

As National President, it is my great pleasure to welcome delegates and observers to this Conference.

For the first time the Black Sash has had a Headquarters Region, and Cape Western, as you all know, have had the honour of being the first Headquarters Region.

There is no doubt that in so far as the Cape Western is concerned having a Headquarters Region instead of a Regional Council and Central Executive in the same area, has been a great improvement. There has been far less drain on available personnel and no valuable time wasted through duplication of work. In consequence, we have all been able to work in complete harmony.

When I look back over the past year, I notice that many of the specific campaigns that we wished to embark upon have not been carried through to fruition. This has undoubtedly been caused by the number of political events -- sometimes crises -- which have caused diversions. The first was, of course, the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference, when South Africa had to leave the Commonwealth. Simultaneously, there was talk of 'trouble' to be expected from Africans. Shortly thereafter, came Republic Day, and the threatened stay-at-home. Then came the announcement that there would be a general election in October. In addition, there were a series of bye-elections. We have had, therefore, as seems to be the rule these days, to cope with circumstances seen and unforeseen beyond our control.

We meet today at what will probably be the beginning of a very difficult five years. Those of us who realise that our privileged white society cannot indefinitely maintain its position of supremacy, are naturally apprehensive of what will happen now that the Nationalist Party has again become the Government of the country, with the support of a majority of the electorate.

The English-speaking section are beginning to realise that the days when they were politically powerful, are over. As a political force on its own, it cannot achieve anything. The same remarks might also be made of the white opposition generally. It is clear that the present parliamentary system which enables half the white electorate to send 105 members to Parliament, while the other half is only represented by 56, does not make parliamentary changes easy or likely. The 1½ million coloured members of our society are represented by a mere 4 'unrepresentative' members, while the vast mass of our people, the Africans, are voiceless in Parliament. We must understand that the Government will not change the electoral system with its loaded vote. This fact, together with the Government's determination to ignore the wishes of the mass of the disenfranchised people and its denial to them of basic human rights, should make us all remember that in the preamble to the Declaration of Human Rights, the warning is given that if the rights incorporated in the Declaration are not guaranteed to the people, they will, as a last resort, have recourse to revolution.

Since the Black Sash earnestly requires that the changes it wishes to see should be brought about peacefully by orthodox and orderly methods, it must naturally be fundamentally opposed to, and view with distress, the possibility of change only being possible by unorthodox methods.

At the same time, the Government, if it makes change by orthodox methods impossible, cannot escape the responsibility for provoking unconstitutional action.

In view of the ban on the main African political organisations and the fact that those Africans with widely different points of view, who came together this year to discuss Africans' problems, have been convicted in a court of law of furthering the aims of a banned organisation, it is clear that it is going to be difficult for any new African organisation to emerge. While the Government obviously considers this will make control easier, it can also present a grave danger.

The daily frustrations which Africans suffer as a result of the laws which largely hamper their advancement, together with the shown by most whites, continue to exacerbate Africans' feelings and to increase the resentment and bitterness they feel towards the Government and white people generally. Without any responsible organisation or leaders to guide them, this anger may well manifest itself in sporadic outbreaks of violence has happened throughout history elsewhere. Yet most white opponents of the Government declare themselves powerless to alter this, as indeed we seem to be.

It was evident in the middle of this year that many white people, who verbally stated that a radical change of policy was necessary, if non-whites were not to resort in increasing measure to illegal or even violent activities, were not prepared to do anything at all to assist those they considered were being wrongly oppressed. They sat back and talked in terms of non-white demonstrations and economic pressures bringing about the changes they desired. But if there is one thing that the May demonstrations and the /today, overseas boycott have shown us, it is surely that in the present context, there is as little chance of changing the Government through non-white demonstrations and overseas pressure, as through the existing electoral system.

While it is certainly time that we were all prepared to treat our non-white neighbours as we ourselves wished to be treated, nobody knows just how much time there is to effect change, and we should continue as of old taking time and care to lay good strong, sound foundations for the future. I do not believe that the talk of time running out should make us feel compelled to take hasty action, nor do I feel we should be driven to despair because all is lost, or to inactivity because of our apparent powerlessness to bring about change.

It is a sad reflection on our society that although politics is on everyone's lips, most do nothing more than pay lip service to the things they believe in. When South Africa was at war with an enemy thousands of miles from its borders, people throughout the length and breadth of the country were prepared almost daily to sacrifice their time and their money in order to beat the forces of evil which it was considered threatened to overwhelm our liberties, but now, when the forces of injustice exist within our own borders, fewer people are prepared to come forward to make the sacrifices which must be made to uphold those freedoms for which we fought.

