

# COLOURED POLITICAL RIGHTS

Back in 1948, apartheid was going to solve all problems. Here, in 1975, it has solved none, aggravated most, and created a plethora of new ones. One of its most spectacular failures has been in its attempt to solve what it chooses to regard as the "problem" of Coloured political rights.

By 1948 the value of the Coloured people's vote had been severely compromised by a number of governments, mostly non-Nationalist, in spite of its entrenchment in the Act of Union. That entrenchment guaranteed the vote to Coloured and White males in the Cape Province on the basis of non-discriminatory qualifications. Its value for Coloured persons was halved by the extension of the vote without qualification to all White women — and then further reduced when the qualifications for White male voters in the Cape were removed on the specious grounds that it would be unfair to ask them to qualify when their wives and daughters didn't have to.

By the time the Nationalists came to power Coloured voting power was thus very much less than it had once been, but the fact that Coloured and White people still voted on the same roll was to Nationalist sensibilities an affront too offensive to be tolerated. Sanctimonious statements about the poor Coloured voter being a 'political football' at the mercy of White politicians rang through the land. From this unhappy, exploited situation the Nationalists were prepared to go to any lengths to save the Coloured voters. The fact that the Coloured voters didn't want to be saved, was irrelevant. As in all things, the Nationalists knew best, and they removed the Coloured voters from the common roll, even though the only way they could get the necessary majority to do so was by packing the Senate with their own appointed supporters. In place of their common roll vote the Coloured people were given a few separate seats in Parliament. When they elected non-Nationalists to these seats the Government was angry, but when they elected Progressives it was infuriated. It therefore abolished those separate roll seats and gave the Coloured people instead their own Coloured Representative Council. When the first elections for the Council took place most Coloured people showed what they thought of it by refusing to vote. Those who did, voted overwhelmingly for anti-Government candidates — only to see the people they had **not** voted for nominated by the Government to be a majority on the Council.

Last year the second election to the CRC was held and the anti-Government Labour Party was returned with a majority so far ahead of its opponents that the Nationalist government found it was left without enough nominated vacancies to be able to neutralise it. Instead, as it became obvious that the Labour Party was heading for an absolute majority, the

Government rushed through a law enabling it to take over any of the functions of the CRC and carry them out in the Council's name. It did not exercise these powers immediately. Sonny Leon, the Labour leader, became Chairman of the Council, and his nominees took office in its Executive Council. When the Council met, the Labour Party majority adjourned it for six months to allow the Government time to respond to its demands for full citizenship. They did so without passing the Budget which was one drawn up by their predecessors in office, the Government-supporting Federal Party. This budget provided, amongst other things, for discriminatory salaries for Coloured public servants and discriminatory pensions for Coloured pensioners. There then followed a protracted battle between Mr Leon and the Minister of Coloured Affairs, the Minister trying to force Mr Leon to sign the budget, Mr Leon refusing. Finally, shortly before funds ran out, the Minister sacked Mr Leon as Chairman of the CRC and appointed one of his own nominated members of the CRC as its Chairman. She signed the budget almost, one felt, before she could have had time to read it.

Mr Leon's refusal to sign the CRC budget threatened teachers with the loss of their salaries, pensioners with the loss of their pensions, and many other Coloured people with hard times and financial embarrassment. Yet, there is no sign that the Coloured people did not support him in his stand. In fact, it seems that his support now is greater than before and that many Coloured people whose policy has always been to boycott government institutions are now behind him at least on this issue.

The Nationalists have spent nearly 28 years trying to divert Coloured political aspirations into apartheid dead-ends. They haven't succeeded. Why they should ever have thought that they might is a mystery. They only had to make one elementary inquiry at the very beginning to know that all their tortuous manoeuvres, arguments, legislation, couldn't work. All they had to do was ask the Coloured people what **they** wanted.

The answer at that time would have been that the Coloured people wanted full citizenship. And this is what they want today. The only difference between now and then is that the demand is more insistent now and the mood of the Coloured people much more militant than it ever was in 1948. Far from reducing friction between the White and Coloured people, apartheid has brought their relations to the point where political confrontation is the order of the day . . . and so added one more item to the growing list of the Nationalist Government's dismal and dangerous policy failures. □