

THE BLACK SASH

NATIONAL CONFERENCE 1985

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

This year the Black Sash will observe its thirtieth anniversary.

It was 19 May 1955 that six women met together in Johannesburg in anger about the introduction of the Senate Bill in Parliament.

As you know, it was that legislation which packed the Senate with sufficient members of the National Party to enable the government in the following year to remove coloured people from the common voter's roll.

The energy of those women is quite astonishing as is the speed with which they acted. The next day hundreds of women came together and addressed a petition to the mayor requesting him to call a public meeting.

On 25 May that meeting was held with 2 000 women marching to the City Hall to join 18 000 citizens who had gathered in protest.

The Women's Defence of the Constitution League had come into being.

It was then decided that two petitions should be drawn up, one to the Prime Minister calling on him to repeal the legislation or to resign, the other to the Governor General asking him to withhold his assent from the Act. Women, working in continuous shifts over the weekend of 4, 5 and 6 June dispatched petition forms all over the country.

More than 100 000 women signed the two petitions within the next ten days. The petition to the Governor General was handed to his secretary with 94 630 signatures. The Prime Minister refused to receive a delegation from the League. On 23 June, over one thousand women representing dozens of cities, towns and villages in South Africa marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to hand over the petition to the Prime Minister calling for his resignation. For forty eight hours, in the bitterly cold highveld winter, eighty women held vigil at the Union Buildings.

Those were the days when freedom of assembly still existed in this country. In the thirty years which have gone by since that time, this right to come together in protest has been taken away piece by piece beginning with bans imposed on gatherings in the central city of Johannesburg and in a large area around Parliament in Cape Town, to the present total ban on all outdoor gatherings which has been in force since 1976.

A gathering is defined as more than one person coming together, so for the past eight years, Black Sash demonstrations have been one woman standing alone with her poster, out of sight of the next person. Even this is now under threat from the police. In November last year in a combined protest with Churches, DPSC and other organisations calling for the release of detainees, demonstrators were arrested in a massive police action as soon as they took up positions. Posters were confiscated, charges laid and a long drawn out investigation is apparently being conducted by the police.

It is my belief that this ban on outdoor gatherings together with the frequent temporary bans on indoor gatherings and on funerals must be held largely responsible for the chaos which is now the way of life in many black townships. People who have come together in orderly fashion to picket polling booths in the August elections, to demand negotiation with Town Councillors and Development Board officials about rents, or with Department of Education and Training officials about abuses in the intolerable bantu education system, or to bury their dead, have been ordered to disperse and when they failed to do so, have been forced to scatter in confusion by the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, bird and buck shot. Orderly organised protest and non-violent resistance is prevented. When the authorities also abuse the wide powers given to them and resort to removing leaders by detaining them for 48 hours, or indefinitely, it is not surprising that planned disciplined non-violent resistance in the form of boycotts by students, boycotts by consumers, withdrawal of labour by workers, withholding of rent by householders, become disorganised with disorganised violence cropping up in all directions. It is only a short step from that to organised and coercive violence, the evidence of which is now appearing in some places. It is inevitable that this should be so when the State uses its whole repressive machinery to prevent grievances from being expressed, to prevent demands from being laid on the negotiating table, to prevent organisation from taking place; to insist that control by the few over the many continues.

One of the issues we will be discussing at this Conference is the way in which the State is laying criminal charges against those who oppose the government's policies thus keeping them in prison as awaiting trial prisoners for lengthy periods or immobilising them by making issues sub-judice and thus not open for discussion. Very often, charges are withdrawn at the last minute or the prosecution does not go ahead. The recent non-trial of Archbishop Hurley is just one example.

I ask you all tonight to remember Madoda Jacobs, the young leader of the Cradock Youth Organisation who was headboy of his school. He was held in Preventive Detention last year and is now a "listed" person. He is at present being held as an awaiting trial prisoner on a charge of murder at the Mortimer police station miles and miles from anywhere.

Also very much in our thoughts are the leaders of the UDF now awaiting trial for treason. Many of them are our personal friends. All of them are highly respected.

