

## THE BLACK SASH

Presidential Address, National Conference 12th March 1987.

### 1987 - The Year of the Krimpvark, the Cougar and the Rooibok?

The State of Emergency proclaimed on June 12th 1986 is exactly nine months old. We are told that political violence is waning, after having claimed at least 2 387 lives in the past two and a half years (S.A. Institute of Race Relations). Yet we hear from townships all over the country of the despair and distress and anger felt by people suffering under the repressive presence of the forces of the state. We know that thousands have been detained under security legislation and that many of them remain in detention. We know that such detentions have not ceased. The difficulty of finding out very much about them, the widespread concern about the conditions in which they are held, and the impotence of the courts to secure their release, all compound the seriousness of the situation.

Apart from the actions of the security forces, during these past nine months we have seen the closure of many schools, the presence of community guards and "special constables" in the townships (with or without the assistance of the SADF and the SAP), and also the severest press restrictions South Africa has known so far.

The impact on the lives of the majority of South Africans has been severe: daily life has been disrupted; many communities have lost their respected leaders and experienced fragmentation and disorganization; horrifying accounts have been received about the treatment of detainees; parents are profoundly disturbed at reports that ex-detainees under the age of 21 years have attended special courses at "youth centres" about which little is known; young people coming to trial on charges of public violence have been given long prison sentences; and all this falls mainly upon the backs of people who are already struggling to surmount increasing poverty and unemployment.

What kind of legacy will the next generation inherit from this?

In many parts of the country organizations specially concerned with the plight of children have demonstrated their profound anxiety and their willingness to take action in this regard.

To some degree we can comprehend the effect of the State of Emergency on the people of South Africa. We need to examine what advantage the State can have derived from it.

Firstly, the National Party has succeeded in fostering a siege mentality among many of the electorate: the response to sanctions and isolation is an attitude of bravado - "we can go it alone". South Africa is depicted as the victim of unjust interference from abroad and of a total and revolutionary onslaught on its ideology and structures. The government controls the electronic media and exerts a stranglehold on the press: deprived of full access to information, many of the voters in the coming House of Assembly election will be making a choice based on scanty knowledge of their own country. (It will be the responsibility of organizations like ours to do what we can to remedy this).

Secondly, the State of Emergency has provided an embattled government with the breathing space to re-think its strategies and to draw on increasingly sophisticated tactics. The National Security Council and its specialised network of Joint Management Centres and their component parts are ensuring that information-gathering becomes more efficient, and greater control over the entire population can be achieved.

At the same time, the strategy involves attention to some of the areas which have attracted most criticism: the pass laws have been replaced by the new urbanisation policy; forced removals have to be handled more carefully; it seems inevitable that attempts to co-opt black people into government structures will accelerate; it also is probable that much-needed development in many townships will be undertaken in an attempt to legitimize the Regional Services Councils and black local authorities. The May 7th election seems to have been designed to give the National Party government the mandate to continue unimpeded along this path: to deal with what it sees to be some of the causes of "unrest", while retaining unhampered overall control.

All this has formed the climate within which we have tried to continue our on-going advice office work, our study of urbanizations policy and practice, our contact with communities outside as well as within the main urban centres, and our campaigns for civil rights. Over the next days we shall be hearing reports from our members and defining our policy for the tasks that lie ahead.

Where are we to look for solutions to South Africa's crisis?

The present critical phase of the struggle to effect real change in South Africa can be dated from the introduction of the new tricameral constitution in 1984. Those who voted "Yes" in the referendum which preceded it were optimistic that wondrous changes would result, and it was thought that its momentum would carry the government further along the road to power-sharing than it could envisage.

Instead, the tricameral parliament has failed to achieve even what it set out to do. If its credentials were dubious to start off with, it has now been severely discredited. It was bad enough that the State President should reveal his contempt for his junior partners by his public humiliation of Mr. Allan Hendrickse. Even before that, however, the progress of legislation through Parliament last year revealed the inherent flaws in their participation in the system:

In May and June 1986 the three Houses were presented with amendments to existing security legislation - the "Le Grange Bills". The Members of the House of Delegates and of the House of Representatives recognised this as a major hurdle, a test of their ability to influence the course of events. They wrested some concessions for the protection of detainees and for the restoration of the courts' right to question proclamations, and then went still further by upsetting the passage of the Bills after they were already halfway through the House of Assembly, referring them back to committee. Eventually the Bills were referred to the appointed President's Council, as the new constitutional dispensation provided, and were approved. The Members of the House of Delegates and House of Representatives could argue that their hands were clean - but they had been powerless to stop the Bills becoming law, and must share the responsibility.

