

## *Douglas Mitchell (1896–1988): A Personal Memoir*

The passing from the parliamentary stage of the last representative of the old United Party tradition, Ralph Hardingham, leads thoughts inevitably to the great Natalian who shaped and led so many of this province's public representatives, Douglas Mitchell.

I saw him for the first time 40 years ago, with a decisive general election pending in 1948. An 'uitlander', new to the district and new to South African politics, I had returned from honeymoon only the day before, and was now part of a large and enthusiastic crowd at the annual general meeting of the Elandslaagte branch of the United Party.

The Farmer's Hall was packed, and amidst the hubbub of the teacups a certain undercurrent of dissatisfaction could be heard. Several farmers were still smarting from what they considered had been Douglas Mitchell's cavalier treatment of a delegation which had been to see him in his capacity as Administrator of Natal. He had apparently been impatient of some of their proposals, and their *amour-propre* was wounded. Other old Smuts men were uneasy about local and provincial representation for Indians. Post-war shortages were an irritation, and womenfolk were complaining about the poor



Mr Douglas Mitchell

(*Photograph: Natal Witness*)

quality of flour, and the drudgery of (illegally!) sieving it.

As the chairman led in the speaker, the crowd rose, and there was hearty applause. Douglas Mitchell compelled attention as he vigorously and trenchantly addressed the large problems facing Natal and South Africa. He spoke with the authority of a man chosen by the 'Oubaas' to be one of his lieutenants. Appraising the crowd, he clearly outlined the findings of the Fagan Commission, 'the bridge', as he called it, to accommodation with the 'great race' — the Zulus — who were our neighbours. To me he seemed to have a vast knowledge of that nation. As he outlined in curiously mixed metaphors his vision of the future, his powers of leadership were plain to see. Then, with some relaxation and a touch of humour in his blue eyes, he set about demolishing the opposition — to the amusement and approval of the crowd.

Later in the meeting, elected branch secretary, I came to meet the man of the hour, who questioned me shrewdly. 'Do you know anything of our politics?' 'Nothing.' 'Ah well, then you know just about as much as our voters!' And when our candidate and his organizer spoke casually of what a safe polling district Elandsplaagte was, I was startled by Mitchell's sharp rejoinder: 'You have nothing to be complacent about. *Work* is your only answer!'

Work indeed became the lot of those loyal teams that he led for the next 25 years. Baptized by him into the United Party, I soon realized that total immersion was his style! One exhausted friend after a particularly gruelling by-election campaign compared Douglas Mitchell to Simon Legree, lashing us on to further efforts. His workers were indeed slaves to his relentless and ruthless opposition to nationalism, but he gave them purpose and pride.

'Fancy' men and place-seekers he derided; traitors he despised. Of one chairman's election to office in a higher tribunal Mitchell once ruefully remarked: 'Oh dear, I do wish he'd stop adding to his titles!' Talkers and 'smooth Johnnies' were often discomfited by his undisguised distrust and scorn. Integrity and simplicity were what he valued, and he preferred these qualities to any amount of intellectual brilliance. He relished the unbridled rallies of the 'oudstryder' Oom Jan Landman, who would fiercely label a renegade 'that old political chameleon', or react to Dr D.F. Malan's claim to be the true leader of Afrikanerdom with an explosive bilingual 'Ladies and gentlemen, ek sê vir jou, when I was sleeping under the same blanket as Yeneral Botha, waar was daardie Daniel Francois Malan? Sleeping in silk pyjamas under the union yack!' I can still hear Douglas Mitchell's crow of mirth.

He had deep empathy with the Afrikaner. In the 1953 election the Flentershoek United Party branch asked for him as a guest speaker. The venue was a simple farmhouse in the hills. The black mass of Majuba with its memories of Boer independence and British blundering loomed in the background. Lit by moonlight, paraffin lamps and braaivleis fires, the party stalwarts gathered round the stocky figure in his usual crumpled brown suit. Their seamed, bearded faces looked like the bronzes of Anton van Wouw or Moses Kottler. These earnest, solemn elders smiled as Mitchell teased them, but he dealt gently with them in his speech, ever sensitive to the price such men paid in their community for their refusal to abandon the ideals of Union. They took no offence at his addressing them in English: these Afrikaners knew and valued him as a true friend. Indeed, his impatience was far greater

with the English-speaking South African. Irascible at many meetings, Mitchell rounded furiously on one pussy-footing speaker with 'I am sick and tired of you English sitting with your feet in the gutter and weeping crocodile tears. Get up and *do!*' The compelling finger jabbed the air. We got up and we *did*, all right!

The Republican Referendum campaign of 1960 was the climax of our 'doing', and the leader of a fighting Natal was indubitably Douglas Mitchell. He strode the province in truly Napoleonic fashion, bringing an exhilaration to party workers which they think of with nostalgia to this day. Meetings were well organized, and the postal vote headquarters in Durban was a model of streamlined efficiency. Constituency agents aimed at the targets Mitchell had set — percentage polls of 80 to 90. Ever watchful for young men to carry on the political fight into parliament, he noted the unflinching dedication of the Three Musketeers of the North — Charles Henderson, Monty Crook and Jannie Moll. Sounding me out one day on the possibility of their standing for office, Douglas voiced his one reservation: 'I wish they were more rugged characters.' Twenty years later when the trio had served in the Senate with the same unflinching devotion to their leaders as his own, he recalled his early criticism and acknowledged: 'They turned out rugged all right!' Like him, these men could not be bought with the temptations of office.