Those days when the Black Sash began were very different. South Africa was certainly not a democracy but the Rule of Law did mean something and people could and did look to the Courts for protection. Last year I spoke about those old fashioned people in areas threatened with removal who cannot understand that the law is not a protection anymore. They are all middle-aged to elderly. Young people in this country do not understand the concept. They have never known it and have never lived under the protection of the Rule of Law. For them, the law has always been a threat. A threat because it denies them the fundamental human rights.

I do not wish to spend time this evening going into the details of security legislation but do wish to say that one of the most urgent matters on the national agenda should be the restoration of the Rule of Law. Today's young people are tomorrow's government and it will be very bad if the injustices embodied in our law are to continue into yet another era and used for preservation of yet another government in power. There are already too many signs of coercion and co-optation of people into opposition strategies. These give cause for disquietude and anxiety. There is no time to be lost if we are to demonstrate what democracy really means.

The values which are embodied in the phrase "Rule of Law" are lost to us because they have not been practised for so long. We need to restore them now in order to preserve them into the future.

It is a disaster that President Botha's "reform" programme has been marked by ever greater repression and that there are no signs whatsoever that he intends to repeal of any of the repressive laws; quite the opposite in fact. 1982 saw several new laws placed on the statute book which prevent many of the legitimate activities of opposition groups - the Protection of Information Act, the Prohibition of Demonstrations in or near Court Buildings Act and, of course, the omnibus Internal Security Act.

The Women's defence of the Constitution League held its first National Conference in Bloemfontein in April 1956. It was at that conference that the nickname given us by the press "The Black Sash" was adopted as the official name of the organisation.

It was also at that conference that one Jeanette Davidoff was elected to the Central Committee. Netty is still very much with us. She is here tonight as one of the Transvaal delegates to this conference. In 1955 she was chairman of the education sub-committee whose task it was to inform and educate our own members as well as the wider public. Another one of those early stalwarts who is here as a delegate from Cape Town is Noel Robb. Her task used to be to support and look after the country branches in the western Cape. The two of them should really be up here talking to you about those first years. Some of you in this hall tonight were among those who began it and we salute you.

I was not around then but it has been very instructive for me to page through the early minute books to see what issues were engaging the Black Sash's attention at that time.

We have changed in some ways. Many of the women who joined at the beginning had never participated in any kind of public life before. Some of them seemed full of trepidation. As late as July 1957 the Hermanus branch committee began keeping minutes for the first time. It was decided on 4 July to "keep minutes forthwith". All did not go quite smoothly. In the minutes for the meeting held on 15 October, we find the following entry:

"Owing to a regrettable air of informality occasioned by Miss Forsdike's return, the minutes of the last meeting were not read."

They could also be quite tart about their bosses in Cape Town.

"Mrs T gave a brief account of the adverse report on Mrs B's powers as a speaker which was discussed at the All Branches meeting. It was decided that no further action need be taken to invite her to address an Hermanus branch meeting."

All the minutes show what a task it was to educate the membership. Many women had joined in outrage at what was called the "rape of the constitution". They had never before thought about justice in race relations or been brought to face the political consequences of the nature of South African society.

From the Hermanus minutes again in August 1957. There had been a "multi-racial" meeting in the Drill Hall in protest against passes being imposed on black women. There must have been some uneasiness expressed by members. The minutes read:

"The chairwoman explained that at the Cape multi-racial meetings were a matter of custom as well as principle."

In the Cape itself we find the same uncertainty. In minutes dated 14 October 1957 we find the following entry:

"An official protest was handed in by Mrs H. A statement in the paper advertising a series of lectures had appeared with the words "open to all races".She felt this was provocative."

One argument which is a little more familiar and not so far in our distant past is outlined in this 30 September 1957 minute in Cape Town after a request for support for striking members from the Council for Canning workers:

"...agreed that a reply should be sent stressing that we only concern ourselves with moral issues and not industrial disputes."

