

Review

Hermann Giliomee (2012) *The Last Afrikaner Leaders: a supreme test of power*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Willie Esterhuysen (2012) *Secret Talks and the End of Apartheid*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Sampie Terreblanche (2012) *Lost in Transformation: South Africa's search for a new future since 1986*. Johannesburg: KMM Review Publishing House.

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The set of books under review here are all accounts of recent political history and with an emphasis on the transition from National Party to ANC rule by former University of Stellenbosch professors. Of these the most ambitious and lengthy is by Giliomee. Giliomee, who actually spent years at the University of Cape Town where he was perhaps better appreciated at the time than at Stellenbosch, has become a prolific and important columnist and writer on South African politics and political history. His new book attempts to cover the whole rise and fall of apartheid but with a particular angle through the assessment of four top Nat leaders plus van Zyl Slabbert who led the Progressive Federal Party through part of the 1980s.

It is questionable how much individuals can influence the direction of social and political change but Giliomee provides a shrewd and thoughtful commentary on political strategy and tactics. In practice, the prime ministers and presidents functioned within a very distinct social system and had to keep their eyes on a particular blinkered electorate; their ability to manoeuvre, and they certainly at the least did more than just reflect the prejudices of that

electorate, was limited and became more so with time. The book is focussed on the big questions pertaining to the social and political system; there is virtually nothing on the private lives of the leaders once their origins are mentioned.

Giliomee has delved intensively into what practitioners tend to call 'contemporary history'. He makes use of some official publications, memoirs (which are becoming very extensive on the Afrikaner side), available primary material collected by others and an impressive range of interviews with virtually everyone who plays a key part in the book and is still alive. It may be that Giliomee is insufficiently critical in repeating the opinions and memories of some participants; he is certainly too trusting in the value of opinion polls. Moreover, it should be noted that the only individual on the ANC side interviewed or cited at any length is Joe Slovo. Yet while Giliomee does not entirely disguise his strong distaste for the ANC and most of its works, his assessment of their strategy and tactics, despite the qualifications raised above, seems convincing. For instance, he provides a plausible portrait of Mandela as a political actor independent from the usual hagiographic portraits.

Looking at the book in more detail, the first chapters focus on Verwoerd and Vorster. Despite his 'outward policy' which in the end went nowhere very interesting, Vorster these days gets a pretty bad press and he is not rescued here. Pragmatic, inconsistent and unable to formulate a bigger picture, he is obviously contrasted with Verwoerd. If Verwoerd was only too able and ready to provide calmly and repeatedly a full blueprint of the apartheid dream, Giliomee's attempt to rescue him from obloquy is very unconvincing. Verwoerd's ideas changed somewhat with circumstances from time to time but he was stuck in his racial paradigm and the changes followed logically from pursuing it, an 'ideologue with dogmatic confidence' as Slabbert wrote of him (211). Here was a man who even shortly before his assassination could not bring himself to attend a lunch in person with a black man in the person of the new premier of Lesotho in 1966 as is here related. Verwoerd made a not unfavourable impression on foreigners at times but then his was the only show in town. His commitment to racial separation and white dominance was unbending and almost mindless, as far as even Giliomee's evidence suggests, albeit he did seem an impressive intellectual to the average Nat MP of the day, giving fancy expression to daily racist assumptions without ever intending to make the huge and painful changes a serious partition of the country would have entailed.

Maybe such a partition would have at least put a very different spin on later events but the main thing about both Verwoerd and at least the earlier Vorster is the context: the easy dominance of white rule, the intense and satisfying focus on growing Afrikaner hegemony in the civil service and elsewhere and the relative absence of anything like a crisis as the economy sizzled. PW Botha, by contrast, had to preside over a growing set of more and more intensive problems. He was certainly a very intelligent and in many respects capable individual who will probably be more interesting to historians than the others. His unfortunate bullying temperament and the impossible task of retaining power while substantially modifying apartheid, however, must tower over any positive assessment.

Finally we have FW de Klerk. For Giliomee the question about De Klerk is how and why he gave the family silver away. He portrays De Klerk as essentially the kind of politician who mediates and finds compromises while always wanting to be able to cover himself with a moral sheen. It was fascinating to find that De Klerk, if so much less than Slabbert, found himself somewhat cleansed of shame, if not guilt, after his dramatic 1990 speech opening the way to negotiations. However, once that moment had happened, he proceeded as though he were presiding over an entirely legitimate state with a bargaining partner that had somewhat similar assumptions about what was at stake and equally concerned with how to stabilise a new power balance. Giliomee sounds right in stating that De Klerk did not understand in any sense black politics and its moral universe nor was he in a position to control the police and to some extent army whose leaders were hostile to negotiations and whose middle level operatives had become a law unto themselves.

