

CILLIE COMMISSION

BY Pat Tucker

The Report of Mr Justice Piet Cillie's Commission into the causes of the 1976 riots in Soweto and elsewhere was tabled in Parliament on Leap Day 1980 — three years, eight months and 12 days after the inferno which began on June 16 and ended months later with 575 people dead, thousands injured and damage costing more than R45-million in cash and an inestimable amount in hatred, resentment, bitterness and fear.

The Commission's findings were greeted, almost universally, with a certain amount of amazement, some applause and, from various quarters, a degree of soul searching.

Not that anything the Commissioner said was new. The grievances to which he pointed are those that have been reiterated again and again over the years by innumerable extra-parliamentary opposition bodies black and white, by English language newspapers, churchpeople and political parties left of centre.

But, in the circumstances, it seemed like a remarkably enlightened piece of work.

The disturbances, Mr Justice Cillie concluded in his 1 000-plus page report were a consequence of apartheid injustice and official bungling.

The report, which covered events from June 16, 1976 to February 1977 confirmed that the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in certain subjects at black schools was the immediate cause of the unrest but it blamed the escalating situation of frustration and anger on bungling by education officials and on a lack of police preparedness.

But, the Commissioner concluded, more basically, the causes of the unrest were to be sought in some of the cornerstones of the apartheid policy.

His summing up of the reasons for the unrest was cited by Die Vaderland as a document which should be a "revelation" and "compulsory reading" for every white in the country.

"It is a story of regimentation and discrimination, of frustration and a feeling of injustice. Naturally there was intimidation and exploitation of the grievances for political ends during the disturbances. . . ." but "Anyone who reads the report and still tries to oppose reforms is both blind and deaf."

The causes, as Mr Justice Cillie saw them were the Government's apartheid policies and discrimination; the influx control laws and the hurtful way in which they are applied; the group areas act, especially as it affects the Cape Coloured people; the homelands system; the rule of administration boards and the citizenship provisions applied to urban blacks.

The catalogue continued with the fact that urban blacks felt they had no say in their own affairs, they feared the loss of their South African citizenship and they were unhappy about their inability to own homes and, in general, about discrimination.

Other factors that contributed to the climate of unrest were the breaking up of families in urban areas by Section

10 of the Urban Areas Act and resettlement caused by the Group Areas Act (this was the direct cause of a riot in Stellenbosch and contributed to one in Mossel Bay.)

But, with all these factors noted, the commissioner found that intimidation was possibly the largest driving force behind the riots and that organisations like the ANC, PAC and SACP as well as the then lawful Saso and Soweto Students' Representative Council played an active role in inciting and encouraging the riots.

He found, despite evidence to the contrary, that black consciousness meant black power and that the exercise of black consciousness led to a polarisation of black and white, creating a mood which was useful to an agitator.

Bantu education officials came in for a share of the criticism when Mr Justice Cillie found they had not properly informed the then Minister of Bantu Education, M. C. Botha, his deputy and the Secretary of Bantu Education, Mr G. J. Rousseau of the badly deteriorating situation.

He also criticised the "take it or leave it attitude" of the Regional Director of the Bantu Education Department, Mr W. C. Ackermann.

And, while he criticised the Soweto police for ignoring clear signs of gathering unrest before June 16 and, when trouble broke out, for being unprepared in terms of manpower, equipment and attitudes, he also praised them for trying their best to preserve peace and for not becoming panic stricken.

This latter finding has been the subject of much criticism from both sides of the Houses of Parliament with the Minister of Police, Mr Louis le Grange rejecting the finding that the police shared collective responsibility for the outbreak of rioting and Mrs Helen Suzman finding the Commission's "exoneration" of the police except for their ignorance about "the situation" and the "incompetent" handling of the first day of the unrest "difficult to understand."

The disturbances and their aftermath, the Commissioner found, had led to "an exceptional deterioration—especially in urban areas—of the attitude of black youth to whites; the rejection by black youth of negotiation with the government and their readiness to continue their liberation struggle by force of arms."

It does not take an enormously insightful observer of the South African political scene to realise that the Commission's findings point to an urgent need for real change if the events of 1976 (or worse) are not to be repeated.

In political trials in various parts of the country, returnees from the mass exodus of black students that followed the disturbances are making their appearances, many of them accused of terrorism. The spinoff from the events of 1976 have been felt in Goch Street, in Silverton, in armed attacks on police stations and in an escalating threat of violence born of growing anger and frustrations unassuaged.

Looked at in these terms, how relevant in fact is the Cillie report in terms of promoting change? Significantly, the Commissioner made findings, he did not make recommendations.

