, Indian, and Coloured support, it had to diminish the DP's role and portray itself as the party responsible for the dismantling of apartheid. Here its decades-old propaganda of portraying liberals as high on ideals, but powerless and ineffectual muddlers in practice, paid off. Especially amongst white voters who feared an ANC majority, the perception

remained that liberals were weak, untrustworthy, and opportunistic hypocrites who were financially so comfortable that they could escape the consequences of the collapse of apartheid.

In the ANC, the DP's long history of opposing apartheid through its Progressive predecessors, and the vindication of its liberal principles was resented. For the ANC to credit the Democrats for the peaceful transition to a democratically elected majority government would be to disparage the history of its own long and heroic struggle against white oppression. During the long anti-apartheid struggle, socialists, Marxists and black nationalists scorned liberals as agents of capitalism, maintainers of white privilege and underminers of the revolutionary struggle for criticising the ANC's armed struggle, international sanctions, and the disinvestment campaign. The DP was also regarded as being beyond the pale for participating in the apartheid state's parliamentary system. Liberalism was, in effect, just another form of apartheid for the ANC.

As a result, De Beer's election campaign gained little traction and he led the Democrats to a crushing defeat, securing only 1.7 per cent of the vote. Many Democrats, hurt, angry and frustrated, held him personally responsible for this. The party's poor performance ended his political career because he resigned as party leader as well as a parliamentarian. After April 1994, liberals received no credit for the dramatic changes which had taken place. The ANC appropriated all the moral capital of the struggle against apartheid. Despite her international reputation as a liberal champion of human rights and the rule of law, Helen Suzman's portrait was removed from a parliamentary corridor, together with those of apartheid politicians, to be placed in a parliamentary cellar.<sup>1</sup> More than a quarter of a century after 1994, the bypassing of the role of liberals, especially those of the Progressive parties, is reflected in the absence of biographies of them. The only one since 1994 to be published on a prominent Progressive parliamentarian is that by Albert Grundlingh, *Slabbert: Man on a Mission* (2020), an outstanding study of the former leader of the Progressive Federal Party who in 1986 resigned from the party and from parliament, after becoming disillusioned with parliamentary politics in the apartheid state. In the new South Africa since 1994, De Beer has become a mere historical footnote as the leader who had led his party to a near annihilating defeat. Not even the Democratic Alliance (DA), the successor to the DP, has made any attempt to keep Zach de Beer's legacy alive. For the 2014 election, for example, and in an effort to shed its image as a party for white voters only, a video on the history of the party, 'Know your DA' makes no mention at all of his role.<sup>2</sup>

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1. M. Shain ed., *Opposing Voices: Liberalism and Opposition in South Africa Today* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2006), 20, 23–24.

2. E. McKaiser, *DA of Nie? 'n Kieser se Krisis* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2014), 133–136.

And yet, as this article will show, De Beer played a significant role in opposing apartheid. As a Progressive Party (PP) member of parliament, he championed the gradual extension of political rights to the black majority. In 1960, he opposed the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). This was a politically courageous action that would cost him his parliamentary seat in the 1961 general election and led to years in the political wilderness. During the darkest years of the apartheid state he, along with others, played a crucial role in keeping liberal democratic ideals alive. This article explains that De Beer's liberalism was rooted in the ideal of a non-racial, qualified franchise, shows the challenges of being a liberal in a conservative and racist white society and evaluates his role in opposing apartheid.

### **The young liberal**

Zacharias (Zach) Johannes de Beer was born on 11 October 1928 in Woodstock, Cape Town as the second of the four children born to Jean Isobel (McCrae) and Zacharias (Ray) Johannes de Beer, a medical doctor. Because of the inability of his Scottish mother to speak Afrikaans the home language of the De Beers was English.<sup>3</sup> Through his father and the extended De Beer family, the young Zach became fluent in Afrikaans.<sup>4</sup> He was proud of his Afrikaner identity, always referring to himself as an Afrikaner, and he placed his children in Afrikaans-medium schools. Furthermore, the NP-supporting Afrikaans press always referred to him as an Afrikaner. In his public life he was scrupulously bilingual in all his speeches. De Beer attributed his deeply-held liberal principles to his father who exemplified classic liberal ideals, and a sense of duty to serve the wider community. According to the obituary in the *South African Medical Journal* (16 May 1953), Ray de Beer had a large working-class practice in Woodstock and attended to poor patients without expecting payment. Zach de Beer was schooled at Bishops Diocesan College in Rondebosch from 1936 to 1945 and studied medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

In May 1948, the NP won an unexpected, narrow victory in the general election. The same year Zach encountered Dr T.B. Davie the newly appointed principal of UCT, an outspoken champion of academic freedom and a defender of the right of universities to appoint staff, and to enrol students, whatever their colour, race, or religion. Davies's values and actions as the principal would have a profound influence on De Beer. The implementation of apartheid policies under the NP politicised De Beer and he became involved in student politics as the leader of the UCT Liberal Association. He was elected to the Students' Representative Council (SRC) in 1949, becoming its president in 1950. As president of the SRC he was active

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3. Sheilah Macrae Lloyd, 'Remembrance of time past. Childhood days', Unpublished memoirs in the possession of Wendy de Beer Furniss.

4. Author's telephonic interview with D. Cox, 13 April 2020.

in the Civil Rights League, opposing the authoritarianism of the apartheid state. Sheila van der Horst, then the acting chair of the Civil Rights League, initiated De Beer's political career when in 1950 she approached him to address a protest meeting in the Cape Town City Hall to oppose the Suppression of Communism Bill.<sup>5</sup> The League led to De Beer's association with Donald Molteno, a prominent liberal who believed that all South Africans, irrespective of race, should be eligible for the franchise, based on non-racial educational qualifications.<sup>6</sup>

De Beer graduated in 1951 and joined his father's medical practice in Woodstock. Established as a general practitioner he became involved in the United Party (UP), the official parliamentary opposition. Led by his father-in-law, J.G.N. Strauss, the UP was a deeply divided party with a powerful right-wing led by Douglas Mitchell who shared the NP's racial prejudices,<sup>7</sup> and a small, but vocal, liberal group that hoped to reform the party from within to take a more liberal stance against apartheid. Highly intelligent, good looking, charming and loquacious De Beer was nominated in the 1953 election to contest the seat of Maitland, a lower-middleclass constituency in Cape Town. The UP suffered defeat again, but in Maitland, De Beer was victorious. At 24 he was the youngest ever elected candidate to the South African parliament.

