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The Color Question in South Africa

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[The color problem in South Africa has been made more acute by the policy of the present Government, which frankly favors repression of both the native and the Indian inhabitants. The Government aims to diminish, ultimately to exterminate, the Indian population; it has proposed a measure restricting the areas in which Indians may live, thus establishing virtual ghettos; taking away the right to buy or lease land except in a narrowly limited district in Natal; and creating other limitations on the rights of people already living under heavy restrictions.]

On April 23, in a quiet and rather tense House, the Minister of the Interior, Dr. Malan, announced that, owing to a formula which had been agreed upon between his own Government and that of India, the Asiatic bill would be postponed, pending a round-table conference to discuss the whole Asiatic problem in South Africa. The crux of that formula, oh, blessed word—is the sentence which states :

Cape Town, May 1

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The Government of the Union have impressed on the Government of India that public opinion in South Africa will not view with favor any settlement which does not hold out a reasonable prospect of safeguarding the maintenance of Western standards of life by just and legitimate means.

General Smuts, for the Opposition, gave the Government his rather lugubrious blessing, and the House agreed formally and unanimously to the postponement. The time and place of the conference have not yet been announced, but the oppressive bill, in any event, cannot come before Parliament until next year.

On this result of their visit the Government of India deputation, consisting of Mr. Paddison, an Englishman; two Indian members of the Council of State; and the Indian secretary of the deputation, Mr. Bajpai, have every reason to congratulate themselves. That their tact, their knowledge, and their unfailing courtesy under conditions calculated to try that courtesy to the uttermost were important elements in bringing it about cannot be doubted. In view of the feeling in South Africa on what General Smuts called "this very great and difficult question," the Government, in consenting to the round-table conference, has made a very marked concession and one which, one may

be certain, was not yielded without some strenuous protest from its own followers and some arguments of extraordinary persuasiveness from the deputation. What these latter may have been time will probably unfold. But the fact that compulsory repatriation of the South African Indians was unthinkable, while the voluntary repatriation so much desired by the South African people would cease automatically from the moment a bill unacceptable to the Indian people was placed on the statute book, may have made its impression. So also may the equally vital and previously unrealized fact of the almost limitless market which a friendly India might afford for South African products, notably for South African fruit.

Whether that carefully worded formula will in the end prove sufficiently potent to exorcise the fears and the prejudices of white South Africa remains to be seen. The mere fact of the prospective conference has undoubtedly lifted the whole question on to a higher plane, but the whole trend of the present Government, both in speech and legislation, has been in the direction of a harsher and franker declaration of white supremacy than any previous Government since Union has allowed itself, and there is little indication in the press or in the talk of the man in the street that this policy is unwelcome.

Meanwhile the plight of the Indians in the Transvaal and in Natal remains pitiable enough. Present restrictions press heavily upon them, and the uncertainty of their future shadows their days. A few of them have attained comfort, if not wealth, but most of them are poor and without facilities for education and self-improvement. They live among people who almost universally dislike and distrust them, even while making use of them, and who will do nothing to help them to improve their conditions. They lack leadership, and have rather deteriorated than otherwise since Mr. Gandhi left them. On the other hand, for the bulk of them repatriation would take them away from home rather than return them to their own place. Many of them are South African born of the second or third generation; and even those who are only domiciled here have for the most part been overlong away from the self-contained and caste-ridden atmosphere from which they came, Pariahs in this country, they are likely to be outcasts in their motherland. To this pass have the joint exertions of India, South Africa, and England herself brought them that commerce might be served.

