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GOVERNMENT CREATED POLITICAL BODIES

Coloured Persons Representative Council

The year 1975 became the most eventful one in the short history of the Coloured Persons Representative Council (CPRC). It was the year during which the second general elections of the Council were held and won decisively by the controversial Labour Party of South Africa under the leadership of Mr Sonny Leon. As was related in *Black Review* 1974/75, the Labour Party altered its earlier strategy of gaining control of the CPRC to destroy it through the boycott tactic. On the contrary, the Party opted to return to its original policy of remaining within the CPRC to expose the Government's policy of separate development. In accordance with the party decision, therefore, leader Sonny Leon accepted nomination as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the CPRC. The following Labour Party members were elected into his Executive Committee: Rev. Alan Hendrickse, Deputy Leader (Education); Mr Norman Middleton, Vice-chairman (Social Welfare and Pensions); Mr David Curry (Housing); Mr Fortuin (Rural Areas and Settlements).

After the Labour Party had taken control of the CPRC, definite moves were made by the Government to introduce proposals enhancing the status of the CPRC and giving it wider and greater powers over Coloured affairs. Meetings were held between the Labour CPRC

leadership and Government Cabinet Ministers, as well as the Prime Minister, Mr Vorster. Government proposals, which included the raising of the status of the CPRC Executive to that of a fully fledged cabinet and that of its members to ministerial status, provided for:

- The necessary arrangements whereby each minister would carry responsibility for his own department, and relations between ministers to be conducted in accordance with conventional cabinet procedures;
- Delegation of the necessary powers to ministers not only to initiate legislation without prior approval as at present, but also to carry out decisions of the council;
- The creation of a consultative cabinet council which would consist of an equal number of ministers from the CPRC cabinet and the white cabinet to consider matters of Common interest.¹

Subsequent to a meeting between the CPRC Executive and two South African cabinet ministers, namely Dr Schalk Van der Merwe, Minister of Coloured Affairs, and Mr. A H. Du Plessis, Minister of Community Development, in August 1975, the CPRC chairman, Mr Sonny Leon, announced that the whole Council would have to vote on whether or not his executive should accept the Government proposals. Talking about their meeting with the Government Ministers Mr Leon said; "We made it plain to the Minister that we are sick and tired of serving on toothless advisory bodies". He said his own view was that unless the Coloured members of the Inter-Cabinet committee were given real powers to introduce improvements in the political and the economic lot of the Coloureds, the whole exercise would be a waste of time.²

The new session of the CPRC was opened on the 5th September, by the State President, Dr Nico Diedericks, who urged Coloured leaders to respond positively to the Government proposals. By this time, however, the Labour Party leadership, which controlled the CPRC, was calling on the Government to give the Coloured people "political and economic parity with the Whites at every opportunity." Within a few days following the opening of the session, it was reported that the Labour Party caucus had unanimously approved a proposal to adjourn the CPRC until 19th March to give the Government time to consider Coloured demands for full South African citizenship. This was seen as a move that could force the Government to make use of the provisions of the new amendment to the CPRC Act. The provisions allowed for ministerial take-over of CPRC business, should the Council stop functioning.

On 12th September the CPRC decided by 33-22 votes to adjourn for a period of between 130 days and six months (until March) as had been proposed by the Labour Party caucus. The opposition Federal Party

Leader, Mr Willie Bergins, desperately tried to sway the Council against the move. He tried unsuccessfully to make a case that the Council should be used because it was the start of constitutional developments for Coloureds. He eventually threatened: "I will make it my work to go to the Government and ask them to make the necessary legislative amendments to make the Council work."³ In a speech introducing the motion Mr Leon mentioned several Coloured grievances. One of his major complaints about the Council was that, rather than narrowing, the disparity in expenditure between Whites and Coloureds had increased. He complained also that the Council had to accept the budget approved for it by the White Government, and nothing could be changed.

Later, referring to the six months ultimatum for the Prime Minister, Mr Leon said, "We've given him extra time, I think the Government will have to provide us with a new political dispensation for all the people. *They have no alternative.*"⁴ However, Mr Leon added that he would continue to carry out his duties as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the CPRC unless the Government decided to oust him. "Should I be dismissed then I am sure South Africa would be a laughing stock."⁵

All this was happening at a time when the Prime Minister, Mr Vorster, was due to meet the Executive Committee of the CPRC on 20 October. When the meeting actually took place, Mr Vorster made it clear that the Government's policy remained firmly one of separate development.⁶ This was followed by a statement by the Minister of Coloured Re'ations, Mr Van der Merwe, on 23 October in which he called on Mr Leon to pass the budget for the continued services of the CPRC. In the statement⁷ the Minister said that in view of the fact that the Council had adjourned on 12 September 1975 until March 1976, before it had considered its estimates of expenditure for the financial year 1975-76, thus failing to make the necessary funds available for the continued services of the Council, he had prorogued the Council with effect from 8 October. He said he had consequently appointed CPRC Chairman, Mr Leon, to consider and appropriate funds deemed necessary for the continued services of the Council by way of expenditure for the current financial year, as well as the necessary part appropriation estimates for the first half of the following financial year.