Out of loyalty to his father-in-law, De Beer associated himself with the moderate wing of the party, those MPs supporting the party leader's enlightened paternalism. But after Strauss's replacement by Sir De Villiers Graaff in 1956 De Beer shifted his allegiance to the group of liberals that included Helen Suzman, Colin Eglin, Ray Swart and Jan Steytler. For this group, the Liberal Party, formed in 1953, was too small and marginal to oppose the NP. De Beer proved to be an outstanding parliamentarian and an outspoken opponent of apartheid. He was a defender of the Coloured franchise on the common voters' roll in the Cape Province.<sup>8</sup> He opposed a succession of apartheid Bills on the grounds that South Africa was a multi-racial country in which political rights could not be withheld from the black majority. To do so would, he was convinced, lead to violence and bloodshed. For this reason, he rejected the Bantustan policy of Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd. In De Beer's view, it would not secure justice for black people, or security for the white minority.<sup>9</sup> In the 1958 general election the UP suffered another defeat, losing four seats to the NP. Graaff lost his rural

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5. University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits), Helen Suzman Papers, Mb2.33.1.12, S. van der Horst to H. Suzman, 27 May 1994.

6. S. Gastrow, *Who's Who in South African Politics, Number 3* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1992), 47–48.

7. R. Swart, *Progressive Odyssey: Towards a Democratic South Africa* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1991), 31–32; J. Strangewayes-Booth, *A Cricket in the Thorn Tree: Helen Suzman and the Progressive Party* (Johannesburg: Hutchison, 1976), 113.

8. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 18 April 1956, 3889–3895.

9. *The Star*, 17 April 1959.

Cape constituency of Hottentots-Holland. For Graaff this was proof that the electorate saw the UP as too liberal.<sup>10</sup> The election result also convinced Mitchell that the liberals had to be purged.<sup>11</sup>

At the UP's national congress in August 1959 there was an all-out onslaught on the liberals. The acceptance of ultra-conservative policies, which in the words of the *Sunday Times* of 16 August 1959, was an attempt to 'out-Nat the Nats', led to the principle of a common voters' roll for blacks and whites being rejected. De Beer and ten other MPs felt they had no choice but to leave the UP and to form the liberal Progressive Party (PP) in November 1959. Jan Steytler was the leader, and De Beer was appointed as a member of the Molteno Commission to formulate the party's policy. The main task of that commission was to decide on the non-racial franchise qualifications.

The commission's report – which was eventually accepted as party policy in November 1960 – approved a franchise based on literacy and wage qualifications, as well as the ownership of immovable property. Ultimately, the PP accepted that whatever the qualifications to be a voter, the day had to come when black voters would be in the majority, but the process would be gradual. The Molteno Commission furthermore proposed a Bill of Rights to entrench the rights of individuals and to invalidate the Group Areas Act, the Urban Areas Act, the Pass Laws, and the Immigration Act. The final report also envisaged a geographic federation consisting of several states or provinces. The rights and powers of the provinces would be widened and entrenched to safeguard their affairs from central interference. The appointment of judges would be taken out of political hands and entrusted to a special panel comprising judges and lawyers of distinction. This was intended to ensure that the courts were free of political interference. To bring about these far-reaching constitutional changes a PP government would convene a National Convention of all races, representing all political parties and organisations, to enact a new constitution. The Molteno Report provided the PP with an alternative to apartheid, but it proved a daunting task to sell it to a sceptical and conservative white electorate. Indeed, according to *Die Transvaler*, mouthpiece of the NP in the Transvaal, the report was 'so revolutionary that one wonders how the Progressive Party can hope to get popular support from the whites in South Africa'.<sup>12</sup>

With the opening of the 1960 parliamentary session, the Progressive MPs were met by a wall of hostility. The NP viewed liberalism as a legacy of British imperialism, an alien ideology, fuelled by hatred of the Afrikaner. The PP was

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10. Swart, *Progressive Odyssey*, 45.

11. T. Wilks, *Douglas Mitchell* (Durban: King and Wilks Publishers, 1980), 119–121.

12. D. Scher, *Donald Molteno. Dilizintaba: He Who Removes Mountains* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1979), 81–87, 92, 96–98. (Translation of quotation by Scher.)

furthermore seen as an instrument of big capital, the traditional enemy of Afrikaner nationalism, because of the PP's ties with Harry Oppenheimer of the Anglo American Corporation of South Africa (AAC), who was also a close friend of De Beer.<sup>13</sup> (In reality, the PP and its successors would be cash-strapped because big business refused to be associated with liberalism, and the PP had to rely on Oppenheimer's personal donations.)<sup>14</sup> But the main reason why NP MPs reviled the PP was because it exposed the brutality of the apartheid system. The NP members did not want to hear of the dark side of apartheid because they had convinced themselves that it was a just and Christian policy. For them, any black discontent with apartheid was the result of communist agitation, with the liberals acting as their useful idiots.

On 5 February, Steytler introduced a motion for a reformed constitution for a multi-racial state which would give each 'racial community' a due share in the government and would guarantee the fundamental rights and liberties of individuals. De Beer, the star performer of the PP and seen as a future leader of the party, seconded the motion. He argued that consent of the governed was a basic required principle:

... the present situation in South Africa is inherently a dangerous one because of all the people on whose respect for the law and maintenance of law and order depends, of all those people only a small proportion are consulted in the making of the laws of the country.<sup>15</sup>

A non-racial qualified franchise would ensure that all South Africans would be represented in parliament. He furthermore argued that in 1960 black people needed protection against the white minority, but that the day would come when whites would badly want such protection against a black majority. This could be achieved with a Bill of Rights safeguarding all communities.<sup>16</sup>

On 4 March 1960, the PP supported a motion that the pass laws and influx control for black people had to be abolished. The motion was rejected by the House of Assembly, while outside parliament black anger was building up against the pass laws. The newly created Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) called for a nationwide campaign against these laws. Combined with a call for a stay-away from work, black people were urged to march on police stations without their passbooks and to insist on being arrested. On 21 March the police at Sharpeville outside Vereeniging panicked and fired on the protesters at the police station. Sixty-nine people were killed and 180 were wounded. In the face of the PP's demands for the government to

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13. A. Hocking, *Oppenheimer and Son* (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 304–305.

14. See, E.R. McKenzie, 'Its Master's Voice? The South African "Progressive" Parties and Business, 1959–1983', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 1, 3 (1996), 90–107.

15. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 5 February 1960, 1010.

16. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 5 February 1960, 1014–1019.

negotiate with black leaders, and to determine the root-causes of the bloodshed, the NP MPs went on the offensive. Their faith in apartheid was unshaken because they were firmly of the opinion that the unrest was the result of white liberals spreading lies and ‘poison’ about apartheid. They poured scorn and anger upon the Progressives, accusing them, along with the ANC and PAC, of being responsible for the violence.<sup>17</sup>

On 28 March the Minister of Justice, Frans Erasmus, tabled the Unlawful Organisations Bill that outlawed the ANC and PAC. The second reading of the Bill lasted more than 19 hours. The PP MPs fought through the night to oppose the banning. In the early morning hours of 31 March, De Beer got to address the House. He condemned the NP’s attitude that because the PP had warned of the dangers facing the country, they had a role in causing the disturbances. The reason for the violence, he said, was the abject failure of apartheid. He pointed out that whites would not submit to the laws that applied exclusively to blacks: for example, the pass laws, or to be banned from trade union activities. Real peace could only come about by consulting with the leaders of the ANC and PAC and by meeting their grievances. The future would be bleak if these grievances were not addressed, he argued.<sup>18</sup> On 4 April, during the third reading of the Bill, the NP attacks on the Progressives became fiercer. De Beer made it clear that he opposed the banning of the ANC and PAC because it was healthier for the body politic that these organisations be allowed to operate. The outlawing of the movements would not prevent future uprisings. It would not silence the views to which the government took exception, nor would it put a stop to the activities to which the government objected. He furthermore emphasised that it was the duty of parliament to avoid placing excessive power in the hands of the executive allowing it to act without parliamentary supervision.<sup>19</sup> His warnings fell on deaf ears. On 8 April 1960, the ANC and PAC were outlawed.

### **The electoral annihilation of the Progressive Party**

In the 1961 parliamentary session De Beer and his fellow PP MPs continued to oppose apartheid. In a wide-ranging speech during the budget debate on 27 March, De Beer rejected with contempt Verwoerd’s claim of apartheid as a policy of non-subjugation. He ended his speech with an emotional warning:

That apartheid threatens us firstly and most dangerously with internal strife, and secondly with economic impoverishment and thirdly with external hostility, and finally it is threatening us in our own conscience as we sit here, because we cannot face what we are doing. If this is to continue, I can only say as Jefferson said long ago: “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.”<sup>20</sup>

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17. *Cape Times*, 24 March 1960.

18. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 30–31 March 1960, 4579–4590.

19. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 4 April 1960, 4762–4766.

20. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 27 March 1961, 3698.



On 1 August 1961, Verwoerd announced an early election for 18 October. Steytler led the Progressive campaign with the message that South Africa was a multi-racial country, and that exploitation and suppression could not secure white survival in Africa. Whites had to ‘adapt or perish’. To adapt, political rights had to be extended to the black majority with a qualified vote, while the pass laws, influx control and job reservation had to be removed.<sup>21</sup> It was a message De Beer propagated with messianic zeal. To dedicate himself full-time to the Progressive cause he had sold his medical practice. In a letter to his Maitland constituents De Beer explained Progressive policy:

[Apartheid] ... is unjust and it leads to hostility, bitterness and internal disturbances. The right kind of protection is through a constitution which makes it impossible for even parliament to destroy the rights of any section of the population. This sort of protective constitution is used today in America’s and indeed in most Western Countries. I stand for it here. We also reject injustice. I am, for example, a doctor by profession: I cannot refuse to another doctor the rights I give myself. This would be unjust. Therefore, I stand for what is called a ‘qualified franchise’ – votes on merit and not on colour ... , I believe in extending full voting rights to anyone who has passed Standard Six and has at some time earned R600 per year, or who has certain equivalent qualifications. I believe that South Africa can only become richer if every South African is given the opportunity to do the best work he can – to produce more, to earn more and to spend more. Socially, I believe every South African should be allowed to choose his own company. Nobody should be forced to mix with people of other races if he does not wish to: equally, no one should be forbidden to meet people of other races if he chooses to do so. This is my policy in brief: on this basis I have the honour to seek your support.<sup>22</sup>

Against the background of the chaos and bloodshed in the Congo after the withdrawal of Belgium, and the black peril tactics used by both the UP and NP, the voters of Maitland did not want to be represented by him. On polling day De Beer suffered a crushing defeat, securing a paltry 16.8 per cent of the vote. (With the exception of Helen Suzman all the PP candidates were defeated.) De Beer was devastated. In 1994, he described the dismal outcome as the lowest point of his political career.<sup>23</sup> At a post-election function the chairman, with a sense of humour, referred to De Beer and Colin Eglin, a close friend and the former PP MP for Pinelands, as ‘these brilliant young men

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21. J. Mervis, *The Fourth Estate: A Newspaper Story* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1989), 343–344.

22. University of South Africa Archive (hereafter Unisa), Progressive Party Papers, File 5.4.1, De Beer’s letter to the voters of Maitland, no date.

23. The O’Malley Archives, Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory, O’Malley’s interview with Zach de Beer, 8 November 1994, accessed 28 August 2019, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index>.

who have great futures ... behind them'.<sup>24</sup> And yet, by following the principle of what he termed as 'the long obedience' he did not lose his idealism. 'There should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living' was a quote from Nietzsche which he wrote down and gave to Dene Smuts when she was elected to parliament as the Democratic Party representative for Groote Schuur in September 1989. This was his way of reminding her that liberal convictions in the apartheid state 'were forged in adversity. Because there was no profit and there were no rewards in being liberal'.<sup>25</sup> The long-term reward, according to De Beer, would be a liberal democratic country that would lead to prosperous South Africa. For him, in a society in which so many whites pretended that apartheid was a fair and just policy, this could only be achieved by telling the truth and by sticking to one's liberal principles.

To have the time to remain active in politics and to secure an income to provide for his family, De Beer felt obliged to enter the business world. He joined the company P.N. Barrett, a leading advertising, marketing, and research agency. This work made it possible for him to continue as the chairman of the PP's National Executive. In this capacity he had had to travel the county to spread the party's message to increase grassroots support and develop party structures. It was a challenging task because the party had no money. After the heavy expenditure in the 1961 election the PP was in a financial crisis and was unable to attract any donations from the business community. Had Oppenheimer not poured money into the party from his private funds, it would not have been able to continue.<sup>26</sup> But even with his generous support the Progressives were financially strapped and the party was unable to appoint salaried organisers. It had to rely on voluntary workers who at the same time had to earn their living. There was little time for party affairs. The result was that the PP was in no state to fight the 1966 general election. The party's position was aggravated by the NP's campaign that the Progressives were a threat to white survival. This made it near impossible for the PP to hold public meetings. De Beer was not a candidate, but he did campaign for the party. In Stellenbosch on 23 March, rowdy university students refused him the right to speak when he addressed a public meeting in support of the Progressive candidate.<sup>27</sup> Although two more PP candidates stood than in 1961 the Progressives could only attract 43 869 votes compared to the 68 045 five years earlier. Suzman was once more the only successful Progressive candidate.

