

# THE SPECIAL CONFERENCE OF THE A.N.C.

By ALAN DOYLE

I MUST confess that I am not among those who hold up their hands in horror because the A.N.C. kicked the "Bantu World" out of its conference. Critics say it was an attack on the freedom of the press. I just don't see it. Congress does not seek to ban this malodourous newspaper, it was merely told it was not wanted at the Conference. As it is quite obvious that the "Bantu World" was sure to distort and twist any report it might publish of the Conference, I cannot see what everyone is getting so excited about. One might of course have expected that the hostile press might have seized upon the incident, it is a pity though that many democrats have fallen for this "freedom of the press" argument. The "World" (yes, since the Conference it has dropped the "Bantu" out of its name) is quite free to publish anything it likes—even lies. But if it prints lies then it can't come into the A.N.C. Conference. Yes, I can hear some of you saying, but then why not exclude the Transvaler, the Rand Daily Mail and the Cape Times? They also print lies and are even more hostile than the "Bantu World." No doubt they do and they are. But unlike the latter they do not specialise in attempting to disrupt the A.N.C. An important difference.

The real criticism that should be levelled against the conference is not that it showed up the "Bantu World"—an exposure was overdue—but that it allowed this and other relatively trivial matters to waste so much time. While orators were expanding on the sins of the naughty scribblers of Industria, precious hours went sliding by, with the result that matters of the utmost importance were crowded off the agenda. That is one of the reasons why it has been necessary to hold an extraordinary special conference in March. I am not at all sure, however, whether this is really a matter for regret. The three items up for discussion at the special conference all merit the most sober, rational discussion, and it may well be that there will be a better atmosphere for such discussion in March, when the temptations to emotional demagogy, which some people seem to find irresistible at the traditional December 16 conferences, may not be present.

The three items before the conference will be the revision of the A.N.C. Constitution, the Campaign Against Passes for Women, and the endorsement of the Freedom Charter. Another advantage of their being discussed in March instead of February is that it gives a further opportunity to discuss these three matters.

## PASSES AND THE CHARTER

About the question of passes and that of the Charter I do not wish to write much. I do hope that the special conference is not going to

repeat previous mistakes and commit the prestige of the A.N.C. to some rigid preconceived plan of campaign against the passes. It is the task and the function of the A.N.C. to give leadership and inspiration to the people in their struggles: **not to give orders.** We make ourselves particularly ridiculous when we issue orders that the people do not (because we have not explained them, or because they are not ready) follow. Let the A.N.C. go out and explain to the women (and to the men) what passes will mean and why they must be fought. Let us organise the people. That is the sort of general tactics on which a conference can decide.

**What must be done then can only be decided immediately by the leadership on the basis of reviewing from day to day all the factors in a situation which is constantly changing and developing. I believe the special conference must beware of being carried away by the strong emotions which this shocking imposition of passes upon African women inevitably arouses. Let it instruct the executive to fight the passes by every possible means. But let it not appoint some "great day" which may merely make an April Fool of the A.N.C.**

## **THE FREEDOM CHARTER**

From the day that the Congress of the People was decided on at the national conference of the A.N.C., the enemies of South African freedom have been busy trying to prevent or abort this brilliant conception of drawing up a common programme for democracy in our land.

Everything was done to smear the Congress of the People; the Special Police through its chief, General Rademeyer, told the newspapers it was a Communist plot; every effort was made to frighten the people away from it. But nobody—except a few Right-wing leaders who had at first sponsored the idea but then stood aside—took fright. The people, massively, sent their demands and their delegates in to Kliptown on June 25 and 26. At the Congress itself the delegates behaved magnificently. They refused to be intimidated. In the midst of a vast raid by thousands of armed police they adopted the Freedom Charter—a great and noble statement of the future South Africa. Congressmen throughout South Africa are proud of this great achievement which was fathered by the A.N.C., and determined to fight until the Charter is won. The first step to winning it is to make it the official programme of the A.N.C. by endorsing it at Conference: and I am sure that the timid confusions of a handful of muddled intellectuals will not prevent the Conference doing that by a great majority.

The ignorant, or malicious scribblers of such newspapers as the "World" and the "Golden City Post" have tried to make out that there is some sort of conflict or contradiction between the Charter and the so-called "Programme of Action" adopted by the 1949 Conference. That this is absolute nonsense will immediately be shown by comparing the two documents. The Freedom Charter is a statement of the people's demands. The 1949 resolution is merely a statement of intention to boycott certain colour-bar institutions, as a matter of tactics.

Whatever our views on the wisdom and effectiveness of such boycotts, in today's changed circumstances, we can and must all unite around the glorious aims of the Freedom Charter.