But if the case of the South African Indian is pitiable, that of the South African native is at once more pitiable and more ominous, a menace to himself and to South Africa as a whole. Here again, though with more basis, it is fear, fear akin to panic, that dictates the bulk of the speeches and of the legislation of which he is the object. The Prime Minister himself, in a recent speech, drew attention to the fact that the whites were outnumbered by the natives three to one, and added that the proportion in numbers of the natives to the Europeans re-

ceived its true significance only when they realized the difference between the two races. When they had done so they would understand how important a fact this disparity in numbers was in influencing the solution of more than one problem. The feeling behind these words has sent the Secretary for Native Affairs and the Police Commissioner hotfoot to Parliament, to plead before a select committee the necessity for a new Prevention of Disorders Bill which shall render persons held to have been guilty of seditious libel liable to a penalty of £500 fine or five years' imprisonment, with or without hard labor, or to such imprisonment without the option of a fine. It is not even pretended that the object of this bill is other than to permit the effectual terrorizing and silencing of certain native agitators.

Yet of the swarming millions of natives it is a handful, indeed, which has sufficient education either to become liable to these drastic penalties or to lament the franchise which is denied them. Nor are the millions likely to occupy themselves to any extent for some considerable time to come in any other business than that of keeping alive. And this is a matter which the fear and the race prejudice of the white man, coupled with a bland ignoring of economic laws, are rendering more complicated not only year by year but month by month. Last session a paternal Parliament imposed a high protective duty on the cheapest native blankets, on the plea that these could be manufactured in the country.

This to people who earn as little as fifteen, ten, or even six shillings a month (roughly three, two, or one and a half dollars) is, as Professor MacMillan of the Witwatersrand University has pointed out in one of a recent series of articles, a "really cruel" tax. This year a tax "to encourage native development" is proposed. All adult natives are to contribute ten shillings per annum to a "native development fund," in addition to the uniform hut tax of twenty shillings. This will render the situation of the poorer natives even worse than a steady decline in prosperity since 1913 has made it. Among the causes of this decline, according to Professor MacMillan, are the Natives' Land Act of 1913, which checked the natives' power to acquire land to meet their increasing wants; the rise in prices during and after the Great War, to which the wages of the natives were never adequately adjusted; several years of little or no rainfall, ruining crops sown in a soil always more or less starved and in need of scientific treatment; and, since 1920, a drop in the price of cattle and of wool. The "boys" who work on the mines or in towns do, it is true, earn comparatively good wages, but most of their money is swallowed up in the relief of their families from the burden of debt that is the result of their poverty. When to conditions such as these are added the "civilized labor" policy of the present Government, and the Color Bar Bill," which on May 7 is to come before a joint sitting of the upper and lower houses, and which will then almost certainly become law, it is not surprising that the

Deputy Commissioner of Police should say publicly "that we shall have serious trouble with the natives before long." Led by crudely educated men of their own race, men embittered, ill-balanced, and often extremely egoistic, barred from avenues of employment long open to them, and from all hope, whatever their ability, of rising any higher in the scale of industrial work, it is like enough, as General Hertzog said at Malmesbury, that the frankly rebellious speeches of Kadalie and Professor Thaele are "going to be an incentive toward the beginning of a movement among the natives in general to get into their possession the most widely extended powers for having a say in the control of the country."

General Hertzog's proposals for the solution of the native problem are not yet before the country, but the

run-out of 16.

'After a debate lasting four days the bill was passed on May 12 by a

chances are that they will be as sincere, as well-intentioned, and as vague as his many speeches on the subject. Of the temper in which they will be received by Parliament and by the country there can unhappily be little doubt. A panic of self-preservation plus a deeply rooted race prejudice is hardly the atmosphere in which wisdom, justice, or even foresight can have its being. Nor is there any real difference in feeling among the three parties in the country on the question. Sectional economic interest may lead to a temporary difference of attitude, as in the Color Bar Bill, where the South African Party, which is identified largely with the Chamber of Mines, has opposed a measure which will deprive the mines of a certain amount of cheap labor. And in a few constituencies in the Cape, where a native franchise still exists, a gesture of humanitarianism is at times in order. But the body of opinion in Parliament and out of it which is prepared to consider the native problem with detachment, constructive sympathy, and wisdom is appallingly small. The outlook for the next generation of South Africans is gloomy indeed.