

THE        BLACK        SASH

NATIONAL        CONFERENCE        -        JOHANNESBURG

14TH        MARCH        1976.

PRESIDENTIAL        ADDRESS.

BY

SHEENA        DUNCAN.

There is much talk at the moment about change in South Africa, but different people mean different things when they call for change. The Black Sash has organised a symposium to be held tomorrow night on change and what it will mean in practice to the individual lives of both black and white South Africans. We hope that members of the panel will be presenting their different ideas about the degrees of change which they see as being imperative.

Tonight I want to talk about majority rule. I have chosen to do this because it seems to me that in the white community we tend to shy away from discussion of this political concept. If we do discuss it we prefer to use other terms - euphemisms - which only serve to disguise what the political conflict in this country is all about and which prevent us from thinking constructively about the future.

I believe that this reluctance of ours matters very much at the present time because all the indications are that the black demand, not only externally but internally as well, is for majority rule and that nothing short of it will satisfy the aspirations of black South Africans.

It is very dangerous for us to delude ourselves that even sincerely planned and whole-hearted efforts to improve social and economic conditions can be a sufficient response to the challenge being presented to us by blacks. The fact is that as long as we retain all political power in our hands everything else remains ours to give or to withhold, to use for our purposes and for our own ends. The way in which we have used our power in the past has led black people to the point where the winning of political power and the placing of it in the hands of the majority is the primary objective after which economic and political justice will become possible.

Majority rule is the political principle that the majority of the people should have the power to make decisions which, translated into law, become binding upon the whole population. The way in which the wishes of the majority are made known in democratic

countries is generally through acceptance of the principle of one man one vote.

This is not a foreign concept to white South Africans of either language group. The Government has recognised it as being a valid demand and a sound principle and has sought to put it into practice through the creation of independent homelands. The flaw in Government thinking remains that it has only allowed the principle to come into effect after imposing an unwanted solution on the majority. English-speaking people, too, say that they stand for the principles of Western democracy, the foundation stone of which is the principle of universal adult franchise.

So why do whites who accept the principle for themselves reject it for other people and remain adamant that it must not happen here?

The first and obvious reason is that they fear for themselves as a white minority in a country dominated by a black majority. They not only fear being able to exercise little or no power but they fear having to give up the very privileged way of life they have heretofore been able to enjoy.

Secondly, looking at the countries which have won independence in the last three decades they see only too many where majority rule has not established democracy, where all the freedoms which they value have been destroyed and where the quality of life has not been improved for the majority of the people. All too often majority rule has not survived more than a few years and has been replaced by inefficient or far from benevolent dictatorships and occasionally by horrifying tyranny.

Thirdly, Whites fear that majority rule will lead to a communist takeover and the introduction of Marxist Socialism.

Let us look at some of the white fears about and arguments against majority rule and at the black answers as they are being expressed by black South Africans.

Whites value the free enterprise system and say that it is the only economic system which can produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. They say that majority rule will lead to a socialist economic system and they believe socialism to be undesirable and threatening to their interests.

Blacks point out that free enterprise as practised in South Africa has failed to demonstrate that it can spread the rewards of economic development throughout the whole population. They argue that although a handful of black people have reached a reasonably high level of prosperity this has been in spite of controls placed on black businessmen preventing them from expanding their enterprises in so-called white areas and forbidding them to be entrepreneurs in the true sense of the word. They maintain that these controls have been imposed by whites to protect their own interests from black competition.

Blacks as a group have remained poverty-stricken while whites have attained a high level of financial security, and a significantly large percentage of the white group enjoys a life style and standard of living which is so luxurious as to be totally unreasonable when compared with the living standards of their fellow citizens. Black people claim that whites have been able to reach and maintain this standard only at the expense of black workers. They feel that they have justification for believing that black wages are only raised when white profits are threatened by worker action or, as on the mines, when a shortage of foreign labour arising from various causes forces whites to make mine jobs more attractive.

Whites might claim that these conflicting forces are part of the free enterprise system but workers maintain that whites do not allow a free play of these forces. They prevent organised black worker action by not recognising black trade unions and by favouring white workers at the expense of blacks all along the line.

Whites have said that economic development and prosperity will lead to equal opportunities for blacks. Blacks look bitterly at such

actions as the recent threatened withdrawal of permits for black building workers to be employed in Grade One jobs in the industry as soon as recession began to threaten white jobs. They maintain that upward mobility for black workers is a myth. The ceiling remains impenetrable even if at a higher level and the opportunity to do more skilled work is grudgingly allowed by whites only when it becomes necessary for the white economy.

Equality of opportunity does not seem to be attainable when equality of education and training facilities is denied and when blacks are told they must pay for their own facilities through their own taxes.

In this situation does an alternative system which promises to redistribute wealth not begin to look very attractive?

The Capitalist system as practised in South Africa has failed to provide social security for the vast majority of people.

Discriminatory and totally inadequate pensions are paid at unrealistic levels according to racial groups. There is no national minimum wage, there is inadequate unemployment insurance, and health services, particularly in rural areas are pitifully inadequate.