An even clearer example came in September 1986 when the Borders of Parti-

cular States Extension Amendment Bill came before the three Houses. This legislation "adds many portions of land, together with the communities living on them, to the schedules of areas which are to be incorporated into Bophutatswana, Venda and Ciskei. In the light of the Restoration of South African Citizenship Act and the changes in the "pass laws", these incorporations will have particularly tragic consequences for the Xhosa, Tswana and Venda people involved. These people are at present permanently and lawfully resident in the Republic of South Africa. They are entitled to have their South African citizenship restored to them, to be issued with the new identity documents and to enjoy freedom of movement for the first time in many generations. After incorporation they will be entitled to nothing. They will be dependent upon temporary permits to work in South Africa which may or may not be granted to them. They will be condemned to permanent alienation from their own country, now and in the future. Their children and grandchildren will remain foreign." (South Africa 1986 - The New Betrayal S. Duncan, Sept. 1986).

A reading of the debates <sup>on this Bill</sup> in the House of Representatives and the House of Delegates is extremely revealing: Members were caught in a dilemma caused by their reluctance to oppose 'consolidation' of land for black people, set against their anxiety about the citizenship issue and possible 'forced incorporation'. The Deputy Minister of Development and of Land Affairs reassured them, and the State President himself visited the House of Delegates during the debate - an indication of the importance the government attached to having the Bill passed. Finally it was passed in all Houses.

Representatives in the two new Houses of Parliament all claimed at the time of their election that they would enter the new dispensation in order to oppose apartheid. Yet they are powerless to bring about any change in the patterns of power.

It is painfully clear that the tricameral parliamentary system is not the answer. Nor will it miraculously become the answer through the addition of any further arrangements which might be made for black citizens as a group or groups to be represented. The present system, from the Houses of Parliament, through the Regional Services Councils and the Joint Management Centres, down to the local level in every town and village, is designed to maintain power in the hands of the ruling group while drawing in compliant partners to create an updated concept of apartheid - together but unequal.

The longer this system is in force and the more its structures become entrenched, the harder it will be to dismantle. We are convinced that along this road lies disaster.

The most logical, the most peaceful, the most just dispensation for South Africa can only be reached through a commitment to ending apartheid and building a non-racial democracy with full and equal adult suffrage. The negotiations which might get us there will have to be preceded by the release of political prisoners and the unbanning of organizations; and whatever new constitutional arrangement is devised, it must ensure the recognition, and protection by law of basic human rights and freedoms - of person, conscience, speech, information, movement, meeting and association. The laws of the country must provide for control over the power of the state, and not for unfettered control by the state over the people.

That kind of society may seem a long way out of our reach, but as the might of the National Party government crumbles away after nearly 40 years in power, it is not too early to plan and work for it.

It is one of the straws of hope for the future that in spite of everything people are doing precisely this. We see the democratic trade unions building worker strength and organization, and looking outwards to the community in which they are based. We see alliances forged between organizations - workers, students, civics and women's groups. We see continuing efforts to draw up plans for a new kind of education. We see a strong commitment to discipline, democracy and debate.

What do we, the Black Sash, do to hasten that future society? Our organization is small, although it is growing. The majority of our members are women classified 'white': we have profitted through our access to the benefits of education, inheritance and privilege. Yet we also are in bondage to the system which denies us the freedom to participate on an equal basis in the rich tapestry which is the true South African life. How can we contribute to the struggle for that liberation which will free us at the same time as it frees the oppressed and disenfranchised majority?

We can start by rejecting some of the options:

1. We can resist the increasing militarisation of the country, and

re-affirm with the End Conscription Campaign that "War is no solution". In December I read with the most profound despair of farming families in the northern Transvaal who are being armed and trained and prepared to fight off cross-border raids. They have suffered losses from landmines, and this year they expect to receive grants and loans from the government so that they can buy vehicles protected against the blasts. Self-preservation and protection of one's family are natural instincts, but we should learn from the history of our neighbouring countries that working for a just peace is preferable to embracing war - especially a civil war which in the long run cannot be won.

