

# REVOLUTIONS ARE NOT ABNORMAL

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WHEN Julius Lewin writes that there is "No Revolution Round the Corner" one cannot exactly quarrel with him. There are so many imponderables, so many variations and possible combinations of sets of circumstances, in the near future, that it would be a rash political prophet who would set out to establish a timetable and pattern for exactly when and how changes will come about in this country. Moreover, as Dr. Simons has pointed out in his commentary on Mr. Lewin's article, our country is by no means insulated from the shocks and currents that are affecting and changing the great world beyond the Limpopo and across the seas. Here, again, is a further set of unpredictable variations and developments, economic, political and military, that must affect the course of the great struggle that is proceeding in South Africa between Nationalist autocracy and the democratic opposition.

All the same, I am sure that there must be substantial changes in our country in the fairly near future, and that when Mr. Lewin declares that "the present state of the Union" is likely to "go on almost indefinitely" he is giving grounds for quite unjustifiable complacency to the upholders of the present set-up (which is as fundamentally unstable and unviable as it is unjust) and quite unnecessary pessimism to its opponents.

What is meant by "revolution", anyway? Must it mean fighting? Despite his warning that the word "should not be lightly tossed around," Mr. Lewin does not tell us how he uses it. I think it means a fairly rapid and fundamental change in a society, involving the displacement of the ruling class: whether there is any fighting or not. Although he emphasises military factors, Mr. Lewin seems to agree with this definition when he reiterates his belief that there is not going to be any major change in the *status quo* in this country. At any rate that is just where I want to join issue with him.

Mr. Lewin leans rather heavily on a thesis by an American professor, Brinton, who has concluded from a study of four revolutions (the 1640 English revolution, the Eighteenth Century American and French revolutions and the 1917 revolution in Russia) that certain specific conditions must be present for such an event to take place. This approach has the grave

disadvantage that it treats revolution as something quite exceptional and remarkable in modern society.

Nothing could be further from the truth. During the past century practically every country in Europe has undergone a revolution—many of them through several. The same may be said of Central and South America. In the brief years since the second World War the wave of revolutionary change and upheaval has been enormously extended and accelerated, covering much the greater part of Asia, Eastern Europe and still steadily advancing in Africa. Any sort of analysis which regards revolution as something abnormal, depending on a rare combination of circumstances, therefore conflicts sharply with the realities of our world and our times, and is academic in the bad sense of the word.

Today, anybody can see what a 100 years ago it took a genius to foresee: that industrialization is incompatible with feudal despotism, with group or class monopoly of political (and ultimately of economic) power. The old absolute rulers could and did ban revolutionary movements and radical ideas, but they were powerless to ban factory production allied to new sources of energy. Invariably and inevitably, these have proved fatal to their authority and to the old order.

One by one the autocracies and absolute monarchies had to give way to republics and elected legislatures. The daring ideas of the French and American revolutions have become the universally acknowledged principles of the United Nations Charter. Today practically nowhere, outside the Union, does a privileged minority claim to govern by divine right.

The type of despotism we still endure in the Union in this age—and our country stands high in the ranks of industrial nations—is a kind of freak, an anachronism which cannot hope much longer to survive. Before the last war the upholder of White supremacy could have comforted himself with the thought that after all democratic revolutions were confined to Europe and America, but that illusion has been shattered to fragments. The Afro-Asian revolution is proving even more rapid and dynamic than the European-American; there can be few people today, outside Southern Africa, Alabama and Notting Hill, who think that democracy and self-government are "*slegs vir blankes*".\*

This point is of particular significance when considered in relation to Professor Brinton's "rules", cited by Mr. Lewin,

\* For whites only (Afrikaans).

regarding such matters as "subversion of the armed forces", etc. It is obvious that Brinton's facile generalizations simply do not work when applied to the Afro-Asian situation.

There was no marked civil service inefficiency, certainly not much in the way of defection from the imperial forces, in the many colonies and "possessions" which, in the past few years Britain, France, Holland and other Powers have had to quit with varying degrees of haste and indignity.

And it is quite impossible to understand the South African perspective without taking into account its pronounced similarity to the characteristic "colonial" upsurge of this decade. The point was well put by the United Nations Commission on the Racial Situation in the Union, when it observed that this country "closely resembles a colonial Power, but one whose colonies . . . are scattered over the territory of the metropolitan country itself".

Of course there are significant differences as well between the position of the White South African State in relation to its African "colonies" and that of a European power and its overseas territories—one must not push an analogy too far. The obvious difference is that mentioned by the UN Commission—that the "colonies" are not overseas but right here. And it is this difference which makes the task of the national liberation movement—by which I mean essentially the Congress alliance—so extra-ordinarily complicated and difficult that, despite a leadership which in skill, wisdom and maturity can compare not unfavourably with any in the world, and certainly on this continent, it has little to show in the way of practical success.