Now, I know that we do not actually have a free enterprise system in South Africa. The Government has imposed extensive controls on industry and commerce and on the movement of labour. We only partially have an economic system characterized by private ownership of capital goods where investments are determined by private decision rather than by state control. Nor are prices and distribution of goods determined by competition in a free market. These are the marks of capitalism according to Webster's definition.

But the point is that we claim to have such a system. Government nationalises and controls in the name of free enterprise and because people resent and reject the present system which whites have called free enterprise alternative economic systems become correspondingly attractive. For blacks the system whites enjoy at the moment is an economic tyranny.

The South African government has similarly debased and destroyed all the other ideals which it protests that it values and which it claims that it is defending against external and internal attack.

Whites say that they value Parliamentary democracy. Professor W. H. B. Dean, professor of Public Law at the University of Cape Town, in an address to the Civil Rights League last year said:

"What the rioting confirms is what I consider to be a fundamental trend in South African constitutional law - the trend towards the concentration of total power in the hands of the executive which is then able to use the other arms of government where it considers these to be necessary or desirable.

In research which I conducted last year, I tried to show that the self-conceived function of the South African parliament was simply to provide support for a government which had obtained a majority of seats in parliament at a general election. From this point of view, the sole function of the legislature is to provide the executive with the legislation the executive considers necessary to give effect to its policy. The idea of the legislature controlling, or even bringing down the government, through mechanisms such as cabinet responsibility and the use of questions, has little or no role to play." He continues:

"Yet the government remains responsive to popular pressure, particularly pressure from its supporters. How is this responsiveness maintained if not through parliament? Once again I would suggest that the current rioting supplies an answer - the National Party. It is, in my view, significant that, although no attempt was made to summon Parliament, the Prime Minister did summon a special meeting of members of his parliament and party, and the executive as a whole devoted their efforts at party conferences to explanations of actions taken. I would suggest that the party has supplanted parliament as the link between the electorate and the executive."

Is this Parliamentary democracy? Is it not much more akin to the one-

party states of which whites are so critical when they occur in other African countries? In fact the difference between them and us is that the party which rules is generally a majority where ours is indubitably the party of the minority.

Whites say that they value the Rule of Law and the independence of the courts. Professor Dean has this to say:

"Parliamentary legislation has, in areas such as the maintenance of public order, largely deprived the courts of their traditional role as guardians of civil liberties and the rights of citizens against executive attack. As a result it has often limited the part played by the courts to that of passive onlookers reduced to functioning as part of the process by which those who contravene the law are punished.

In the final analysis, not only has power been concentrated in the hands of the executive but the other organs of government have been deprived of their proper role in a free democracy, that of supervisors of the powers enjoyed by the executive."

The white government does not and has not practised democracy in this country but has destroyed the principle of parliamentary government and the power of the courts of law and it has destroyed these things in the name of democracy.

Whites say that they value Christianity and claim that the white system of government is a Christian one. They say that Christianity and the Judeo-Christian heritage is what they are defending against the onslaughts of communism. Yet black people see that this Christian government has legislated to separate husbands from their wives and children from their parents. It is not only the government which is guilty. How many English-speaking South Africans have said and continue to say that influx control is necessary and must remain? Whites say that they believe that a stable family life is the basis for a stable society and that they believe in the sanctity of marriage but they have demonstrated by their actions that they believe this to

be true only for themselves.

Blacks believe that the discrimination and oppression practised against them because of their race is heresy and doubly a heresy because it is practised in the name of Christianity.

Whites say they value the right to freedom of movement but they deny all such freedom to black South Africans while jealously guarding it for themselves.

They say they reject state ownership of the land and bitterly condemn the Mozambique government for appropriating privately-owned property. Yet they deny black South Africans the right to own land in 86% of their country and for years have denied them more than a one month tenancy to the houses they live in.

White South Africans also reject majority rule because they say it too often results in military rule and martial law but black South Africans say that they already live under such a regime. The will of the minority is imposed on them by the armed might of the State.

I do not make this statement lightly nor do I refer only to the events of last year. The pass laws which are the very foundations of the whole apartheid system and of the whole policy of separate development are imposed and maintained by constant police action as is the enforced separation of one race from another in every sphere of our national life - raids in black townships and in the so-called white suburbs, arrests, entry into private property without warrant, police dogs clearing 'white' beaches of black people - all this apart from the whole structure of security legislation which allows detention without trial for indefinite periods, preventive detention, bannings, in fact all the identifying features of a police state which are all too familiar to people who live in countries where the military governs by coercion and not by consent. There are no arguments whites can present to blacks in this sphere which can persuade them that majority rule is not in their interest.



Whites reject majority rule because they say it leads to government by a bureaucracy with resulting inefficiency, stagnation and corruption. Blacks are already governed by the bureaucracy. Every decision is made for them and about them by non-elective government officials. They experience daily the helpless, hopeless frustration of conflict with officialdom - faceless, impersonal and undefeatable.

White South Africans rightly condemn violence and violent attempts to achieve change. But there is no point in condemning violence if at the same time they (a) use violence to entrench their own power and privilege and (b) close all other channels for the realisation of the legitimate aspirations of the people of this country.