This anxiety about what was or was not a moral issue crops up over and over again very often related to relationships with the then official opposition, the United Party. The non-party political stance of the Black Sash has always been maintained but in those days when there was still a hope nurtured that the National Party might be defeated at the polls, it was a constant concern not to weaken the opposition while maintaining a principled public protest. One member in Cape Town is recorded in the minutes of 19 September as saying:

"As far as Kei Road was concerned, the quieter the Sash kept at the moment the better. It must not be seen or implied that the Sash supports the progressives."
She was evidently in a minority.

Sometimes these debates sound very strange to us now. On 12 August 1959 we read:

"Mrs Stott had been asked to enquire whether atomic fall-out in the Cape Province was not dangerous. Mrs Stott wonders whether the subject of Atomic Bombs is a moral issue for the Sash or not."

Eulalie Stott is still one of our most active & valued members in Cape Town.

In many ways we have not changed at all. Our peculiar office procedures remain the same.

In October 1958 Cape Town had become the Headquarters of the Black Sash. They hired an office in Claremont for five pounds a month and agreed at a meeting, "that a letter be written to Mrs Dietrich asking her to arrange to have the filing cabinet plus the files and stationery sent down to Cape Town by Pickfords - the key to be sent by registered post."

Mrs Willis offered the loan of her desk, Mrs Smith the loan of four chairs, Mrs Petersen one table and it was agreed that Mrs Solomon receive a float of five pounds for petty cash!

I'm glad we have not changed in this respect. Our offices remain untidy places with second hand furniture and limited equipment. We have not erected barriers of technology and the paraphenalia of modern office furnishings between us and those who come to seek our help.

Less a matter for congratulation is the extraordinary filing systems we try out and change in regular succession. A Cape minute of October 1957 re lost circular number 88, "...it is agreed that Council members should search for this circular." is echoed in Transvaal minutes of 1984 when we discovered that the master files of three whole national conferences in ~~the~~ 1970s are missing.

Allegations against the Black Sash remain much the same now as they were then. In 1959, "loose allegations of incitement levelled at Sash" were discussed at a Cape council meeting. Only last year a member of the Cape Provincial Council accused us of creeping around the black areas at night and being always present where there is trouble.

Perhaps these accusations are not framed so quaintly as they used to be.

Before this was prohibited, Black Sash women used to hold vigil in the public gallery of the House of Assembly. They were rebuked by a National Party whip who told them:

"You ladies must not come to Parliament to propagate."

But the issues which concerned us then are astonishingly the same as those which occupy us now - the pass laws and pass law arrests, Group Area removals, academic freedom, freedom of the press, freedom of movement, SABC propaganda, race classification, farm labour, support for the families of detainees and how we can co-operate with other organisations in this and in protest against all detentions and bannings.

Passive resistance and support for those entering into civil disobedience was an issue then as it is now. The Black Sash support for the ANC and for Chief Luthuli in those long ago days caused the same debates as has our support for the UDF in the last eighteen months. Protest against the banning of Chief Luthuli was as wholehearted then as is our protest now about action taken against UDF and other leaders. Economic boycotts were very much an issue then as they are now.

In August 1959 we were saying:

"In the history of South Africa the white man has so frequently broken his word that promises should not be broken now without the Africans, to whom they were made, approving of the step."

The list of broken promises has lengthened immeasurably in the twenty six years since that statement was made. Is it really now coming to an end? There is no evidence of that yet.

In September 1959 the Black Sash said in a letter to Dr Verwoerd:

"We believe that when there are these misunderstandings they could be avoided if clearer details of what is in the government's mind were given at the time."

Oh, how whole-heartedly we repeat that now.

Some people have suggested that the present government has deliberately adopted a strategy of sowing confusion and uncertainty in order to introduce piecemeal reforms. This would be such an incredibly dangerous course of action that we cannot believe that any rational group of people could embark on it. The other interpretation of current government actions is that it is as confused and uncertain as everyone else and is therefore being totally inept. Whatever the reason, this country cannot afford the current total lack of clarity about government intentions nor the contradictory statements which often follow one another on a daily basis from the mouths of the same Ministers.