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24. C. Eglin, *Crossing the Borders of Power, The Memoirs of Colin Eglin* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 2007), 96.

25. D. Smuts, *Patriots & Parasites: South Africa and the Struggle to Evade History* (Rondebosch: Overtree Publications, 2016), 322.

26. B. Hackland, 'The Progressive Party of South Africa, 1959-1981: Political Responses to Structural Change and Class Struggle' (PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1984), 222-229.

27. *Die Burger*, 23 March 1966.

In the wake of the election De Beer, as a member of the National Executive, was requested to analyse the position of the party and to provide advice on the best way forward. The result was a document entitled 'The Progressive Party, 1966–1971'. He did his utmost to be positive by claiming that the image of failure was not unrelieved because the Progressives looked active, courageous, and modern, and many who rejected the party believed that it would, sometime in the future, have a significant role to play. To do so the party had to portray itself as the propagator of modernity. De Beer also recommended that the party improve its administrative system, and that in the next election the Progressives avoid the wasteful expenditure of money, talent and time by focusing on six or seven conceivably winnable seats.<sup>28</sup> In 1980 Eglin credited the revival of the PP in the 1970s to De Beer's organisational role.<sup>29</sup>

However, in 1966 any revival seemed a distant dream. The loathing of the Progressives was reflected on 6 September 1966 when Verwoerd was stabbed to death in the House of Assembly by Dimitri Tsafendas, a parliamentary messenger. As Verwoerd was being carried out of the House P.W Botha, the Minister of Defence, raged at Suzman, 'It's you who did this. It's all you liberals. You incite people. Now we will get you. We will get the lot of you.'<sup>30</sup>

In the parliamentary election of 22 April 1970, the PP found once more that white voters viewed the party with distrust. In addition, the PP's financial situation was so dire that during the campaign it ran out of money.<sup>31</sup> De Beer, who had joined the AAC's public relations department in January 1968, again decided not to put his name forward as a candidate, but he did campaign for the party. Vote-wise the PP did slightly better than in 1966, but the total vote of 51 760 was still far below the tally of 1961 and it compared badly with 553 290 for the UP.

### **The revival of the Progressive Party**

At the end of November 1970, Steytler announced his decision to retire from politics and he was replaced by Eglin. To assist him Eglin formed five advisory committees, with De Beer as the chairman of the Political Planning Committee.<sup>32</sup> By then De Beer did not just focus on reform through the ballot box, but did his utmost to convince fellow businessmen that they had a duty to take a lead to bring about change in the country, and to remove all those measures that inhibited opportunity and denied

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28. Wits, PFP/DP Papers, D2, The Progressive Party, 1966 to 1971, 11 April 1966.

29. C. Eglin, 'A Remarkably Gifted South African', *Impact*, May 1980.

30. H. Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1993), 69.

31. 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 (1980), 7.

32. *Progress*, May 1971.

rights to the black majority.<sup>33</sup> He set an example by using his position at AAC to improve the living and working conditions of black miners.<sup>34</sup> In July 1972 he was appointed as chairman of Anglo American Central Africa and went to live in Zambia. He returned to South Africa to support Progressive candidates in the April 1974 general election. Eglin did much to revive the party and the PP's effective organisation. This combined with political divisions in the UP, as well as the realisation amongst some voters that the official opposition was failing in its duties, led to Progressive Party victories in six UP-held constituencies.<sup>35</sup>

On 16 June 1976 pent-up forces of frustration and anger with the lack of political power, the use of Afrikaans as a teaching medium in schools, and the poor socio-economic conditions erupted in Soweto. De Beer's desire to improve the living conditions of urban black people led to his involvement in the Urban Foundation, an organisation consisting of black and white businessmen, that was founded in the aftermath of the uprising. It was the brainchild of Clive Menell, a leading figure in the mining industry, and his wife Irene. The idea was based on the 'New Detroit' programme of the late 1960s in the United States to improve the quality of life in deprived black urban areas. They sold the idea through De Beer, whom they viewed as part of the 'do-gooder wing' of AAC, to Oppenheimer. The Urban Foundation was formally born at an urban housing conference in Johannesburg on 29 and 30 November 1976, with Oppenheimer and Anton Rupert, a prominent Afrikaner businessman in the lead. De Beer served as one of the Foundation's directors.<sup>36</sup>

In the wake of the Soweto uprising parliamentary politics changed beyond recognition. Since 1974 the UP had been falling apart. Impatient with the conservatism of the party a group of reformists 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>37</sup> 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. Some UP MPs decided to merge with the PRP to form on 5 September 1977 the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) with Eglin as party leader. De Beer, as part of the PFP's Constitutional Committee under the chairmanship of Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, MP for

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33. *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 May 1972.

34. A. Borraine, *A Life in Transition* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2008), 71.

35. S.L. Barnard and A.H. Marais, *Die Verenigde Party: Die Groot Eksperiment* (Durban: Butterworth Publishers, 1982), 259–261.

36. A. Butler, *Cyril Ramaphosa: The Road to Presidential Power* (Johannesburg: James Currey, 2019), 112–113.

37. E.R. McKenzie, 'From Obscurity to Official Opposition: The Progressive Federal Party, 1959–1977', *Historia*, 39, 1 (1994), 89.

