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# Observing the First Democratic Elections in South Africa

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by Donald H. Oliver, Senator

*Canada was one of many countries invited to send observers to the historic elections that took place in South Africa in the Spring of 1994. One of the Canadian election observers was Senator Donald Oliver. In this article he describes the situation of the Black South African, discusses his experience as a UN observer and speculates on the challenges to be faced by the new government of Mr. Mandela.*

South Africa is a country of contrasts and contradictions. It is a country of stunning physical beauty and charm and a land of great mineral resources. However, the proceeds from the exploitation of the resources are basically only shared among whites. There is a wide, wide gulf between the wages and standard of living of white society living in South Africa's most modern cities, while blacks live in the outlying townships or homelands where there are few facilities, no paved roads and running water. Few are educated.

South Africa has one of the highest rates of child labour in the world. There are 60,000 children between 8 and 14 working as farm labourers. There are over 2 million black pupils without school spaces while there are 307,000 empty spaces in white schools. The unemployment rate for blacks is over 50 percent in several provinces. The health system is characterized by the same racism as the education system. Virtually five times as much money is spent on the health care of whites as on blacks.

While over 80 percent of whites are covered by medical plans — just under 20 percent of blacks are covered. The number of patients per medical doctor among whites is 330 but among blacks is 12,000. In order to ameliorate the housing shortage for blacks, 330,000 houses would have

to be built each year for the next ten years. And the discrepancies in quality of life and benefits provided as between whites and blacks just goes on and on.

The North West Province where I was deployed during the election covers about 5 percent of South Africa's land mass and contains approximately 1.8 million people or 4.8 percent of the total South African population. The mainstay of the economy in this part of South Africa is mining — gold, platinum, and uranium. This mining activity represents virtually 30 percent of the total mining production of South Africa. The second largest industry in the North West is agriculture. Two of the main problems in this province are poverty, and poor health care. Incidences of TB are also high.

Some 1800 people were sent under the UN mandate to observe the South African election. In addition there were over 3,000 international observers in the country whose work was coordinated by the UN. Approximately 21,000,000 were people eligible to vote throughout South Africa in the election. The country was divided into 374 electoral districts with 7,000 voting stations. I found they needed more — many more.

The electoral system in South Africa is based on proportional representation with parties putting up both national and local lists. Each elector in the April election cast two separate ballots. One for the national election and one for the provincial election. Of the 400 seats in Parliament half are elected from the national lists and the rest from the local. In proportional representation jurisdictions there is a perception — a feeling — among the

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*A former member of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Donald Oliver was named to the Senate in 1990.*

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people that their individual votes really count because the more the party gets, the more members it elects. Unlike our first past the post system where we vote for individual candidates and one's vote seems insignificant when the winning candidate has a large plurality.

The North West province was divided into four large areas. In total we had 28 electoral districts, 779 voting stations and over 1.7 million potential voters. The voting procedures were slightly different than what we are used to in Canada.

The polls were due to open at 7:00 a.m. and close at 7:00 p.m. There was no general list of eligible electors. Electors could vote anywhere in South Africa they wished. There were two election officials at the door of the voting station. Voters were requested to show voter identification documents. Once inside the centre the voter would place both hands under the Ultra Violet Light scanner and if the voter's hands did not show traces of the invisible ink used to mark a voter's hand after he or she has voted, then the voter would go to the document check table in order to have the voter identity documents inspected and approved.

Once the documents were approved then the voter would proceed to the ink-marking table where fingers were brushed with invisible ink. This procedure was then tested to make sure the marking took effect and the voter then would go to the Ballot Paper Issue table – receive a ballot – and then take it to the Ballot Booth, mark it and place it in the ballot box.

Our job was to observe this whole procedure and report any incidents which could render the election either not free or unfair. We were to determine if the necessary staff were at the polling stations, were the polling stations ready for the voters, did the voting procedure run smoothly, were there delays and was anyone discouraged from voting.

***We had been briefed. We knew what our responsibilities were but no one could prepare us for the experience we were to undergo in three days of voting.***

The communities in the North West region are remote and the roads dirty and dusty. Few were paved. There were few road signs, inadequate maps, no electrical power and no telephones. Life is tough, sewer or fresh water distribution systems are virtually unheard of in these communities.

