

THE BLACK SASH

NATIONAL CONFERENCE 1986

Presidential Address

The past year has been a year of mourning. We last met in Port Elizabeth in March 1985. Matthew Goniwe was there. Di Bishop presented a report about the visit she and Brian had made to Namibia. Molly Blackburn was there.

Matthew is dead. Brian is dead. Molly is dead. We have wept for them as we weep for the hundreds of South Africans who have died since September 1984. The Institute of Race Relations estimates that 1158 people were killed during those months. At least 11 people died in police custody, or soon after detention or arrest for alleged political offences in 1985. At least 4000 people have been injured in the past 17 months. We don't suppose those figures are complete.

Too many people have just disappeared without trace in circumstances which lead their relatives to believe that they must be dead. We know that many of the wounded will not go to clinics and hospitals for treatment for fear of instant arrest. They do not appear in the official statistics.

Nor do the statistics list those who are irreparably maimed in mind and spirit by the violence which has engulfed them and in which some of them have participated.

How does one cure those young men whose training and experience in conscripted service have led them to enjoy, even to lust after, a piece of the action?

How does one cure those young people who lust to kill and burn

and destroy and for whom hatred is the staff of life - those who can burn a person with the dreadful necklace and dance around the flames?

How does one cure those who revel in inflicting pain on their fellow human beings by torture and beating and unimaginable varieties of ways of demonstrating power and authority through the physical subjection of others to their brutal will?

I don't know if any of this is curable. I am by nature optimistic but at the moment I fear that our whole country is being consumed by a mortal disease.

It did not take root in us on 3 September 1984. It began long ago when we used human beings for our own ends, when we stopped caring about other people, when we decided that people were expendable in the interests of power, profit and privilege.

Like other cancers it was once curable had we been prepared to accept treatment. Now it is devouring us and feeding itself on its own monstrous and obscene excrescences.

We in this conference have spent the whole day today listening to reports of repression and violence. We have heard of the country-wide use of vigilantes to terrorise black communities through murders, beatings, petrol bomb and grenade attacks on the homes of leaders of community organisations formed to oppose apartheid, and through the establishing of a rule of fear in townships, villages and rural communities. We have heard of the obstruction experienced by the victims of vigilante assaults when they try to lay charges with the police against their assailants.

During recent weeks reports of white vigilantes arming themselves and going on the attack against black people have become more and more frequent. This is happening now on the West Rand. The Sunday Star this week reported in horrifying detail brutal attacks on the people of Kagiso. In the same edition is a report of a Pretoria City Councillor, Mr Piet Rudolph, who has founded an

organisation called The Movement for the Liberation and Preservation of White South Africa. Membership is open to anyone who "puts emphasis on race". This organisation aims to teach women and children to shoot, fight fires and "identify the enemy".

We have tried to think what we can do in response to these terrible things beyond the effort to expose what is happening and providing succour to the victims.

So much remains unpublished because of restrictions on reporting imposed in terms of the Police, Prisons and Defence Acts and the almost total clamp-down on information which was part and parcel of the State of Emergency and which is now, we are told, to be built into new legislation giving the police the power to impose restrictions at will, at any time and at any place.

Not only does the law prevent full and proper investigative reporting of events in crisis situations but some newspapers have stopped even trying to convey to their readers news of what is happening. Too often one has to comb the inside pages and the small print to find any reference to some cataclysmic event which has caused death and injury and suffering to people in a black community.

The full consequences of the closure of the Rand Daily Mail are now becoming evident. We heard the news of that decision by the SAAN Board at our 1985 conference. Our fears and predictions at that time were well founded.

We have to search for news now and to make a point of reading those newspapers which are published for a black readership in order to get any idea of what is really going on. We have to search for newscasts on alternative radio stations and learn to balance what we see on SABC TV with our own knowledge of events.

Information is now only readily available to those who are fully involved in the realities of life in South Africa and the tragedy is that those who are now making the decisions which will shape

our future are not involved at all.

Most people in this country live in a state of chaos, disorder and confusion. Rational analysis seems impossible and only the very brave will venture to predict what will happen next week, next month, next year. There are many contradictions in our society and a good deal of duplicity in public affairs. These things make it very difficult to understand what is happening and where we are heading.

But there are some things which we can see clearly. What we see does not lead us to hope that South Africa is on the way towards democracy and justice.

There has been no change towards the dismantling of apartheid.

There has been some removal of race barriers at a social level for those who are wealthy enough to make use of expensive hotels, theatres and cinemas. There has been a noticeable removal of race discrimination in government owned and privately owned buildings in the major cities, and in shops, post offices, parks, sports-fields, public places. These changes are welcome but they have little to do with apartheid. There have been significant improvements in laws relating to labour relations. These improvements do not touch apartheid.

