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by: Michael Fridjhon

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THE TORCH COMMANDO & THE POLITICS OF WHITE OPPOSITION.

SOUTH AFRICA 1951 - 1953

By Michael Fridjhon.

The Torch Commando is customarily regarded as a war veterans' movement which emerged spontaneously as a response to the proposed violation of the Constitution by the Nationalist Government through the removal of the Coloureds from the Common Roll without the requisite two thirds majority.[1]

In terms of this view, the emotional and volatile nature of the movement's origins are both its strength and its weakness. The Torch is regarded as an ephemeral feature on the South African political landscape. The explanation of its meteoric rise and fall needs to be consistent for itself only, and only bears relation to the rest of the white political structure inasmuch as it can be used to elucidate problems about the official opposition groups.[2]

There is no definitive published source on the Torch Commando. On the contrary, the most remarkable feature about the bibliographical material on the war veterans' movement is its paucity. There are several published accounts on the period but only four of them allocate more than a page or two to the movement. Were it not so far-fetched an idea, one might almost conclude that a conspiracy of silence sheathes the Torch's history. Ten years after the movement's collapse, the obituaries of 'Sailor' Malan - who had been National President of the Torch - all failed to mention his involvement in the organisation at all.

The failure to investigate the Torch's history with any real penetration has been largely responsible for the failure to attribute to it its more profound place in terms of the politics of the white political spectrum. Political analysts of the period have been happy to accept the canned accounts of the movement's activities.[3] Controversial areas are blithely glossed over, and the overall impression left with one is of an opposition which was united in its impotence. In fact, throughout its brief but turbulent career, the Torch touched on alternatives which it failed to utilise for reasons more deep-seated than most glib analyses can explain.

Central to an understanding of the Torch's political rôle is an investigation into the controversy of the movement's origins. The inception of the War Veterans' Action Committee heralded a propaganda campaign from the movement's opponents which only died down some time after the Torch's demise. J.G.Strydom and Dr Karl Bremer, both ministers in the Nationalist government, almost immediately accused the Torch of totalitarian inclinations.[4] More explicitly, Prime Minister Malan alleged its descent from the Springbok Legion.[5]

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1. Carter, G.M. The Politics of Inequality. London 1958 pp 303-333
   Ballinger, M. From Union to Apartheid 1969 p. 272
2. Carter, G.M. op. cit. passim
   Robertson, J. Liberalism in South Africa 1948 -1963 Oxford 1971
3. Ibid.
4. Carter, G.M. op. cit p 310
5. Sunday Times . 5th August, 1951.

Naturally enough, the ex-servicemen repudiated these allegations. Since most of the Nationalists claims were patently far-fetched and contradictory[6] the possibility that there could have been a connection between the Torch and the Springbok Legion was swiftly glossed over.

There was, of course, reason to deny the tie- up. The Springbok Legion had doubtful enough origins as a kind of soldiers' trade union, and many of its office-bearers were of dubious political connections.[7] Nevertheless, it had in its time been a fairly acceptable body, operating with the blessing of several of the United Party's Ministers.[8]

The period immediately prior to the 1948 elections began the decline of the Legion's fortunes. Firstly, it quarrelled with the other ex-servicemen's organisations on the question of how actively to approach the 1948 election;[9] secondly, with demobilisation proceeding relatively smoothly by 1948, it had lost much of its raison d'etre.

This decline promoted a divergence between the Legion's officers and their ostensible functions. A more radical leadership emerged willing to use the shell of the war veterans' organisation for precisely located political ends. As a former employee of the Legion put it: 'We spent our time raising money for the Legion, and only got enough to pay our own salaries.'[10]

By the early 1950's, the Springbok Legion was regarded as distinctly disreputable. For years it had had to counter accusations that it was simply another front for the Communist Party.[11] Its virulent opposition to the Suppression of Communism Act[12] must have left its detractors in little doubt.

In truth the movement's leadership was far further to the Left than its remaining members. Several of its executive officers were subsequently banned or listed. Allegations about its activities contained a sufficient core of substantiatable fact.

Under these circumstances, the War Veterans' Action Committee - which became the Torch Commando - did its best to eliminate any traces of a possible connection between the two organisations. Sympathetic literature has accepted these denials, commending the motion carried by a member of the Torch executive, himself a Legionnaire, to the effect that all Springbok Legion members on the Torch executive should resign.[13] Despite this very conscientious activity to obliterate any signs of a direct link between the two organisations, there does seem to be sufficient evidence to support Dr Malan's claims that the Torch emerged as a front for the activist wing of the Springbok Legion.