Thousands Coloured officials, teachers and pensioners depended on funds voted in the budget for their salaries and pensions.⁸ Commenting on the Minister's demand, Mr Leon said, "This latest action of the government makes nonsense of the concept of democracy and forces me into an invidious position. It also makes an absolute farce of the CPRC as an institution by which Coloured people can attain control over their own affairs. He added that if there were still Coloured people

in South Africa who believed that the CPRC was anything other than a facade and that it could play any constructive role in their development, *they needed their heads examined*".⁹ It was subsequently announced that after consultation with his Executive, Mr Leon had refused to pass the budget.¹⁰ This budget, which Mr Leon regarded as discriminatory and unacceptable, amounted to R158 million. On the contrary the Labour Party submitted an increased budget amounting to R264 million which would enable the CPRC Executive to achieve parity with white expenditure on education.

A wrangle ensued between the Government and Mr Leon which ended with the Government dismissing the Labour Party Leader from his position as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the CPRC. Making the announcement, the Minister of Coloured Affairs also disclosed that the State President had appointed Mrs Alatheia Jansen to succeed Mr Leon. Mrs Jansen, a government nominated member of the CPRC, was employed by the Department of Information as an Information Officer.

Announcing Mr Leon's dismissal, the Minister said: "The position has now been reached where Mr Leon has not only failed until today to execute the duties conferred on him, but he refuses to do so on account of decisions taken by his Executive Committee and his party, the Labour Party. This has created a situation where the duties conferred on him as Chairman apparently clashed with his position as leader of a political party. His final refusal created a situation which, for the sake of orderly administration, could not be allowed to continue." The Minister added "Anybody who accepted such a responsible administrative and executive position knew it was inherent in such an acceptance that the duties attached should be executed irrespective of personal or sectional interest."¹¹

This incident was followed by the mass resignation of the rest of the members of the Executive Committee who had been elected by the CPRC. After the dismissal of the Labour Party from the CPRC driving seat, there emerged reports that in fact the opposition Federal Party Leader, Mr William Bergins, had recommended the Leon expulsion in a meeting with Premier J. Vorster on 29 October, 1975. In a memorandum, Mr Bergins was reported to have requested for the Leader of the minority party or an independent member to be appointed to the post.¹² The Transvaal leader of the Federal Party, Mr Jac Rabie, clashed with Mr Bergins over the Leon chairmanship issue. Mr Rabie apparently objected to the recommendation to have Mr Leon dismissed as CPRC Executive Chairman. He was subsequently dismissed from his position as Transvaal leader of the Federal Party and eventually expelled from the party.¹³

Following the sacking of Mr Leon as leader of the Labour Party which had won 31 of the 40 elected seats in the CPRC, Mr Leon immediately requested a general election. It is believed that Mr Leon was hoping that he would return to his position with a majority. However, this request was refused by the South African Government.

General Issues

June 1976, a month of storms and upheavals that were sweeping the country, was also the month during which the long-awaited Theron Commission report was published. This Commission, named after its chairman, Professor Erika Theron, who was regarded as an expert on Coloured matters, had been appointed in 1973 to research and analyse Coloured living conditions so as to recommend ways in which the interests of the Coloured community could be served economically, politically and socially. Other Commissioners, most of them Whites, included senior academics, senior members of the Coloured community, and people known to have expert knowledge of Coloured Affairs.¹⁴

This Commission presented recommendations which sparked off controversial reaction, not only from amongst white political parties, but also from the general public. Having conducted extensive investigations, the Theron Commission made wide-ranging recommendations in the fields of sport, welfare, economy, education, politics, etc. Almost all recommendations—centred around the Nats' policy of apartheid—led to a conclusion that the Government should reverse its policy in all respects. This was a bone of contention over which the Nats were not prepared to bow down. Prior to the release of this document, the Prime Minister, Mr B. J. Vorster, had made it clear to the public that the Government would not alter its policy irrespective of the findings of the Commission. The National Party Congress would indicate the line of direction to be followed by the Nationalist Government. Recommended reforms included the following:

- that there should be drastic constitutional changes which would allow for direct representation in Parliament, at different Government levels and in various decision-making bodies. Detailed proposals would be made by a committee of experts to look into the matter. The Coloured Persons Representative Council and its executive committee was rejected as being a total failure;
- the repeal of the Mixed Marriages Act as well as Section 16 of the Immorality Act (which prohibits sexual relations between Blacks and Whites);
- that the Group Areas Act should be modified so that certain business and industrial areas could be available for use by Coloureds as well. District Six, Woodstock and Salt River in the Western Cape should