Rondebosch, recommended the principle of universal suffrage based on proportional representation in a federal form of government as party policy. (De Beer had found it difficult to depart from the qualified franchise but accepted that it was no longer tenable.)<sup>38</sup> This political system would be based on a Bill of Rights, an independent judiciary, and the protection of minority rights through a form of consensus democracy. This meant power sharing by reconciling the need for majority rule with minority protection and the sharing of executive power between the majority and minority parties, while minorities would have a veto on crucial issues. A National Convention at which representatives of all South Africans would be represented would draw up a constitution for the country.<sup>39</sup>

### **The parliamentary member for Parktown**

On 20 September 1977, Prime Minister John Vorster, eager to exploit the state of flux in opposition politics, announced a snap general election for 30 November. De Beer who in the wake of Soweto felt that he had do something to address the challenges facing the country contested the constituency of Parktown in Johannesburg. By then there was a growing wave of criticism from anti-apartheid activists that the presence of liberals in parliament provided the apartheid state with legitimacy. However, De Beer felt that parliament was a crucial platform to bring about reform. The PFP managed to gain seventeen seats, to become the official opposition. All these constituencies, including Parktown, were concentrated in the affluent and predominately English-speaking suburbs of Cape Town and Johannesburg. Back in parliament after sixteen years, De Beer made an immediate impact by playing a leading role in the exposure of corruption in the Department of Information, and to hammer on the destructive effects of apartheid.<sup>40</sup> He urged the government to embrace reform as ‘doing nothing seems to be the most dangerous of all possible courses of action’. That ‘baaskap’ (white domination) was still being championed by the NP despite the fine-sounding assurances of the government.<sup>41</sup> After years in big business De Beer found that compared to commercial initiatives that were setting the pace for social change, most of parliamentary business was trivial and of marginal relevance to the main issues facing South Africa. He felt that he could wield more influence outside of parliament.<sup>42</sup> In April 1980 he resigned his seat and returned to the AAC. By then, Slabbert had replaced Eglin as party leader.

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38. Wits, Brian Hackland Papers. Hackland’s interview with De Beer, 14 July 1980.

39. A. Grundlingh, *Slabbert: Man on a Mission* (Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2020), 77.

40. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 21 April 1978, 5300–5311.

41. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 7 February 1979, 252–253, 258.

42. *Finansies & Tegniek*, March 1985.

## Talking to the African National Congress

Back at AAC De Beer became an executive director responsible for the corporation's interests in insurance, property and construction. He used his position to urge the business community to become involved in politics to bring about constitutional reform as 'you cannot do good business in a rotten society'.<sup>43</sup> In 1983 he was, with Oppenheimer and Tony Bloom, the only prominent businessmen who campaigned actively for the 'No' campaign during the 1983 referendum on the proposed tricameral parliament of Prime Minister P.W. Botha.

Addressing a meeting of businessmen in Port Elizabeth, De Beer made it clear that the new constitution was an insult to black African people by asking whites to turn their backs on them. It furthermore swindled Coloureds and Indians by bringing them into the parliamentary system in which they would have no power. In addition, it would give the president, elected by the majority party in the white chamber, too much power. White South Africans should vote 'No', let the NP go back to the drawing board, and come back with something which really was a step in the right direction.<sup>44</sup> Business leaders were however deaf to this warning, as they were receptive to Botha's message that he could not continue with reform if there was a 'No' vote in the referendum.<sup>45</sup> In 1984 the tricameral constitution triggered a new wave of resistance to the apartheid state.

By 1986 South Africa was in the grip of a seemingly never-ending cycle of violence. To break the cycle De Beer was part of a delegation to meet the ANC leadership. President Kaunda had suggested a meeting between businessmen and the ANC. He acted as the facilitator, with Hugh Murray, editor of *Leadership*, as the organiser in South Africa for a delegation to be led by Gavin Relly, chairman of AAC. An outraged Botha responded that to talk with the ANC was an act of disloyalty to the young soldiers' protecting South Africa against the violence of the communist dominated ANC.<sup>46</sup> This led to Rupert refusing to be part of the talks. Oppenheimer also felt that the trip should be cancelled, but Relly insisted that it go ahead. He led a delegation of seven to Zambia, namely De Beer, Tony Bloom of Premier Milling, the South African Foundation's Peter Sorour, and three journalists.<sup>47</sup>

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43. *The Star*, 23 June 1987.

44. *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 October 1983.

45. *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 November 1983.

46. *Die Burger*, 9 September 1985.

47. D. Pallister, S. Stewart and I. Lepper, *South Africa Inc.: The Oppenheimer Empire* (London: Yale University Press, 1988), 275.

The group departed from Johannesburg on Friday 13 September 1985 in a private Gulfstream jet and landed at an airstrip in the Luangwa Game Park, 400 km east of Lusaka. They met an ANC group consisting of Oliver Tambo, Thabo Mbeki, Chris Hani, Mac Maharaj, James Stuart and Pallo Jordan at Kaunda's Mfuwe presidential game lodge. In the 'relaxed conversations' that followed De Beer spoke of the delegation's impression of events in South Africa. He concluded by asking how much bloodshed there would be before political power would be shared, and what kind of country would be left at the end.<sup>48</sup> This led to an animated discussion on the influence of the South African Communist Party (SACP) in the ANC, the use of violence, negotiations with the apartheid state and the respective merits of private 'economic initiative' versus 'economic justice'.<sup>49</sup>

Despite frank exchanges and widely different views the six-hour meeting was cordial. The businessmen left Zambia in a positive mood, and they had reason to be. Mark Gevisser, Mbeki's biographer, is of the opinion that the meeting established a dialogue between South Africa's reigning industrialists and its future rulers about the shape of post-apartheid South Africa. It was a dialogue that enlightened both sides and contributed to the transformation of the ANC into an advocate of liberal democracy.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately the meeting was a significant moment in South African history because it paved the way for a succession of delegations to the ANC by cultural leaders, academics and politicians.

### **Progressive Federal Party leader**

In 1988 De Beer returned to parliamentary politics as the leader of the PFP. Slabbert had resigned from parliament in 1986 as he felt he could not make any contribution to getting rid of apartheid.<sup>51</sup> His resignation contributed to the trauma of the Progressives losing seven seats to the NP in the 1987 election. As Suzman puts it in her memoirs: 'who wants to vote or work for a party in which the leader declared parliament irrelevant.'<sup>52</sup> By 1988 the Progressives were in a state of despair, it was feared the PFP was in a terminal decline, and there was a feeling that Eglin who had replaced Slabbert, was not the person to revive the party. Several prominent Progressives urged De Beer, who was a member of the PFP's National Executive to come to the party's rescue. Tony Leon, the young and dynamic leader of the Progressives in the Johannesburg City

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48. L. Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004), 579–583.

49. H. Pakendorf, *Stroomop: Herinneringe van 'n Koerantman in die Apartheidsera* (Cape Town: Penguin Books, 2018), 155–156, 175–183; *Sunday Times*, 15 September 1985.

50. M. Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 2007), 504.

51. Hansard, House of Assembly Debates, 7 February 1986, 413–431.

52. Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms*, 255.