Just before the 1948 election, the Springbok Legion called upon all ex-servicemen to support the United Party for fear of the consequences of Nationalist victory (14) After the elections, the Legion continued its liaison with the United Party. In the course of discussions they argued that unless the Nationalists were forced to the polls before the 1952 delimitation, the government would entrench themselves immovably by means of that delimitation, the inclusion of South West Africa with disproportionate loading in the South African House of Assembly, and the removal of the Cape Coloureds from the Common Roll. (15)

With Smuts' death, the Legion/United Party liaison fell into abeyance. However, it was reopened later in 1950, or more

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6. Malan spoke of the Torch as being communist-based. Strydom alleged they were the creation of the United Party. The Burger (8th November, 1951) suggested it thrived on Jewish funds. Minister Swart reconciled all this by pointing out that the United Party was closely allied to the communists. (Star 24th September, 1951)
7. e.g. Bram Fischer and Vernon Berrange vide Rand Daily Mail 3rd May 1943

probably early in 1951. It was then decided to mobilise ex-servicemen discontent on such a scale that the government would be provoked into calling an election. The pattern of early Torch activity corroborates this circumstantially. Certainly the connection is alleged in interviews with several former officials of the Legion. One specifically claimed that it was the Legion which proposed to Vic Clapham, a full-time United Party organiser and regular contributor to Forum, the plan which led to the meetings of 4th May, 1951. (16)

The meeting appears to have been attended by Clapham, Cecil Williams, who subsequently became Chairman of the Legion and P.J.Hodgson, the Legion's secretary. At the time Clapham was involved with organising the United Party protest meeting to be held at the Johannesburg City Hall at Lunchtime on Monday 23rd April, 1951. The Legionaires put it to Clapham that the protest campaign against the unconstitutional removal of the Coloureds from the Common Roll would obtain force and vitality if the support of ex-servicemen were enlisted en masse.

In view of the doubtful political associations of most of the Legion's office-bearers, an official connection between the two organisations would have been political suicide. This was acknowledged as much by the Legion as by the United Party. The other ex-servicemen's organisations had already rejected the idea of involvement in the overt political arena. To mobilise ex-servicemen discontent therefore necessitated the creation of a new ex-servicemen's organisation, ostensibly of a-political origins. The War Veterans' Action Committee, which subsequently became the Torch Commando fulfilled this requirement admirably. Louis Kane-Berman, Ralph Parrott and 'Sailor' Malan had no political affiliations. Maj. J.D.Pretorius was admittedly a member of the Provincial Council, though he was arguably involved in his capacity as a fairly senior officer. There is no evidence to suggest that Mrs Doreen Dunning's presence on the Committee was due to anything other than her being former head of W.A.A.F. (18)

The ex-servicemen launched their protest by laying wreathes on the Johannesburg Cenotaph, together with a coffin bearing the 'constitution.' The object of the protest was to hand over to the war dead the Constitution for safekeeping. The inscription on the coffin pledged the war veterans to defend the sacrifices of their dead comrades.(19)

On the 4th May, 1951 two mass meetings were held in which some 25 000 people participated.At both meetings the speakers spoke in terms of the right of ex-servicemen to a voice in the affairs of the country: this attitude came to epitomise the war veterans' grounds for overt political involvement. Political activity was not seen by them as a party issue. Rather, it was a crusade in the same spirit as their opposition to Hitler in 1939. As such, it was perceived in moral rather than political terms. 'Sailor' Malan summed up their position when he said:

> Who has the greater claim to talk about saving white civilisation? the moles who now pay lip service to it or the men who fought for it? (20)

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8. Specifically W.B.Madeley, Minister of Labour.Star , 5th February, 1944
   Harry Lawrence, Minister of Justice Ibid 4th December, 1946
   General Smuts Ibid 13th September, 1947; 20th September, 1947.
9. The issue of political involvement cost the Legion the resignations of Sir George Albu and A.E.P.Robinson (Star 24th February, 1945) Within a few months of this, tension with the South African Legion made even a joint coordinating committee impossible.
10. Author's interview. Interviewee unwilling to disclose identity.
11. For this and refutation vide Sunday Times 27th June 1948
12. vide Springbok Legion 'Will we be banned for this?' Johannesburg 1950

There was in this approach, however, a contradiction basic to the rôle assumed by the Torch Commando. While attempting to wage a moral crusade over principles, they were engaging in the very political arena above which they believed themselves to be. The issue of the Separate Representation of Voters Bill was for them an ethical problem of method rather than end: they found the abrogation of an Entrenched Clause, particularly without a genuine two thirds majority, more offensive than the deprivation of voting rights the Coloureds might suffer.

