

MISSING THE POINT—

The Theron Commission Report

by M. G. Whisson

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Thus spoke Macbeth on hearing of the death of the great lady who had fuelled his ambitious hopes of real political clout in the land of his birth. Were there any brown Macbeths who staked any real hopes upon the labours of the Theron commissioners as they consulted with the latter day, forked tongued diviners — sociologists, demographers and economists? Did anyone seriously believe that the Commission would propose a new deal acceptable to the "coloured" people which would be honoured by the existing government? The answer is, amazingly, yes, there were. The disenfranchised members of the Commission itself must have believed that their efforts were going to be worth making, and that by bothering to participate in the voting that took place from time to time they might be making some contribution to a better future for those sharing their legal classification. Others responded to questionnaires and talked to the Commission. Some perhaps, in their hearts, expected nothing, but nevertheless felt that their viewpoint should be put rather than be lost by default.

What did they get? Three major themes seem to arise out of the recommendations. First, there is the tentative and contested request that provision should be made for satisfactory forms of direct Coloured representation and decision-making on the various levels of authority and of government. That was what the whole Commission was about as far as some people were concerned, but the Commission, hopelessly divided between those who recognise that significant political rights are the *sine qua non* of justice and communal harmony and those who could not support proposals inconsistent with the Nationalist Party dreams of "parallel development", proposed a committee of experts to look into the matter and make more concrete proposals. The response of the government has been predictable — another commission should look into ways whereby the aspirations of the "Coloured" people can be met without challenging the traditional right of the white parliament to govern its own affairs, affairs which include, of course, the proper ordering of communal relations and its own position at the apex of the socio-political hierarchy.

A second theme is more fundamental and concerns the

identity of the "Coloured" people themselves. The law defines them as a residual category i.e. by their **not** being members of positively defined or substantive categories. The operation of the apartheid legislation however implies that they **do** form a substantive category. If one is going to attempt to classify people and order their access to the resources of the whole society by virtue of that classification, it is inevitable that such a basic problem will occur. There will always be a residual category, whose corporateness can be expressed only in terms such as those used at the Coloured Convention "a number of people discriminated against in a particular sort of way". The only way out of this dilemma is to abolish the legal category entirely, which is what the vast majority of the "Coloured" people have consistently demanded. Fiddling about with the system can achieve a little, whether for good or evil it is hard to predict. Making it easier for people to be re-classified through the humiliating procedures of the Classification Boards may ease the personal lot of some, while leading to the hurtful rejection of others and the destruction of normal human relations as people endeavour to achieve "acceptance" by one group through rejecting the other. The Commission recommended fiddling with the classification system — racism and humiliation with a little more humanity and a little more consideration of the individual, but racism and humiliation nonetheless.

So far, so bad. The rest of the recommendations, predicated as they are upon the false categorisation of "Coloured" people as a substantive category, can be considered together as an exercise in fiddling, for the most part to good effect. The miscegenation laws should be repealed; commercial and industrial areas should be open; organisations and places of entertainment should be free to admit whom they wish; the wage gaps should be closed; freehold farms should be available to "Coloured" farmers; private schools should be free to accept "Coloured" pupils, as should all universities; income criteria for housing in state schemes should be the same for "Coloured" and "White"; state welfare grants should be equalised; films should be released on the same basis for "White" and "Coloured"; the organisation and playing of sports should be left to the unions and clubs concerned. The fore-going recommendations may be justified on the grounds that even if they do not go far enough and in some cases retain a measure of discrimination they are at least firm steps in the direction of abolishing all discrimination. But so many

questions are begged — if we can now see the same film in different houses (a step forward) why not the same film in the same house? As Nero might have said, “How can I complete the harmony, this is only the beginning of the second movement”.

Then there are the recommendations which are predicated on the sound assumption that the “Coloured” people, as the victims of circumstances over centuries, are in need of not only the removal of some restrictions, but of positive help to enable them to compete in an open society, or to achieve such a measure of prosperity and communal welfare that they have no desire to compete or participate in the “White” dominated areas. The Coloured Development Corporation should be given greater scope to assist in the development of “Coloured” owned and managed business enterprise; people should be given greater assistance in dealing with credit and hire purchase arrangements; training centres for apprentices should be developed; the “tot” system should be abolished; far more resources should be devoted to education at all levels from nursery schools to the university, with higher education falling under the Department of National Education and more generous subsidy formulae than those used for the older universities being applied to the University of the Western Cape; District Six, Woodstock and Salt River should be proclaimed “Coloured” areas; additional resources should be devoted

to the promotion of family planning.

If the government responds positively to the recommendations that an end should be made of a mass of petty restrictions upon the freedom of “Coloured” people to live their lives according to their own choice, then the Commission will have been worthwhile and will have signified more than nothing — albeit stating no more than the self-evident. If the government responds generously to the recommendations that the “Coloured” people be given assistance to reach levels of housing, education and social welfare equivalent to the “Whites”, then again, the effort will have been worthwhile. But since the Commission failed to grasp the fundamental issue of classification in its recommendations if not in its deliberations, and failed to confront the government with the real political demands of the “Coloured” people, it has come nowhere near offering a solution to “the Coloured Problem”. Whether through wilful blindness or through the understandable belief that to ask for what might be granted is better than to ask for what is really needed, is neither here nor there — it has missed the point. The “Problem” remains, and will only be resolved when the term “Coloured” and its various synonyms is removed from the statute book. Once that step is taken, perspectives will be a little clearer on the problems of poverty, ignorance and anomie with which the Commission could do no more than fiddle.□

SOME NOTES

ON THE BRITISH CONNECTION

by Eric Harber (in Britain)

English speaking people living in South Africa are rather like those American citizens of, was it Arizona, who bought London Bridge thinking it was the original article and set it up in the desert with an artificial river and a fleet of red buses to carry the excited tourists to and fro. They were a little disappointed to find that it wasn't the original bridge and it didn't have castellated towers but they believed in it all the same. It was highly profitable and enjoyable for them to believe in it. They never told their visitors that it was only 150 years old and was in danger of falling down and needed to be rebuilt on sounder foundations. So it is for those who believe that Britain is a civilised society that its “most crucial social arrangements are based on the notion of fair play, mutual considerateness, and common sense”. This is a quotation from Colin Gardner's article on Britain that appeared in “Reality” recently. No doubt the purpose of this article was partly

to persuade the readers, if they were not persuaded already, that these principles and the institutions that practised them were a **very good idea**, but Professor Gardner, apart from the rhetorical proviso of “British society is far from perfect”, clearly believes what he says to be true and wishes everyone to believe this also. I would like to argue that his view of Britain is unreal and sentimental, especially when he says that the characteristic bents of public life in Britain are “intelligence, courtesy, outspokenness and relaxation”. This view is possible only to one who does not venture much beyond the congenial atmosphere of a university common room, when visiting Britain.

Democracy as it has been practised in the West has not moved very far away from the paradigm of a slave society. Slavery was abolished or officially abolished a mere 140 years ago, but the effective enslavement of the colonies by Britain and the other colonial countries lasted until they