## THE A.N.C. CONSTITUTION

For several years now, successive annual Conferences of the A.N.C. have decided that a revision of the Congress Constitution should be carried out. There has been a widespread feeling that Congress organisation has lagged behind the marked development in the strength and stature of the movement which has taken place in recent years. Hence, it is argued, we need a new constitution which will remedy our organisational weaknesses. Unfortunately, it was never made very clear exactly where the present constitution is lacking, or precisely what new organisational principles the new constitution should embody.

In general, it must be said frankly, that while every organisation should aim at perfecting its constitution, it is quite fallacious to believe that serious organisational defects, of the type which have been criticised in the executive reports to the past two annual conferences, can be eradicated through constitutional changes. **A high standard of efficiency; the raising of the level of activity and political understanding throughout the organisation; the implementation of previous resolutions and plans to build Congress branches of a new type, based upon blocks and streets; the elimination of petty personalities and small-minded provincialism; the creation of a fine spirit and discipline**—all these aims can and must be accomplished by means of thorough discussion of each problem, in all its aspects, the taking and carrying out of practical decisions in each case, on every level of leadership and membership. The conception that a national conference can legislate the necessary changes into being by means of a new constitution, however fine, is impractical idealism. A constitution defines, describes, provides a framework for an organisation; it does not fill it with the living content of work and understanding which is our outstanding need.

This is not to say that the present constitution is perfect, or that it does not need changing, or that we should not discuss changes. But we should beware of any illusions as to what can be accomplished by such changes. And we should bear in mind that a healthy discussion can only take place about the **principles** of the changes that are required. It is precisely because no such discussion has taken place that this matter keeps getting deferred from year to year, that abortive drafts keep being referred back. What's the good of appointing draftsmen to prepare documents when we have not instructed them what they are required to do? Many people may want the constitution changed. But ask them *why*, and what they expect of the new one. You are likely to get twenty different—and often contradictory—answers. First make up your mind, on principle, what you want. Then draft it. Until Congress adopts this procedure, it is likely to keep referring back unsatisfactory drafts to writers who themselves are not in the least to blame. Or, worse still, a conference will some day get so fed up with repeated delays of this matter that it will hurriedly adopt a constitution which may well turn out to be inferior to the present one. For, make no mistake about

it, the existing A.N.C. Constitution has many solid merits which should not be overlooked. It has served Congress well over the past ten years. It may sound odd, but one of the measures of the soundness of the A.N.C. Constitution is that so little is heard of it, and most of its critics have not even studied it themselves. It is simple and straightforward. That is why, since its adoption in 1942, the endless Constitutional wranglings that used to disfigure A.N.C. meetings have almost disappeared. It is also fundamentally democratic, a quality that has not always been present in some of the drafts presented over the past few years.

Prior to the adoption of the present Constitution, the A.N.C. bore little organisational resemblance to the Union-wide mass liberation movement, capable of leading militant struggles of the people, into which it has developed. It must not be forgotten that at the time of its foundation in 1912, the A.N.C. was little more than a loose federation of the separate organisations which had grown up in the four colonies of the Cape, the Transvaal, Natal and the Orange River Colony, in the years before Union. These organisations consisted exclusively of Chiefs and middle class and professional men, who tended to regard the Congress as a sort of Parliamentary debating society. There were no Congress branches. For them the main activity was the annual conference: it was designed to conform more or less with Parliamentary procedure. The President, having been elected, chose his "Cabinet"—consisting of "Ministers" of Justice, Land, Labour, etc. Other features of the old constitution showed the same tendency to "play at Parliament"—e.g. the offices of "Chaplain," "Speaker," etc. Again, prior to the Xuma constitution, the Provincial organisations of the A.N.C. were largely autonomous: Congress was not really a unitary organisation, and the national conference rather took on the form of "negotiations" between the "Transvaal African Congress," "Cape African Congress," etc., as the provincial bodies were then called. All these backward features were preserved in the former constitution. But the surge into the Congress movement of workers, peasants and militant African intellectuals who identified themselves with the working class, had transformed the nature of Congress itself into a mass movement, demanding full democracy. **Hence the old constitution acted as a brake on development.** It was the historic merit of the present constitution that it removed that brake and allowed the A.N.C. to develop into a popular people's organisation, based on live branches in towns and villages throughout the country.

We should think very carefully, therefore, before we decide to throw this constitution on to the scrap-heap. We must ask ourselves very soberly, "What is wrong with it?" And when we have answered that question, we must ask, further, "Cannot we put right what is wrong by means of amendments, instead of a completely new document?"

