

FUSING THE CONGRESSES?

The Congress Movement is a convenient expression for the alliance of liberationist, democratic and trade union organisations headed by the African National Congress, and accepting the Freedom Charter as a common programme of immediate objectives. Convenient as it may be, the expression is not really accurate, for the alliance comprehends five quite distinct movements, each with its own evolution, character and purpose. While they have formulated a common political programme in the Charter, and meet from time to time to seek agreement on means to further it, each continues vigourously and independently in furtherance of its own objects and functions.

Thus the alliance is not a single "movement"; it is not even a "federation" as Mr. Duncan once tried, unsuccessfully to maintain in "Contact", for a federation implies some surrender of sovereign independence by its constituents, whereas the alliance is an informal and voluntary working association of fully outonomous and independent partners. This independence, as anybody who is the least aware of the background and history of the alliance should be aware, is jealously guarded by the various organisations. The National Consultative Committee is not a policy-making body, but a forum for the exchange of suggestions for co-ordination, and its resolutions are not binding directives, but open recommendations which each body is free to reject or accept.

This distinction is no mere matter of semantics, and it becomes especially important in view of the proposals which have been advanced by some members of the Youth Branch of the Congress of Democrats, with the support of two Editors, Mr. Eprile of "Golden City Post" and Mr. Segal of "Africa South". Their suggestions vary in detail.

The general idea seems to be that the Congress allies should sink their separate identities and merge or amalgamate into one body.

A variation on this proposal is that the African National Congress should recruit non-Africans into its ranks, and two White candidates recently took the unusual step of offering themselves publicly for membership.

We do not agree with these proposals.

For one thing, they are unacceptable, and they will not work.

Take the major organisation involved, the African National Congress. The A.N.C. is not racialistic. It has proved that by forming the Alliance, by adopting the Freedom Charter, by overwhelmingly repudiating the

Africanists, who object to the anti-racialist basis of the Charter. But that does not mean that the A.N.C. membership will, or even should, welcome non-African sympathisers into the ranks of their organisation.

It is true that the A.N.C. has, on more than one occasion, elected Coloured members to leading positions. That, indeed, proves that the Congress is not racial but national. But let us not forget that these members live among the Africans, speak their languages, and share the hardships which are their common lot. It is rather a different matter when it comes to people from other communities who — however unwillingly — share in all the privileges and opportunities from which Africans are barred, and which Congress exists to destroy.

Ordinary African Congressmen find it hard to accept seriously when a well-meaning White man stands up and says "I am also an African." Yes, it is a nice phrase to use on the platform; in a sense, it is even true: we are all Africans if we are natives of this country. But do you really know what it is to be an African? To have a half-educated policeman call you 'f----- Kaffer?' To see a notice "Whites Only" — and know that means "You keep out?" Perhaps you are really so sensitive and sympathetic that you are as keenly aware of all these things as those who suffer them, that you can put yourself in the place of the sufferer. Then why can't you also understand and appreciate how hard it is for the average Congress member to think of a European joining the A.N.C. in any other capacity than of a would-be supervisor, or at best, missionary for his own viewpoint?

After all, everything that can be done in this country is done to make the African feel and appear to be helpless and inferior. There is no aspect of his life where he can act for himself without White supervisors, superintendants, foreman and bosses. What could be more natural, then, that at least in the African National Congress members wish to make certain that this is truly their own organisation?

It is embarrassing to have to point out these things to our friends, and we should like to make it clear that we do consider them friends, although we disagree on this matter; we respect their motives. All the same, they have thrust this embarrassing discussion upon the movement.

We wonder, too, whether they have considered what the effect of their proposal would be, even if, what is highly unlikely, it were to be accepted. You would have a new organisation, a sort of political party, perhaps, somewhat in advance of the Liberal Party. But — whatever you called it, it would not be the African National Congress. We must not forget that A.N.C., like the S.A.I.C. and the S.A.C.P.O. is not only a political body. It has more than one aspect. In another aspect, it is a community organisation of the African people, a national body. The "fusionists'" suggestion would destroy this aspect of the A.N.C.

Again, the Indian community in this country has very serious and far-reaching problems of its own; problems which have repeatedly been the subject of discussion at the United Nations. It is natural and inevitable that the South Africans of Indian descent should band together in an organisation to face these problems and these threats to their very existence and future in this country.

It is true that all oppressed people in this country have tasks and problems in common, and so have White democrats and trade unionists of all races. To meet these common problems they have formed an alliance to fight together and co-ordinate their efforts in a common programme — the Freedom Charter.

But it is also true that the various communities have their own separate problems, and as long as national discrimination continues and persists, so long will each community find it necessary to organise to meet those problems.

In short, we consider the plans of the "fusionists" to be unpractical, schematic and incorrect.

WRONG IN PRINCIPLE

They are also wrong in principle. We believe that they are well-intentioned, but some of them in the heat of debate have used arguments which are rather offensive.

One of these is to refer to the A.N.C. and the other Congress movements as "racial organisations", "group areas" and so forth. Such talk cannot damage the Congresses, which have proved over many years their firmness and devotion in the struggle against racialism, but it does expose the limitations of those who indulge in it.

They appear to be unable to distinguish between a national liberation movement and various other types of organisation.

Where people organise as workers, or as students, or as socialists, or as musicians, or as sportsmen: there, we agree, there is a basis for multi-racial organisations; the more of them the merrier, and exclusiveness is objectionable and should be opposed.

But where you find oppressed people organising as a nationality, in the common struggle against the disabilities which they suffer as a community, and to preserve their very existence and identity, their national languages, cultures and traditions, you cannot deny their right and their duty to do so.

Our Congresses have defended vigorously their right to exist, in the face of fierce Government repression. We can but expect them to defend it also against well-intentioned but misguided advisers, the effect of whose proposals would be in the end that they lose their all-embracing and dynamic character as national liberation organisations.