However the very ideology underlying this attitude was for their political opponents just as much of a political issue. It was quite naive to believe that an ex-servicemen's organisation of the nature of the Torch would be regarded by the Nationalists as supra political, when their very existence as war veterans provided concrete evidence of a political chasm which had been reopened twelve years before. (21)

Despite the unwillingness of the literature on the Torch to examine the problem of the movement's connections with the Springbok Legion, there seems to be little doubt that a very definite connection existed between the two. This is confirmed by the events which followed during the first few months of the Torch's existence. Of particular note are the activities leading to the 'Steel Commando' drive to Cape Town, and the riot which followed the meeting at the Grand Parade, culminating the drive. Once again, this has proved to be an area in which investigators of the movement have happily accepted the Torch's denials of any responsibility for the unrest which usurped their meeting and its aftermath, and once again, this repudiation was hardly surprising at a time when the Nationalists attempted to gain a great deal of political mileage from the lawlessness which followed the 'constitutionalists'' gathering.

The 4th May, 1951 meeting in Johannesburg adopted four resolutions:

1. We ex-servicemen and women and other citizens assembled here protest in the strongest possible terms against the action of the present Government in proposing to violate the spirit of the Constitution.

2. We solemnly pledge ourselves to take every constitutional step in the interests of our country to enforce an immediate General Election.

3. We call on other ex-servicemen and women, ex-service organisations and democratic South Africans to pledge themselves to this cause.

4. We resolve that the foregoing resolutions be forwarded to the Prime Minister and the leaders of the other political parties. (22)

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13. Carter, G.M. op. cit. p. 311
14. This had been a constant feature of Legion policy since 1945 when an official statement (Star 26th September, 1945) said: ' The Springbok Legion must, in the ex-servicemen's interests, oppose the political rise of the anti-war group who will betray the soldiers' interests.'
15. Author's communication with former Legion office-bearer. Interviewee unwilling to disclose identity.
16. Author's interview. Interviewee unwilling to disclose identity.
17. vide Forum 20th April, 1951.

These resolutions had to be conveyed to the government. The Torch recognised its essential strength to be its capacity to mobilise the disillusioned whites, however divergent their political affiliations might be. The obvious next phase of mass mobilisation would be to exploit the situation created by the fourth resolution to bring home to the Prime Minister the full implications of the war veterans' stand.

On 8th May, the War Veterans' Action Committee met, ostensibly to consider how best to implement the decisions of 4th May (23) A statement issued after this meeting announced that a manifesto would be released on 13th May. The statement suggested that a 'dramatic means' of transmitting the resolutions was to be employed.(24)

The four resolutions had been formulated by the War Veterans' Action Committee before the demonstration of 4th May. There is therefore no doubt that they constituted an integral part of the Action Committee's plans - that is to say, the Action Committee wanted to be in a position of having to convey the resolutions to the Nationalists. The 'dramatic means' of conveying the meeting's sentiments evolved into what is known as the 'Steel Commando' drive to Cape Town. Jeeps and vehicles from seventeen towns in the Union set off in convoy to meet at Somerset West on 28th May, proceeding to Cape Town that evening for what is perhaps the largest white opposition demonstration in South African politics.(25) It seems reasonable to assume that the War Veterans' Action Committee's planning of the 'Steel Commando' drive antedated the 4th May meeting in view of the fourth resolution and the statement following the 8th May meeting. But it was essential that the Action Committee's programme to mobilise mass sentiment appeared to emanate from the public. Hence the statement that the 8th May meeting had been called to consider the implementation of the resolutions of 4th May.