Confusion, whether deliberately or carelessly sown, is leading to total chaos and a state of disorderliness in administration and in daily experience for the majority of people in this country, which will take us nowhere.

What does Dr Viljoen's statement about the suspension of removals mean? He did not go as far as Dr Koornhof's previous statement that, "There will be no more forced removals," but perhaps the public may be inclined to give greater weight to what Dr Viljoen says. When pressed, he said he supposed that there were about twenty six black spots and about the same number of urban communities whose position would be reassessed. A little later the number of black spots involved was given as sixty seven. We all know that there are one hundred and eighty eight black spots in Natal alone which are scheduled for removal and well over two hundred in the country as a whole. What does the Minister mean and when is he going to say firmly and openly what his intentions are?

The urban communities of Huhudi at Vryburg and Valspan at Jan Kempdorp are relieved from the total removal but then there is talk about their development only within existing already overcrowded boundaries. What will happen to those who cannot be fitted in?

I have given up trying to keep track of the various statements about Crossroads and Khayelitsha. Who goes and who stays is anyone's guess.

Has government accepted that all the black people who are at present in Cape Town are to be permitted to remain there or does it still intend to get rid of the "illegals" by deporting them to those so-called foreign countries, Transkei and Ciskei?

If influx control is on its way out and if everyone is to be allowed to remain where they are, what possible reason can there be for not saying so? The failure to make clear statements of intent means that all of us, including the people concerned, remain distrustful, suspicious and very angry indeed.

On this most fundamental issue of influx control, we are left in a state of uncertainty. The whole propaganda thrust at the moment seems designed to persuade white South Africans that influx control must go and soon, that if it does not we will not be able to reduce population growth to a rate commensurate with available natural resources, that urbanisation cannot be prevented and must therefore be managed, that we cannot afford the influx control system anymore. Yet at the same time the Minister is announcing proposed amendments to Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act to make certain technical adjustments and to defuse the anger of urban communities destined for incorporation within homeland borders. Section 10 is the instrument of influx control. This is the clause which says that no black person may remain in an urban area for more than 72 hours unless he or she fulfills certain conditions. If you are going to lift influx control, you certainly should not be wasting time and money tinkering around with its provisions. When announcing these changes the Minister stated that no urbanisation legislation could be expected during this session of Parliament. Yet a few days later we are told that a revamped Orderly Movement Bill and an Urbanisation bill are on the cards.

Influx control has to go in its entirety and it has to go very soon. The latest economic projections for the year 2000 estimate that 44% of South Africa's adult population will not be able to find employment in the formal sector. This is a fact of life and only freedom of movement and rapid urbanisation will allow that 44% to escape from hunger and poverty into the informal sector.

Unrestricted growth of family enterprises and service industries will give an enormous boost to economic growth and also ensure a more just distribution of wealth.

If everyone now accepts these facts, why go on pretending that anything else is possible? What sensible reason can there be for hesitation and delay?

Why should it be taking so long for central business districts to be opened for trading by people of all races? Will they do it or won't they, and how long must we wait to find out?

In all the important issues, government displays the same lack of clarity. Whether it be inept or deliberate does not make any difference to the disastrous end result.

Dr Viljoen succeeded, in one short statement, in inflaming the populations of two Transvaal townships, Ekangala and Soshanguve. Soshanguve is a township outside the prescribed area of Pretoria which was established to accommodate that part of the non-Tswana population of Pretoria which has urban rights. Ekangala is a new township, very well planned, a model of pleasant new town development in many ways, 20kms north of Bronkhorst-spruit. Only people with urban rights on the East Rand qualify to live there. Part of the township is set aside for occupation by Ndebele people, the rest for other language groups. Dr Viljoen recently announced that the whole of Ekangala is to be incorporated into KwaNdebele which is soon to become independent. The people of Soshanguve immediately had cause to believe persistent rumours that their township is to be incorporated into Bophuthatswana.

