

# “A TRAGIC REPORT”



A critique of the SPRO – CAS Social Commission Report: “Towards Social Change”

by Fatima Meer.

The findings of the Spro-cas social commission as recorded in Chapter 1 of the report and signed by a number of commissioners make up the most reactionary statement yet to emerge from within the body of White liberalism. (The fact that the Report has two Black signatories is irrelevant, since neither functioned as social commissioners at any time and it is doubtful that either studied the Report seriously). It tables the retreat of White liberalism, and as such pertinently challenges those Whites who hope to realise a common society with shared power and equal opportunity through changed White attitudes. Its reactionary nature, however, is not obvious and has to be abstracted from a body of facts and figures that highlight the stark discrepancy that exists in the material conditions of Black and White; and from an array of theoretical arguments that often create the feeling of radicalism.

Yet its radicalism serves the interest of White conservation for it is an integral part of a fundamental argument for retaining the status quo, and working for amelioration within it, on the grounds: (a) that change is not possible since the objective indications are that Whites will not change and Blacks do not have the power to pressurise change; and (b) that even if change occurred it would not necessarily result in Christian justice and equality.

## NO FRANCHISE PROPOSALS

This being its observations, it warns against placing too much emphasis on the enfranchisement of Blacks or on the elimination of the colour bar to attain freedom. Thus while over a decade ago, the Liberal Party proposed universal adult

franchise, and the Progressives close on their heels settled for qualified franchise, these new liberals of 1971 have no franchise proposals for Blacks. Thus 61 years after a Sauer, a Malan, and a Stanford had pleaded for a common franchise for all South Africans regardless of race, and had succeeded at least in retaining the existing Black vote in the Cape and "safeguarding" it through the requirement of a two-third majority in both Houses of Parliament to abolish it; 61 years after an Onze Jan of an Afrikaner Bond had remained unimpressed with this safeguard and had insisted on an absolute majority of Cape members to secure that vote, and a Schreiner and a Sprigg had refused all compromise with racialism in the Union about to be born; 61 years after a Jabavu and an Abdurahman had campaigned up to London for their franchise rights — these new liberals of 1971 have no franchise proposals for Blacks. So mesmerized are they by the power of the present, that they neither comprehend the past nor grasp the future, and offer the "myth" "that effective political organisation and the articulation of group interests must be present", before the franchise "can be used to full effect" (p.47). Since in their specially tailored view Blacks have never possessed these pre-requisites in the past and do not have them in the present, their enfranchisement could actually undermine their interests instead of promoting them. An evolutionary franchise could syphon off Black leaders to the White rank and thereby undermine Black solidarity; and a universal one may expose them to exploitation by unscrupulous White politicians and divide them into tribal, racial and status blocs. As evidence the Report points to the Coloureds who, it contends, did not use their franchise fully to improve their position but "voted for political parties whose primary concern was with the interests of Whites". The absurd impression is created (mischievously? since it is so patently false), that Coloureds had the opportunity to vote for Black political parties representing Black interests!

## WHITES NO BETTER

**However the Coloureds used their limited political power, they did not use it less intelligently or less effectively than Whites are presently using their universal franchise. Neither is the body of White politics for all its power, and all its capital, and all its privileges, less characterised by racial and status blocs. If the fear exists, as the report suggests, that Blacks may become the victims of the emotive and exploitive appeals of unscrupulous politicians in the future, this has already become a reality in the case of Whites. The "commissioners" (p. 47) do not suggest that on these grounds the White vote should be suspended.** An honest appraisal of the value of the franchise leads more easily to the observation that the fact that the Coloureds have the strongest position within the Black stratum is in no small measure due to the franchise that they, until recently, exercised on the common roll. It may be useful, too, to remind ourselves that it was the pre-Union African vote that was primarily responsible for the position of some of the most important Cape statesmen, notably James Rose-Innes and J.W. Sauer.

The Report's suggestion that Blacks do not understand their interests or are incapable of articulating them is preposterous. Blacks know precisely what they want and have articulated their wants effectively and through powerful political organisations for over a century. It is *because* the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress were effective that they were banned. But even if Blacks were inarticulate and incapable of organising

themselves, they would learn to do so in the process of exercising the vote, of assessing the programmes and policies of parties and candidates, of becoming involved in electoral campaigns. Even people who win freedom and power have to learn to use it and they do so in the exercising of it. Thus Parliamentary power is learnt in the process of using it, not in a vacuum, outside of it.

The fact is that any consideration of change cannot evade the franchise issue, and South African politicians know this. Thus it is that franchise is seen as the key to the South African problem; that White South Africans have spent a large portion of their parliamentary history disenfranchising enfranchised Blacks; and that all Black political organisations have given priority to franchise demands.