The people I met were some of the poorest people in the country. But they are not poor in spirit and they make

the most of the little they have. They have no washer or dryer to wash clothing. No dishwasher for dishes. No lights for reading, no power for watching TV or listening to a radio; so when it got dark at the polling stations around 5:30, in the absence of a portable generator that worked, you were left to candlelight. Thousands of South African Blacks voted in the dark by candlelight.

Apartheid has ghettoized the Black people of South Africa. They have laboured in mines for low wages and in poor working conditions or they worked on the white-owned farms. I asked one teenage girl what she did. She told me she was self-employed. I questioned her further. She explained she worked on a white farm in the corn fields. She worked from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., six days a week with a half hour off for lunch. Her daily pay was 18 Rand or \$8.00 but at the close of each day the white landlord farmer gave her two ears of corn to take home. Life is tough in South Africa for Black folk. The inner strength of the Black Africans is a sight to behold.

As we drove to the voting stations through the unending community townships around 6:30 in the morning, I could see the women out in the centre of the village pumping water from the well and filling the pails. Some was for drinking, some was for cooking and most was for the daily wash. Yes, they used the old fashioned scrub brush and their tired clothing was carefully and meticulously washed each day and placed in the sun on a nearby bush or small tree to dry.

We had five voting stations to observe on day one. When we arrived at 6:50 a.m. on the first morning for voting in the ordinary poll, we were staggered by the interminable line of first-time Black electors patiently lined up to exercise their democratic right. These lines seemed to have had an impact on everyone who went to South Africa. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* in their issues for the second week of May include pictures of the lines, commenting on the orderliness of the Black voters and the fact many had brought food to eat, water to drink as it took hours to process the voters.

But while in these lines, in the back of their minds, it was clear they were wondering whether the evil forces of apartheid would somehow prevent them in the end from voting at all. However, the smiles of satisfaction when they emerged from the voting station illustrated that they knew apartheid was at an end.

Nelson Mandela assumed the status of saint, a God, a Saviour, a divine being that could pull Blacks out of the morass of Apartheid. In one station where I was an observer, one very elderly gentleman was standing in the polling booth almost 20 seconds after having received his ballot. He was not moving. Nothing was happening. It was painfully obvious he was having a problem. He was embarrassed. He could not read or write. He did not

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appear to be voting. The presiding officer went over to him. She asked if the voter needed some assistance in voting. The voter nodded yes. The appropriate monitors or observers were called over and the elector was asked in their presence to express his voting preference. After a short lull, a soft, quiet voice muttered Mandela, Mandela. An X was placed by ANC Mandela and the ballot paper folded and returned to the elector for deposit in the box. A broad smile of personal satisfaction covered the voter's face. It was thanksgiving for a job well and truly done.

This was democracy in action. This was grass roots politics. This was politics of conviction and strength. This is what perseverance is all about. This was a graphic demonstration of the healing power of the vote. Now Black Africans have a chance to be free. Now their vote is equal to the vote of the white man. Colour was no longer a factor in political power. Perhaps Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu captured this feeling best after he left the polling station when he said "I am about 2 inches taller than when I arrived". Voting is a positive step and by performing this act, it seemed to signify that Black people, one by one were nailing shut the coffin of the old regime.

In spite of this great feeling among the voters I encountered, there were many administrative and logistical problems in the Townships. Voting stations were not supposed to be more than 4 kilometres apart. That was theory. Some were more than 14. Voting did not start on time because the ballot papers had not arrived. Some other problems existed such as: no power to run the UV machines, or there was no seal to properly close the ballot box; or there were no pencils to mark the ballots with. Although I was to be just an observer, I did more than that as I attempted to facilitate those who need to phone to report problems and request electoral supplies. There were no phones in the voting stations, so when materials did not arrive, I felt I had to do something more than just stand around and observe that nothing was happening. So I drove election officials wherever they needed to go to phone to obtain supplies.

As well as things going wrong, there was always the threat of violence. Contrary to what the CBC tells us and as properly reported in the May 9 edition of *Time* magazine, the problem in South Africa today is not a Black problem, but it is a white problem. When I was there, 12 people were murdered – all at the hands of the white extremists, and NOT as the CBC would have you believe, at the behest of Blacks.

