THE NEW SPROCAS VISION

A Review of **South Africa's Political Alternatives:**
Report of the Political Commission of the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society.
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AN ACCOUNT OF THE REPORT

by Marie Dyer

The Spro-cas political commission undertook an ambitious task: to formulate a statement of the Christian doctrine of Man; to derive from this a set of ethical considerations applicable to political life; to examine the present political situation in South Africa and to evaluate it in the light of these considerations; in the many areas where it fails to satisfy them, to consider the possibilities for change inherent in the situation itself; to consider the theoretical and practical validity of other current or conventional proposals for political change; and finally itself to suggest both immediate and long-term strategies for change which could progress from the present situation to a system embodying its ethical principles in a practical and satisfactory way.

If the task was intimidating, the achievement is impressive. Again and again the reader is almost daunted by the rigour with which difficulties are confronted and implications pursued, the closeness with which conventional assumptions are scrutinised, and the coherence with which arguments are presented. The conclusions reached and suggestions offered may be controversial; but they have been reached openly, lucidly and with a total absence of evasion.

The ethical principles established are the basic ones of equality, freedom and justice, and the 'derived' ones — with an admirably logical account of their derivation — of the rule of law, guaranteed civil rights, and effective participation in government. The very scrupulous examination of the present South African system exposes it — not unexpectedly — as flouting these principles in almost every possible way.

In investigating the special nature of South Africa's political problems (with many references to other sociological studies and researches, particularly those into the heterogeneous American society) the report suggests that the peculiar intractability of those problems results not from South Africa's diversity of races as such, but from the fact that the racial cleavages coincide with other lines, principally those of economic exploitation, political domination and social stratification. Thus conflicts arising at one level over specific issues will rapidly be generalised into other spheres; and the intense group conflicts so generated must be regulated by force. The task for South Africa is seen as one of moving from this kind of society, which is fundamentally unstable and must be held together by coercion, to the stability of an open 'pluralistic' society, in which power is widely diffused and in which there are cross-cutting affiliations of all sorts across the lines of cleavage.

Political concepts often recommended for application in South Africa are thus subjected in the report to a double scrutiny: first, whether their adoption would satisfy the commission's ethical principles; and second, whether they would effectively promote the establishment of an open pluralistic society. Ideas like the common society, separate development, liberal-constitutionalism, the qualified franchise, the two-party system, are carefully examined. In addition, the report mentions other less familiar but also relevant systems operating in some European countries — for instance the 'consociational' system in which sub-cultures (those in Holland are Catholic, Protestant and secular) have a large measure of social autonomy; or 'corporate pluralism' as in Norway, where a major area of decision-making and participation by citizens is in bargaining with the government through interest groups.

The report rejects each of these concepts as being in itself unlikely to fulfil the conditions established. It will be recognised that in its inability to adopt the principles of liberal-constitutionalism, the report seems to be rejecting a system for which liberal democrats have consistently campaigned: in particular, the formula

of universal suffrage, a rigid constitution and a Bill of Rights, which has often been regarded as the only democratic ideal. In acknowledgement of the almost unprecedented nature of this rejection in South Africa the report presents a cogent defence. It suggests that the liberal-constitutional system, in concerning itself almost solely with the relationship between the individual and the state, would not confront the main difficulty in South Africa, which is its divided pluralism (implicit in an adherence to the system is the expectation or hope that conflicting White and Black nationalisms would simply disappear). It argues that in plural societies with rigidly divided group interests the franchise easily becomes a battleground in which groups seek to dominate each other, and that extension of the franchise in South Africa might do no more than provide the possibility of a plural society under Black domination. It points out that the system does not in itself help to achieve equality in areas not directly concerned with relations between the individual and the state; and concludes that the system as applied in a racially divided society is calculated to intensify the politics of race.

In setting out short- and long-term goals, and recommending strategies for change in South Africa derived from these investigations and conclusions, the report sets out specifically to avoid the kind of 'utopian' proposals often recommended — proposals which would only work when all the obstacles preventing their adoption had of themselves disappeared. (It may be argued that all proposals not made or endorsed by the present government are utopian in this sense; but the report suggests that there are conditions under which the government might modify its rigid stance — for instance a crisis, which the report does not predict or define, but insists it would be irresponsible not to provide for, in which the previously unbargainable issues become bargainable; or a progressive and intolerable intensification of the strains and illogicalities inherent in the Separate Development policy). Thus the recommendations of the report accept in part the 'group' system now operating in South Africa. The report acknowledges the fear and scepticism with which liberals regard the group as a political category; but asserts that acceptance of this idea involves no transgression of its own ethical principles, provided that the groups are formed by voluntary affiliation and leave freedom for individual affiliations across the cleavages between them.

The recommendations of the report are formulated into a Model for Transition, divided into two stages, whose main proposals are these:

The First Stage — starting from the present system in which the central government is still responsible to a parliament elected by the White group.

A 1 The removal of inequalities and injustices and the provision of better opportunities for all people in education, economics, occupational mobility, collective bargaining, social security and welfare.

2 The liberalisation of society in the areas of political dissent and protest, freedom of the press, censorship, voluntary association.

3 The safeguarding of the defence force from the monopoly of any one group.

B 1 The setting up of representative Regional (not ethnic) authorities, and the definition and extension of their powers.

2 The setting up of representative communal authorities to accept some powers of local government and to negotiate in the interests of unenfranchised groups in the common areas.