The white people who sit back and wait for others to make the sacrifices would do well to realise that if non-whites on their own have to bring about their salvation, there will be little reason for them to feel well-disposed towards white people afterwards. So we must realise that the clouds on the political horizon, which Mrs. Petersen referred to in her presidential address last year, have increased and when one looks at them and forecasts a storm, it should be remembered that this does not mean one wants a storm, but merely that it seems a storm is likely.

Change in our country, is inevitable sooner or later. If it is to be a change for the better, it is essential that we try to avoid a repetition of the Algerian situation. We on our own may not be able to bring about

change, but we can ensure that when change comes there are sufficient numbers of whites and non-whites who respect and trust each other, to make a multi-racial Government possible.

One of the tragedies in our country is the divisions that exist between the many opposition parties and groups -- white and non-white. The result is that at present amongst them there is not one existing opposition group that could produce a suitable alternative Government, truly representative of all the people.

Since, in my view, only a Government which guarantees basic rights and liberties to all, can expect to establish a peaceable and stable society when the present Government goes, I consider that the Black Sash should do all it can in the coming years, to persuade people openly to support a policy which will uphold the rights and liberties of every citizen, and that it should do what it can to act as a catalyst in bringing all people who share this aim to unite.

We will need to introduce more and more white people to non-whites in order that they may realise the non-whites' point of view and find from this how much they really have in common.

This is going to be an immensely difficult task in the future, because it is apparent that the Government is banning just about every articulate non-white. We must, however, continue our efforts to organise multi-racial discussion groups, conferences etc.

Another one of the things the Black Sash needs to do is to find ways of combatting the effects of Government propaganda which results in people, even in the opposition camp, widely believing such untruths as, for example, that a reference book is nothing more than a white person's identity card or passport. How to do this when most people do not think for themselves, and do not have the facts on which to base their views, is one of our most difficult tasks.

In the Sash, I believe, we may have to face three problems :-

The one caused by the dearth of people in our organisation willing and able to undertake the activities we have decided should be carried out; another caused by the fact that some people within our organisation feel that their time may be better spent working for their political party. The third may be caused by members allowing their party political differences to be brought into the Sash.

Members will realise that the Black Sash is constituted to uphold people's rights and liberties and to do all it can to assist in getting these rights and liberties respected, and that within the Sash one is fortunate in having only to consider what people's rights are and what methods should be used in order to have them upheld. We stand on principle and therefore are lucky in not having to consider expediency.

We do not have to get mass popular support. Political parties, on the other hand, in order to obtain power, are dependent upon mass support. Furthermore, political parties consisting, as they do, primarily of voluntary workers cannot possibly be held responsible for all the party political tactics, manoeuvrings and views of its many canvassers, candidates etc., and Black Sash members should be sufficiently politically mature to understand that in party politics, political manoeuvrings and back-biting are almost inevitable.

I think also that it can be expected of the Black Sash that they should understand that people may legitimately differ in their opinion of which party is able best to supplant the present Government, or to effect the necessary changes, and that fellow members of the Black Sash should not have their integrity questioned because of the political party they see fit to support. Inside the Sash we do not deal with party politics, but outside the Sash, everyone must clearly be entitled to advocate support for their own point of view. It seems to me greatly lacking in tolerance to think that because a person does not belong to the same political party as oneself, that person is wrong and their sincerity should be suspect. This indicates not only intolerance, but in the end, lack of respect for parliamentary democracy which by its very nature is dependant upon the existence of different political parties. The Black Sash surely should encourage people to think for themselves and respect the right of others to hold a point of view different from their own.

It is sad to hear people in one political party saying - "I cannot understand how Mrs. X can be a member of the Black Sash and still support X party"! Provided Mrs. X, within the Sash, does everything she can to uphold Black Sash policy in protesting against the diminution of people's rights and liberties etc., it seems to me she should not be criticised.

I foresee the time when once more some political leaders will try to weaken, if not break, the Sash as an organisation. After all, they would not be human if they did not wish to have devoted to their cause the time and money available from their members. In addition, in the white field, it is immeasurably safer to be a member of a large parliamentary opposition, that is concerning itself mainly with work in the white electoral field. In the coming years, small pressure groups working with non-whites, can expect to come more and more into conflict with authority, but on the other hand, I think political parties would do well to remember that when this Government goes — as go I am sure it will — it will be very difficult for any other white Government at its outset to have the confidence of non-whites. Those of us who have worked with non-white leaders know how very suspect or discredited almost every white leader is in non-white circles.

