

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO BLACK SASH CONFERENCE
NOVEMBER 1960.

It once again falls to me to have the pleasant task of welcoming all delegates and observers to this conference.

I know that we always find it a heartwarming experience to meet, as we do at our conferences, those from other regions who, throughout the year, have been carrying out the same hard, and often seemingly fruitless task, of trying to preserve civil and human rights and liberties in a country which has been steadily retrogressing towards totalitarianism and government by decree.

But a new quality seems to have been added by the experiences of the past year to the very sincere pleasure we always experience when we get together like this to discuss our problems and to be heartened by each others successes. A new link has been forged in the chain of common ideals and common purpose which binds us together. That link is the sense of comradeship and deepened trust which always springs up between those who have gone through a time of testing and have found that their courage, and that of their companions, has not failed them under duress.

If the leaders of the Black Sash in any region had suffered from fainthearts during the time of emergency, the work of the Sash would have been made infinitely more difficult, but none did. Instead, they rose almost as one woman to meet the new developments. In every region, they showed both wisdom and courage in the handling of the many difficult problems the emergency created and by so doing, have earned new respect and admiration among white people and created valuable bridges of goodwill and mutual understanding with non-whites. Last, but by no means least, we have learned to know and trust ourselves.

South Africa has, during this last year, passed through sad and difficult times and the Sash, because it did not hesitate to carry on with what it conceived to be its duty, was closely involved both in the political complications arising from the state of emergency, and in the heartbreaking human tragedies which resulted from the massed African protest against pass laws and inadequate wages.

There are still menacing clouds on the political horizon. In spite of the lifting of the emergency, Opposition parties have been unable to persuade the government to modify its policy and there is no hope that they will be able to defeat the government, either singly or together, in the foreseeable future, unless a considerable change can be brought about in the thinking of the electorate. The need for the Sash, therefore, to help bring about such a change, is more urgent and imperative than ever before, and efforts to bring it about must be stepped up, however tired and exhausted we are after five years of unremitting campaigning. We simply must not fail to give of our utmost in this endeavour during the coming year, which will, by all portents, be a crucial one in the history of the country.

When we ^{at least} turn our attention to the non-white situation, we have to recognise that the African protests against the pass system did bring home to whites a greater awareness of the injustices which Africans suffer and the resentment which they feel, they were abortive in so far as they did not obtain from the Government any significant concession to African demands. Instead the pass law system is being used more vigorously than ever to endorse Africans out of the towns where they come to seek for work; to control where they shall live, and to prevent African women from living with their husbands. As if this were not enough, the Government has chosen this moment to announce that the carrying of reference books will be made compulsory for African women.

True, the date /2.

True, the date on which it is to be made compulsory has been changed from the 1st of December to coincide with the date on which it will be compulsory for white people to carry identity cards, but this will not soothe African feelings. White people who are, for the most part, lamentably ignorant of the difference between the identity card, which white people will have to carry, and the reference books which Africans have to carry, may consider that Africans are only being asked to do the same thing that white people are asked to do, and that therefore Africans have no cause for complaint. Africans, however, who know only too well, to their own bitter cost and humiliation, the vast difference between an identity card and a reference book, will in no way be placated by the knowledge that white people are having to carry identity cards.

It requires very little imagination to realise the seething bitterness and frustration which must be filling the hearts of millions of Africans, at the blank refusal of the Government to either consider their most reasonable representations, or to be moved to any kind of modification by massed demonstrations of African antipathy to laws which they had no hand in making.

During the referendum campaign, Dr. Verwoerd promised that once there was a republic there would be a great change for the better in race relations, but almost immediately after the result of the referendum had been made known, he announced in a public speech that there would be no change in the Government's apartheid policy. Yet, unless there is a change, there can be no improvement in race relations in this country — instead we must march forward to some catastrophic upheaval.

Against the sombre prospect of the events of the past year, coupled with the announcement by Dr. Verwoerd that there would be no change in Nationalist apartheid policy, can any light be seen, any cause for hope be found?

I think there can.

When I opened our conference last year, I referred to the advent of the Progressive Party, which at that time had just been formed, as a sign that the ideals and ideas for which the Sash had striven so hard, were at last beginning to make an impact on the thinking of South Africans. In the twelve months that have elapsed since then, we have seen the Progressive Party grow rapidly in strength and influence.

The voice of the Progressives has been added to those of other opposition parties and groups in asking for a revision of the present racial policies in this country, and in explaining to the public how there is a moral obligation upon all South Africans to shed their prejudices and to refuse to allow present race discriminations, which bring untold hardship, misery and injustice to our non-white fellow South Africans, to be continued.