Determination, hard work and a steady sense of purpose motivated him. Fragmentation of the opposition was a recurring nightmare. Prior to the great referendum fight against a republic, he had been deeply distressed by what he saw as the dissipation of opposition forces in the Torch Commando and the Black Sash. My husband and I had played a leading role in the work of these two movements in Northern Natal, and Mitchell decided to come and speak to us about our iniquities. His humour was always disarming, but as he revealed what I considered were short-sighted criticisms, my temper and his flared. It didn't help my suffragette soul to discover that he seriously distrusted women's role in politics. Resentfully I blurted out: 'You obviously think we're good enough to work ourselves to the bone in the back rooms while you men strut it out on the platforms. You're nothing but a political St Paul!' He promptly defused my wrath by replying 'This is the first time anyone has called me a saint. And it's likely to be the last!' Engagingly, when he phoned a few days later, he began: 'This is St Paul speaking.' Thereafter he left me in peace to my aberrations, provided that at election time I did my duty in the back room.

The year 1961 marked the beginning of my husband's 20 years service in the republican Senate, and we were privileged to observe Douglas Mitchell at work in the arena where he showed at his best, the Houses of Parliament. His Cape Town home was across the Gardens, as close to his office as he could get. Early in the morning, trilby firmly planted on his grizzled head, heavy brief-case in hand, he would stride past the two 'dreadful' statues of his revered Jan Christiaan Smuts, salute the police at the green gates, exchange a few pleasantries with the parliamentary messengers, and disappear across the green carpet of the Lobby into his office. After a day spent chivvyng the idlers of his team into action, as darkness fell he would make the march home again, turning a sardonic glance towards the parliamentary bar where lesser and light-hearted members were congregated.

With hindsight, I realize that the validity of Douglas Mitchell's views on affairs was remarkable. He had demonstrated in 1953 at a Northern Natal

Regional Council AGM the need for viability of independent 'Bantustan' economies, and had the foresight to realize that world reluctance to recognize such puppet states would make them the millstone round the South African taxpayer's neck. His private criticism of Minister M.C. Botha was scathing, his attacks on him in the House were continual. As architect of a Provincial Administration that could boast of 75 years of honest government, he was angered by corruption in high places.

High living and social climbing were of no concern to him. Meeting him one evening in the Lobby as he made his way home to study the day's papers and prepare for the next day's caucus and committee meetings and a main debate, I was surprised and flattered to be complimented on my appearance. 'We're off to dine with the British Ambassador', I explained with some self-importance. 'Climbing on *that* bandwagon, are you?' was his sardonic remark. The implied rebuke went home. And on a later occasion he shamed us thoroughly. Weary after a stressful week of hammering fruitlessly against newly-tabled security legislation, we had made up our minds to fly out of the turmoil and find peace with the animals in the Kalahari Gemsbok Park. At the airport we met Douglas Mitchell, brief-case in hand, as ever. He was on his way to Natal 'to put people in the picture'. Our weekend away from it all was not a success.

For all his authoritarian ways, Douglas Mitchell was a team player. No more generous gesture could have been made than Natal's readiness to accommodate voiceless Transvaal, Free State and Cape opposition voters in the Natal Senate team, and that move was engineered by Mitchell himself.

His love of South Africa with all her warts and her diverse ways led him to deplore the endless divisions that Nationalism brought — in education, in internal and external relationships. Long before the State of Emergency he foresaw the end result of the Verwoerdian policy. Peering with disbelief at a Bantustan map of our country, he said despairingly: 'What are they trying to do? It can only end in chaos.' And when Dr Verwoerd returned home to a triumphant and euphoric welcome after withdrawing South Africa from the British Commonwealth of Nations, Mitchell said sadly 'They are cheering because we have withdrawn from the world. Will they cheer when the world withdraws from us?' — words with great poignancy in South Africa's present situation, boycotted and undermined by world sanctions.

Dr Verwoerd's landslide victory of 1966 after a strange, unnerving, gagged election, did not deter Douglas Mitchell from the task of fighting Nationalism at the ballot box. Stolidly he continued to keep his faltering teams together, and when an opportunity came to contest a by-election in 1969 in the safe Nationalist seat of Newcastle, he flung them in. The resulting reduction in a Nationalist majority — the first in Natal since 1948 — had him jubilant. His opponents called him the Natal rhino, short-sighted and blundering as it charged. But to me he was a wire-haired terrier, holding on fearlessly to the muzzle of a larger adversary.

