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GOVERNMENT CREATED POLITICAL BODIES

South African Indian Council

Political Developments

Insistent calls had been echoed in 1974 to the Government by various people opposed to the idea of division of thirty seats into fifteen elected and fifteen nominated by the Minister of Indian Affairs, that all members of the South African Indian Council (SAIC) be elected by the Indian community and these had been of no avail. It was later learned that some senior members of the SAIC (elected in 1974) had secretly asked the Minister of Indian Affairs, Mr Marais Steyn, never to make the council a fully elected body.¹ It was reported that these council members had asked Mr Steyn to recommend to the Government that the next council be made up of thirty elected seats and fifteen nominated seats hence increasing the seats to forty-five. It was suspected that the senior council members had wanted this amendment to protect those nominated members who would be unlikely to win elections by popular vote. Commenting on these disclosures, Mr S. Abram Mayet, a SAIC elected member, said "the so-called leaders who are not wanted by the people should not try to get into the council through the back door."²

Later in 1975 an invitation by the Prime Minister, Mr B. J. Vorster, was tendered to the SAIC and the Coloured Person's Representative Council (CRC) to establish an Inter-Cabinet Council (ICC) with the South African Government. CRC and SAIC executive members would

meet, in consultation with the White cabinet minister, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, to discuss common issues.³ The CRC rejected the offer whilst the SAIC had resolved to give the Cabinet Council a try for one year. This news was received with anger and disappointment from some Indian circles who disassociated themselves from the resolution. They felt that local communities, which have the pulse of the people and the Indians at large, had not been given a chance to air their views on the fundamental issue affecting them. They pointed out that a referendum should have been held on the Cabinet Council issue.⁴ In its editorial, the *Leader*⁵ praised the CRC for rejecting the invitation to "enter the White man's laager" especially after the Government's rejection of the Theron Commission recommendations. It was also noted that "The African was not invited at all because he is, no doubt, expected to resolve his destiny in his homelands". It further asserted that the "ICC was no legislative or executive power. At this stage it appears to be no more than another consultative and advisory body of no greater force and effect than the local affairs committees which have been proved to be so ineffectual and pointless."⁶ In yet another attack meted against the Council decision, Mr S. A. Mayet, amongst those SAIC members who wanted to delay its entrance into the Council until the SAIC was an elected body, said the Cabinet Council would not be able to do any more for the Indian community than the SAIC had done in the past twelve 'frustrating' years.⁷

The majority feeling within the council was that the climate of change in South Africa was moving favourably for the Government to prove its sincerity by making concessions through representations made in the committee and that the Indian Community could not lose anything by being included in the committee.⁸

The Indian Labour Party in Natal also raised voices of rejection to the Prime Minister's offer because they did not regard it as a stepping stone in the political development of the Black people towards direct representation in parliament. Mr Maurice Lewis, the party's executive member in Natal, reiterated that after a closer scrutiny of the details of the Cabinet Council, the party leadership arrived at the following conclusions:

—The Cabinet Council offered no real power, since the ultimate power of deciding was vested in the hands of the Prime Minister;

—It is simply white baasskop, sugar-coated;

—The Cabinet Council would not be the forum for the discussion of Indian and White affairs. Matters affecting the Indian community would be handled by the Indian Council and therefore, could not be presented to Cabinet Council for discussions.

—The ultimate goal of direct representation in the Parliament of South Africa was a matter not for consideration by the Cabinet Council. It was

therefore not the intention of the government to utilise the Cabinet Council as a stepping stone in the political development towards direct representation.⁹ It was on the basis of these reasons that Mr Lewis called the SAIC "tools of the government" insinuating at the irony which he saw in SAIC accepting the ICC proposals on the one hand and rejecting the CRC call for a black alliance on the other.

The subtle emergence of new Indian political parties, geared at contesting seats for SAIC, appeared to observers as a sign of inherent discontent with SAIC emanating from the way this body handled Indian matters. These parties appeared mainly from top businessmen's circles. A new political party, known as the South African Congress Party, was allegedly launched after some top-level caucuses among the executive of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC).¹⁰ It should be remembered that the NIC policy rejected any type of participation in these platforms. This issue of whether or not NIC should participate in SAIC to expose its fraudulence had accrued at the time of SAIC election and a resolution rejecting this move was adopted.

Having confirmed the intentions of some NIC top men to contest the SAIC elections, Mr M. J. Naidoo, the NIC chairman, interviewed by *Black Review*, said that this group rescinded its decision, after having analysed the possibilities of achieving its objectives. Mr Naidoo said that in the wake of new developments in the country, this group (with which he had sympathised) saw no value and no point in attempting to expose the system within the government created platforms. Therefore this party dissolved and a resolution to this effect was passed. Yet another party, the Republican Party, led by a Durban Cliffdale businessman, Mr R. G. Douglas, was formed, apparently on a strong footing. Consequently, the Minister of Indian Affairs requested it to submit five names of people who would stand for nomination to the vacant seat created by the death of a SAIC nominated member, Mr I. E. Vanda of Newcastle.¹¹ Interviewed by the *Leader*, the party's secretary, Mr R. Pillay, whose name was also submitted to the Minister, said that the Department of Indian Affairs had approached the party in February and the required names were subsequently submitted but no acknowledgement had been sent by the Minister. Briefly outlining the new party's mode of operation, Mr Pillay said that his party, being recognised by the Government, would, therefore, work in consultation with it. "We do not intend to make unreasonable demands on the government" he said.¹² Justifying the Party's participation in the SAIC, the chairman, Mr N. Sewchurran, said that the party decided to secure a position in the Council because it felt that two SAIC members were not able to highlight all the problems faced by the people of Chatsworth (referring to the SAIC members who were residents of Chatsworth); "In fact since both members are on the executive committee, it has

