

GROUNDS FOR HOPE

A year of great political importance lies ahead

Keynote address to the Black Sash National Conference

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Retiring National President

SOUTH AFRICA has, during this last year, passed through sad and difficult times and the Sash, because it did not hesitate to carry on with what it conceived to be its duty, was closely involved both in the political complications arising from the state of emergency, and in the heartbreaking human tragedies which resulted from the massed African protest against pass laws and inadequate wages.

There are still menacing clouds on the political horizon. In spite of the lifting of the emergency, Opposition parties have been unable to persuade the Government to modify its policy and there is no hope that they will be able to defeat the Government, either singly or together, in the foreseeable future, unless a considerable change can be brought about in the thinking of the electorate. The need for the Sash, therefore, to help bring about such a change, is more urgent and imperative than ever before, and efforts to bring it about must be stepped up, however tired and exhausted we are after five years of unremitting campaigning. We simply must not fail to give of our utmost in this endeavour during the coming year, which will, by all portents, be a crucial one in the history of the country.

Abortive Protests

When we turn our attention to the non-white situation, we have to recognise that although the African protests against the pass system did bring home to Whites a greater awareness of the injustices which Africans suffer and the resentment which they feel, they were abortive in so far as they did not obtain from the Government any significant concession to African demands. Instead the pass law system is being used more vigorously than ever to endorse Africans out of the towns where they come to seek for work; to control where they shall live,



“ . . . to build a better South Africa.”

and to prevent African women from living with their husbands.

As if this were not enough, the Government has chosen this moment to announce that the carrying of reference books will be made compulsory for African women. True, the date on which it is to be made compulsory has been changed from the 1st of December to coincide with the date on which it will be compulsory for white people to carry identity cards, but this will not soothe African feelings. White people who are, for the most part, lamentably ignorant of the difference between the identity card, which white people will have to carry, and the reference books which Africans have to carry, may consider that Africans are only being asked to do the same thing that white people are asked to do, and that therefore Africans have no cause for complaint. Africans, however, who know only too well, to their own bitter cost and humiliation, the vast difference between an identity card and a reference book, will in no way be placated by the knowledge that white people are having to carry identity cards.

It requires very little imagination to realise the seething bitterness and frustration which must be filling the hearts of millions of Africans, at the blank refusal of the Government to either consider their most reasonable representations, or to be moved to any kind of modification by massed demonstrations of African antipathy to laws which they had no hand in making.

During the referendum campaign, Dr. Verwoerd promised that once there was a republic there would be a great change for the better in race relations, but almost immediately after the result of the referendum had been made known, he announced in a public speech that there would be no change

in the Government's apartheid policy. Yet, unless there is a change, there can be no improvement in race relations in this country: instead, we must march forward to some catastrophic upheaval.

Against the sombre prospect of the events of the past year, coupled with the announcement by Dr. Verwoerd that there would be no change in Nationalist apartheid policy, can any light be seen, any cause for hope be found?

I think there can.

When I opened our conference last year, I referred to the advent of the Progressive Party, which at that time had just been formed, as a sign that the *ideals and ideas for which the Sash had striven so hard*, were at last beginning to make an impact on the thinking of South Africans. In the twelve months that have elapsed since then, we have seen the Progressive Party grow rapidly in strength and influence.

Shed Prejudices

The voice of the Progressives has been added to those of other opposition parties and groups in asking for a revision of the present racial policies in this country, and in explaining to the public how *there is a moral obligation upon all South Africans to shed their prejudices and to refuse to allow present race discriminations, which bring untold hardship, misery and injustice to our non-white fellow South Africans, to be continued.*

As a result of this addition to the groups pleading for radical political reforms, the idea that some sort of reform is urgently necessary is reaching an ever-widening number of people and there are signs that it is making a definite impact on the thinking of increasing numbers of South Africans.

Here the President mentioned the co-operation received from the Press and went on to say:

Another, to my mind, even more encouraging ray of hope comes from the enlightened statements made by leading Nationalists since the referendum and by the apparent willingness of influential white men from all political parties to sink party political loyalties and to get together to discuss what they now recognise to be the most fundamental and urgent of all South Africa's problems, the race problem.