3 The setting up of regional planning and co-ordinating committees with representatives from regional and communal authorities, and also from interest groups like trade unions and agricultural associations, to assume responsibilities in matters transcending the competence of regional and communal authorities.

4 The progressive devolution of decisive policy-making, executive and administrative powers from the central government to the regional and communal authorities.

5 The creation of standing ad-hoc committees, with representatives from all authorities, groups and interests, to accept an increasing measure of control over national matters like influx control, transport and communications.

C The setting up of independent tribunals to supervise action taken under security measures like the Terrorism and Suppression of Communism Acts.

After a round of negotiations, conferences and conventions, comprehensive constitutional changes are envisaged for the *Second Stage,* for which the commission's recommendations are more general. The major recommendation is the establishment of a *Federal Government,* to determine matters of national policy and to be responsible to a legislative assembly representative of all the citizens of the Republic. (The composition, powers, and election procedures of this assembly would be decided in the round of conferences; the elections could be indirect with regional and communal authorities acting as electoral colleges, or could embody some form of direct election combining constituency and proportional representation)

Civil liberties and minorities' rights would be entrenched and protected by an independent judiciary. Present security laws would be repealed and replaced by democratically acceptable ones.

In the creation of an *Open Society, allowing some degree of Optional Segregation:*

1 Multi-racial Regional authorities, set up as in stage 1, and with similar powers, would remain.

2 Communal authorities — including White communal authorities — would control and provide facilities for their own groups in their own group areas.

3 Multi-racial local authorities would control common areas — i.e. all commercial areas and all open residential areas (for those who chose to live outside group areas).

4 General cultural councils would provide facilities for people who did not wish to affiliate with a communal authority or make use e.g. of its educational facilities.

5 All services supplied by the federal government and local authorities in the common area would be available to all citizens.

6 Authorities in group areas, and private·bodies, could impose some segregation at their own expense, if they so wished.

A BRIEF FURTHER COMMENT

by Colin Gardner

This comment is brief, not because *South Africa's Political Alternatives* is uninteresting or unimportant, but for precisely the opposite reason: the book inspires a good deal of that appreciative silence that is the proper response to an achievement which is both subtle and revelatory; and one senses that one must resist the temptation to provide one's reader with a body of secondary commentary which may get in the way of the work itself. The Report, the last and the most elaborate of the reports of the six spro-cas commissions, deserves above all to be *read* — carefully, thoughtfully, imaginatively.

To say this is not to say that the Report is necessarily wholly "right". No study which provides both a full analysis of the present complicated political situation and a series of strategies for creative future development could conceivably be infallible. I personally find most of the Commission's arguments convincing, including almost all of its criticisms of some of the central policies that were adopted by the now-disbanded Liberal Party (I was myself, like several of the signatories of the Report, an active member of that party); but at the same time I think one cannot but be grateful for Dr Edgar Brookes' minority report which sturdily reaffirms the traditional liberal viewpoint. The majority report and the minority report are at one as to the basic ethical principles which a just political system must embody: the tension between them in regard to strategy and tactics seems to me to be, at the moment at any rate, a healthy one.

One of Dr Brookes's criticisms of the Report runs like this: "I do my colleagues the justice — and it is no more than justice — to say that they have framed their report with an hones. and earnest desire to make that impact which they feel traditional liberalism to have lacked. But, subconsciously as good South Africans, they have considered the impact on the white voters, and forgotten what impact their report would have on the black community and on world Christian consciousness."

These remarks pinpoint interestingly, though I think rather unfairly, one of the Report's main achievements, and its one serious shortcoming. Deliberately avoiding the eloquent denunciations which made up so large a part of the rhetoric of the old liberal opposition, the Commission has produced a document which could be read and responded to even by many supporters of the Nationalist Government. Clearly the Commission has worked on the assumption that it is right to try to talk to the people who have power, and to offer them — since it seems possible to do so — a not dishonourable way out of their present dilemma. Perhaps no book on South Africa written by a liberal or by liberals has ever before had quite this appeal.

But of course in a country where the range of political attitudes and experiences is so wide, speaking to one group of people is apt to involve neglecting or indeed insulting another group. In fact — and this is another of its achievements — I don't think this Report would offend any reasonable person, whatever his race, or any but fanatical groups of persons. But the Report is not likely to be immediately *accepted* by most blacks, for several reasons: the fact that it suggests a way of progressing from the present hated situation is bound to be a cause of suspicion; the very complexity of its analyses and proposals is likely to be regarded by many as yet another instance of wily obfuscation; but most important of all, the Report is written and signed only by white people. For various reasons (the chief of which was I believe the understandable reluctance of many blacks to commit themselves to public declarations which might arouse a punitive mood in the Government) the spro-cas commissions consisted mainly of whites. The Political Commission had only one black member, Dr W. F. Nkomo; and he died before the Report was written. In one most unhappy respect, then, *South Africa's Political Alternatives* resembles the calamitous Anglo-Rhodesian settlement proposals . . .

This Report deserves a better fate. But it cannot hope to succeed properly unless it is widely circulated and thoroughly canvassed among influential blacks — as well as among influential whites. Indeed I suspect that circulation and canvassing will not be sufficient: the Report will have to be added to, modified, rewritten in various ways. It is perhaps a starting-point rather than a finishing-post (it is only fair to add that the Commission does not claim to have predicted or controlled the future). Still, in the deadlock, the logjam, that the country has endured for so long, a starting-point is what is needed. I believe that this Report offers us all the chance of a flying start.□