As a result of this addition, to the groups pleading for radical political reforms, the idea that some sort of reform is urgently necessary is reaching an ever widening number of people and there are signs that it is making a definite impact on the thinking of increasing numbers of South Africans.

The English press and even some sections of the Afrikaans press, have been very co-operative. A number of papers have not only been willing to publish our letters and statements and to give publicity to those activities of ours which they consider merit publicity because they are news,

but they have /3.

but they have frequently done so under banner headlines.

We are naturally most deeply grateful for the wonderful help the press has given us, as, had the press been hostile or un-cooperative, our work would have been greatly handicapped. At the same time, we should bear in mind that the press is not a philanthropic organisation and therefore, the mere fact of its co-operative attitude indicates that it considers Black Sash views of value and some of its activities as news.

Another, to my mind, even more encouraging ray of hope comes from the enlightened statements made by leading nationalists since the referendum and by the apparent willingness of influential white men from all political parties to sink party political loyalties and to get together to discuss, what they now recognise to be the most fundamental and urgent of all South Africa's problems, the race problem.

It still remains to be seen whether these tentative efforts to come together will result in anything worthwhile, but I believe that the Sash is in a unique position to help make them worthwhile and that one of its major efforts in the coming year must be to nurse and help to bring to maturity this embryonic effort for South Africans to get together to find a way out of the difficult racial impasse into which we, as a nation, have got ourselves.

For years the Sash has worked with little but the light of its own faith in the fundamental value of preserving human rights and liberties to cheer it on its way. Those who so willingly have dedicated themselves to the work of the Sash have been looked on askance by their own friends and sometimes even by their own husbands. They have been laughed at as being hopelessly visionary, a silly band of crusading women who should be devoting their time and attention to their homes and children and not meddling in politics. They have, while fighting a never-ending battle against the very sort of totalitarianism which is one of the hallmarks of communism, even been accused of being communistic. Worse still, they have, by implication, been accused by members of Parliament and by some members of the public of being in part responsible for African unrest. The argument goes that by the protests the Sash makes against the unjust laws, which are inflicted on Africans, it encourages Africans to feel they are being unjustly treated. Africans, however, do not need anyone to tell them how unjust the laws are and the Sash is of the opinion that it is the knowledge that there are groups of people, such as the Sash, who are prepared to work with them and for them for a repeal of these laws, which is responsible for the fact that there are Africans who still have faith in the humanity and sense of justice of white people.

In the face of the many difficulties which confront women in the Sash, many faint hearts have dropped by the wayside, but a surprising number have remained to carry on the work with undiminished faith, and I am reminded, as I look back over the past and forward to the future, of the last lines of Shelly's Prometheus Unbound, for they seem almost to sum up the work and attitude of the faithful band of Black Sash women:

" To defy power which seems omnipotent;
To love and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates. "

I believe /4.

I believe that these words apply to the Black Sash because the Black Sash is about to reap some reward for its unremitting labours of the past five years.

Influential people who were once either openly antagonistic to the Sash, or coldly sceptical of its value, are recognising that the Sash was right in its attitude. More than that, they are beginning to accept that the Sash is not the secret weapon or stooge of any political party and that its approach to politics is as objective as is humanly possible. I do not think it would be too much to say that there is a rapidly growing recognition that the Sash has been and is playing a very useful and responsible role in South African political life.

Because of this, the Sash, together with other non-party groups such as the Institute of Race Relations and SABRA, is one of the best placed bodies in the country to help to bring about a rapprochement between all political groups and to help weld together into some effective form, the emerging recognition by people of widely divergent political opinions, that something must be done to get a revision of present race policies.

At a time like this, when our country is in a torment of bitterness, fear and resentment, it should be remembered by the Black Sash that no effort to mitigate the political deadlock or to right the intolerable injustices we see all around us, is ever wasted. Even should there be violent reactions by those who are so oppressed by the present unjust laws, that violence is bound to be tempered and modified to some degree by the goodwill established by right and just action on the part of some whites now. Let us bear in mind, therefore, that even if we are unable to prevent the unpleasant consequences resulting from the present Government's policy of oppression, we can do a great deal to mitigate the severity of these consequences.

I see a year of tremendous political importance lying ahead for South Africa. I do not think it is in any way a wild guess to say that perhaps this is the last year in which it will be possible to find a solution to South Africa's race problems round the conference table. The Black Sash realises full well just how fast the seeds of time are running out and therefore, on it lies a tremendous responsibility to try to bring about and to help make fruitful some form of round table conference between leading members of all political parties and groups.

The political scene is in a state of flux. If what emerges is wrought into something of real value, and the Black Sash must strain every nerve to see that this happens, then we may truly be able to build a better South Africa for all our peoples, but if not --- well, a dark, dangerous and unforeseeable future lies ahead for all of us.