Council, led a delegation to him with this request. He had high expectations of De Beer, and expected a second political coming to save the PFP:

I ... expected the “old Zach” of party mythology to appear: the one-time boy wonder who apparently according to old Prog hands, had blazed a trail of intellectual brilliance and charisma across the South African political scene in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>53</sup>

De Beer was content to be in the business world. In an interview with B.M. Schoeman of the Afrikaans financial magazine *Finansies & Tegniek* (March 1985) he made it clear that in the three professions he had pursued, medicine, politics and business, the financial world gave him the most satisfaction and that despite his interest in politics he had no desire to return to parliament. But as he explained to Paul Bell in an interview for the *Leadership* magazine it was his sense of duty to the PFP and its principles that convinced him to re-enter the bear pit of parliamentary politics:

... well, if you’ve an active member of the PFP since 1959, you’ve persuaded a lot of people to put their resources and their lives on the line. The time comes when you have to do it too. The duty falls on you. If your children have grown up, and you’ve got a few bob in the bank, how do you justify not doing that?<sup>54</sup>

Ultimately, and in contrast to Slabbert, he remained convinced of the importance of parliament to bring about constitutional reform.

At the Progressive congress on 5 August, De Beer was elected unopposed as party leader. His main task was to rebuild the morale of the shattered and demoralised party. Even if the PFP was not in its battered state it was a challenging task to be the leader of a small liberal opposition party in apartheid South Africa. As Slabbert explained:

How does a liberal-minded party in opposition make progress when the Parliamentary terrain is dominated by an unaccountable executive authority that uses its power to rig the game totally in its favour and is threatened only by a growing party to its right that believes it is not rigging it well enough? ... Out there in the hustings of white politics it is getting tougher for liberals, not easier.<sup>55</sup>

On De Beer becoming party leader Slabbert send him a telegram, ‘Jy slaan jou hand aan die ploeg op ’n moeilike akker in ons land. Baie sterkte.’ (You are putting your hand to the plough in a difficult situation in our country. I wish you strength.)<sup>56</sup>

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53. T. Leon, *On the Contrary: Leading the Opposition in a Democratic South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2008), 191.

54. P. Bell, ‘Changing the Guard’, *Leadership*, 7, 3 (1988), 14.

55. F. Van Zyl Slabbert, ‘Rituals and Realities’, *Leadership*, 7, 3 (1988), 20.

56. University of Stellenbosch Archive, 430.A.39, F. Van Zyl Slabbert – Z. de Beer, 4 August 1988.



De Beer indeed needed all the strength he could muster as among the younger Progressives there was a nagging concern that his leadership was perhaps a mistake. As Leon explains in his memoirs:

De Beer had unfailing civility, great personal charm and warmth; he was possessed of a first-rate intellect and noblesse oblige acquired over 25 years in the Anglo American empire, however, his removal in 1961 from the political front line extinguished much of the fire in his belly. Assuming the leadership of a battered political party at the age of nearly sixty ... was probably not the most rejuvenating step the PFP could muster.<sup>57</sup>

That De Beer was aware of these concerns was reflected in his acceptance speech. He vowed to dedicate himself to the party and its liberal democratic values:

I am deeply honoured to be the leader of the Progressive Federal Party. I am under no illusions as to the difficulty of the task — but please also understand that I view it as vital to the future of South Africa, and that I will make any effort, run any risk and pay any price to achieve success in building a strong organisation to promote our values.<sup>58</sup>

As a first step he set out to address a succession of meetings to lay down the major principles upon which the PFP was built and for which it had to fight. Namely equal rights, personal freedom and the Rule of Law. At a meeting in the Johannesburg City Hall on 17 August 1988, he informed those present that the PP's first public meeting had been held at the same venue. In his short speech to that meeting 29 years earlier he had raised the question he now put to the conscience of each person present in 1988. 'Is the colour of a man's skin the measure of his worth?' He made it clear that the PFP rejected any discrimination based on race, while demanding that Mandela be released, and the ANC unbanned.<sup>59</sup>

The local government election on 26 October 1988 was De Beer's first test as party leader. The future of the party depended on its election performance. He personally campaigned hard and the PFP managed to halt the slide in support, doing well in Johannesburg, Randburg, Midrand, East London and Cape Town.<sup>60</sup> However, the PFP's limited success in reaching out to Afrikaners, as well as De Beer's sense that 'verligtes' (politically enlightened Afrikaners) were ready for the plucking because the NP was drifting, convinced him of the necessity to reach out to the

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57. Leon, *On the Contrary*, 153.

58. University of South Africa Archive, Progressive Federal Party Papers, File 37, *Comment*, September 1988, 'De Beer: The Way Ahead'.

59. De Beer's speech at the Johannesburg City Hall, 17 August 1988. Copy (Ref: Z 5) in the possession of Wendy de Beer Furniss.

60. *Beeld*, 27 and 28 October 1988.

National Democratic Movement (NDM) of Wynand Malan and the Independent Party (IP) of Dennis Worrall to form a broader-based party to oppose the NP. (Malan, a former NP MP, and Worrall a former ambassador to London, had broken with the NP in 1987 and formed their respective parties to bring about reform.) To bring the three parties together was a challenge: Malan and Worrall did not get on, while the proposed merger was resented by many Progressives who felt that the PFP compared to the two smaller parties was the only one that was financially solvent and had significant grassroots support. As the PFP's good performance erased the doubts about De Beer's leadership, it boosted his attempt to reach out to the NDM and IP. Merger talks gained momentum when Louis Luyt, a prominent and controversial businessman became involved. It was the beginning of a long process of occasionally acrimonious negotiations to form a new party. Realising what the sacrifice of the Progressive identity meant for many PFP members, De Beer was meticulous in keeping the PFP's Federal Council and MPs informed of developments, even getting Luyt to address them on the benefit of the merger.<sup>61</sup>

On 14 December 1988 the three leaders agreed that early in 1989 a new party, the Democratic Party was to be formed on the principles of a true democracy, the removal of apartheid, the protection of cultural, language and religious rights and that parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities could not be separated.<sup>62</sup> To bring about a broad-based party De Beer had no choice but to accept a joint leadership with Worrall and Malan, popularly known as the troika. He did so because he felt that a joint leadership was not viable except as a very temporary expedient<sup>63</sup> This compromise placed considerable stress on his longstanding relationship with Suzman as she felt that Malan and Worrall were hijacking the PFP. She thought that De Beer had been very weak in the negotiating process and that he should have made the leadership issue non-negotiable.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Democratic Party**

Zach de Beer returned to parliament in February 1989 as the leader of the PFP. He reiterated his warning that without democracy there would never be peace in the country:

As long as the majority of South Africans are denied normal civil rights, there will be no consent of the governed. The government will as now continue to be by force majeure. As long as this goes on there will be no peace, prosperity or real security, only strife, corruption and creeping poverty.<sup>65</sup>

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61. L. Luyt, *Walking Proud: The Louis Luyt Autobiography* (Cape Town: Don Nelson, 2003), 312–316.