How can government possibly plan to relocate thousands of South African citizens within the borders of what is, according to their own laws, a foreign country?

What is the difference between citizenship and nationality? The government has been making vague noises about this since before Ciskei independence in 1981. They should not be surprised that people regard recent government talk about a review of citizenship laws with the utmost cynicism.

At this conference we will be considering the question whether Bophuthatswana's Bill of Rights has any value whatsoever. The more than a million non-Tswana South African citizens who suddenly found themselves resident within the borders of a foreign country at independence in 1977 are victimised at every turn. They often don't get pensions, or permanent residence permits, or trading licences, or work seekers registration. They are labelled "squatters" by the Bophuthatswana government, and the South African government has apparently washed its hands of them. There has been talk of inter-government negotiations for years. Nothing happens. Many of these people are being subjected to the most brutal repression by the Bophuthatswana police and the Bill of Rights does not seem to offer any protection.

What price a Bill of Rights guaranteeing freedom of assembly when the Bophuthatswana government last year prohibited all meetings of more than 20 people unless the permission of the Minister is obtained for a larger meeting to be held?

REFORM

There is no doubt that the sudden enthusiasm for reform is a result of increasing pressure from the black majority inside South Africa as well as from the western democracies together with the economic crisis into which we have been brought by many different factors, not the least of which has been the profligate spending entailed in the attempt to bring to fruition the policy of apartheid.

The dictates of Afrikaner nationalism are no longer a priority. The preservation of the capitalist system is the overlying concern, now enshrined in our constitution. But you cannot preserve capitalism by continuing to exploit the black majority and continuing to deny them all the basic individual freedoms which capitalism claims to protect.

So we suddenly see the business sector in South Africa urging government to reform and to what seem to be quite radical changes in the ordering of society. Where were they during all those years when one apartheid law after another was placed on the statute book? Their silence was deafening.

When did they speak out against migrant labour, the pass laws, the Group Areas Act, removals, denationalisation, race classification? We know when they spoke out - when the disinvestment lobby began getting somewhere, when US legislation embodying economic sanctions of one kind or another suddenly became a real possibility, when black workers got organised and began making demands backed by united action and the power to strike effectively.

We welcome the claims made by employer's organisations in their memorandum to Senator Kennedy in January this year. The Chambers and Federations of employers concerned represent more than 80% of the employent strength of this country. They have been urged over and over again for the past thirty seven years to use their undoubted power to persuade government to stop removals, to remove influx control, to retreat from apartheid. They are doing so now, at last, and we must be thankful for it. They must be held to the commitments they made to Senator Kennedy and to all of us. I quote:

"In the national interest they are committed to an on-going programme of legislative reform to give effect to the following goals:

- meaningful political participation to Blacks
- full participation in a private enterprise economy for all South Africans regardless of race, colour, sex or creed
- common loyalty to the country in all South Africans through a universal citizenship
- the development of a free and independent trade union movement
- the administration of justice as safe-guarded by the Courts
- an end to the forceful removal of people."

Will they hold to those commitments if the threat of disinvestment and divestment is removed? They must prove to us that they would do so.

I am sure that most members of the Black Sash would agree with me in saying that nothing must be done which will cause one more person to lose a job. There is no social security in this country, no safety net to rescue the starving except what can be inadequately provided by voluntary welfare organisations. We sit in the advice offices all day long, faced with people who literally do not know where the next meal is to come from and we will not do one thing to make that situation worse.

But, we have some questions to ask of the business community here - both South African and foreign businessmen. The unemployment which exists on so large a scale now in this country is not a consequence of disinvestment, divestment or economic sanctions. They have not yet been imposed. We ask those who are most audible in their criticisms of the disinvestment and divestment lobby overseas:

How many jobs have you destroyed in the last five years because you have mechanised?

Did you worry about unemployment when you merged and relocated and rationalised your operations?

What have you done about the growing monopolistic control over industry and commerce, about price fixing, about destruction of competition, about squeezing out the small man?