## **THE PROVINCIAL SYSTEM**

The most radical of the proposed changes in the Congress is one which would abolish altogether the system of separate Congress organisation based on the four provinces. Let me say at once that there is a

tremendous amount that can be said in favour of such a proposal. Provincialism in the A.N.C. is and always has been a curse; and, often enough, a cover for thinly-veiled tribalism. What, it may be asked, do the divisions into Cape, Transvaal, O.F.S. and Natal mean to the African Congressman? Nothing at all: they correspond merely to past disputes between rival groups of white conquerors and colonisers, and not at all to natural administrative divisions on the basis of linguistic or geographical areas. Granted that it is efficient for branches in a large national organisation to be grouped into regional bodies, why should these bodies correspond with the present provinces? As a writer in the Eastern Cape says:

“the unitary structure of the ruling class governmental system was bound to affect the nature of the national liberatory organisation . . . . The development of the Union into a totalitarian state, in which every part of the country follows a uniform policy and practice in the oppression of the people, has called for changes in our own system.”

It is absurd, he says, to bandy about “ghosts of the past”—Transvaal, Natal, etc. at Congress national conferences, “as if the problems discussed are not those of a single Union Government and its laws.”

While much sympathy must be shown for this point of view, we should not forget that some administrative divisions must exist in any national body if it is to work properly: a national headquarters will never be able to exercise adequate control and leadership over thousands of branches scattered throughout the country. That is not centralism, but chaos. And since we must have divisions, why not maintain the traditional ones which everyone understands, rather than invent new ones? One must admit that the Cape Province, as large as all the rest put together, is a ridiculously big administrative division. Why not divide it then? Can we really defeat the **spirit** of petty provincialism and parochialism by means of a mere organisational change? Doesn't this spirit spring from political backwardness: and must it not be dealt with on a political level? These are the questions that the opponents of the provincial system have to answer.

In any case, two points are perfectly clear to me. Firstly, that it is not necessary to have a completely new constitution in order to substitute new administrative regions for the present provinces. Secondly, that it would be quite wrong suddenly to abolish the provincial basis of A.N.C. organisation without full debate of this very issue on its own merits, throughout the A.N.C.

## SOME OTHER ISSUES

What other issues arise now in connection with the revision of the Constitution? Here are a few:

A number of the proposed drafts provide for inclusion of the Congress Youth and Women's Leagues as integral parts of the organisation with provision for their representation at A.N.C. conferences and on leading committees. This, in my opinion, is a grave mistake. If we want these Leagues to have any life and strength of their own, then

they must be independent bodies free of external organisational ties. Congress must exercise its leadership through its political correctness; not by constitutional rules and regulations. The proposal would merely perpetuate the unhealthy position of the A.N.C.Y.L. as a separate political grouping with its own platform, instead of becoming a mass youth organisation supporting Congress. It could easily lead to the absurd position of a young woman delegate to conference exercising three votes: from her A.N.C. branch, from her W.L. branch, and from her Y.L. branch. It seems to me that no constitution is truly democratic unless it provides for **equality** for all members. All delegates to national conference should be equally mandated. They should be elected only by Congress branches, regions or provinces.

On the same grounds I also believe that the whole of the national leadership should be elected by the national conference. No-one (and that should go for provincial presidents as well) should be ex-officio on the national executive or working committee. Anything else is undemocratic, and makes a farce of the supremacy of the national conference.

The present constitution provides for "affiliated members" of the A.N.C. In fact this clause has been a dead letter. It was clearly envisaged that the A.N.C. might develop as a federal body, but it has not done so. Instead it has taken the path of an individual membership body. I think that the federal survivals might well be removed for the sake of simplicity. And simplicity, may I point out again, is a very great merit in a Constitution, as older A.N.C. members who suffered under the old complicated and ambiguous one will agree.

Finally, there is the question of membership subscriptions. The present constitution provides for 2s. 6d. a year. Since the time when it was adopted the value of money has lessened greatly. Also, the idea of the annual subscription derives from the old concept of the annual conference as the main Congress activity, and ignores the regular branch meeting. I think that monthly subscriptions should be introduced and the amount should be decided annually at conference, not laid down in the constitution.

Now. Let the branches discuss these and similar matters. Let them submit specific amendments for the next annual conference, in December. Let them send these in at once so that they can be circulated three months before then. That is the democratic way to amend a constitution. Let us put an end to this business of appointing sub-committees to draft constitutions up in the air without any mandate from the rank and file.

It is precisely this conception of leadership from above, without proper full discussion by the members, that leads to irresponsible demagoguery at conferences, and undemocratic practices. No conference should take place in future unless all reports have been discussed throughout the country first in the branches—and in the press too for that matter. Let me point out too that the present constitution (clause 15) provides that 3 months notice of amendments must be circulated. The special conference, therefore, should discuss principles, make recommendations, and initiate a union-wide discussion of the constitution.