And, in a section of the report devoted to changes that had been made in the course of and after the disturbances, he singles out shifts in policy that are at best superficially palliative, at worst irrelevant in the light of the real causes of the unrest.

The Commissioner points to the change of ruling in connection with the use of Afrikaans, a change which was made soon after the disturbances began.

He goes on to assert that "since then, a great number of changes have been made in the lifestyle of the black man. All of them applied to blacks in the urban areas."

The Commission, said Mr Justice Cillie, did not try to ascertain if the changes were all a result of the unrest because it was possible that some had already been considered necessary before the unrest.

Just what were these changes? In the field of education, the start of the introduction of compulsory education and the "so-called" free education. There had also been changes in tertiary education.

He cited the application of the Community Councils act and the replacement of advisory and urban bantu councils by community councils.

There were wide-ranging changes in regard to housing in urban areas, said Mr Justice Cillie. They involved matters like the ownership and disposal of houses; the financing, purchasing or building of houses and the taking of steps towards the provision of electricity to Soweto.

In the area of sport, the Commissioner observed that there had been a move away from discrimination.

The restrictive regulations in regard to trade in black urban residential areas had been considerably changed, he said. The list of permissible commercial enterprises in these areas was enlarged from 26 to 67.

Changes had also been made in connection with attendance at theatres, and cinemas, the use of hotels and restaurants, the sale of beer by dealers and other matters.

There is very little in the Commissioner's list to lighten the heart of the impoverished, the unemployed, the migrant or the starving child in the homeland. They are in fact relevant only to a comparatively small number of middle-class, urban blacks.

The report appeared more than three years after the events: three years in which, if anything, the factors which the commissioner cites as causes of the unrest have been exacerbated rather than ameliorated.

They are three years in which three homelands have become "independent" with the resultant loss of citizenship for hundreds of thousands of black South Africans.

They are three years in which emergent black leaders have been detained, banned and have died in South African prisons.

They are three years in which black, coloured and Indian peoples in the Government's separate development jigsaw puzzle have been deprived of their homes, and often their livelihood; in which tales of poverty and starvation in remote rural areas have filled pages of newsprint.

They are three years which have seen the institution of the R500 fine for the employment of "illegals" which has put hundreds out of jobs and made it impossible for thousands of others ever to get them.

They are three years, in short, in which little if anything has been done at any meaningful level to change any of the factors which resulted in the shots and the flames, the destruction and the misery of the events of that tragic eight months.

A question which must inevitably be asked is was there any point to the commission at all? Is there any meaning in a report which appears three years after the event?

And does the Government feel that, having allowed Mr Justice Cillie to produce his magnum opus and having taken its rap over the knuckles manfully, it can now safely bury the matter in the archives with a sigh of relief?

If previous experience is anything to go by, that might well be exactly what will happen.

Twenty years ago, as the reverberations of the guns of Sharpeville and Langa died away, the Nationalist Government established two commissions of inquiry. The findings of the two commissioners, Mr J. Wessels (Sharpeville) and Mr Justice Diemont (Langa) were in tone and content not very different from those of Mr Justice Cillie two decades later.

In his report, Mr Wessels found the first aim of the defiance campaign was the immediate abolition of the pass laws. The pass book system was regarded as evil and this factor had won over a number of Africans to the campaign of protest although they had not been members of the PAC.

Another source of dissatisfaction was the low standard of wages and a third was "the feeling of frustration of the Bantu in not having any effective body through which to air their grievances."

In Cape Town, Mr Justice Diemont found that the success of the Pan African Congress in organising large protest meetings was due to the fact that the people had serious grievances and no means of stating them or obtaining redress.

And again "Witness after witness testified that their major grievances were low wages and the operation of the reference book system."

The response of Dr Verwoerd to these findings was that the Government saw no reason to depart from the policy of separate representation and "the underlying good this held for all in the future."

It had decided too, he said, that it would have to take steps to prevent incitement from continuing.

The Government was unable to abandon the reference book or the influx control systems, nor could exemptions be considered. The size of the reference book would, however, be reduced.

As far as wages were concerned, the Government would see to it that the machinery which existed for "Bantu" workers to negotiate with their employers was implemented to a greater extent and that "Bantu" homelands must be enabled to provide for both their increase in population and the returning flow of "Bantu".

Meanwhile, the PAC and the ANC were banned and, in the years that followed, trials, bannings, detentions, decimated the organised black opposition.

Far from responding to the very real grievances expressed by witnesses to the two commissions, the Government tightened its legal stronghold on extra-parliamentary opposition and continued to implement its stated policy.

So what price the Wessels and Diemont Commission findings? What price the Cillie Commission findings? □