Under the surface, there is in this book more than a whiff of ‘what might have been’ and we are teased with the idea that leaders could have made a substantial difference to the road on which white-run South Africa was travelling. Just as many contemporaries reflect a general annoyance at Botha for not crossing the Rubicon in 1985, others were angry at what seemed ostensibly a president in charge of a functioning national system giving everything away to more capable negotiators but the reality is that there was a reason for why the Nat negotiators were not able to come up with much and why in the end they lost the day. This was not the fault of De Klerk, given what he was being expected to defend. Giliomee at times does give the game away:

Two scenarios are possible. One is that the ANC might have found its following exhausted by disruptions and the loss of wages and less keen on mass action. The ANC might have returned to the negotiations divided and in a much weaker position. The other scenario is one of the government taking a much tougher line and calling a state of emergency. The world would have responded with tougher action. The economy would have taken a nose dive and the negotiations would have resumed with the NP in a much weaker position. Of the two scenarios the second is more likely. (377-8)

Both sides needed one another to strike a deal but only the ANC could afford to walk out.

The weakest part of Giliomee's analysis is the limited attention he gives to economic power. There are a very few remarks on big business but little awareness of how early and effectively it operated. The big corporations sure didn't give the silver away; on the contrary, the ANC gave them the end of sanctions, the capacity to join powerful globalised networks in new and more intense ways and effectively to end the crisis in which they found themselves. It is true, as a couple of Giliomee's informants point out, that the state was not on its economic knees in 1990 but the economic giants, Afrikaners included, were not prepared to settle for the trajectory they were coming to know too well. Talking to Derek Keys proves to be no substitute for the economic heavyweights themselves.

An interesting little mistake Giliomee makes is to give Mandela's historic visit to Davos where he canned the radical language far too late a date. It took place not in mid-1992 but as early as January 1991.¹ And it is very questionable that Mandela, Tambo or Sisulu were much interested in socialism of any sort unless you go back far further in time. Mandela was a guest of Harry Oppenheimer at Vergelegen within weeks of his release from prison. The idea that Thabo Mbeki was a serious Communist in 1989 reflects a peculiar bee in the bonnet shared by otherwise perceptive South African liberals and ignores the two fine biographies of this Machiavellian but extremely influential man. Perhaps he was still a nominal member but he surely by then had already long lost interest in the party. The political culture of the ANC was indeed very left-wing and lined up strongly with a pro-Soviet view of the world but it was very thin and unconsidered and not shared by the crucial leaders in whom the most power was entrusted, however little this was grasped by cadres. And the so-called National Democratic Revolution, a phrase Giliomee uses repeatedly, may reflect Communist terminology but it represented just

the same as what almost invariably happened in post-colonial situations in Africa and elsewhere when the once conquered peoples took over, whether nationalist governments were right or left wing.

It is not easy to say something new in this massive field with so many entrants. Much of the narrative is familiar. However, here and there Giliomee has done some intensive research and adds to the knowledge base. I found enlightening his discussion of the decision in Vorster's time to invade Angola in the hopes of ensnaring the USA and African players in an anti-Communist alliance, his detailed account of the Wiehahn Commission proceedings leading to a major concession that inaugurated the reform apartheid era and the turning point in CODESA in 1992. The chapter on Van Zyl Slabbert, a man of great personal charm, integrity and certainly the brightest of the lot, is actually a sad, not uncritical but moving, tribute to a leader far outside the Nat box. Perhaps the most striking absence is a comparison, so obvious to this reader, of the two nationalist parties that had to accept something a bit different than a straightforward overt dominance in South Africa – the National Party among the whites and the ANC amongst the whole population – while keeping their strong ethnic bias at the same time. The similarities are often so striking.

Both Esterhuysen and Terreblanche have bit parts in the Giliomee narrative. Esterhuysen, a political scientist, was selected in the middle 1980s by the National Intelligence Service to act as a go-between to the ANC on their part, one of several links that were then being formed in secret. By this time much of the Afrikaner establishment, including an ambivalent PW Botha to some degree, realised that apartheid was not going to be a long-term political option for South Africa. This entailed talks with the exiled ANC and, of course, Nelson Mandela, but serious sticking points remained. Esterhuysen himself had a demonised view of the Communist Party and an intense dislike of the military struggle and MK, an understanding of the world he shared with the NIS people and the Afrikaner establishment. Botha wanted to talk but was ambivalent about retaining a group definition of society for political purposes and expected the ANC to renounce violence in advance and abandon its Communist allies. Thus as long as he remained in power, the stalemate continued even as the NIS and other key Afrikaner operatives and civil society leaders became more restive. It was only after Botha's stroke and the rise to power of FW de Klerk that the impasse could be overcome. However before this, Esterhuysen (usually with both Willem de Klerk, the future state president's brother and Sampie Terreblanche, a Stellenbosch

economist interested in socialist ideas, in tow) participated in confidential talks about talks, mainly in England. Esterhuysen is at first riveting although eventually the story becomes somewhat repetitious and even tedious when it moralises, but he deserves our gratitude for offering a public and likely accurate account of his role in this historically important phase, enlivened by his personal reactions.

