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## *EDITORIALS*

# i CENSORSHIP AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

The Nationalist Government's Bill to control the South African Press has been dropped — for a year, anyway. The Bill would have put the Press in a straitjacket. The National Press Union, which represents the people who control the Press, and whose meeting with the Prime Minister led to the Bill being withdrawn, has been given this year's respite so that it can "put its own house in order". This it seems to be hastening to do.

The Government has been threatening the Press for years, promising to pass legislation to make sure that it only publishes what the Government wants it to publish in the way the Government would like it to be published. Nor has it only threatened. It has passed laws, for instance, free reporting on defence matters and prison matters has been made impossible and, in this present Parliamentary session, an end has been put to free reporting in the almost certainly expanding field of what might be called civil

disturbance. At the same time the threats resulted in a Press Code, administered by the Press itself, which, before the Newspaper Bill was introduced this year, had already made many editors much more careful about what they published.

However, this Press Code and the way it has been administered has not been good enough for the Government. Its supporters have kept on threatening new laws to control the Press. A fair proportion of the threats have come from the Prime Minister himself. This war of nerves apparently led to a series of discussions between the National Press Union and the Government which the NPU finally broke off when the Government insisted that it would accept nothing less than legislative control of the Press. This breakdown, we are sure, didn't upset the Government at all. It gave it the opportunity to introduce the Newspaper Bill and at the same time to claim that it had been forced to do so by the unreasonableness and irresponsibility of the Press in refusing to discipline itself adequately in a time of

national crisis. We all now know what the provisions of that Bill were — its definitions so wide and vague that publishing almost anything could have been an offence, its penalties in the best Nationalist tradition. Newspapers could be closed down for a while; newspapermen could be heavily fined, or gaoled, if they were held to have broken its provisions; the right of appeal to the courts was removed.

Not surprisingly the terms of the Bill created an uproar amongst opponents of the Government and in the newspaper world. The Government responded by doing nothing for a while.

It let anxiety build up. It then announced that if the NPU didn't like the Bill it could make an appointment with the Prime Minister to discuss it. This the NPU did. But the Bill was not withdrawn. Its second reading was instead set down to take place two days after the NPU's meeting with the Prime Minister. In this way it was ensured that when the meeting took place the full weight of the threat to the Press was hanging over the head of every NPU man at it.

What went on at that meeting we don't know. What we do know is that the NPU has now produced a new Press Code which seems to us to include, almost word for word, all the restrictions the Nationalist Government's Bill contained. All that is missing is the Newspaper Bill's penalties. There is really no need for them if the NPU accepts the restrictions. Won't brave journalists and editors who ignore them just find themselves out of a job?

Right now it looks as if the NPU has given to the Government what it wanted. Instead of censorship we are to have self-censorship. The Government will be able to continue to propagate the myth that a free Press still functions here and those who want to will believe it.

REALITY is neither big enough nor important enough to belong to the NPU. Even if we were we hope that our policy would be the same as it is now, to continue to report what we see, and say what we think until we either go broke or are closed down. •

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# ANOTHER NAIL IN EVERYONE'S COFFIN ?

In the aftermath of last year's student revolt a mass of prosecutions for "terrorism", "sabotage", arson, public violence and other offences is taking place all over South Africa.

One of these trials, which started in early February, involves 20 students from the Zulu University at Ngoye. They are charged with "sabotage" and arson. Most of them were detained in June or July last year and kept in solitary confinement until December, when they were first allowed access to lawyers.

There is another group of students, whose number is unknown, many of whom have been detained for as long as the accused. The members of this group have not been charged with anything nor have they had access to their lawyers, although some of them have been allowed visits from relatives in recent weeks. Presumably they are still in custody because, having had them in solitary confinement and at its mercy for all these months, the State now intends

calling them as witnesses against their fellows.

It is a fairly safe assumption that every student against whom the Security Police had any evidence at all, real or imaginary, of involvement in last year's outbreak of violence at the university, has either been charged or is still being detained by them, either as a potential witness, or for some other purpose. It would be quite out of character for the Security Police to let go anyone they felt they had the slightest chance of associating with those events. Yet there is still another, much larger group of students, who were presumably not implicated at all, or who did not know enough to warrant detention, whom the university itself has decided to punish with quite drastic severity. There are said to be over 500 of them, who, having committed no offence sufficiently serious to fall within the ambit of our mass of security legislation, the university authorities have refused to allow back at Ngoye. This decision seems to have been taken as a result of some kind of internal inquiry conducted at the university at which the students concerned were neither present nor represented.