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EDITORIALS

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SOWETO

In June Soweto burst into flames and on to the world's headlines. The demonstrations and the fires spread to many places, erupting in other Black townships, on university campuses, at schools hundreds of miles away. Why did it happen?

The Nationalists have their usual answer. Agitators were at work. If this is really as far as their thinking takes them, they are under a dangerous illusion. What agitator could go on working so successfully for so long and in so many different places if he did not have a deep-seated grievance to exploit?

Everyone knows what the spark was that set this chain reaction of protest and destruction off. It was the compulsory teaching, in Afrikaans, of certain subjects to Black children. The children objected. Their objections were ignored, so they started boycotting the schools. Tension built up dangerously, but nobody who had the power to

defuse the situation did anything about it. It was not that they were not warned. It is quite obvious that frequent and increasingly urgent warnings were given to government representatives, from Ministers downwards, and that they did nothing. Was it because they thought that they were strong enough to handle any situation that might arise? Had years of power persuaded them that, when it came to dealing with Black people, the will of the Government must inevitably prevail? We think this is precisely the illusion under which the Nationalist authorities laboured at the time of the Soweto school boycott, for is it not one of the major illusions under which they have been labouring ever since they came to power? We hope, with no great confidence, that Soweto has shattered it, once and for all, for if it has not, and the illusion persists, it is likely to prove fatal to those who believe in it, as well as to those who do not.

The illusion that, because you have power, you can do any-

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thing you like, pervades the whole body of Nationalist policy-thinking for Black people. Education policy, the flashpoint in Soweto, provides a typical example.

The Soweto schools fall under the Bantu Education system. "Bantu Education" is a Nationalist invention. It was designed by Nationalist theoreticians for Black people. The Black people weren't asked whether they wanted it or not. Not one of them, to the best of our knowledge, was even consulted about it before it was announced as government policy. Indeed, many of them protested against it — teachers, churchmen, parents, political leaders — but all to no avail. Some teachers lost their jobs, some children were banned from school for life because they protested. The policy was imposed. And the Nationalists deluded themselves that, if they imposed this policy with sufficient determination, Black people would, sooner or later, come to accept it.

Having forced Bantu Education on the schools, the Government turned its attention to the universities. The Extension of University Education Act was passed, preventing any but White students from attending major existing universities, except in exceptional circumstances, and hiving Black students off into their own separate and unasked for Coloured, Indian, Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu colleges. The supporting myth for all this was that contact between students of different racial and tribal origins produced tension and conflict — that you avoided this by channelling them off into separate institutions; that, even if they didn't want to go to them, it was better for them that they should. And for you, too! For, although it might take time, these separate institutions would one day begin to turn out people who believed in Nationalist policy.

How does all this Nationalist theory look now, after Soweto, after 25 years of Bantu Education? Has this quarter of a century produced a single Black man who supports Bantu Education? If it has, we don't know who he is. Have the separate universities produced a single Black student who supports apartheid? Not that we have heard of. The Zulu

university of Ngoye has gone up in flames, and nobody knows when it will reopen again; the Xhosa university of Fort Hare has closed down for the umpteenth time; the Rector of the Sotho university of Turfloop is in despair — and in the Black schools the rejection of Bantu Education appears to be total.

But Nationalist policy has created more than a collapsing educational policy. It has created Black Power. There is a new Black confidence abroad. Young Black people are not only more militant and determined than ever before, they give the impression that they know now that they are winning, that time and the world are on their side, and White South Africa can go to hell.

For years some people, Black and White, have been telling the Nationalists that contact between people of different races, though it certainly creates problems, should be as wide and frequent as possible. If it is not, both sides begin to think the other isn't really human, and effective co-operation becomes impossible. That is the point we have almost reached. As a deliberate consequence of government policy Black school children have been persuaded that they have nothing in common with White school children; Black students neither know about, nor want to speak to, nor give a damn about, White students — yet none of them supports apartheid.

Soweto should finally have exploded the myth that apartheid can solve anything. It has done none of the things it was supposed to do. It has not reduced race tension, it has magnified it a thousand times; it has not satisfied Black aspirations, it has frustrated them at every turn. Whether the Nationalists can disentangle themselves at this late date from the myths and illusions with which they have lived so long is the question of the day. For if they cannot, South Africa is heading for a future which, to use Mr Vorster's oft-repeated words, will be "too ghastly to contemplate" and which will make the catastrophe of Soweto seem like "the good old days".□

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FATIMA MEER

On July 22nd Mrs Fatima Meer, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Natal, in Durban, was banned for five years. Why?

Fatima Meer has been saying and doing things the Government doesn't like for over 20 years now. It is true that her statements have become more radical as time has passed, but there are probably at least two reasons for this. First, the growing need she has felt for it to be publicly shown that leading South African Indians identify totally with the aspirations of Africans. Second, the deteriorating situation against which her statements have been made. Twenty years ago that situation was bad enough, today it is infinitely worse. Change towards a non-racial society was urgent then; today, every month's delay in starting such change, and

getting on with it fast, increases the threat of catastrophe for all of us. Fatima Meer knew this and said it and hoped, by saying it, to shock us all into doing something. And as the situation worsened it was not surprising that her response to it should sound more and more outrageous to those who don't want real change at all.

Reality has not agreed with everything Mrs Meer has had to say, notably her condemnation of the Entebbe raid, but it has the greatest admiration for her courage and is proud to be able to count her amongst its contributors. We condemn her banning utterly. At this time, more than ever, it is vital for South Africa that every voice seeking a peaceful solution to our problems should be heard, however unpopular it may be with those in authority.□