The inevitable trend to economic integration, well brought out by Dr. Simons' statistics, are in the long run utterly destructive of Dr. Verwoerd's vision of a dominant, urban, all-White metropolis controlling separate, primitive, peasant African communities through "Lieutenant-Governors" at the head of a streamlined Native Affairs Department, refashioned in the mould of the British colonial civil services. For better or worse the Union is irretrievably embarked on the course of development into a unitary industrial society. And nowhere in the world has such a society developed without conceding immeasurably higher living standards and political rights to the people than prevail in South Africa.

One of the phenomena that has everywhere preceded and hastened such concessions has been the seething discontent of

the masses.

Mr. Lewin does not think the signs of discontent in our country are very serious. The Africans are "sharing" the economic prosperity, which compensates them for the "frustration induced by the colour bar." The defiance campaign of 1952 did not shake the government, and the election week stay-away failed this year. Anyway a general strike of Africans could not be very effective. Thus there is no prospect of any radical change; the prospect is "hopeless but not desperate"; even very fabian economic improvements will have to await the "slow and difficult emergence of effective trade unions", "under wiser leadership."

The picture is as sedative and reassuring as any that might be painted as an inducement to overseas investors—and as far removed from the facts. How, one wonders, are Africans "sharing in prosperity?" This will certainly come as news to the millions whose miserable wages (stringently pegged by the full might of the State) prove every year more inadequate to cope with soaring prices. (For demonstration, we need only turn to numerous authoritative statements by the Institute of Race Relations, to memoranda by the Congress of Trade Unions and the Trade Union Council, and even surveys made by employers' organizations. We need only recall the striking phenomenon of a year ago, when tens of thousands walked to work to save twopence a day.)

The "prosperity" of the Union, in fact has been very limited, and reflected mainly in bigger profits for producers and higher prices. And the position of the African workers and peasants has grown worse not better, on the whole, so that people are forced into a bitter struggle for what is really an almost beggarly demand for £1 a day.

For the Africans there is no prosperity, and if there were it could never compensate for what it is really a major understatement to call "frustrations of the colour bar." For in this euphemistic phrase one must comprehend all the really unendurable frightfulness of Verwoerd's apartheid. One must recall the intensification to the *n*th degree of the pass system. Its extension to women. The mass uprooting of populations. The shocking implications of Bantu Authorities and of Bantu Education. The menace of job reservation. The new taxes . . . But the list is endless. No one who knows what it means, or could put himself in the place of the people who suffer it, could

imagine that the people are contented. Indeed Mr. Lewin himself, who has fought against every one of these evil things and knows what they mean, must be perfectly well aware that they are not contented, that they hate them and the Government and systems which imposed them with a deep and abiding hatred.

Again to quote the U.N. Commission report: "As the apartheid policy develops, the situation it has made is constantly being aggravated and daily less open to settlement . . . daily more explosive and more menacing to internal peace . . ."

They wrote that in 1953. Since then we have witnessed the mounting resistance of African women to passes, the great bus boycotts, the Drill Hall demonstrations, the Rand strike of June 26, 1957, the violent disturbances in Zeerust, Sekhukhuneland and other rural areas. There has been a continuous awakening of the masses, a steady consolidation of the multiracial movement for democracy, clarification of its views, firming of its determination. The defiance campaign might not have "shaken the government", but it vastly reinforced the liberation movement in membership, influence, experience and maturity. Even the stay-at-home last April, disappointing though it was in many ways, brought home rich lessons which the movement has not been slow to learn and apply.

The Nationalist Government is far from sharing Mr. Lewin's apparent complacency regarding its stability. They are discovering, like the Red Queen in Alice, that you have to go faster and faster merely to remain in the same place. The constant stream of repressive legislation and administrative bans and restrictions on civil liberties, the Treason Trial, followed now by a series of other mass political trials, the mounting obsession with security, the very harshness of each new draconic apartheid measure—all these betray a basic jitteriness. They cannot be explained merely by referring to the well-known authoritarian tendencies of the Nationalists, or Swart's nightmares about Reds under his bed. His gigantic plots and conspiracies may be sick fancies, but there is nevertheless a very real basis for the apprehensions of the Government. That basis is the fact that the Congress movement, the national liberation movement of South Africa, has found its direction and its goal, and is steadily winning the allegiance of the vast majority of the people.

And herein lies the certainty of the defeat of the present form of Government and the victory of the South African revolution. For no minority Government can endure, however rigid its

repression or seemingly powerful its forces, once the great majority of the people have taken the path of resolute resistance and organization against it.

But revolution need not involve violence. There have been plenty of examples in history where a combination of factors have been compelling enough to make a ruling class give way for urgent and overdue changes, without dragging the people through the agony of civil war. We can only hope that this may also be the case in South Africa. We cannot tell what exact form the changes will take, how exactly or when they will come.

No doubt our road to democracy will be no easy one: the way is defended by men who will uphold privilege and injustice with tenacity and ruthlessness; the struggle will demand sacrifices and exact casualties. Insofar as Mr. Lewin was seeking to discourage facile optimism and dispel visions of easy victory, his purpose was worthy. The weakness of his article, however, was that, perhaps under the shadow of the Nationalists' last election victory, he has painted a difficult task as a hopeless one. And that is not true.

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