They maintain that only peaceful and non-violent means of bringing about change are justifiable while making sure that these means are of no avail. They ignore peaceful representations made through the "proper channels". They take no notice of verbal requests or demands. They do not recognise the legitimacy of black community representatives unless they are the ones white government has designated and appointed and unless they are saying what whites want to hear and what fits in with white designs for black futures.

The South African government and both Afrikaans and English speaking people agree that the only way in which a guerilla type war can be won and the only defence against terrorism is to ensure the loyalty and support of the whole population, in other words to achieve a whole-hearted commitment to the defence of the country and all its people. So what action does the government take to achieve this? It forcibly deprives black South Africans of their South African citizenship and their claim to a share in the country's wealth and prosperity and it does this without black consent and in spite of expressed black anger and resentment. The government did it to all Xhosa people on 26th October last year. It intends to do it to all Tswana people on 6th December this year and it has expressed the intention to persevere with this insane policy until all black South Africans are foreigners in their fatherland. Whether the newly created States will survive

as independent countries is a question for the future but, whether they do or not, I am convinced that South Africa will remain a multi-racial country with a majority of black people who will not relinquish their claim to equal political rights and consequent social, legal and economic equality.

With a record of white administration such as this the only possible solution for blacks seems to them to be majority rule. Whatever disadvantages it may have for whites South Africa's black people feel that they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. This is why we who are white must discuss the concept, face our fears and come to terms with the future. The sooner we do so and the more wholeheartedly we accept the challenge the more likely are we to be able to establish a system which offers freedom and peace to all of us, both black and white.

If we accept that majority rule is inevitable the question which remains is what will be the quality of the new society when it is established and this in turn will depend upon the length of time which elapses between now and then and the degree of violent conflict which is involved.

All the way through this argument I have used the black/white terminology because, generally speaking, blacks demand majority rule and whites reject it. But I do not believe that at this point of time the divisions are drawn on racial lines. I believe that the majority includes both blacks and whites who believe in freedom and the infinite value of human personality and that the minority is not entirely composed of whites.

The majority of South Africans want peace. They demand radical change but seek non-violent means to bring it about. They share together in adherence to the principles of democratic government and of political, economic and social justice. They believe in the protection of the rights of minorities and the protection of the rights of the individual, particularly against the power of the State.

Mr Percy Qoboza, editor of The World, in his Christmas message to his readers which was headlined "Think how you can save your white brothers" said:

"I know that you are angered and grieved by insinuations that your legitimate grievances are the result of a communist plot or conspiracy to bring chaos and Red domination in South Africa. I know that you reject these insinuations with the contempt they deserve because communism is also a white man's philosophy which is foreign to your aspirations and needs.

I know, therefore, that you cannot understand why people would think that you reject the present white man's system only to replace it with another white man's system imported from the Soviet Union.

I know that you have nothing but contempt for people who continue to use the communist bogey as an excuse to opt out of their responsibility in the arena of human dignity, and preservation and advancement of civil liberties".

In this shared belief in human liberation lies our hope for the future but whether that hope can survive the pressure of events depends to a great extent on what we white people do to demonstrate that we are willing to act in a way which is consonant with our beliefs.

It is clear that any alternative society which is designed by whites will be rejected by blacks. Whites long ago forfeited any claim that they might have made that they are worthy of trust.

We are always saying that we must consult with blacks but the political centre has moved and we should now be looking at the inversion of this. We need to try to ensure that blacks will consult with us about our position and protection in the South Africa of the future. I believe that together we are quite capable of forging a constitution which will incorporate checks and balances, constitutional devices to create a society in which all people have a maximum of individual freedom and in which human liberties are inviolate. Nor is it beyond our ingenuity to entrench protection for minority groups who place

high value on group identity rather than on individual personality. None of this is beyond our capabilities.

However, given the present political realities of our country, there are grounds for fear that change is not going to come about peacefully. There has already been too much violence. In the struggle for change everything which is done to contain the degree of violence is valuable.

We may not always see clearly what we can do nor can we make long term plans but Archbishop Clayton's constantly repeated admonition is still valid in our present situation: "Do the next right thing". The next right thing may be in conflict with ideological laws as in the case of the Catholic Church's action in desegregating its schools. It may not always seem to bring significant results but it is better than doing nothing and everything which presents constructive alternatives to violence is worth doing. Battles were never won by people standing on the sidelines wringing their hands and proclaiming their irrelevance.

To conclude, I again quote Percy Qoboza's message:

"Finally in the words of the late Dr Martin Luther King, 'I know you shall overcome. Deep in my heart I know we shall overcome'. And in the same vein that great civic leader echoed your sentiments correctly when he added: 'Not only will we win our freedom, we shall also so appeal to your hearts and consciences we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory'.

So, when you reflect this Christmas, think of how you can save your white brothers from the chains of fear. Take them along to a new South Africa where man will be man irrespective of the colour of his skin, or the colour of his eyes, or the length of his hair".

I say to you tonight that we must take the hand stretched out to us for, if we do not, it will be withdrawn and we will be left behind grasping at the empty air.

Sheena Duncan  
14th March, 1977.