## SUSPECT OBSERVATIONS

The Report correctly points out that neither universal franchise nor the elimination of the colour bar will in themselves result in Christian justice and Christian equality, that South Africa "could have an all-Black cabinet but there might none-the-less be very sharp contrasts between affluent 'integrated' suburbs and very influential 'integrated boardrooms' on the one hand, and grinding poverty among peasants and soul destroying dullness and hardships among the urban poor on the other" (p-p 49-50) that "it would be unfortunate if those South Africans who espouse ideas of basic human dignity and of the liberation of the human spirit were to lose sight of the fact that freedom will not necessarily be realised with the removal of the colour bar", (p. 49). However, these observations stand suspect when they are associated with arguments that reject the fundamental importance of extending the franchise to Black South Africans. And progressive and virtuous as the "commissioners" may intend to be when they ascribe the evils of our society to the universal evils of competitive capitalism and acceptance of social conventions as absolute authority, — ("Blame for the ills that beset South Africa cannot be laid at the door of the Afrikaner, or the English-speaking Whites, or the wealthy businessman. Human alienation, in its essence, is found everywhere, in West and East, and in the first, second and third worlds". — p. 50) — they have the hollow ring of apologists, of persons seeking to vindicate White guilt and White responsibility for the existing "immoral" "unchristian" South African society. Their need to demonstrate White innocence is such that they claim "It is important to note that the majority of Whites in South Africa are probably not aware that they enjoy virtually the highest standard of living in the world by means of the systematic exploitation of black labour", that "most White employers for example, do not deliberately exploit Blacks. Indeed, many do as much as they can for Blacks within the norms of the economic system. It is the system which is exploitive rather than the people in it!" (p. 11).

**While universal adult franchise may not result in a model Christian Society, (which exists nowhere to-day) it is the essential pre-requisite for such a society; for a movement towards justice and equality and through these to brotherhood. South Africans in their present predicament cannot afford to sniff at an American-model or British- or Indian-model democracy, though they may well pledge themselves to persevere towards loftier ideals.**

## CLASS CONFLICT THEORY

The most disturbing aspect of the Report is that such impressionistic conclusions appear to be founded on a factual and objective analysis of the South African situation and presented as flowing logically from a radical theory of class conflict. Thus the discussion on change, which includes the discussion on franchise, forms an integral part of the Report's proposition that the South African conflict is fundamentally a conflict between classes rather than a conflict between races, and that following the classical pattern this conflict will be resolved through a clash between the opposing classes – between Black (workers) representing the force for revolution and change, and White (capitalists, entrepreneurs) representing reactionary resistance. The Report contends, however, that the objective conditions for such a confrontation are not yet present and thus no change can be contemplated now; and that a qualified franchise in particular will undermine the emergence of such conditions.

Had the Report followed its radical argument through, it would have proposed ways and means of strengthening and sharpening the revolutionary force, of, say, raising the necessary millions to finance a peaceful withdrawal of labour to the reserves, or even less radically the creation of a climate conducive to the overt organisation of Black political interest through the abolition of such security and pass laws and trade union legislations as militate against this.

Instead the Report emphasises that the political climate is too hazardous for Black leaders and Black political movements, and suggests only one avenue, though it states that this is not the only avenue, through which Black leaders could work – the institutions of apartheid. But these are the bastions of the status quo, the bulwarks against a common society; and a common society, a common brotherhood is the essence of Christianity. To virtually restrict Black leaders to these is to suggest that Blacks can only have puppets for leaders, for no matter how eloquently such leaders perform their rôles and how 'fantastic' the challenge they throw out from time to time, they are tied to apartheid strings and restricted to carrying out apartheid programmes. It is to make a mockery of the 'Black revolutionary force'. As if confirming this mockery, the Report states that Black leadership is ensured in these institutions because they are powerless, and because they give the Government credibility overseas.

**The Report's radicalism thus serves the function of conservation, and has the effect of relieving Whites from responsibility for change, (since they do not bear the potential for it) and of alleviating their fears of Black power, since Blacks have never had the organisational strength in the past, and are not likely to muster one in the foreseeable future to overthrow White power.**

## INTEREST BLURRED

One may query the validity of the marxist model for change through class conflict in present Western capitalist societies, where the interest of worker and entrepreneur becomes blurred, and where in the final analysis the two operate as partners in foreign exploitations; but even more pertinently, one questions the validity of this theory in relation to South Africa. The anatomy of apartheid is not

the anatomy of class in present day Western society. It is not even the anatomy of class as it existed in feudal or in a colonial or early industrial society, for in these the subordinated supplied military power, and through this could hope to overcome tyranny when it became unbearable. In South Africa the workers can only withdraw their labour, at the risk of bringing the violence of a modern military state on their heads as occurred in Bangla Desh, but without the weapons to raise even a Mukhti Bahini.

Racial discrimination in South Africa is a unique historical event because it occurs not only in an industrial society but in a nuclear age which can discount the human element and the will of the mass all the more effectively. This gives its exploitation of the subordinate a hitherto unknown kind of permanency. Thus Blacks cannot hope to shake off their shackles no matter how sharp their political maturity, unless they are helped by a strong external force, or unless Whites share power with them. To see the situation as one of an impending conflict awaiting the maturation of South African Black power is in effect to undermine change through internal resolution and to push the solution on external forces, economic or military, or both.