made their job even more difficult with due respect to the work they have done and are doing.”¹³ In short, according to observers, the Republican Party indulged itself, amongst other reasons, in order to remedy the situation.

Following a call made by the Labour Party leader, Mr Sonny Leon, for a black alliance between all black bodies working within or without the Government platforms, the SAIC had rejected the idea. However, after several attacks by some Labour Party periphery and further negotiations with Sonny Leon, the SAIC affirmed the arrangement of an informal meeting between top SAIC and CRC men. Talks would be based on the possible merger between the two councils. The Labour Chief Whip, Mr Lofty Adams, outlining some of the problems prevailing within the Indian and Coloured communities, mentioned the uproar which emanated from the Athlone committee (Coloured) inspecting licence applications for Indian traders in the area. He said that they found themselves in the same situations since both communities had ethnic councils. “We should get together to hammer out a pattern of uniformity. Once we have sorted ourselves out, the Africans, not amenable to the homeland concept, should in their own right be allowed to do the same: and then the two bodies should get together” he said. Supporting the move Mr, Leon stated his readiness to merge with anybody. He encouraged any moves towards the Councils’ merger.¹⁴ Welcoming the move, Mr Gopie Munsook, the Cape member of the Indian Council executive, said: “We have been living and trading together intermarrying and attending the same schools, so I don’t see why we can’t merge Councils till we get parliamentary representation.”¹⁵

There was a reported split within the SAIC resulting from observable personal differences. Consequently a section of SAIC decided to join forces in attempts to oppose the so-called conservative members of the Council. The Executive Council chairman had denied that the Council was split into two camps. But it emerged later that this group was preparing to form a new political party called the Reform Party which would follow a more liberal trend.

Mr Rajbansi, a member of the Executive Council of the SAIC, tendered his resignation from the Executive Council on the grounds that he opposed any participation in the Cabinet Council which he saw only as a consultative body. In his resignation he said that he upheld principle above finance and position. He felt sorry for Indian teachers who had high hopes that the SAIC, like the ICC, would have done something to put right the many ills in Indian Education. Quoted in *Post*,¹⁶ Mr Rajbansi said “In view of the general conditions prevailing in the country at this particular period, it would be unwise for us to serve on the Cabinet Council on which every race group in South Africa is not represented.”

He urged Indian teachers not to be disappointed but hope for the Reform group to solve their problems.

This new reformist group hoped to contest the 1977 elections with the five spearheads namely, Salam Mayet (Benoni), Mr Ibrahim (Pretoria), Mr Bassoo (Vereeniging), Mr A. Rajbansi (Chatsworth, Natal) and the leader of this group, Mr Y. S. Chinsammy, representing the Reformist party. This party hoped to enjoy full backing from the Indian community having adopted the Coloured Labour Party approach. The leader of the group hoped that the Reform party would be officially launched at an envisaged National Convention by the end of 1976.

Educational Powers entrusted to SAIC

It was reported in January 1976, that the SAIC had been entrusted with educational powers by the Minister of Indian Affairs. This followed a long period of waiting by the SAIC which had requested for such powers for some time. The SAIC executive had, prior to the new arrangement, requested complete control of Indian education, with the intention of opening all Indian schools to all races. It had also decided that it would employ suitably qualified teachers on merit, irrespective of their race. After long deliberations on the control of education the Council had resolved that it was particularly opposed to any educational institution being reserved for a particular race. The Executive Committee (EXCO) was directed by the Council to use every power at its disposal to work towards the ideal of having educational institutions opened to all children of the South African Community. The EXCO was also authorised by Council to make available wherever possible all educational institutions under its control to all other races.¹⁷

Certain powers initially delegated to the Minister of Indian Education were handed over to the SAIC. The Secretary for Indian Affairs, Mr H. A. Prinsloo, gave a clear indication of the position of SAIC in Indian education when he said, "Let me state very clearly that there has been no transfer of education to the SAIC at all.". The SAIC later resolved to redelegate the powers to the Director of Indian Education, Mr Gabriel Krog, to hold the fort for the SAIC until further notice. After the SAIC had been widely criticised for its redelegation of powers to the Director, it resolved in principle to withdraw all or any powers held by the Director. A report detailing the adjustment of powers was drawn up and Mr Rajbansi and two other executives, namely, Mr Ismail Kathrada and Mr I. S. H. Mayet, were mandated to report personally to Mr Krog. The EXCO had taken this decision in view of lack of communication and consultation between the Department and the EXCO.¹⁸ At the time of going to print, there had been no response from the Government officials. In terms of the Indian

Education Act, the control of education is vested on the Minister and the Secretary for Indian Affairs. However, the SAIC Act provides for the Minister of Indian Affairs to delegate certain or all of his powers conferred upon him by the Act to the executive committee".¹⁹ Mr Prinsloo emphasised "Please note that he can delegate his powers but not his responsibility".²⁰ Apparently the Minister delegated some of his powers but not all deducing from the subsequent controversial issue of staff promotions and appointments.