On 12th May several newspapers carried announcements of the impending 'Steel Commando' drive. The public was informed that the War Veterans' Action Committee had 'planned everything down to the last detail;' (26) likewise, that 'the whole operation has been planned with military precision.' (27)

The ex-servicemen were successfully combining a mass movement with a cadre organisation. The quasi-military approach of their organisation, as well as their press statements, suggests an efficient, minority-run body, operating from committee to supporters. However the tone and structure of their announcement conveys the impression that the movement is working in response to mass opinion, not attempting to mould it. As long as this ambiguity between initiative and response was maintained, the Torch Commando was able to convert mass sentiment into political momentum.

On 15th May, yet a further statement was issued:

> Reconnaissance men left Johannesburg on Monday afternoon (14th May, 1951) after the last committee meeting to cover routes and make arrangements for reception committees and accommodation in the various big towns.(28)

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18. Details of members vide Rand Daily Mail 1st May, 1951
19. Ibid 23rd April, 1951.
20. Ibid 5th May, 1951
21. For details of the ideological division in the U.P./H.N.P. split of 1939 vide Katz, E. 'The circumstances surrounding South Africa's entry into the Second World War.' Unpublished History Honours Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand 1962.
22. Rand Daily Mail 5th May, 1951
23. Ibid. 9th May, 1951
24. Ibid.

This release is interesting for two reasons: firstly the statement issued on 11th May claimed that the War Veterans' Action Committee had already planned everything down to the last detail, that the whole operation had been organised with military precision. Yet this announcement suggests that planning was still in the incipient stages. In other words, the War Veterans' propaganda method depended on their presenting their organisation as a fait accompli: the effect of spontaneity and autonomous momentum was maintained through the continual issuing of press statements which implied that informal, but precise organisational work followed immediately the expression of mass sentiment. In this way, the appearance of a mass organisation was conveyed by a body which was in essence a cadre unit.

The further significance of the statement is that it confirms the claim, made in interview that the Springbok Legion played a leading rôle in the launching of the 'Steel Commando.' (29) The Legion organiser interviewed asserted that he and several other full time Legion workers left for Cape Town shortly after the Johannesburg 4th May meeting to arrange support and co-operation from the towns along the route. He added that contacts in the various centres were established by the United Party through their liaison Vic Clapham. Subsequent daily reports on the progress of the 'Steel Commando' further support this: Cecil Williams, soon to be Chairman of the Legion, is described as the adjutant to the 'Steel Commando.' (30) Later denials by the Torch of the presence of any Legion members in positions of seniority proceed from political expediency in the face of the attack launched by the Nationalists and not from a scrupulous sense of accuracy.

The gathering of the 'Steel Commando' in Cape Town shows the mass nature of the Torch Commando at its zenith. However, even then, mere hours before the meeting on the Grand Parade, the statements issued by the movement's leaders revealed the ambiguities inherent in the Torch. 'Sailor' Malan announced that the government has gone too far, that the 'Steel Commando' 'was not an armed protest, but we ... (the war veterans)... are going to go on to the end.' (31) Dolf de la Rey, the figurehead of the 'Steel Commando' said that the Prime Minister was going to be asked to resign -'if he refuses, we are going to see that he is soundly defeated in the next election.'(32)

The problem for both leaders lay in their being at the head of an 'action' - and therefore potentially revolutionary - movement in a situation where such action could only be construed as unconstitutional. Since the very raison d'etre of the Torch was the preservation of the Constitution, the could not permit the movement to manifest its discontent in its most logical way. Hence 'Sailor' Malan denies the armed nature of their protest, but asserts - inconclusively - that they are prepared to go on to the end. Dolf de la Rey, equally lamely, threatens the Prime Minister with defeat if he does not resign. An interview with a former Legion worker, and subsequent correspondence with a former office-bearer now living abroad, suggests that the leaders were themselves fully aware of a discrepancy between intention and act in the mobilisation of the 'Steel Commando.'

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25. For details vide Cape Times 29th May, 1951.
26. Rand Daily Mail 12th May, 1951
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid. 16th May, 1951
29. Interview with former Legion organiser. Interviewee unwilling to disclose identity.
30. Rand Daily Mail 24th May, 1951.
31. Cape Times 28th May, 1951
32. Ibid.

When the Legion/United Party liaison had been renewed after Smuts' death, it appears a decision was taken by both parties to mobilise ex-servicemen discontent to an extent sufficient to provoke the government to go to the polls. It was with this idea in mind that the original plan for the 'Steel Commando' had been mooted. This explains further the formulation of the resolutions passed at the 4th May, 1951 Johannesburg meeting: the second motion declared the War Veterans' intention of forcing a general election by whatever means were constitutionally possible; the fourth resolution opened the way for the 'Steel Commando' drive. Not only does this confirm the connection between the United Party, the Springbok Legion and the Torch, but it provokes two further problems, neither of which has been satisfactorily examined to date because the alliance was always denied: what went wrong with this carefully prepared plan, and how is it that two such divergent organisations saw fit to co-operate with each other?