62. *Beeld*, 15 December 1988; *Cape Times*, 14 December 1988.

63. Wits, PFP/DP Papers, D2, De Beer's letter to senior PFP members, 16 January 1989.

64. Wits, Helen Suzman Papers, Ma 8.2.1, H. Suzman – G. Waddell, 2 June 1989.

65. Debates of Parliament, 10 February 1989, 357.

However, it was difficult to make his mark because parliament was in the grip of a free-for-all fight between the right-wing Conservative Party (CP) and the NP. The CP MPs viewed the slightest deviation from Verwoerdian apartheid as a threat to white survival. The result was bitter and emotional clashes between them, and the NP with Progressive MPs as ignored spectators. James Selfe, the PFP's Director of Communications and Marketing, felt that De Beer after his long absence was out of his depth.<sup>66</sup> It was indeed a challenge for him to find his parliamentary feet again, but he eventually did so. For example, he impressed Dr Pieter Mulder, CP MP for Schweizer-Reneke as a good and measured speaker, whose speeches were based on reason, but who could also use sarcasm and humour with effect to convey his message.<sup>67</sup>

The PFP disbanded on 7 April 1989, at the Johannesburg College of Education.<sup>68</sup> The next day at the same venue the Democratic Party (DP) was launched. De Beer in his speech set out his ideals for the new party:

This party has a new vision for the future of the country. Ours is a vision of one nation: a nation of 37 million South Africans; a nation united by common goals, not divided by racist laws; a nation built on the foundation of freedom, whose people take charge of their own lives, seek their own paths to personal progress, and together build a society which enshrines the very best in human experience, namely the dignity of the individual person; a nation governed by all its people, for all its people: in a word, a democratic nation.<sup>69</sup>

On 10 April, De Beer was elected parliamentary leader of the DP. (Malan would oversee political contacts and Worrall would monitor marketing and public relations.) In the debate on the State President's vote on 13 and 17 April, De Beer set out the DP's goals to create a democratic society by sharing political power with a common voters' roll, scrapping the Group Areas Act and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, and opening educational institutions for all.<sup>70</sup> De Beer, as Worrall points out in his memoirs, stamped a clear liberal democratic identity on the DP.<sup>71</sup> The party was in a difficult position because it had to face a parliamentary election on 6 September. Realising that it was near impossible to win back hard-core CP supporters, the NP turned its focus on the DP to prevent 'verligte' and floating voters from supporting the party. F.W. de Klerk, who had replaced Botha as president in August, portrayed himself as the champion of

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66. Correspondence with J. Selfe, 4 April 2020.

67. Correspondence with Dr P. Mulder, 17 March 2021.

68. *The Star*, 8 April 1989.

69. Z 105, De Beer's speech at the founding conference of the DP, 8 April 1989. (In the possession of Wendy de Beer Furniss.)

70. Hansard, Debates of Parliament, 13 April 1989, 5301 and 17 April 1989, 5489.

71. D. Worrall, *The Independent Factor: My Personal Journey Through Politics and Diplomacy* (Wandsbeck: Reach Publishers, 2018), 197.

moderate and sensible reform compared to the radicalism of the DP, intent handing over the country to a black majority government.<sup>72</sup> NP propaganda painted the DP as a puppet of the United Democratic Front and Cosatu, the alleged internal wing of ANC/SACP alliance. In a newspaper advertisement the NP depicted the three DP leaders as blind mice being manipulated by the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>73</sup>

Despite De Beer's serious concerns about the troika, and though behind the scenes there were tensions, the joint leadership functioned well during the campaign. Together they attracted vast and enthusiastic crowds, more than 2 000 in Cape Town (11 April), 1 400 in Port Elizabeth (25 April) and 1 800 people in Durban (2 May).<sup>74</sup> Each leader had strengths he brought to the team. Malan was highly respected amongst 'verligte' Afrikaners, while the charismatic Worrall was a brilliant orator who attracted vast crowds to his public meetings with barnstorming speeches. In his final meetings he was able to attract 1 500 and 1 200 supporters compared to the 700 for De Klerk's final rally.<sup>75</sup> De Beer's contribution was his cool and polished television appearances combined with his unflappability and gravitas which did much to enhance the DP. He used the NP's attacks on the Democrats as opportunities to turn the tables on the government by pointing out the obsolescence of these tactics and to urge voters to embrace reform and vote for their hopes and not their fears.<sup>76</sup> On 18 June he boosted the momentum of the party with an impressive television interview. To portray the DP as soft on security, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) interviewer was provocative and aggressive. De Beer handled the situation with great aplomb and made it clear that if in power the party would unban the ANC and SACP and would release Mandela unconditionally to participate in negotiations for a new constitution. He was so impressive the *Cape Times* (20 June 1989) dedicated a leading article, 'Dr De Beer scores', in praise of his appearance, while *The Star* (20 June 1989) published a cartoon of him as David slaying the SABC Goliath. On 31 August he dominated Barend du Plessis, the Minister of Finance, in a televised debate. He pointed out to viewers that apartheid was the root cause of high government expenditure, poor productivity in industry and the outflow of capital, all factors harming the economy. The only solution was to bring all South Africans together into one harmonious nation, with a just government. Du Plessis had no choice but to agree that the country's economic ills could only be solved by getting all into one harmonious nation.<sup>77</sup> On the eve of the election it was clear that the DP had succeeded in encouraging a feeling amongst a growing number of voters that significant constitutional reform had become a necessity.

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72. *Die Burger*, 4 and 6 September 1989.

73. *Sunday Times*, 13 August 1989.

74. *Cape Times*, 12 April 1989; *Eastern Province Herald*, 26 April 1989; *The Daily News*, 3 May 1989.

75. Worrall, *The Independent Factor*, 200.

76. *Sunday Times*, 27 August 1984.

77. *The Star*, 1 September 1989.