It still remains to be seen whether these tentative efforts to come together will result in anything worthwhile, but I believe that the Sash is in a unique position to help make them worthwhile and that one of its *major efforts in the coming year must be to nurse and help to bring to maturity this embryonic effort for South Africans to get together to find a way out of the difficult racial impasse into which we, as a nation, have got ourselves.*

For years the Sash has worked with little but the light of its own faith in the fundamental value of preserving human rights and liberties to cheer it on its way. Those who so willingly have dedicated themselves to the work of the Sash have been looked on askance by their own friends and sometimes even by their own husbands. They have been laughed at as being hopelessly visionary, a silly band of crusading women who should be devoting their time and attention to their homes and children and not meddling in politics. They have, while fighting a never-ending battle against the very sort of totalitarianism which is one of the hallmarks of communism, even *been accused of being communistic.*

Worse still, they have, by implication, been accused by members of Parliament and by some members of the public of being in part responsible for African unrest. The argument goes that by the protests the Sash makes against the unjust laws which are inflicted on Africans, it encourages Africans to feel they are being unjustly treated. Africans, however, do not need anyone to tell them how unjust the laws are and the Sash is of the opinion that it is the knowledge that there are groups of people, such as the Sash, who are prepared to work with them and for them for a repeal of these laws, which is responsible for the fact that there are Africans who still have faith in the humanity and sense of justice of white people.

In the face of the many difficulties which confront women in the Sash, many faint hearts have dropped by the wayside, but a surprising number have remained to carry on the work with undiminished faith.

Reap Some Reward

The Black Sash is about to reap some reward for its unremitting labours of the past five years. Influential people who were once either openly antagonistic to the Sash, or coldly sceptical of its value, are recognising that the Sash was right in its attitude. More than that, they are beginning to accept that the Sash is not the secret weapon or stooge of any political party and that its approach to politics is as objective as is humanly possible. I do not think it would be too much to say that there is a rapidly growing recognition that the Sash has been and is playing a very useful and responsible role in South African political life.

Because of this, the Sash, together with other non-party groups such as the Institute of Race Relations and SABRA, is one of the best placed bodies in the country to help to bring about a rapprochement between all political groups and to help weld together into some effective form, the emerging recognition by people of widely divergent political opinions, that

something must be done to get a revision of present race policies.

At a time like this, when our country is in a torment of bitterness, fear and resentment, it should be remembered by the Black Sash that no effort to mitigate the political deadlock or to right the intolerable injustices we see all around us, is ever wasted. Even should there be violent reactions by those who are so oppressed by the present unjust laws, that violence is bound to be tempered and modified to some degree by the goodwill established by right and just action on the part of some Whites now. Let us bear in mind, therefore, that even if we are unable to prevent the unpleasant consequences resulting from the present Government's policy of oppression, we can do a great deal to mitigate the severity of these consequences.

I see a year of tremendous political importance lying ahead for South Africa. I do not think it is in any way a wild guess to say that perhaps this is the last year in which it will be possible to find a solution to South Africa's race problems round the conference table. The Black Sash realises full well just how fast the sands of time are running out, and therefore on it lies a tremendous responsibility to try to bring about and to help make fruitful some form of round table conference between leading members of all political parties and groups.

The political scene is in a state of flux. If what emerges is wrought into something of real value—and the Black Sash must strain every nerve to see that this happens—then we may truly be able to build a better South Africa for all our peoples. If not, a dark, dangerous and unforeseeable future lies ahead for all of us.

The Chairman's Review

FACED WITH unprecedented difficulties, the Sash rose magnificently to face the challenge created by the State of Emergency. At a time when the rule of law had been suspended and it was left to senior officers in the Special Branch to decide whether an action was dangerous to the State or not, Black Sash women set about helping those who were suffering as a result of having protested against laws which both they and the Sash believe to be unjust. . . .

In every Region, except Lowveld where there has been little scope for such activity, the Black Sash has been busy doing what it can to help the families of political detainees and to help those detainees, who asked for it, to obtain legal aid. . . .

Because the protests by Africans which began on 21st March shook many White South Africans out of their political lethargy, the Sash was offered a better opportunity than it had ever had before to get across to the man in the street the real nature of the pass laws and the incredible hardships and humiliations they inflict on Africans. Several Regions perceived at once the opportunity which was being offered and immediately got busy organising pass law meetings. When public meetings seemed unwise, these were organised in drawing rooms and by private invitation.

Much of the C.E. work has been concerned with educating the public and its own members regarding



Delegates from many parts attended the national conference in Cape Town—here, from left, are Mrs. A. Pirie (Cape Eastern), Mrs. D. Currie (Border) and Mrs. S. M. Johnson (Natal Midlands).