Less than a week after the Executive Committee of the SAIC had decided that the portfolio of Indian Education would be handled by Mr A. Rajbansi and Mr J. N. Reddy, the appointment by the Minister of Indian Affairs of ten inspectors of Indian education, three of them White, was announced by the Division of Indian Education. This came as a surprise to the Indian community which had hoped that SAIC could handle appointments as well. This also came as a surprise to the SAIC since they had not been consulted regarding the appointments. Commenting on the appointments, Mr A. Rajbansi said "The Minister of Indian Affairs made those appointments in terms of the Public Service Act while the powers which were delegated to the SAIC were those he enjoyed under the Indians' Education Act."²¹ He nevertheless, stressed that the SAIC should have been consulted in terms of the provision in the Indian Education Act which entrenched the spirit of consultation to prevail between the SAIC and the Division of Education in the Department of Indian Affairs.²² These appointments raised a big storm especially within the educational sectors in the Indian communities.

The South African Indian Teachers' Association (SAITA) registered its concern over the developments on educational matters. It had been sceptical about the redelegation of powers by SAIC to the Director and had voiced this out. When the new promotions of inspectors became known the SAITA officials adopted an we-told-you-so attitude towards SAIC. There was great dissatisfaction within the ranks of teachers over the promotions of teachers as well. Mr Dama Nair, secretary of SAITA, said that SAITA was examining the whole question of promotions of teachers. A memorandum was to be prepared for submission to the Director of Indian Education, Mr Krog, to whom powers of transfer and secondment of teachers were redelegated by the Minister of Education.²³ SAITA had a resolution which barred any recognition of the SAIC by SAITA until it was vested with powers over education.²⁴

General Issues

Housing or accomodation has always remained a key problem within the growing Indian community. The Department of Community

Development which is responsible for resettlement of the people from one area to the other, was severely accused by the Indian Community for various moves it made in terms of the Group Areas Act. Those who recognised SAIC as the authentic voice of the Indian Community, expected it to intervene effectively should any Indian people be evicted from their places of abode. Those who saw fraudulence in the Council expected its interventions to be ineffective.

Quite a number of places occupied by black families or businessmen in towns, were affected by these expropriations and evictions. In Durban, Indian families staying at Cathedral Road Pine Street, who were served with expropriation orders, immediately organised themselves in protest against these evictions. They were given alternative accommodation in Chatsworth until better accommodation was available in Phoenix. An action committee representing affected families was elected and subsequently the committee organised a mass meeting where the eviction would be discussed at length. SAIC had been invited to attend was unable to do so for various reasons. Opening the meeting, Mr I. Butler, one of the convenors, accused the SAIC members of saying "These so-called leaders of ours should have a rethink whether they want to serve their people."²⁵ At the meeting the following resolutions were adopted unanimously:

- Withdrawal of expropriation notices and eviction summonses;
- Stop all further action against families until adequate and suitable accommodation was available in the Phoenix housing scheme;
- Recognise that accommodation being offered to the tenants in Chatsworth's units six and eleven was unsuitable;
- Recognise that the eviction of families when the Muslim fasting month had just commenced and when their children were also busy studying for examinations was untimely.²⁶

Cato Manor, which is a suburb in Durban, had also been declared a white area and therefore Indians were required to leave the place. Indians believed that the whole of Cato Manor was historically theirs hence Mr Reddy's objection for representation by Coloureds to Government authorities pressing for a slice in Cato Manor. Following this the SAIC negotiated for the return of at least, the section of Cato Manor to the Indian Community. In a Cato Manor tour by the Minister of Indian Affairs together with SAIC team led by J. N. Reddy who fed out facts and figures to substantiate its plea for rezoning, only managed to say that the fact that the Prime Minister and the Ministers of Community Development and Planning were prepared to have a second look at Cato Manor was a hopeful sign. After the said tour one SAIC Executive member said that he was confident that at least "a slice of Cato Manor would be given back to Indians after our representation this week."²⁷

Approaches were made by the Member of Parliament for Albany M. W. H. D. Deacon to the Ministers of Community Development and Indian Affairs to allow Indian businessmen in Grahamstown to remain where they were. These businessmen were being moved from the central part of town to 1,6 kilometres from the main business centre adjacent to the Coloured and African areas in Grahamstown. Mr Deacon called for Mr Steyn to heed his plea and thereby gaining respect and appreciation from the people.²⁸

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