Apartheid is a deliberately planned, coldly evil system designed for the subjection and exclusion of the poor and black majority in order to further the interests and preserve the power of the wealthy and mainly white minority. There has been no reform to the apartheid structures.

Apartheid itself cannot be reformed. The administrative procedures used to enforce it can be reformed but such changes as are being made are, I believe, designed to entrench its structures. There is steady advance in this process as new governing systems are introduced and as ever greater powers are taken by the State to prevent and crush opposition and resistance.

The Population Registration Act (Race Classification) is the fundamental piece of legislation on which all else is based. This Act demands that everyone who is resident in South Africa must be classified according to their race. That classification dictates a person's entire existence - the State hospital or clinic in which he may be born, where he will grow up, where he may go to school, where he may live and where he may be buried. Were this Act to be repealed apartheid would crumble. All other legislation dealing with Parliamentary government, homeland and local authorities, Regional Services Councils, health, education, welfare, pensions, housing, Group Areas, influx control, the Constitution itself, would be rendered inoperable.

This is what the "dismantling of apartheid" means - total repeal of an enormous body of law and its replacement with legislation which takes no cognisance of the colour of a person's skin.

Are there any signs that government is even beginning to think about doing away with race classification? There are none whatsoever. On the contrary the Population Registration Act was amended in 1982 to provide for the fingerprinting of people of all race groups when they apply for identity documents, and for new controls to be imposed on people of all races through obligations imposed upon their employers and landlords.

On 31 January 1986 the State President announced that a uniform identity document is to be introduced for all South Africans. Unless the Population Registration Act is repealed, that uniform identity document will include in the identity number a code which describes the race of the holder. It may look uniform on the outside but the race differentiation will remain and will continue to dictate a person's life chances.

Other South Africans will not receive this "uniform" identity document. They are the Tswana, Xhosa and Venda people whose citizenship was taken away from them when the homelands in which they reside took independence. They will continue to be distin-

guished by travel documents proclaiming them to be aliens in the land of their birth.

The promise that citizenship is to be restored to those of them who are "permanently resident" in South Africa has yet to be translated into law. Who knows how "permanent resident" will be defined. It certainly will not include the 6 million people who are locked inside Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthatswana and Venda.

The obligation imposed on black South Africans to surrender all ten fingerprints when they apply for their identity documents at the age of 16 is one of the most bitterly resented aspects of the pass laws. The fact that this is to be extended to people of all race groups may remove the discrimination but it entrenches apartheid and the control the State exerts over its citizens.

The Government has promised that there will be freedom of movement for all South Africans by 1 July this year. Last week in Germiston the State President spoke about an urbanisation strategy which would ensure "a more even population distribution". That and all the talk of decentralisation does not sound much like freedom of movement. It seems to promise a new kind of control. It seems that when he said we have "outgrown the outdated concept of apartheid" he does not mean that we have outgrown apartheid itself. We have just outgrown the way we used to do it and are finding new ways.

The new look apartheid is based on the principle of "own affairs" government. The white, coloured and Indian Houses of Parliament are now well into their second year of existence and the bitter fruits are becoming evident. Apartheid is being greatly extended in the administration of matters such as health and education. One can take the example of hospitals which used to be under the control of Provincial administrations. They were segregated always but the transfer of control to the relevant racially defined House of Parliament is leading to a new and more rigid enforcement of that segregation. The Coronation Hospital in Johannesburg is a coloured "own affair" and has now been instructed to refuse

admission to patients of other race groups in preparation for its hand over by the Province to the House of Representatives.

In the field of education racially and ethnically defined departments proliferate while power to decide on education policy for all of them and to allocate finance to them is centralised in the hands of the white ruling minority party.

Its all very clever, subtle, and sophisticated but it is not leading to the dismantling of apartheid.

The State President's National Statutory Council looks like a non-starter. One can speculate that he may now move even further and establish a black Parliament to which those black people resident outside the homelands would be invited to send representatives. This would be the logical extension of "own affairs" apartheid government - a race federation in which ethnic black groups, non-ethnic black groups, coloured, indian and white groups would all have the trappings of authority while power remains in the hands of the white few through their control of the national budget and the constitutional processes which ensure that no legislation can be passed without their consent.

The State President in his January 31 speech said, "Committed as we are to these norms and values, we will have to defend the South African society against the forces of anarchy which seek to seize a monopoly of power and ultimately rule this nation, through the use of force, by an exclusive political clique."

