

LIBERAL OPINION

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The "Vorster Bill"

THE MAIN provisions of the "Vorster Bill" (General Law Amendment Bill) will probably be known to South African readers of *Liberal Opinion* by now, but they may not be known to overseas readers. They should be. So they are repeated here.

The Minister takes increased powers to ban gatherings. He takes increased powers to ban organisations. He can now ban individuals from attending particular gatherings or particular kinds of gatherings. The Minister may confine a banned person to a particular place. This could be his own home. While the banned person is so confined he may be prohibited from "communicating with any person or receiving any visitor". The Minister may order a banned person to report regularly to a police station.

Statements by banned persons

Section 10 makes it an offence for anyone to publish any statement made by a banned person. It also, as if as an after-thought, provides a minimum penalty of three years for certain offences under the Suppression of Communism Act. Offences under certain sections of this Act carry a maximum sentence of 10 years, others a maximum of three years.

An interesting provision in Section 16 is that

where a state of emergency has been declared in any area, and emergency regulations have been promulgated, any such regulations may be extended by proclamation to any area not falling under a state of emergency. An emergency in Pondoland could mean restriction of civil liberties in Johannesburg.

Threat to newspapers

Section 5 deals with the registration of newspapers. Any newspaper seeking to register its name will have to deposit up to R20,000. If he later decides that the paper has offended against the provisions of the Suppression of Communism Act, the Minister bans the paper and takes the deposit. If it then re-registers under another name it must renew its deposit and run the risk of losing it again. Obviously no outspokenly anti-Nationalist newspaper can hope to survive under a law like this.

Section 21 is the only section of the Bill which has anything to do with sabotage. It provides for the death sentence, extends the death penalty to juveniles convicted of sabotage and stipulates that the minimum sentence imposed shall be five years' imprisonment.

The medieval provisions of this last section have received wide publicity but it is the other twenty sections of the Act which add significant weapons to the already bursting armoury of the Verwoerdian police state.

Power to ban any meeting

It is anticipated that Mr. Vorster might specifically ban mixed political meetings in this Bill. He has not done so because he has given himself powers which make it unnecessary. He can now ban any kind of meeting any time he wants to. He need not stir up a fuss if in future he wants to emasculate Liberal Party activities. It will not be necessary to rouse overseas opinion through banning the Party. He can neutralise it indirectly, or so he hopes, through banning individuals and particular kinds of activities.

He has already announced that meetings on the Johannesburg City Hall steps and the Grand Parade in Cape Town will be stopped. The

Johannesburg City Hall steps are about the only place it is possible to hold a multi-racial meeting in Central Johannesburg. Late last year Nationalist thugs took to breaking up such meetings. Did somebody suggest to them that they should, so that the ban, when it came, could be justified?

The house-arrest provisions amount to virtual imprisonment without trial. The restriction on publishing statements by banned people means that the next time a Foundation importee visits Chief Luthuli he had better not publish what they talked about! More important, it will be quite impossible for Chief Luthuli to comment publicly on any question at all. His appeals for non-violence will no longer be heard.

Liberals' sacrifice

This Bill is a threat to everything the Liberal Party stands for. Its aim is to make it impossible for those who want a nonracial future for South Africa to work effectively for it. It is a futile aim. Whatever restrictions he imposes the things Liberals believe in will be much more durable than anything Mr. Vorster stands for. They will win in the end, provided those who profess them are unrelenting in their work for them and undismayed by this Bill's threats.

Liberals will still have to sacrifice a great deal before they get what they want for South Africa. Some may have to disregard the provisions of this new Bill. All will have to devise ways of carrying on the job of building their nonracial movements, whatever the difficulties placed in their way.

Liberal Opinion

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