

Why we are calling for A NATIONAL CONVENTION

Memorandum by Southern Transvaal Region tabled at the 1961 Black Sash National Conference.

IN all forms of democracy, though there may be variation in franchise systems, there is one basic principle. This principle is that there shall be peaceful means, through the ballot box and regular elections, of changing the government as soon as the majority of the people who have to obey that government are dissatisfied enough to want a change.

Between elections there must be freedom of speech, of press, and of association, to discuss, plan and persuade in order to bring about that change.

South African Constitution, 1910

Our Constitution, accepted by the National Convention of 1910, has been called democratic as far as Whites are concerned, because there was fairly widely-based representation of Whites, although no universal adult franchise (women had no vote), and there were some franchise qualifications for men until 1931. As far as the whole population was concerned, however, it was not a democracy at all, since only one small section of the population was adequately enfranchised.

Paternalistic and colonialist attitudes were, however, fairly generally accepted at the time, and due to the lack of industrial and political development of most of our non-white peoples at that time, the constitution worked comparatively peacefully. There has, however, always been dissatisfaction, although not very loudly voiced, among the people who had to obey laws in whose making they had no effective say.

The flexibility of our constitution meant that if the voters had wanted it, there was ample opportunity for South Africa to have developed into a real democracy. Laws could have been passed to widen the voting rights to include all South Africans, as was done in 1930 to enfran-

chise white women. (Unfortunately, the reason behind that generosity was to lessen the value of the Coloured vote, which remained for men only.)

The liberal Cape Colony had hoped that its policy of granting representation to Africans and Coloureds would spread to the north. Instead, the supporters of white supremacy systematically diminished the say of non-Whites in Government, even to the extent of wrenching the constitution completely out of its intended shape in order to force the Coloured voters off the common roll.

That, of course, was where the Black Sash came in, full of indignation at the trickery, which had ignored the intention of the entrenched clauses and found a legal loophole to make our constitution even less representative of our people. We still hoped then that if we respected this machinery of government ("eerbiedig" is a good word), it could be made to serve our aim to produce "good government."

No Safeguards

Why now this complete change in our policy, which says "Justice demands a National Convention" with the object of drawing up a new constitution? The reason is our realisation that while there was opportunity for improving our democracy, there were no safeguards against the greed of the ruling group. The policy of white supremacy of our leaders, and the selfish complacency of the white voters, has fossilised our government until it is useless in a modern, industrial state in a world that no longer tolerates paternalism and colonialism. The real value of the democratic process, namely, the opportunity it provides for peaceful change through the ballot box, thus ensuring the consent of the governed, does not function in our present political set-up.

(Continued overleaf)

NATIONAL CONVENTION—Continued

We abused the flexibility of a constitution under which our country could have developed with changing times, and we moved *backwards* towards government by force and *away* from government by representation and agreement.

The most restrictive and oppressive laws which are passed by our rulers do *not* affect the people who have the vote; in fact, they are designed to keep the voters in a favoured position of privilege, earned by virtue of having a white skin. The official opposition, being white, has therefore no real incentive to get rid of a government which tries to entrench white supremacy.

What then can the dissatisfied non-white South Africans do, the vast majority of South Africans, to bring about change? Effective political organisation, strikes, passive resistance, protest demonstrations, offering themselves for arrest, burning passbooks, all these things are made illegal and are put down by force. This causes race hatred, leads to bloodshed, disrupts normal life, and destroys confidence in our economic future. Only at the end of this miserable and wasteful process is the white voter affected, and only then does he begin to think about the disadvantages of government policy because it affects his pocket.

This stupidly indirect method of having to show up an inadequate government by violence, strikes and so on, and by economic collapse,

must be changed, and the machinery of an efficient parliamentary democracy must be installed.

But the only big opposition party, the United Party, has made absolutely no promises that, if it should get into power, it will widen the franchise sufficiently to give our non-white South Africans an effective say in government. Nor has the United Party much hope of success, since the rules of a free election are already being ignored by the Government, as the S.A.B.C. and the education system are being used unscrupulously to instil Nationalist attitudes into white voters.

Is there then any good reason for throwing all one's energies into an election* which offers no hope for future peaceful change, whichever way the result goes?

The small political parties which do advocate real increase in suffrage can and will use the election to get across their policies to a very small group of voters, persuading them that it is far-sighted and enlightened self-interest to establish a real democracy, as well as being right and just.

There is, however, *no time* for this slow process of education to bear fruit, because, on the one

* This memorandum was compiled prior to the recent general election.

A Demand that will become Irresistible

WE are dealing here with a demand so basically simple, so eminently reasonable and so obviously essential that it must in time become irresistible . . . Unless we are to erupt in violence and to end in chaos, this is clearly an essential demand in the present crisis in which we find ourselves . . . Our demand is that people should come together and talk and agree to draw up a new democratic constitution. When they do so, it must be at talks representative of the whole nation, and their decisions must be binding on the whole nation. We come with no prior demands about what should be embodied in the new Constitution, though most of us know what we want; all we ask is that we hammer out

by common agreement, a solution to the problems which confront us all.

The demand for a convention must become a powerful force backed by the overwhelming majority of our nation. There is a further advantage: what we are presenting is an idea, and ideas are indestructible. They are impervious to bans. And although Dr. Verwoerd must in time try to ban this idea, as he has banned people and organisations, he is wasting his time. The idea will endure, will persist and will grow into a mighty force.

—Mr. Dennis Brutus, in an address to the Cape Provincial Consultative Conference organised by the S.A. Convention Movement, 14th October, 1961.