The plan itself seems to have foundered as a result of the poor co-ordination and ill-preparedness of the United Party. The preparations were conceived some time before the enthusiastic response to the torchlight protest in Johannesburg on 4th May, 1951. However, the overwhelming response to the 'Steel Commando' call left the United Party flat-footed. Sir de Villiers Graaff M.P. and Harry Oppenheimer M.P. were sent to Johannesburg to consult with the War Veterans' Action Committee. The ex-servicemen were told that on no account were they to call upon the government to resign at this stage, since the United Party electoral machinery was in no position to organise a General Election. (33)

Consequently, though the planned mass gathering in Cape Town went ahead, the reason for such a show of strength - an attempt to compel the government to call an election - had fallen away. It was hardly surprising that Dolf de la Rey proposed supporting his lame call for the Prime Minister's resignation with the threat to trounce him in the next election. Hence too 'Sailor' Malan's non sequitur: from the moment the ex-servicemen agreed to abandon their call to the Nationalists to resign, the mass impact value of a group objuring party politics was lost. From this point in time, the decline of the ex-servicemen's movement can be traced.

From its alliance with the Legion through the Torch, no doubt the United Party aimed at obtaining wider popular support. This is an insufficient explanation for why the Legion committed itself to the alliance. Probably the answer is to be found in the chaos and rioting which followed the orderly demonstration outside Parliament and on the Grand Parade.

After the meeting had been officially terminated, and the delegation had left the Parade to deliver the resolutions to the House, a large crowd, primarily of Coloureds surged up the hill to Parliament. A clash with the police followed, in which about 160 people were injured, and the railings and windows of the Groote Kerk were damaged. (34)

This led to an acrimonious series of exchanges in the House the following day, polarising opinion over the Torch and its responsibility for what took place. What actually happened was swiftly subordinated to what either party chose to believe had happened, so that the issue was confused by contemporaries and

33. Author's communication. Writer unwilling to disclose identity.
34. Rand Daily Mail 30th May, 1951.

researchers alike. However much the bitterness of the debate was the product of a need to gain political advantage from the event, the doubts expressed by the Nationalists as to the constitutionality of the rioters' intentions seem well-founded. Louis KaneBerman admitted in an interview that many of the rank and file at the Grand Parade had urged the leaders of the meeting to direct a march on the Assembly to 'throw out the Nationalists.' (35) Janet Robertson claims that John Lang, formerly on the National Executive of the Torch Commando, told her that Jock Isacowitz former Chairman of the Springbok Legion had mooted a similar scheme. (36)

There is no reason to doubt the opinion expressed by a Legion organiser that by this stage the Legion had very little to lose on a gamble of insurrection. The initial object in suggesting the formation of an ex-servicemen's movement to the United Party had been to create something which would run away with its organisers, or would at least force the government to go to the polls.(37) Now that the plan to force the Nationalists resignation had been sabotaged by the United Party's ill-preparedness, there seemed only gain to be obtained through forcing the issue. If anyone did incite the crowd, it was certainly Torch members with Legion affiliations. This much was certainly believed by the War Veterans' Action Committee, though they naturally enough said nothing: almost immediately after the event the War Veterans took fright, and distanced themselves from the political radicals.

After the 28th May, 1951 meeting in Cape Town, the Torch never received quite the same euphoric support that had characterised its earlier enterprises. This was in part due to a growing awareness that vast demonstrations could not, of their own accord, bring change, and in part due to a change in the strategy of leadership which succeeded the Legion influence. This latter point is well-illustrated by the way preparations were undertaken for the next mass venture, the El Alamein Day commemoration campaign.

The genesis of the scheme was never disguised in the same vagueness that the precdeding demonstrations were clothed in: there was no attempt to imply that the leadership was functioning in response to a mass sentiment. Instead it was made clear that the plans gelled at a meeting of the National Executive of the Torch Commando held on 28th and 29th July, 1951. The apparently mass base of the movement was slowly revealing itself to be cadre in core and conduct.