The excitement for Esterhuysen in getting to know the enemy and establishing bonds of trust and friendship has to be modified by what is revealed of the parochialism and tunnel vision of Afrikaner intellectuals in this period. Esterhuysen shows no sign of having read banned literature of any sort and is blind until late to the unpleasant side of the state security apparatus. I was struck, for example, by his expectations of an intellectual like Harold Wolpe or a writer like Wally Serote as caricature terrorists. There was no glimmer of recognition at an encounter with perhaps the most original South African social scientist of his generation, certainly far more important and thought-provoking than Esterhuysen or his colleagues. Nor was he wont to read Serote, one of the country's foremost poets. He was shocked at first watching Rev Trevor Huddleston openly allowed on stage in England with Nelson Mandela! Much had lain beyond his Pale.

Probably the other striking feature of this memoir is accurately predicted by the cover and its large portrait of ex-president Thabo Mbeki. In this book, Mbeki is everywhere, intelligent, flexible, seductive, tolerant and not very much like what one remembers of this sour Third World nationalist who liked to surround himself with flunkies once in power. At one point, Esterhuysen raises a rhetorical question or two:

Isn't Mbeki simply co-opting credulous Afrikaners for his future plans? Is it not just a case of him using 'negotiations' in order to achieve what MK didn't manage to accomplish: a political takeover of the South African state? (194)

To this reader, this seems pretty fair comment albeit Mbeki certainly never had any truck with the social or economic radicalism that, however superficially, could be found in MK – and rightly saw little chance of it ever defeating the SADF.

For Esterhuysen, the problems of South Africa today emanate from first, the refusal of FW de Klerk (a more negative view of him than that of Giliomee) to sustain a Government of National Unity and second, the Polokwane conference, where the bad guys, ie the hotheads, populists, militants, trade unionists and Communists, won. This kind of dichotomy within the ANC

dominates his view of it from early on and perhaps represents closely how Mbeki himself sees the world.

The Mbeki romance continues. Today Esterhuysen is involved in the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute, a trustee of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation and holder of the Order of Luthuli prize (silver) since 2001. The book does not record what he says to those who complain that for the mass of the population ‘nothing’s changed’.

By contrast, Sampie Terreblanche, once an idealistic supporter of apartheid who only broke decisively with the state in 1987, stresses from the start of his short volume that ‘the outstanding characteristic of South Africa, eighteen years after the transition of 1994, is the intensification of the country’s social problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality’ (ix). He says little about Mbeki and not much about the secret talks that occupied his time for a while, remaining stalwartly unswayed.

Instead he is emphatic that more critical than such rendezvous was the end of the Cold War and the intensifying pressure on South Africa’s economic leaders to fit into a new world order dominated by the USA. The strength of Terreblanche’s polemic is really his consideration of how South Africa fits into a bigger picture. Its weakness is its lack of subtlety. Classifying South Africa as a ‘subempire of the American neoliberal empire’ harkens back to the weaker, most reductive parts of dependency theory (75).

Terreblanche keeps referring to the Fine and Ruston paradigm of a Mineral-Energy Complex to the extent that the complex becomes an actor in his book with a will of its own rather than a system of accumulation as its originators intended, and one that probably has no integrated logic as it once did. Yet he does not consider the energy and environmental aspects of such a complex and he downplays the historic struggle required to create a powerful heavy industrial core based on the parastatals against the will of the mining houses. He himself points to state success in constructing a strong capitalist agricultural sector while claiming that the MEC stifled attempts to construct any other major economic sector. Finally it isn’t entirely clear whether the MEC depends on a particular set of redistributive structures defined racially under apartheid or whether the two were quite separate projects that politicians harnessed together. In other words, the MEC often sounds like what a previous generation of Afrikaner writers used to call the English *geldmag*. Terreblanche, even though he is hardly shy of political commentary, has a tendency towards the reductive that is the opposite side of Esterhuysen’s fascination with the conjunctural. Economics

vs politics? Still Terreblanche's dogged concern for inequality and his ability to see far beyond the desiderata of his own class gives him a larger sense of what the transition was about and who profited from it. So the Stellenbosch boys have gone their own paths, Esterhuysen a keen supporter of a wing of the ANC, Giliomee a liberal hostile to the ANC, and Terreblanche a left critic of the ruling party. Afrikanerdom, the civil religion, is well and truly over.

Note

1. It is true that Mandela was somewhat more militant sounding and offered some equivocal support for nationalisation then as opposed to the following January where he just sustained the policy of a mixed economy.