The Democrats entered election day with momentum and gained twelve seats from the NP, securing a total of 33. In terms of the popular vote the DP secured 20 per cent compared to the fourteen per cent of the PFP in 1987. The Democrats had won over the floating English-speaking vote while making significant inroads into Afrikaner middle-class urban constituencies, winning in North Rand, a constituency with a majority of Afrikaner voters. Although the NP won 93 seats the DP's performance was a warning to De Klerk that the "verligte" vote, formerly a solid base of support for the NP could no longer be taken for granted. De Beer was surprised when De Klerk, in his comments on the election, noted that, when the votes cast for the Democrats were added to those earned by the NP there was close to seventy per cent support for orderly reform and renewal amongst white voters.<sup>78</sup> He expressed the hope that De Klerk was correct but made it clear that he did not share the president's confidence in the desire of NP voters to accept constitutional reform.<sup>79</sup>

De Beer approached the new parliamentary session in February 1990 determined to pressurise the NP to implement reforms. He was unaware that De Klerk had realised that white domination had become untenable and morally indefensible.<sup>80</sup> The country was in the grip of a low-level civil war with internal unrest, strikes, the guerrilla warfare of the ANC, and the rise of right-wing violence. South Africa was turning into a wasteland. In addition, sanctions and disinvestment were paralysing the economy. To continue with apartheid would be catastrophic. The implosion of Communism and the decline of the Soviet Union provided him with an opportunity to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the anti-apartheid liberation movements. On the morning of 2 February 1990 at 9:30 De Beer was handed a copy of the presidential opening address that De Klerk would deliver at 11:00. He was stunned to read that De Klerk was about to unban the ANC, PAC, and SACP. In parliament listening to the speech, he turned to Eglin sitting next to him and said, 'I have the feeling that the things we have fought for are actually going to happen.'<sup>81</sup>

In his retirement De Beer argued that credit for the end of apartheid was due to the fighters in the national liberation movement as well as to those who participated in the apartheid system to oppose it.<sup>82</sup> For him, the election result of 1989 was the high point of his political career because the DP had helped to push De Klerk into his reforms.<sup>83</sup> In his study on the rise and fall of apartheid, David Welsh

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78. A. Ries and E. Dommissie, *Leierstryd* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1990), 257.

79. Z 40, Z. de Beer, 'The 1989 Election and the Next Five Years', 28 September 1989. (In the possession of Wendy de Beer Furniss.)

80. *Beeld*, 14 February 2015.

81. Z 152, De Beer's report-back meeting to the Parktown constituency, 8 August 1990. (In the possession of Wendy de Beer Furniss.)

82. Fragment of a book De Beer intended to write. (In the possession of Wendy Furniss.)

83. O'Malley's interview with Zach de Beer.

concurr, and is of the view that the DP and its Progressive predecessors with their sustained criticism of apartheid had an impact on a growing number of whites, encouraging them to embrace reform.<sup>84</sup> For Eglin the DP had pushed De Klerk over his own Rubicon as he viewed the election result as a mandate for a new leader with fresh ideas to establish a common system for black and white.<sup>85</sup> De Beer's faith in parliamentary politics had been vindicated.

## Conclusion

In his speech to parliament on 5 February De Beer rose to the occasion by proclaiming that the DP was not in mourning that the NP had taken over its policies. He congratulated De Klerk on his speech which had created more hope for South Africa than had been evident for 40 years but said that in his view it would be difficult to arrive at a non-racial democracy. To realise this ideal the DP would cooperate with anyone who moved in that direction. But the party would not sacrifice its independence because its most important work was still to come.<sup>86</sup> To bring about a democratic South Africa the Democrats would support De Klerk against the outraged CP in parliament, as well as in the 1992 referendum, and play a significant role in the negotiations on a new constitution. This came at a cost as many DP supporters drifted to the NP, while several DP MPs joined the ANC.

In September 1990 De Beer became the sole leader of the Democratic Party. Under challenging circumstances, especially with the DP trapped between the competing ANC and NP, he ensured that the party survived as an independent liberal voice. Without his unbending leadership there was the possibility that the party might have splintered with the remnants being absorbed by the NP or the ANC. In April 1994, in a state of exhaustion and in poor health, with a party hampered by a lack of finances, he fought an election against impossible odds. The DP was all but wiped out as the party secured only seven seats in the National Assembly. De Beer pointed out ruefully: 'The D.P. saw its policies triumph while its candidates were defeated.'<sup>87</sup> On 5 May 1994 De Beer announced his resignation as party leader and from the newly elected parliament.<sup>88</sup> In recognition of his contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle President Mandela appointed him as the ambassador to the Netherlands in 1994. He served in The Hague for two years before ill-health led to his retirement. De Beer died on 27 May 1999.<sup>89</sup>

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84. D. Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2009), 386.

85. H. Giliomee, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders: A Supreme Test of Power* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012), 297.

86. Hansard, Debates of Parliament, 5 February 1990, 71–72.

87. Fragment of a book De Beer intended to write. (In the possession of Wendy De Beer Furniss.)

88. *The Pretoria News*, 7 May 1994.

89. *Cape Times*, 28 May 1999.

Paul Trehwela in the *Independent* (3 June 1999) summarised De Beer's career in the following terms: 'Talented, handsome, persuasive, De Beer provided a measure of sanity in South Africa through troubled decades'. The warmest praise came from Professor Kader Asmal, an anti-apartheid veteran and the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry:

He will always be remembered as one of those few whites who was prepared to take risks for non-racialism, and who did so much to prod the business community and other sectors of white opinion into adopting a more realistic attitude towards what was both inevitable and desirable in South Africa. I recall the remarkable work Zach did in the constitutional process, leading to substantial progress in what at times was the most intractable position-taking. He was, in truth, a peace-maker, and the democratic order that has been established bears his mark, too. ... Zach's life was an example to others in steadfastness and courage against the worst possible odds.<sup>90</sup>

De Beer was a liberal crusader for the ideal of a fair, democratic and prosperous South Africa in which the rights of all its citizens would be protected. His idealism and moral courage contributed to the founding of the PP in 1961, to the party's durability in the face of numerous defeats and setbacks, and to its eventual resurgence by the 1970s as an increasing number of white voters became convinced of the need for reform. Without his leadership of the PFP there would not have been a DP and the electoral performance of 1989 that helped to push De Klerk in the direction of reform. The strength of Zach de Beer's character, combined with his ability to explain the necessity of political and constitutional reform, helped to lay the groundwork to convince many in the white minority to accept by 1990 the dismantling of the apartheid state.

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