The El Alamein Day commemoration campaign mobilised some 150 000 people despite unfavourable weather and administrative difficulties.[38] This was obviously not an unsatisfactory response to the Torch's call, but it was able to offer nothing to those who had braved the elements to attend. The bankruptcy of ideas at the centre undermined the cadre nature of the movement simultaneously with, and on account of, the mass support the Torch had generated. People expected that more would happen than simply their ideas being put over 'on an unprecedented scale.' (39)

All but the Afrikaner political nation had been mobilised; yet the full strength and implications of the widespread political

35. Author's interview.
36. Robertson, J. op. cit. p. 60 Footnote 3.
37. Author's interview. Interviewee unwilling to disclose identity.
38. Full details of attendances summarised in Natal Daily News 24th October, 1951
39. Rand Daily Mail 30th July, 1951; 7th August, 1951.

discontent remained unexploited because no one was prepared to harness them unequivocally. The failure to offer a real plan of action left the Torch Commando with two equally unpalatable alternatives: it could either be a national circus staging meaningless spectaculars, or it could attempt to channel the force of its numbers through legitimate political outlets. The only other possibility, namely an attempt to organise some sort of an insurrection was obviously not under consideration, once ties with the alienated groups on the Left had been cut.

Since neither of the two alternatives was particularly attractive, the Torch Commando tended to opt for both. The eighteen months following the El Alamein Day commemoration saw several mass demonstrations organised. The Appeal Court decision invalidating the Separate Representation of Voters Bill and the government's threats to override that decision led to widespread protests during the early months of 1952. These were expressions of discontent felt by all the white opposition groups in South Africa and organised in conjunction with them. There was no intention of radically terminating Nationalist rule. Instead, the Torch Commando was becoming increasingly involved in the world of structured party politics.

Until the conclusion of the pact known as the United Democratic Front in April 1952, the Torch Commando's relations with the opposition parties were officially characterised by a friendly informality. Almost from the moment these relations were formalised, they deteriorated. This was not simply a coincidence, nor a necessary result of the structuring of their mutual situations. It was a pattern which had been evolving for some time, and which was rendered manifest by the additional strains the pact imposed.

The Torch Commando had been formed ostensibly to protest against the proposed violation of the Constitution, and to remove the Nationalist government from power. Ethical considerations about the means to be employed in the fulfilment of the second of these aims determined that there would be a contradiction between the nature of the movement, and its method. Its leaders were aware of this, for within months of the Torch's inception, 'Sailor' Malan was quoted as saying:

> We have no intention of affiliating with the United Party but since the National Party was elected to power in a constitutional way, we must fight them constitutionally, and we can only do this by helping the United Party.(40)

Once the Torch had abandoned the original demand - scheduled for 28th May, 1951 - that the government should resign, and had renounced any unconstitutional attempt at removing the Nationalists, their force of numbers could only have meaning in a General Election - which would be called at the Government's pleasure. Consequently the Torch was driven towards the political groups which held a fixed place in the political structure.

The United Party, for their part, commended the activities of the Torch, defending them whenever they were called upon to do so.(41) 'Sailor' Malan developed on his earlier statement when he said - somewhat more tersely - that 'it would be

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40. Ibid. 27th July, 1951
41. Over the Cape Town clash: vide Assembly Debates Vol 76 Cols. 7914 et seq Ibid. Vol. 78 Cols. 4407 et seq.
Statements in commendation: East London Daily Dispatch 22nd August, 1951 Natal Daily News 29th September, 1951

fatal for us to form a separate party. ' (42) The co-operation between the Torch and the United Party in the municipal elections in November, 1951 in Johannesburg seemed a natural step along the path that both the Torch and the Opposition parties were treading. (43)

However, the great risk for the Torch of too close a link with the United Party was that it would inherit the weakness of the party and its place on the political structure. It would also lose the liberty and power of popular sentiment which, as Joyce Waring observed, had characterised the movement thus far. (44) In terms of the relationship which was developing between the Torch and the United Party, the Torch would become dependent on the United Party for strategic leadership: as Evander Murray pointed out in a bitter letter to the Star on 24th November, 1951, the United Party's failures of leadership would become the Torch's weaknesses. (45)