Instead the border farmers are welded by the military into a "hell-of-a-good force of civilian soldiers", and the local vehicle industry gets a much-needed boost as its 1987 production plan is geared for armoured vehicles:

- \* The Cougar is a "one-ton anti-ambush and mine resistant bakkie";
- \* the Krimpvark, made by the creators of the Buffel and the Casspir, is a "mine-resistant vehicle for the civil sector" (the first production model has been delivered to a business concern in Witbank, so it is not only border farmers who form the target market);
- \* the Rooibok is a basic mine-protected capsule designed by the CSIR and mounted on a pick-up truck. (Argus, 13th and 17th December 1986)

2. We can choose to stay and work for our common future in South Africa. We do not blame those who decide they cannot bring up young children in this violent society, or who leave because they cannot in conscience serve in the South African Defence Force, or who cannot reconcile themselves to living with injustice. But we believe that people with skills to offer and the willingness to contribute to an open society are needed here.

total of 2 164 professional and technical workers emigrated during 1986, 80 doctors, 50 lawyers, 263 teachers, 616 engineers ... (Weekly Mail, 27/2/87 - 5/3/87).

We all know of people who have gone or plan to go to Canada, Australia, and other English-speaking countries. I wonder what kind of person would be interested in his recent newspaper advertisement:

"PARAGUAY country with a rapid development. Region of the thousand rivers of the ALTO PARANA. For sale: Beautiful farms for agriculture, rich ground giving two recofts a year. Forest: an investment with a high profit. Technical assistance on side and

facilities for local label. Ideal live frame and climate. Various fiscal advantages". The advertiser gives an address in Geneva.

If, then, we reject these two classic fight or flight responses, how do we face the future and contribute to it?

1. We can appropriate our common history. We need people's education too. Let me give an example: in 1979 a National Conference of the Black Sash, meeting in Cape Town, spent a good deal of time and effort drawing up a Charter for Women. I was one of the delegates and put considerable thought into rewording some of the clauses - it was an interesting and useful exercise. But it was only much later that I learned that there already was a Women's Charter in South Africa, and that it had been in existence since 1955, when it was part of the thinking towards the Freedom Charter. I felt I had been deprived of a vital piece of information and of the shared experience of women working together for their rights. We must not cheat ourselves of this heritage.

2. We can prepare ourselves to accept the inevitable growth of our cities into major urban centres where the majority of our fellow city-dwellers will be black and will thus more accurately reflect the reality of the South African population. We need to think of what this means in terms of infrastructure, jobs, schools, housing and social security - human needs that are at the moment no more than dreams.

3. Most of all we need to maintain an unrelenting pressure on whatever weak points we can find in the system that rules us, so as to hasten the day when the negotiations I have spoken of can take place at last.

The State of Emergency regulations make this more difficult than ever: so many peaceful avenues are now denied to us and to communities which have sought to avoid violence in the past: no boycott action can be advocated; no reports of security force action if it seems to be "unrest-related"; no civil disobedience; no bringing military service into disrepute; no making of "subversive statements"; and many risks in giving information about detainees or the conditions of their detention, which has made our reaction to the detention of our own members and of many others far less outspoken than we would have wished.

In spite of all the restrictions on publishing information we must continue to try to expose the facts as we witness them. The truth is a powerful tool and we must use it with courage and confidence. It can give us greater protection than a Krimpvark.

We have gained valuable experience from participating in the campaign to free the children, and we have noted that the authorities have demonstrated their vulnerability on this issue by their defensive reactions.

We commit ourselves to contributing now to the process of change, as we have tried to do in the past. At this Conference and in the years ahead we plan to show that while we have carved a small niche for the Black Sash in specific areas of work, we can also be rooted in the wider community of which we also form a part. We do not want to be left behind to become tragic curiosities in the new South Africa, like fading pictures of the sad Afrikaners in Kenya, or 'expats' anywhere in Africa.

We can assure other white South Africans, from our own experience, that non-racialism is alive and well in this country, if not in its governing structure.

The quality of the society we can look forward to in the future depends on the quality of the contribution we make to it now.

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Mary Burton.  
Cape Town.  
12th March 1937.