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EDITORIALS

1. MORE COVERING UP

Even in the most open society, which South Africa is not, there are areas of official activity where, by virtue of the power wielded by those with authority over those without any, abuses of individuals are an ever-present danger. Three such areas are those controlled by the military, the prisons and the police authorities. The recent rumpus over the treatment of detainees in Northern Ireland, an area where the activities of all three authorities meet, has shown just how vital it is that the full light of public scrutiny, which in practice means press scrutiny, should shine on what these departments do.

What happens in South Africa?

For several years now it has been virtually impossible for the Press to publish anything about military matters without the prior approval of the military authorities. This meant of course that South Africa could launch its army into Angola without anyone knowing about it until it all ended in an ignominious withdrawal. Would such an escapade ever have been possible if it had been given the press publicity it deserved? And if it hadn't happened would the Namibian question not have been a great deal easier to solve?

When the Rand Daily Mail published allegations by ex-prisoners and ex-prison officers about abuses in gaols fifteen years ago it was charged with not having taken adequate steps to check the truth of the stories. The fact that it had taken affidavits from all of its informants was not considered an adequate precaution, and its publishers, editor, and reporter responsible for the stories, were all found guilty of not having taken "reasonable steps" to verify the information. Since then the Press has been extremely reluctant to publish anything about prison conditions which didn't have official blessing. If anything bad is going on in our prisons now you can be pretty sure we will never hear about it.

And now, if the Minister of Justice has his way, the same comfortable blanket of silence will descend over police activities. He wants a law which will make it well-nigh impossible for the Press to publish anything critical of the police unless they have cast-iron proof of its truth. How on earth does one ever get cast-iron proof of anything a policeman has ever done to someone in custody, when there are invariably half-a-dozen other policemen available

to swear that whatever anyone of them has been accused of simply didn't happen. In terms of the Minister's proposal, the penalty for publishing an accusation against a policeman which cannot then be proved will be a maximum fine of R10 000, a maximum prison sentence of 5 years, or both. Who will risk that?

But even this is not enough to satisfy Mr Kruger. He has introduced another Bill, the Inquests Bill, which will make it an offence to prejudice, influence or anticipate the proceedings of any inquest.

With laws like these on the statute book would we have ever heard much more about Steve Biko's death than the same Minister's bland announcement that he had been on a

hunger strike? Or would Mrs Joseph Mdluli ever have been able to press her claim for damages over the death of her husband in the hands of the security police, to the extent that she would have been paid the R15 000 she has just received in an out-of-court settlement? And how much would we have ever heard about all those other deaths in detention?

All over the world there are people with power in armies, police stations and prisons who abuse those who are helpless in their hands. The only real brake on such abuses is the fear of being found out. The law in South Africa is increasingly designed to make sure nobody can find out. That is the law of the jungle. □

2.

GETTING "CLEAN" GOVERNMENT

Since the Information Department scandal burst upon us the credibility rating of everyone touched by it has sunk to zero.

Most credibility gaps represent the difference between what a normal person's logic and commonsense tell him seems to be the truth, and what somebody else, usually somebody in a high place with an axe to grind, would like him to believe is the truth. In the Information Department affair, however, we have a new phenomenon. Here we have two groups of people, one group not long ago in high places, the other group still there, each of them consisting of people who for years have been holding one another up before us as examples of probity, honesty and incorruptibility and every other virtue we should try to emulate — and suddenly each is calling the other a bunch of liars.

What can we believe of what any of them have to say anymore, this seemingly impressive array of contestants, who between them can muster almost every important office the state has to offer? Is it possible, as both sides claim, that one side only tells the truth and the other only lies? Does not the balance of probability suggest that both tell some of each? Which brings us to another point.

The Parliamentary opposition parties and the anti-Nationalist press have been calling on the government to resign and call an election. No doubt this would be the

proper thing for it to do. But what would it achieve? The argument is that the Government must call an election in order to "cleanse" itself of the Information scandal. How will an election do that? The opposition parties might well win back a few seats from the Nationalists, where there were three-cornered contests in the last election, but does anyone seriously believe that anyone but the same old gang will end up running the country? How many Nationalists will change their affiliations just because the people they have been sending to Parliament and the Cabinet have turned out to be not as pure as they claimed to be?

Survival as boss is the Nationalist voter's main concern and if fiddling with the funds is part of the cost of that survival, so be it. This attitude is the inevitable consequence of thirty years of government based on the assumption that the end will justify the means.

If Mr P. W. Botha calls an election which he knows he cannot lose how can it possibly be argued that, by so doing, he will somehow achieve a miraculous conversion to "cleanness" and incorruptibility for his Government? The claim is nonsense. There will only be a prospect for "clean" government in South Africa when "survival as boss" at all costs is no longer the guiding principle of those who do the governing. And that moment, unfortunately, has not come yet. □

3. URBAN TERROR

Recently Harold Strachan appealed through the Press for an end to all urban terrorism, whether left or right inspired. And well he might.

Last August somebody knocked on his door one night and, when his wife opened it, tried to murder him. In March seven shots were fired into his house. On the same night, not far away, Mr Morgan Naidoo's house was fired upon.

Mr Strachan and Mr Naidoo are both people with a history of vigorous opposition to the Government. That the attacks were politically inspired there can be no doubt. They are only the latest in a long line of similar incidents.

Urban terrorism from the left is a comparatively recent development in South Africa. One knows about it because people get caught and appear in court and are sentenced.

Urban terrorism of the right has a much longer history, going back to World War II — if we dare mention that. It draws its support from sympathisers of the Nationalist

Party. In its milder manifestations it takes the form of throwing tear-gas bombs into crowded opposition meetings, or damaging or defacing the cars or homes of more outspoken critics of apartheid. At a more dangerous level it involves throwing petrol bombs into the same sort of people's houses, or firing shots through the windows. At its worst it includes the August attempt to murder Harold Strachan and, we suspect, the successful murder of Rick Turner.

These various attacks have two things in common. They are all directed at well-known opponents of the Government . . . and hardly anyone ever gets caught. As far as we know in the more than twenty years that such attacks have been going on under our present rulers there has only been one arrest which has led to a conviction, and that for a comparatively minor offence, and just recently two people have been arrested and charged with firing shots into Colin Eglin's flat. For the rest, these attacks seem to be carried out by people who appear quite confident that they will never be caught. That confidence seems fully justified. □