In one of our security briefings in Klerksdorf and Rustenburg in the North West province, we were told that there was no real fear of mugging on the street, or other petty crimes. But instead, because the area was rich

in ore and mineral wealth such as gold, diamond and uranium mines (all owned and white controlled) that the biggest fear and the security forces' biggest fear was that explosives used in mining operations would be used to attempt to sabotage the electoral process. We were warned, for instance, that white extremists might plant bombs at polling stations in the Black townships to attempt to deter Blacks from voting. And in fact there were such racial incidents not too far from where we were stationed. A Black American journalist was badly beaten by white extremists at Rustenburg, our headquarters for United Nations Observations in the Monipole region. A bomb was found and fortunately diffused near a polling station. To put this in perspective geographically, Rustenburg is an historical platinum town that is situated 130 kilometres from Johannesburg and Pretoria and only 25 minutes from Sun City.

*The voters moved me most of all in my South Africa experience. North West Province was electric with excitement and anticipation. After decades and decades of the pain of apartheid, true democracy would take over.*

As a United Nations Observer I had a questionnaire to complete each day to help the UN make the ultimate determination whether the elections were free and fair. That was the test.

My partner and I found no evidence of duress, coercion, oppression, undue influence, threats, intimidation or blatant attempts to influence the way electors voted or to deter them from voting as they wished.

But, how can it be said to be fair when 90 year old people are left standing in scorching heat for 12 hours waiting for ballot boxes, ballot papers, pencils to mark with, when in most white areas the materials arrived on time and in ample supply. It is not my contention that the elections should be voided but it did not strike us as being fair. It was almost as if the racism which so characterized apartheid was going to be with South African Blacks right up until the close of voting.

But the election was one of those remarkable events in history when one can truly say that what is good and right in our world won out over everything else. Black people spoke through their ballots. They spoke with conviction and strength. They spoke to end a regime found to be intolerable by most of the civilized countries of the

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world. And they were successful. Good did triumph over evil.

Now, what about the future of South Africa. It will be important for Nelson Mandela to reach out to his opponents to solidify his role and to ensure that they all come together in a common cause. He has certainly done this with the way he has formed his cabinet. Mr. DeKlerk has been given the position of second deputy and Mangosuthu Buthelezi has been named Home Secretary and two of his supporters are also in Cabinet.



He must also make it clear to the international monetary community that he intends to be an exacting steward of the country's resources and monetary policy. Initially he has done this by retaining Mr. Derek Keys as finance minister. In his last two years as finance minister Mr. Keys proved to be a tough fiscal disciplinarian. He halted the rise in government spending and reined in the budget deficit.

The other major economic post he gave to his incumbent, Mr. Chris Stals. Mr. Stals will stay on as governor of the Reserve Bank or Central Bank when his term ends in July.

But perhaps even more than showing sound financial discipline, Mr. Mandela must reach out to Blacks all over South Africa in order to diminish the high expectations they have for this administration. He must explain to them that the years of doing without, and being considered to be lesser beings have ended. But it will take time to realize the tangible benefits.

This is a job which, I submit, Mr. Mandela is equal to. He realizes that not all white run industries is necessarily bad by definition and will work with both leaders of industry and the people of South Africa to start the process which will bring the tangible benefits.

What are these benefits that are so desperately needed. The list is long. Housing seems to be at the top of every list followed closely by spending on power and water and education, training, telecommunications and transportation. This will be good for South Africa and it will be good for Canada as these are areas where our industries have expertise. It will also increase the knowledge of trades in South Africa among Blacks and will help the Black unemployment problem.

These needs cannot be denied. Six million people are unemployed, nine million are without technical skills, 10 million have no access to running water, 23 million have no electricity and because of the struggle for equality, virtually a whole generation of Blacks are uneducated.

This renewal program will take years to accomplish but it is achievable. Statements have already been made that taxes will not be raised and industries will not be nationalized. Projects will be funded either through budget reallocation or through the international bond market.

I am optimistic. Having been given this great opportunity to be recognized as equal, to end apartheid forever, Black South Africans will follow the leadership they trust as they move into the 21st century.

Canada supported the concept of majority vote and I believe we will benefit from closer ties with the Mandela government. I believe Canadian industry has the expertise to help in the rebuilding of South Africa and we should be front and centre among the nations of the world in committing to help with the enormous task faced by Mr. Mandela.

Mr. Mandela is looking to the international community for help for as he said: "We trust that you (the international community) will continue to stand by us as we tackle the challenges of building peace, prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism and democracy. We must act together as united people, for national reconciliation, for nation building, for the birth of a new world. Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all." ❖