The Torch leadership recognised these contradictions. They could not afford to split the forces of the Opposition (46) and so could have no candidates or real influence in a general election. (47) There was no real unity in the evolving Torch/ United Party except a broad solidarity of purpose. Nationalist propaganda, coupled with the exploitation of areas of mutual co-operation maintained a semblance of togetherness. But the position was anomalous, and by early 1952 both groups admitted that liaison activities had been proceeding for some time (48)

While these negotiations were being pursued, the Torch continued to work on the periphery of structured politics. The imminent sitting of the 10th Delimitation Commission prompted the Torch to engage in a widespread voters' registration campaign, and intensive research was carried out into the whole nature and function of delimitation in South Africa. This represented the last vestiges of the original War Veteran/ United Party alliance to prevent the Nationalists entrenching themselves after a favourable hearing at the 1952 delimitation.

The liaison between the opposition white groups before the 1953 election led to the formation in April, 1952 of the United Democratic Front formed by the Torch, the Labour Party and the United Party. From the moment of its inception the Front was subjected to almost intolerable stresses. Speaking on the evening of Strauss' announcement of the formation of the Front, Kane-Berman, discussing the government's plans to circumvent the Appeal Court said that if the Nationalists persisted in this policy, the Torch would call a day of protest 'to bring the country to a virtual standstill.'(49)

This was ready made political ammunition for the Nationalists. The next day in Parliament Minister Swart asked the United Party and Labour Party if Kane-Berman spoke with their blessing. (50) The immediate denial tarnished the facade of unity upon which the Front depended.

Kane-Berman's indiscretion was actually a very natural result of the predicament in which the Torch found itself. It had long regarded structured politics as anathema; many of its senior officials had never been members of political parties. For the situation to have arisen whereby it appeared that they were compelled to participate in structured politics was an admission of the failure of the mass movement they were leading.

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42. Star 8th October, 1951
43. Rand Daily Mail 3rd November, 1951
44. Star 19th November, 1951
45. Ibid 24th November, 1951
46. Friend 25th August, 1951
47. Rand Daily Mail 21st August, 1951.

The difficulties which had been encountered from the outset in defining the relationship between the Torch and the other opposition political parties were not reconciled for the Torch by the United Democratic Front. On the contrary, the Torch was driven by the pact into anto an acknowledgement that it did not justify its size, scope or claims. In the Front the Torch was simply a repetition in form and numbers of the other members of the pact. The sheer inability to shift the Nationalists by constitutional mass demonstration meant the acceptance that only unconstitutional mass demonstration or the ballot box would provide the answer. And the ballot box was really the concern of people who participate in the day-to-day business of structured politics. 195

Some kind of a division of labour was naturally possible with the Front. The Torch took the lead in organising the demonstrations against the High Court of Parliament Bill(51) Likewise the number of workers the Torch had at its disposal was of great use to the pact in conducting voters'registrations and canvassing.

But tensions were greater than these mere semblances of unity, and matters deteriorated gravely over the issue of the Natal Stand. In June 1952 a public meeting was held in Durban at which opinions over the constitutional crisis were aired. Secession was a topic lying below the surface of most of the activity, and 'Gillie' Ford, the Natal leader of the Torch brought it out into the open through an oft-quoted catechism with the crowd of about 35 000:

> Will you remain in a Broederbond republic if it is declared on the pretext of the Volkswil ? - No!
> Are your prepared to take the consequence if Natal is forced to stand on her own? - Yes! (52)

Natal split over the issue, the structured political groups rejecting the idea whereas the Defenders of the Constitution and the Natal Torch accepted the principle. The National Executive of the Torch attempted to steer a middle course, finally repudiating some of 'Gillie' Ford's more extreme statements and provoking a split in the Natal Torch (53) 196

At the centre of the crisis lay the same divisions which had paralysed the Torch at the inception of the movement. Ford evidently believed that there was something unprincipled in the way the United Party refused to state 'clearly and honestly ...its policies.' (54) After all, he represented the more militant,less constitutionally inhibited side of the ex-servicemen's movement. He was prepared to sacrifice means for ends, and consequently estranged himself from the majority, who saw the means as ends in themselves. Between these two factions the gap widened, and it was only the immensity of the problems facing the Opposition in South African politics which maintained the semblance of unity in the pact. Defeat in the 1953 election shattered utterly the facade.