This bold persistence was the more remarkable because personal problems, including the tragic illness of his beloved companion and wife, Mildred, would have justified his retirement from politics in 1969. Instead we found him firmly at the helm in 1970. There was every possible reason, financial and otherwise, why we should have the sense to withdraw from the general election of that year, but there was no refusing the demand of a leader who put his own personal considerations aside. My husband accepted the task of contesting

Klip River, the safe seat of the Natal leader of the Nationalist Party, Henry Torlage. A scratch campaign team, blessed with little but enthusiasm, surprised even itself by reducing the Nationalist majority so substantially that shortly afterwards Torlage was removed and installed as Commissioner-General for KwaZulu. To this success could be added the winning back of nine seats from the government party, and also the strengthening of 'Mitchell's men' in the Natal Provincial Council. Typically, Douglas Mitchell did not exult: he got out the lash and whipped us on to greater effort.

The two ensuing Klip River by-election campaigns made history as a volunteer team created a superb election machine to stand up to a mighty Nationalist onslaught. It was something of a David and Goliath affair, and Mitchell revelled in it. He and I spent that tense day in 1974 together. As phones rang and voting figures came in from polling stations, we watched with mounting excitement as the gap between government and opposition candidates narrowed. Brusquely silencing some self-appointed expert in election analysis (who had already prophesied our victory) Mitchell began a careful weighing-up of our chances. He turned to me and said quietly: 'Sheila, this could be the last chance to save South Africa. Nothing will deter John Vorster except defeat here tonight. We must not fail.' We failed by fewer than 250 votes. The weariness and despair on Douglas Mitchell's face as the result was known was heartbreaking.

His indomitable spirit never broke. In retirement after 1973, honoured by his erstwhile parliamentary foes with the Decoration for Meritorious Service, he gave his mind to powering his young lieutenants on the Natal Provincial Council and the Natal Parks Board. On one occasion I expressed to him an uneasiness my Welsh witch's instinct had felt at the inauguration of John Vorster as State President in the Groot Kerk in Pretoria. Behind him had stood Magnus Malan and P.W. Botha. There had been a sense of militant ambition, of hawk-like ruthlessness that had disturbed me. Once more he urged me to carry on the fight.

Two other episodes after his retirement are vivid memories. Dr Louis Steenkamp and the Dundee History and Museum Committee were trying to rescue the virtually derelict Trappist mission station of Maria Ratschitz in the Waschbank valley. This daughter station to the famous Mariannahill had been the victim of the government's removals policy, and its superb monastic buildings and church with a carillon of bells stood weedstrewn and crumbling. My memorandum suggesting rescue by Douglas Mitchell's own Natal Parks Board had brought instant response. Douglas Mitchell, Parks Board Chairman Horace Rall and John Geddes-Page, its Director, were on our doorstep. We drove towards the mission in its grand setting under the forested flanks of Hlatikulu Mountain, talking of the birds and the buck, and the rare plants and trees of the area. I watched the elder statesman's face begin to light up with excitement. As we walked into the silent and deserted church, his voice rang out in anger: 'This is a crime against our civilization. This must be rescued.' His anger burst out spontaneously and grandly against all the divisive, shrivelling, malicious and negative aspects of Nationalist Party policy. So much for press rumours that John Vorster had bamboozled him.

The most extraordinary memory was still to come. He was our guest on a private visit, and one evening our daughter arrived with a band of fellow-students from the University of Cape Town. Among them were some impassioned radicals. They groaned when I told them that 'that old

conservative' was their fellow-guest. They were aghast when I told them crisply to show respect for his years and position by bathing and dressing decently — with shoes — for dinner. They would report for a drink at the appropriate time in the drawing room. Rebellious and scoffing, they vanished. They filed in sheepishly and awkwardly at the indicated hour, and confronted their host and his distinguished guest — both of them, in their youthful eyes, 'as bad as any Nat'. Quietly the two elderly statesmen began to talk of the 30 years they had spent in opposition. Student faces began to turn their way, and questions began to break the conversation. The young slipped from their chairs and settled comfortably on the floor at the feet of the old Natal rhino.

The questions continued throughout dinner, with the coffee, as we piled log after log on to the fire, long into the winter's night. Douglas Mitchell told them of the great fight to defend the Constitution, of the Centlivres judgement, of the disgraceful High Court of Parliament and the packing of the Senate, of the struggle against the Group Areas Act and its application, of our fierce Natal Stand against a republic, and against the fragmentation of South Africa by the Bantustan policy. And then with characteristic humour and his old sardonic twinkle, he said: 'I suppose that's what made me a Nationalist.' The time passed unnoticed as he spoke of his best love, the Natal Parks Board, and he revealed his deep and sympathetic knowledge of the Zulu people. There was a sigh as, at two in the morning, he declared himself tired and bade us goodnight. Still enthralled, the young sat on before the fire in silence.

Douglas Mitchell's departure next morning was something of a triumph. Without prompting, the students were at the door to wish him Godspeed. Hands held out, smiles respectful, they thanked him for a 'great experience'.

It was a maturing experience for us all, and taught us much about the dignity and responsibility of dissent. From such memories comes the power to fight on as Douglas Mitchell fought on. Success or failure were not, and are not, at issue. To be popular is irrelevant. To be faithful is all. Douglas Mitchell was faithful.

SHEILA HENDERSON