**The Report's objective basis for interpreting the South African structure as a class structure is that Whites discriminate against Blacks not because of a peculiar race prejudice, but, in order to exploit them materially. But material exploitation is not exclusive to class and in South Africa it occurs regardless of class and on the basis of race. Thus the White entrepreneur exploits the Indian entrepreneur through the Group Areas Act, regardless of the fact that the two have the same exploitive interests – indeed, because of that fact, because the Indian entrepreneur competes against the White entrepreneur.**

The Report risks such absurdities in straining to squeeze the South African population into two classes that one begins to question its motives. To arrive at a Black class of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, it identifies skilled Black artisans with the White class and claims that they share with that class, as an 'aristocracy of labour', the surplus profits of unskilled, non-White labour; this despite the Report's disclosure that the incomes of Black artisans are about a third and a half of that of White artisans.

## FACTUAL POSITION OVERLOOKED

The Black middle class is simply operated out of the two-class system and given a sort of mid-air marginal position, presumably in formalin for it is characterised as extolling the Government or kicking against it from personal frustration. (p. 16). **Thus it does violence to an important segment of the Black community and brazenly overlooks the factual position that the Black middle class is an integral and valued part of Black society, providing it with leadership in every area, and having contributed to it such political personalities as the Ghandis, the Luthulis, Mandelas, Naickers, Sobukwes and Sitas.** What is the purpose of this strained squeezing of the South African population, into two classes, of the absurd dismembering of the constituent classes of the component race groups? Is it because class divisions find acceptance in Western eyes where racial ones evoke abhorrence?

Social classes have up to now proved inevitable in modern industrial societies, some sort of class hierarchy obtaining even in socialist countries. Whether intended or not, to conceive South Africa in terms of a class hierarchy is to give it respectability and to bring it in accord with Western democratic Christian traditions. But this is not possible, for racial discrimination in South Africa is in conflict with the fundamental principle of modern Western class society, which tolerates class on the underlying assumption that a person's position is not fixed by birth, that he is free to utilise his talents to move out of it. Western democracies explain that their vitality and dynamism are due to the motivation to compete and achieve which such social scales stimulate. It is precisely because this freedom is obstructed, this drive, this motivation to aspire to the top is blocked, that the Western world condemns the South African system and implies or contemplates sanctions against it. South Africa with its rigid, permanent, and unchangeable grouping of persons by race violates the fundamental democratic principle of individual freedom to pursue social and economic goals.

### IMPRISONED AND POWERLESS

In modern class society the distance between classes constrict, and there are real expectations that lower classes move towards increasing freedom and greater power; this is so because the classes are integrated into a democracy. The Black race is not the equivalent of such a class. It does not manipulate political power to curb capitalist exploitation, and extend the areas of State control in its interest. Imprisoned and made powerless by its race, it cannot move out of its race. Though the wages and living conditions of Blacks may improve, their exploitation will continue unabated and the discrepancies between their objective condition and that of the White will remain as sharp. Exploitation on the basis of race has continued in South Africa for three hundred years and it can continue for as many more, no matter how enlightened the oppressed Blacks. This is the intrinsic difference between a class society and a race society as it exists in South Africa to-day.



*Robert Sobukwe*

It does not seem possible that the social scientists who are signatories to the Report, can be so ignorant of Black history or so out of touch with Black dynamics to interpret their present quiescence as absence of political awareness, or to believe that Blacks are not ready to participate in a common democracy or that they would support an even less Christian society than the one presently existing in South Africa. **It seems quite apparent that the "new liberals" are so overawed by the power of the present Government, and so fearful of losing White sympathy that they dare not propose change, and thus this tragic report.**□

## FROM PROTEST TO ACTION

by David Hemson

It is commonly held that students are privileged members of society. This is true. For a comparatively short span of three years students can, if they make the effort, begin to acquire an understanding of South African society and themselves. The student who moves in the environment of the university and the farm worker who labours from sunrise to sunset occupy different worlds. There is a connection, however; a link between the exploitation of the worker and the production of knowledge at the university.

Only a small fraction of the amount of money required for study is provided by the student himself; the state provides the bulk and the proportion is increasing. These amounts are fed to the grateful universities which can then continue their 'useful' role in the production and distribution of certain forms of knowledge. The state gathers its funds from taxation :- income tax, company tax, and other forms of taxation which add to the burden of black workers. In this way the state scoops off a percentage of the profit which results from production in major sectors of the South African economy and gains revenue from workers who earn below the poverty datum line.

The amount of surplus which can be gained is related to the rate of exploitation of the workers within that sector. The clearest example of state revenue from the high rate of exploitation of workers is that of the gold mining industry

which has always been a major source of revenue and it has paid for the extension of the state and general revenues which have been absorbed by universities. The industry has had a decisive role in the establishment and development of the University of Witwatersrand. So as we see, the accumulation of knowledge is concomitant with the accumulation of capital; the means to knowledge have not dropped from heaven.

### LOYALTY TO WORKERS

The universities are now in a subservient relationship to the state which has acted as a mechanism for transferring surplus value from the workers to the students. In this context the universities and students owe a loyalty to the workers of South Africa. This is not a sentence which has been written casually. The university should be involved in the production of information directly relevant to