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48. Natal Daily News 25th January, 1951.
49. Rand Daily Mail 17th April, 1952
50. Assembly Debates Vol 78 Cols. 3879 et seq.
51. For details of meetings vide passim the Natal Press 19th-22nd May,195; and e.g. Star 7th June, 1952.
52. Natal Mercury 7th June, 1952
53. For details vide Nicholls, G.H. South Africa in My Time London 1961 pp. 443-454
54. Natal Mercury 13th September, 1952.

It is not necessary to examine in any detail the 1953 election to account for the failure of the United Democratic Front. Such a study would only show why the opposition political parties performed even less successfully than in 1948. The Torch was not really an issue in the election. At best it rendered the opposition machine more effective as a result of its campaigns for voter registration, and its participation in electoral activities (55) But the election was fought by political parties on the territory which was familiar to them, and the rôle of the Torch in the Front from the beginning of 1953 was, as Gwendolen Carter has pointed out, that of 'a partner, a very junior partner as far as influence was concerned.'(56)

The manifesto issued at the time of the Torch's inception indicated that the movement would dissolve within 100 hours of the achievement of its objectives.(57) The collapse of the Front with the results of the 1953 election brought to a head the problem of dissolution. Theoretically the Torch should have been strengthened in its resolution to remove the Nationalists. However, the recognition that a general election had failed to dislodge the government cast doubt upon the method and function of the Torch as a political movement.

The second National Congress of the Torch in June 1953 determined by a narrow majority that the Torch would not disband. Its effective presence in South African politics ceased utterly, and several of its national leaders joined the new political parties which proliferated after the election.

The 1953 election results shattered the compromise of white opposition politics in South Africa. The emergence of the Union Federal Party and the Liberal Party, and the shift to the Left in the Natal Labour Party expresses the dissatisfaction felt by opposition politicians with the concept of a single unified opposition. There was no attempt to find a place for a political pressure group which refused to become a political party. This was a tacit acknowledgement that the Torch had been functionally out of place in the South African opposition.

Some observations about the Torch Commando and white opposition politics in South Africa are perhaps apposite:

The establishment of the Front had formalised an evolving political pattern in South Africa: the tendency for opposition forces to concentrate together. This unification of Oppositions determined that there would be a growing competitiveness within the political structure: in the 1953 election any seat not won by the Front would be gained by their opponents (there were only five independent candidates) and vice versa.

The Torch's participation in the Front formalised a relationship which was strategically dysfunctional to it as a movement. The Torch regarded itself as a supra political group. Yet the site it chose for the political confrontation in 1953 was a parliamentary election. As a mass movement, its resources were far more effective outside the constitutional political arena. Inasmuch as it is a political strategy to chose the site of a political encounter in terms of ones capacities, the Torch did itself no service by meeting their enemy on ground which was unfamiliar. This was not wholly their own shortcoming. It is a feature of white opposition

55. Heard, K.A. General Elections in South Africa 1943-70 London 1974 pp. 51-3
56. Carter, G.M. op. cit. p. 325.
57. Rand Daily Mail 12th May, 1951

politics of this period that the Nationalists dominate by seizing control of the initiative. Customarily they achieve this by driving their Opposition on to the defensive over policies or absence of them. In the case of the Torch, their attitude to the inclusion of Coloured exservicemen in their ranks was subjected to scrutiny. In the Westminster system it is usually the prerogative of the Opposition to oppose, and to oblige the government to defend its policies. By reversing this, the Nationalists condemned their opposition to the exposure and risks of government without the commensurate advantage of power. 198

Initially the Torch controlled the initiative, for the infectious enthusiasm which characterised the early stages of the war veterans' movement was something wholly unfamiliar to the Nationalists. But as the Torch lost its raison d'etre through not being permitted to try and force the government into resignation in 1951, their strategies were ineffectually directed. Doubtless the Nationalists would have resisted a call for resignation, but at least the Torch would have been in a position where the means at their disposal would have had some correlation with the ends they had in mind. Instead, they were forced onto the defensive just as the initial euphoria of their mass demonstrations wore off. It then became necessary to show their supporters some results. This was never possible because there had been no consideration of what strategies hoped to achieve.

Unwilling to be revolutionary, because that would be a denial of the aims of the movement, the Torch found itself compelled to express itself through the ballot box - which was a denial of the nature of the movement. Consequently it became nothing. It was a bubble which burst over the South African political scene. It vanished almost as suddenly as it emerged, and remarkably few South Africans know, care or remember anything about it.

Michael Fridjhon.
18th February, 1976.