He should know. His own exclusive political clique has seized a monopoly of power and has ruled this nation through the use of force for thirty eight years.

Mr Botha has a fine way with words. He committed himself to the following norms and values:

* Faith in the sovereignty of law as the basis for the protection of the fundamental rights of individuals, as well as groups.

- * Peace, freedom and democracy cannot exist without law and any future system has to conform to the requirements of civilised legal order and ensure access to the courts and equality before the law.
- * The dignity, life, liberty and property of all have to be protected, regardless of colour, race, creed or religion.

The State President either does not understand the words his speech writers put into his mouth, or that is one of the most cynical statements ever made by the President of any nation.

He must know that his political clique long ago destroyed the sovereignty of law as the basis for the protection of the fundamental rights of individuals.

He knows that his political clique has denied assured access to the Courts.

He must know that there is no peace, freedom or democracy in South Africa and it is his political clique that has denied these things to the people of this country.

He knows that the dignity of his fellow citizens is violated every day, that life is not protected, that property is not protected but that laws made by white people in South Africa have wrenched from tens of thousands of black people the land they owned and used and the homes they occupied.

He knows that there is no liberty in South Africa. Those who have the illusion that they are free merely enjoy a privileged exemption from the bonds which tie us all down. That exemption is withdrawn the minute a person ceases to conform and to be obedient.

Power is maintained by Mr Botha's political clique through the barrel of a gun (to quote another Botha). If this power has to be taken from them through the barrel of a gun then we are all going to live through a time of unimaginable terror. We will be afraid

and will have to learn to live with fear - for our children, our grandchildren and ourselves. There will not be much hope that we will come out of those terrible times into an era of justice and peace.

War destroys the future as well as the present.

I believe that there is one small hope left in South Africa at the present time and that lies in those political movements and black communities who have withdrawn and are withdrawing their co-operation from the apartheid State.

The withdrawal of co-operation entails civil disobedience.

Civil disobedience is not to be undertaken lightly but only in deep respect for the idea of law. All societies need a framework of law in which people can know what it is to be free. It is the law which is necessary to uphold justice and democracy and peace in free societies.

Civil disobedience must not be entered into when the law can offer redress. It is a last resort. In South Africa the law does not offer redress for the many gross violations of civil liberties and human rights which are part of the laws of this country.

We must claim for ourselves the right to live as free men and women. The guns of the state cannot prevent us. They can only succeed if we offer our co-operation and we have done that for too long.

We have hoped against hope that those who rule over us would change, would meet us half way, would see that the only hope for their own survival is to move forward with hands outstretched towards those whom they fear.

It is now clear that they will not. They have sown the seeds of their own destruction and will reap the bitter fruits unless we can rescue them from the results of their own sad blindness.

In The Star last Wednesday (5 March 1986) there were two photographs attached to quite unrelated stories.

One was of a group of children aged between 9 and 12 talking to their attorney. They have been charged with public violence. The picture showed so clearly that look small boys have when seen from behind. We know that look in our own sons - big heads on thin vulnerable necks, the defiant protective folded arms, the unnaturally neat and freshly pressed shorts.

The other was a photograph taken inside the hostel at Rand Mines Wolwekrans Colliery with those dreadful narrow concrete shelves in which mineworkers are evidently still expected to stack themselves away one on top of the other during the hours which are not spent wresting the coal from the rich earth to the profit of their employers.

Those small boys must not and will not grow up to be used and abused like that.

One way or the other these things are going to be stopped. The way is for us to choose.

There is not much time left but perhaps we can all work hard enough, be committed enough, do enough, to choose the ways which will build a new just and peaceful society for our common future.

Time magazine of 10 March 1986 began its editorial thus:

"Try not to forget what you saw last week.... Filipinos armed to the teeth with rosaries and flowers, massing in front of tanks, and the tanks stopping, and some of the soldiers who were the enemy embracing the people and their flowers. Call that a revolution? Where were the heads stuck on pikes? Where were the torches for the estates of the rich? The rich were in the streets with the

poor, a whole country up in flowers.

In a short string of remarkable days a crooked election was held and exposed; a dignified woman established her stature and leadership; a despot ranted, sweated, fled; a palace changed guard - all with a minimum of blood lust and an abundance of determination and common national will."

We could still do it like that. We could stop the tanks with our bare hands, we could find that common national will. If we do not do so we are going to enter into a very long and very terrible time of violent conflict which will not bring peace and justice for our sons and daughters, for our grandsons and granddaughters, or for their children.

The time is very short.

Sheena Duncan

14 March 1986