Have we heard your voices raised about the new Regulations relating to the retailing of coal which will destroy the small traders, or about the monopolistic controls over road transportation which prevent the self-employed driver from finding his survival?

As you move into agri-business producing what, I am told, are called in America "non-consumptives" - that which is not food - have you ever wondered about the one and a quarter million people who were dispossessed from South African farms in the years between 1960 and 1980? Do you know what happened to them in the resettlement camps where they were dumped? They are not part of the urban middle class in which your interest has been invested since 1976.

You have told us that you are totally opposed to disinvestment and to divestment because it will cause increased unemployment here in South Africa.

Then you must answer us as to why South African businesses have become multinational? Why are you investing in Massachusetts and Britain and elsewhere? How many jobs could you have created here by bringing those investments back home?

Is it true that Anglo American is the second largest foreign investor in the United States?

Is it true that a major foreign company recently announced a R40million investment in new plant, in South Africa which will not create one single new job, and is it true that in the same week that company was laying off 460 workers for a period of eight weeks?

These are, no doubt, naive questions but we are entitled to honest factual answers. You are presenting to us an apocalyptic vision of the consequences of disinvestment and divestment. We are entitled to ask you just where your investment is and what your investment is doing. You must start being honest with us. We have to be persuaded that your operations really do create jobs, really do spread the profits of capitalism through the whole society.

The evidence is not in your favour. The Reserves policy upon which the sophisticated political structures for apartheid are based were created by you in the past in a deliberate programme designed to ensure a plentiful supply of cheap labour. The migrant labour policies of succeeding governments were merely a development of your model created to maximise profits on the mines.

During the boom years apartheid was entrenched and refined and because it was in the interests of profits, you did not speak out against the manifold injustices and increasing poverty and misery.

Much more recently your free enterprise/home ownership model has furthered the government's urban preference policies which are squeezing out the poor and less well paid because the struggle to find accommodation is now a winner take all struggle for privilege and preference available only to those who can pay the inflated costs of residence in the confined, limited geographical borders of black townships. All this is contributing to the great fortified wall which has been erected between the urban insiders and the poverty-stricken outsiders.

Were you ignorant or naive when you proclaimed to Senator Kennedy that you have been in the forefront in successfully urging the South African government to make meaningful policy changes especially in the following areas:

opening up housing to black private ownership and thus effectively reversing the use of Black urban housing shortages as a form of influx control.

Have you heard of the 26 August 1983 amendment to Section 10 which made the housing shortage a more stringent influx control tool than it has ever been before?

You were told about it but we never heard you complain.

You owe us answers to these questions and you should be aware that if you fail to answer, not only in the things that you say at Carlton Hotel banquets, but in what you do in your business enterprises, the future will condemn you. You will be judged if you cannot provide much more concrete evidence that free enterprise really does mean more freedom, more well-being, more peace with justice than any other economic system devised by man.

My last question is addressed both to you and to the State President. What do you mean by "meaningful political participation to Blacks"? Meaningful political participation means "one person, one vote", no more and no less. After accepting that principle one can start negotiating constitutional structures to protect the liberty and security of individuals.

Is this what you mean?

If you do not mean that we are all doomed. The demand in black communities has gone beyond any tinkering around the edges of local government, educational systems, housing policies. It is a demand for liberation. Only if government is responsible to the whole people will all the injustices in welfare, pensions, housing, urbanisation, employment policies fall away.

Peace with justice is only ever achieved in the tension held between conflicting interests. Are you prepared to risk everything to be a partner in that creative tension? or will you wait to be destroyed because you have never been able to show that you mean what you say?

Meanwhile the rest of us have to get on with doing what we have to do.

We in the Black Sash have always been concerned with the victims, the excluded, the poor, the dispossessed. Our task is to find the non-violent ways in which power can be transferred to the powerless - not in any desire for the defeat or subjugation of the presently powerful, but in the true longing for a society in which equal distribution of powers will lead to peace and justice preserved in that creative tension which exists between conflicting interests of equal strength.

Sheena Duncan
Port Elizabeth
14 March 1985