- be reclassified as Coloured areas. Coloureds should also be allowed to buy agricultural land wherever they wished;
- all sporting, theatrical and recreational amenities should be open to Coloureds on application to local authorities as against the traditional system of seeking ministerial permission. The Commissioner noted the widespread and intense opposition among the vast majority of Coloureds to the administration of Group Areas Act. However, it felt that the 'essential structure' of separate residential areas accommodated for in the Group Areas Act should not be disturbed;
 - that trade unions, agricultural co-operatives, private schools, business organisations like Assocom and other White organisations should be allowed to decide for themselves whether to admit Coloureds or not;
 - that in business, various measures were to be recommended to encourage the development of Coloured entrepreneurs. The Coloured Development Corporation (CDC), whose progress was still at a low ebb, should be expanded in scope;
 - that job reservation should be lifted for Coloureds because "job reservation between Coloureds and Whites no longer fulfils any appreciable function".¹⁵ In order for Coloureds to qualify in these jobs, a labour advancement programme was needed including the establishment of training centres. Wage gaps between Coloureds and Whites doing the same work should be eliminated;
 - reforms needed in farm labour included improved living conditions for labourers, abolition of the prison labour system and the giving of liquor to labourers—the so called 'tot-system';
 - that social welfare, transport, general housing services for Coloureds were inadequate and therefore needed urgent attention;
 - that culturally, the Coloureds should be regarded as part of the white group;
 - that there should be increased contact and dialogue between Coloureds and Whites in sport and move away from all unnecessary controlling regulations for competitions at national, regional and club level. Merit teams were preferred to "Invitation Sides" at national level.

In a subsequent White Paper, the Government reacted to the Theron recommendations which were somewhat unpalatable to it, reiterated that it would not divert from its standpoint. By so doing, the Government was avoiding a return to "a situation of political exploitation and conflicting of group interests."¹⁶ The White Paper further pointed out that parallel development had been beneficial to the Coloured people and the Republic since its inception. Most of the recommendations were rejected by the Government. These included: the repeal of Immorality Act's Section 16 and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act.

Also, another recommendation that Coloureds be allocated their own homeland was totally rejected by the Government.

Despite this adamant standpoint by the South African Government, the basic premise from which the Theron recommendations were based, that "there should be the greatest measure of consultation and the greatest possible say in the spheres of common interest"¹⁷ was affirmed in the White Paper. However, a more detailed official standpoint on the recommendations was still due for publication after the Government Departments affected by proposals had been given time to study them.

Widespread expressions of disappointment and anger swept the country following the Government's reaction to the proposals. The white opposition political parties saw this rejection as an omen for confrontation between all South African races.¹⁸ Mr Frederick van Zyl Slabbert warned that the Government rejected the recommendations "at its own peril as well as at the peril of South Africa".¹⁹ He further said that the last thing South Africa could afford at such a time was a government that floundered indeterminately in a political impasse of its own. The opposition saw this hesitancy to implement some of the recommendations as arising out of differences and tensions within the Nationalist Party.²⁰ The Coloured Community which had been waiting for the Theron Commission report for the past three years, expressed its feelings on the whole controversy. Amongst Coloured leaders who indicated concern was the Labour Party leader, Mr Sonny Leon, who said that relations between Whites and Coloureds would be strained as a result of the hopes that Coloureds had cherished over the recommendations and the subsequent refusal thereof. He asserted also that it would further encourage an African-Coloured alliance. Asked for his comment by *Rand Daily Mail*, Mr Willie Bergens, leader of the pro-Government Federal Party, declined to comment. Dr R. E. Van der Ross, Rector of the University of Western Cape who had served on this commission, based his argument on his experience with the Theron Commission warning people not to rush to conclusions and get rid of hot air, dispense a mass of flowery oratory which would vanish in the end. Coloured people were to accept that the Government would obviously not bend. Apparently Dr Van der Ross was worried about Coloured identity and the need for the Government to accept the Coloureds as nation and equal with Whites. He predicted disillusionment within the Coloured Community specifically from the merging middle-class who wanted a new dispensation. He said that the position could result in Coloured emigration from the country.²¹

Statements uttered by SAIC leaders give the impression that the Indian Council had been awaiting the report as well as Government reaction to it with keen interest. According to the former Chairman of the South

African Indian Council, Mr H. Joosab, the Indians were as disappointed as the Coloureds were at the Government's "ill considered action." As long as the Nationalist Party remained in power, the Indians would be condemned to second class citizenship. Indians, like Coloureds, were frustrated at their lack of representation in the real political power centres.

REFERENCES

¹*Daily Dispatch* 5.9.75, 19.8.75

²*Daily Dispatch* 23.8.75

³*Daily Dispatch* 13.9.75

⁴Ibid

⁵*Daily Dispatch* 15.9.75

⁶*Rand Daily Mail* 21.10.75

⁷*Herald* 24.10.75

⁸Ibid

⁹Ibid

¹⁰*Daily Dispatch* 31.10.75

¹¹*Daily Dispatch* 12.11.75

¹²*Sunday Times* 23.11.75

¹³*Daily Dispatch* 21.11.75, *Rand Daily Mail* 18.12.75

¹⁴*Rand Daily Mail* 19.6.76

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Ibid

¹⁸Ibid

¹⁹Ibid

²⁰Ibid

²¹*Herald* 10.7.76