

“SABRA’S” PROPOSED “MULTI-RACIAL” CONFERENCE

One of the main functions of SABRA has been to explain and justify the policy of apartheid as enunciated by the Nationalist Party, stressing the point that there is no alternative to apartheid. They believe that the only way of avoiding a clash between black and white is by separate development. Exactly how the danger is to be avoided is left to future generations to solve.

Mr. Paul Sauer, the Minister of Lands, addressed the SABRA Conference at its opening with these words: "Government and SABRA were 100% on the traditional policy of apartheid, which amounts to the white man trying to maintain his position, socially and politically. We are the politicians; we must make scientific solutions acceptable to the ordinary man." The 'scientific' solution in this case, of course, is the policy of apartheid.

The second point is that SABRA's conference was timed to take place after the general elections, in which the Nationalists emerged even more victorious than before. It was a fitting moment, when there was disillusionment and distress among the opponents of the government. It was natural that those who believe our problems may be settled by the ballot box were relieved to accept SABRA's decision as though clutching at a straw of moderation in Nationalist policies.

The third point is that the idea of a multi-racial conference has become important in South African politics. It has taken shape since 1952 as a result of the impact of the Defiance Campaign on the country. Organisations of a multi-racial character came into being, and the great multi-racial gathering of the Congress of the People followed by multi-racial conferences sponsored by the church (some by the D.R.C.) gave new impetus to this idea.

Then at the end of 1957 a multi-racial conference took place, which was sponsored and attended by outstanding leaders of both Europeans and Non-Europeans. It was a result of discussion on the Tomlinson Report (the blueprint of apartheid) which had been rejected by the African people in toto. The success of this conference was far-reaching, its decisions were bound to have a profound influence on political trends in the country, and these could not be ignored even by those who refuse to accept the fact of our multi-racial society.

The last, and most important point of all is that the changes taking place throughout the world, the winning of freedom by those formerly oppressed in colonial countries, the growth of the liberation movement generally, the Bandung Conference and its decisions, have all marked a definite turning-point in world affairs and force re-thinking even among South Africa's most reactionary nationalists. At the SABRA Conference of 1956, after the Bandung conference, the Editor of 'Dagbreek' stated that white authority in Africa is disappearing, and our approach must consequently be remodelled. "Unless we do this in time," he said, "we are closer to tragedy than we think."

From then on the Nationalist government changed its attitude towards emergent African states. This new line of thought was followed by Prof. du Plessis in relation to the South African situation, when he stated that the era of white domination and oppression are of a passing phase, and that freedom must be granted to the Non-Europeans, so as to prevent the danger of the Non-European people taking it themselves. His conception of equality and freedom is based on 'separate development — apartheid.' Together with others, he visualises a time when the Non-European will be convinced of the justice of apartheid, and thus give co-operation. This contradiction of apartheid and freedom need not necessarily imply dishonesty on the part of those who believe in it. To some it may be a real dilemma, due to the blindly incorrect attitude in which they persist.

It is not the purpose of this article to show where SABRA's policy is bad or wrong, but rather to explain what factors must be taken into account to assess correctly SABRA's decision.

The idea of a multi-racial conference is always welcome. But we must understand its scope and purpose. Non-European leaders have always stood for co-operation between black and white; this is, we know, what the A.N.C. has preached since its inception to this very day. In 1957 Chief Luthuli's letter to the Prime Minister stated among other things that "no time must be lost in making contact with the leadership of the organisations and bodies, among them the A.N.C., to solve the pressing problems before the African people and the country. My Congress is convinced that it is today urgently necessary that this present impasse be broken, and the danger of future tensions in the country recognised and averted before it is too late."

So the point about this particular conference is: Who is to be invited, and what is the basis for discussion?

Although some have displayed enthusiasm at the idea of wider contact with Non-European leaders, the sponsors themselves have made no official statement yet about who they propose to invite; whether Chiefs and hand-picked leaders; or true representatives of the people. The difference between previous conferences and this one would rest on whether SABRA would invite elected leaders of the Non-Europeans, or would carry on as the government has done before, by meeting chiefs and then claiming to have consulted the African people.

There are other important aspects about this conference which would have to be thoroughly examined by the peoples' leaders; both positive and negative aspects. We must divorce our minds from excitement whipped up by the press, so that we are not diverted at all from the real issues confronting us — growing oppression and fascism in our land.

Political tricksters of the Nationalist party will try to give the impression that the protagonists of apartheid have become moderate, so as to win over the English-speaking section, and also to woo those among the Non-Europeans who are ready to betray their own people — self-appointed leaders or reactionary chiefs, referred to by Dr. Verwoerd as "the real leaders." Verwoerd's conception is no doubt along the lines of his notorious "indabas" where his "Chiefs" together with some hand-picked "moderate" Africans such as made press statements opposing the strike just before April 14, would be summoned to express their support for apartheid.

