

In his great essay on Turgenev, Isaiah Berlin sketches not only the liberal position but also the liberal dilemma. He argues that, “Men of this sort need a good deal of courage to resist magnetisation by either polar force [of conservatism or radicalism] and to urge moderation in a disturbed situation. Among them are those who see, and cannot help seeing, many sides of a case, as well as those who perceive that a humane cause promoted by means that are too ruthless is in danger of turning into its opposite, liberty into oppression in the name of liberty, equality into a new, self-perpetuating oligarchy to defend equality, justice into crushing all forms of nonconformity, love of men into hatred of those who oppose brutal methods of achieving it. The middle ground is a notoriously exposed, dangerous and ungrateful position.”¹



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This in many ways characterizes the challenges of the liberal position in South Africa, where there are more than faint echoes of the sorts of dilemmas which Turgenev and others were confronted with in their exile. Perhaps the greatest challenge which the liberal position has confronted in South Africa arises from two different sets of nationalisms.

This edition of *Focus* is devoted to exploring some of these challenges, both social and political, while at the same time seeking to deepen the notion of liberty in our daily life. Balancing the demands of economic efficiency, social justice and individual liberty is, as Keynes so neatly pointed out nearly a century ago, the central political problem.²

This theme is taken up in our first contribution by Bobby Godsell, who poses the question of what role liberal ideals and ideas can play in our post-transition politics. He identifies three important challenges which these liberal ideas face, and which need to be addressed. These are: first, “Going beyond the politics of identity”; second, creating a liberalism that takes economic interests and social cohesion seriously; and third, accommodating an active and digital citizenship.

Michael Cardo reviews the liberal tradition in South Africa and considers the relationship between liberalism and nationalism, in this case the jingoism of British imperialism and, more recently, Afrikaner nationalism. He reminds us that liberalism offered us many of the tools to end apartheid, and to begin building an open society based on democratic government and respect for the rule of law. He concludes that the biggest challenge for liberals in our plural and unequal society is to find ways of accommodating diversity and addressing poverty while gaining the momentum of political support.

Anthony Egan reviews South African liberalism and South African history, and he focuses on the liberal emphasis on human agency, personhood and liberty as key features of the liberal project in South Africa.

Z. Pallo Jordan takes up this theme of ‘liberal individualism’ as the ultimate social and political agency. He points out that, “The gestation of South Africa’s liberal democratic constitution was, ironically, a dialogue between parties from the opposing poles of the political spectrum – the ANC on the left, the NP on the right. Representing constituencies that were suspicious of liberalism, in the process of finding each other in negotiations they arrived at the common ground of the institutions of liberalism.” He finally draws attention to the political practice of liberals and their relationship to the political capacity of the poor and non-propertied classes.

Colin Gardner considers the question, “How liberal is the current ANC?” In a wide-ranging discussion he poses the uncomfortable suggestion that, “the ANC government’s failure to deal effectively with the issues of poverty and proper service delivery is also, arguably, an indication of its ability to function in a democratic manner.”

In commissioning this edition of *Focus*, a similar question was posed to a senior DA party official: how liberal is the DA? Sadly, at the time of going to print, no article was forthcoming.

Charles Simkins considers liberalism and communitarianism in South Africa today. His review of the potential sources of communitarianism is nuanced and perceptive, and he suggests four liberal priorities, namely: constitutionalism; the promotion of a high rate of economic growth; permanent attention to the situation of the poor; and (the introduction of) a Weberian civil service.

William Gumede suggests that a pragmatic relationship between business and government in the form of a developmental coalition for growth offers the most sustainable solution for overcoming South Africa’s deep-seated developmental challenges. He cautions that, unless government governs better, it will be difficult to generate a partnership with business based on trust.

John Matisonn reviews media freedom from apartheid to democracy. He suggests that the current travails over media freedom in South Africa warrant an examination of where the media has come from for clues to where it is going, now that the country is democratic.

Gareth van Onselen looks at the problem of appearance and reality with reference to liberal values in South Africa. His interrogation of key terms such as accountability, respect, consultation, excellence, and freedom are timely reminders of how these terms are so often elided over or obscured in our political discourse in South Africa. His call for a ‘cultural conversation’ is, as he points out, a necessary one and, we might add, a timely one.

Claudia Braude takes as her starting point the furore over the painting called “*The Spear*”, which has so galvanized the public. She raises the question of competing rights in post-apartheid South Africa, and she points out that the trauma related to our past has not been appropriately dealt with and will continue to inform, if not haunt, our public life.

This edition of *Focus* carries a memoir and review article by Jack Spence, and further reviews by Aubrey Matshiqi, Sean Hawkins, Kate Francis and Dennis Davis. We also note that Hugh Lewin’s book, *Stones Against the Mirror*, which was reviewed in *Focus 62*, has been awarded the Alan Paton non-fiction prize. We take this opportunity to congratulate Hugh.

Finally, we record, with an obituary by Claudia Braude, the passing of Phillip Vallentine Tobias, whose immense contribution to South Africa’s intellectual life served to inform his lifelong commitment to non-racialism and the cause of liberalism.

NOTES

1 Isaiah Berlin, “Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the liberal predicament”, *Russian Thinkers*, p.297

2 J.M. Keynes, *Liberalism and Labour*, 1926