So many non-whites feel that white people only 'say' the things they do because they are afraid of black nationalism. They fear that if the white opposition were in power, it would itself devise clever ways of keeping the mass of the people without rights and liberties. From a hard-headed point of view, therefore, I think political parties would do well to realise that one of the greatest assets they can have is a large number of Black Sash members throughout the country, who are known to have been working hard with non-whites in their darkest hours.

In addition, the Sash serves a purpose which no political party thus far has.

It gives practical assistance to non-whites in the form of bail funds, etc.,

It arranges Brains Trusts and public lectures where differing opinions can be expressed, where ~~the~~ public is enabled to listen to important matters objectively discussed, and they are provided with facts enabling them to come to their own independant conclusions.

Every member, through stands etc., is enabled to bear public witness to their attitude to unjust laws, which they are not able to do through their political party.

It is constantly stated by people that we have failed to make any impact on the white electorate, and I think it is necessary for us to examine the statement to see if it is true.

Certainly if it is true, we must try to discover how much we are to blame for the fact; why we have had no impact; and what we need to do to rectify this. But the following example should give us encouragement.

In 1955, I can remember holding a drawing-room meeting at which I asked people to join the Black Sash. At that time, I think only one of those present, namely an aunt of mine, joined the movement. The others shied away. I am convinced this was because I indicated that it would be hypocrisy to protest against the Senate Act if in fact one was quite happy that coloured people have their rights removed.

In the election that has just passed, I went amongst those same people in my same neighbourhood to canvass for a policy which advocated the complete abolition of racial discrimination, and while many would not support the candidate for whom I was canvassing, I did not find one single person, who was not in agreement on this particular issue. So while the Black Sash cannot necessarily be said to have been responsible for the change in attitude of these people, it is clear to me that there has been a significant change of the attitude of the white electorate in the last six years. Since for a very large part of that time the Black Sash was one of the few groups in the field advocating that all people's rights should be safeguarded, it seems reasonable to consider that we have played a significant part in bringing about this change of attitude, amongst a certain section. Who knows whether if we had spent the same amount of effort, time and money in Nationalist areas, we would not have had a similar impact!

At election time, people inevitably become more concerned with political matters, while at other times, it is very difficult to evoke any response and active interest in politics from the electorate. As we all know, the Black Sash reduces its activities at election times, in order to let its members work for the party of their choice. In the 5 years ahead, people will once again fall into their usual apathy and it will require a great deal of ingenuity to get them to come to meetings to hear what they need to know regarding the views of non-whites and the effects on them of present legislation.

Also, one may take it that the non-white opposition groups will have further inroads made on their liberties and that they will suffer increased hardships. Such help as we can give, I believe should be readily available.

I am perpetually astonished by the members who say to me - "There is nothing for us to do". I can assure you ladies, that for those who are really anxious to help, there is plenty for us all to do. The fact that we are not better known is due entirely to the fact that we do not do all the things we should.

Another reason why people do not hear of all our activities is that we often assist with activities without the public realising that we are the prime movers.

I would say that the achievement of our aims is limited only by the small number of members in our organisation, who actively participate in the work, and also by the amount of time and money which they are willing or able to give to it. This does not infer that we do not greatly value the moral support of our silent sisters. Without the support of our many inactive members, we would not be the force we are.

There is, therefore, an increased need for Black Sash activities. I, myself, find that much of our unheralded work is only now becoming known.

I (and I am sure every other Regional Chair must have the same experience) am continually telephoned and visited for advice and assistance by whites and non-whites, who are unknown to me.

At last it is beginning to permeate to the man in the street that to stand in protest with a Black Sash on, is not our only activity.

Finally, there are two important matters which I must mention. Firstly, members must realise that every member of a Black Sash committee shares with the Chairman the responsibility for the activities undertaken. In the period upon which we are now embarking, it is therefore of the utmost importance that people who are members of committees should give their undivided and earnest consideration to what is undertaken and should realise that they can be held responsible for whatever is done. This obviously greatly increases the burden on those who agree to belong to Sash committees.

Secondly, it appears that in future, we may have to get permission from the relevant City Councils to hold stands in the streets of towns. It seems that if a group of people come together in order to stand against a particular Bill, it means that they have come together for a common purpose and therefore, constitute a meeting, which may not take place without permission.