Some Nationalists, however, have a more realistic conception. These, among them Professor I. D. du Plessis of Potchefstroom, appear to be realising that any conference which excluded such genuine leaders of the African people as the senior leaders of the African National Congress would be of little value, even as a propaganda stunt. While the debate goes on among the Nationalists over these rival conceptions SABRA does not appear to be making any practical preparations for the Conference.

No compromise is really possible between these points of view. If SABRA wants to run some sort of stunt "indaba", stage-managed by the Native Affairs Department and composed, on the African side, of its paid employees and agents, no one can stop it. But no one in South Africa or abroad, whatever the endeavours of the State Information Service, will be persuaded for one moment that this is a genuine consultation with African representatives.

It is possible, of course, that SABRA will try some sort of compromise. They might decide to invite, in addition to NAD employees, certain African leaders, even including some A.N.C. members whom they regard as more "moderate" and "reasonable", in order to make a show of "representativeness," but excluding the senior elected leaders. If they try that, the conference is sure to fail. Africans will see in any such move a deliberate attempt to destroy the unity which has been achieved and to divide the people away from their chosen leaders. No Congress representatives and no African leaders with the slightest self-respect could attend such a conference.

Finally, one must consider the possibility of SABRA inviting the genuine and acknowledged leaders of the African people to its projected conference. Would they come? It might be thought that they would not, in view of the numerous wrongs done by the Nationalists to the African people, and their persecution of our leaders. Nevertheless, it is likely that the Africans would accept. It is not Congress policy to refuse discussions with anyone, provided such discussions are meant as a genuine exchange of views and not merely as a propaganda trick or a device to divide our ranks.

But the conference will serve little purpose if it is to be restricted merely to a debate on the doubtful merits of apartheid.

Race relations are a serious matter, not a mere debating point. We do not need a conference for the purpose of attempting to convince the Non-European of the justice and goodness of apartheid. The problems that a multi-racial conference must discuss are those that are constantly widening the gap between black and white in a fundamental way — the evils of Bantu Authorities, the Pass Laws, Bantu Education, the effects of such legislation on race relations. Let us, in other words, consider first things first. An academic approach on abstract issues cannot bring any solution.

No amount of dodging, no amount of tricks, can obscure the basic fact that the future of our country depends on what the mass of the people want. Wishful thinking will not help solve our problems. The human race as a whole is progressing, and progress cannot be stopped by wishes or illusions that changes will not take place, or can be prevented, or postponed during our lifetime. SABRA leaders too must face facts, and any attempt to ignore them, and ignore the existence of the people and their organisations will only create greater gaps in our relations, not bridge them.



by

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(This is a slightly abbreviated version of the Presidential Address to a recent Conference of the Congress of Democrats. We believe our readers will agree with us that so thoughtful and stimulating an address merits wider circulation and discussion.)

CLEARLY election week marked something of a turning point in the political life of South Africa. The decline which has been steadily overtaking the United Party for many years has now reached the stage at which the return of the United Party to power by a parliamentary election is so remote as to be virtually unthinkable. As yet, however, there has been no significant growth of illiberal outlook and of Nationalist thinking.

What then does the future hold for us? Clearly our position has not grown easier. We can expect a continuation of the harassing and persecution by the Special Branch. We can look forward also to a continuation of Nationalist Apartheid legislation, erecting further barriers against contact and co-operation between the racial groups; already the cumulative effect of such legislation, coupled with intimidation and racial propaganda has corrupted the conscience and the democratic ideas of a large section of the population, and has purchased the allegiance of many by direct economic advantage; the corruption will, no doubt, continue, and the isolation of White from Black become more difficult to penetrate.

But this is only one side of the picture. Equally as clear is the other side, that a section of the European population will be looking for new solutions to the problems of their own future. Already there are many who see that as long as the future of South Africa is contained within a strait-jacket of our parliamentary system — with its minority voting rights, its loading of countryside against town, its packed Senate and its gerrymandering delimitation system, — there is no future for South Africa save in steady retrogression towards backwardness, anti-democratic authoritarianism, and a return to the patterns of mediaevalism. Already people begin to cast around for new solutions and new ways forward; there is talk of new voting systems (proportional representation etc.); there is the beginning of a tranquil process of reconsideration everywhere both for good and bad. In the United Party where the beginnings of a surrender to the Nationalists begin to show themselves; in the Labour Party where the whole problem of its continued existence and the basis therefore is under consideration; in the Liberal party, the Black Sash Movement and the Congresses.