
THE STORY OF THE BLACK SASH

The Women's Campaign for Justice and Good Government in South Africa

THE BLACK SASH came into being in May 1955, at a time of great political unrest in South Africa. After four years of repeated crises, caused by Government attempts to remove the Cape Coloured voters from the common Voters' Roll by unconstitutional means, the country had once again been thrown into a turmoil by the proposal to "pack" the Senate, in order to circumvent the entrenched clauses of the Constitution as embodied in the South Africa Act of 1909.

The Background to the Senate Act.

The Nationalist Party, supported by a minority of the voters, came to power in 1948 with a slender Parliamentary majority. The new Government lost no time in consolidating its position, and in implementing the policy of *apartheid* which had won the election. From the outset, much of the legislation passed curtailed the freedom of the individual, limited the protection of the Courts and conferred wide and arbitrary powers on Cabinet Ministers. Little regard was shown for the constitutional forms upon which our Parliamentary system was based. Public misgiving mounted, and was finally expressed in country-wide protests in 1951, when the Separate Representation of Voters Act, designed to remove the Coloured voters from the common roll, was passed with a bare majority.

The Cape Coloured people had enjoyed common roll franchise rights for nearly a hundred years. At the time of Union, the franchise in the Cape was non-racial, and non-Whites enjoyed the same qualified voting rights as Whites. The preservation of these rights was regarded by the Cape delegates to the all-White National Convention of 1909 as a moral obligation, and they were adamant that they be recognized in the new South African constitution. The existing Cape franchise was accordingly entrenched in the Constitution, together with the Dutch and English language rights, the entrenchment providing that these two clauses could be altered only by a two-thirds majority of both Houses of Parliament in joint session.

The protests against the Separate Representation of Voters Act were therefore based on two issues, one legal, one moral — the violation of the legal provisions of the Constitution, and the breaking of a solemn pledge to the Coloured people. The Government maintained that the Statute of Westminster, in conferring sovereign status on the South African Parliament in 1931, had invalidated the entrenched clauses, and they pointed

out that the Cape Africans had been removed from the common roll in 1936. This removal had, however, been agreed to by a two-thirds majority of both houses of Parliament sitting together, as laid down in the Constitution, although there was considerable opposition to it on moral grounds. Moreover, at the time of the enactment of the Statute of Westminster, the Nationalist Government of the day (which included many members of the Government that now repudiated the entrenched clauses), had re-pledged its faith in these entrenchments, declaring them to be "a matter of honour".

In 1952, the Separate Representation of Voters Act was tested in the Supreme Court of Appeal. The Court ruled that the entrenched clauses were still binding upon Parliament and declared the Act invalid, to the great relief of many South Africans whose faith in the integrity of their courts of law was thus confirmed. The Government, however, refused to accept the ruling of the Court, and proceeded to re-establish the "sovereignty of Parliament" by passing the High Court of Parliament Act, which provided that all the members of Parliament, sitting together, should constitute a special High Court, with power to set aside judgments of the Appeal Court. In 1953, this Act, too, was declared invalid by the Supreme Court.

The Senate Bill

In the General Election of 1953, the Nationalists were again returned to power, with an increased majority, although still with a minority of the votes cast. The Prime Minister, Dr. Malan, made no further attempt to remove the Coloured voters from the common roll, but upon his retirement from active politics at the end of 1954, he was succeeded by the strong man of the Nationalist Party, Mr. J. G. Strijdom, "the Lion of the North".



Marching up the hill to the Union Buildings, Pretoria, to present the petition to the Prime Minister's Deputy.

Early in 1955, Mr. Strijdom announced his party's intention of taking advantage of another provision of the Constitution and reconstituting the Senate or upper house, "packing" it with nominated Nationalist Senators, in order to give the Government the two-thirds majority it could not obtain by normal means. The intention was, of course, to use the spurious two-thirds majority to remove the Coloured voters from the common roll.

The people of South Africa seethed with anger and resentment at the mockery that was being made of their Constitution. Mass protest meetings were held throughout the country. The Senate Bill was attacked in and out of Parliament, in the Press, in public halls, in private homes.

It was at this stage that six women met for tea one morning in mid-May at a house in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Like thousands of other South Africans, they were filled with indignation, and with a sense of frustration and personal helplessness. "What can we do?" they asked. And suddenly realizing that there were thousands who were asking themselves the same question, they decided that there was something they could do — they could organize a women's protest march. They telephoned their friends, who in turn telephoned their friends, and a preliminary meeting was arranged. Pamphlets were printed and distributed, the co-operation of the Press was

sought, banners were prepared, and on the afternoon of the 25th May, 1955, 2,500 White women assembled at the Scottish War Memorial near Joubert Park, and then marched silently through the streets of Johannesburg, led by one drummer girl, to the City Hall steps. In response to public demand, the Mayor of Johannesburg had called a citizens' meeting there, and thousands of people had assembled to listen to several speakers, including the late Dr. Winifred Höernle, whose inspiring address moved many to tears.

The Women's Defence of the Constitution League

So deep was the emotion aroused in that historic march, that a meeting was called for the following week to consider further action. Fifty women attended, and a committee of twelve was elected. It was decided to launch two petitions, one to the Governor-General, asking him not to sign the Bill, and the second, to be presented in the event of his refusal, to the Prime Minister, petitioning him to repeal the Act or to resign from office. The petitions were to be signed by White women only.

The protest was confined to White women because it was felt that the responsibility for much that was wrong in South Africa, and the duty of

trying to put it right, belonged to the White South African electorate. Later on, membership of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League was restricted to South African women voters, (and therefore White women), for the same reason.

The Senate Bill was then being debated in Parliament, and this newly-formed Women's Defence of the Constitution League had just two weeks in which to collect the signatures. The preamble to the petition to the Governor-General, a piece of fine prose and reasoned argument drawn up by a well-known South African writer, was hurriedly printed, and petitions were sent out to 290 towns in the Union, to unknown people, in the faith and belief that the women of South Africa must feel as the women of Johannesburg did. That faith was not misplaced. In spite of postal delays, difficulties of communication, amateur organization and lack of money, 100,000 signatures were collected in ten days.

On June 16th, the Secretary of the League flew to Cape Town with the petition forms, which were presented to the Governor-General — in vain. The Bill was signed, the Act became law, and the Parliamentary session ended.

The Vigil at Union Buildings

The Prime Minister was then asked to meet a deputation in Pretoria, to receive the second petition. He refused, but appointed Mr. Ben Schoeman, Minister of Transport, as his deputy.

On the 28th June, a bitterly cold day, women from the length and breadth of the Union gathered at the Zoo Lake in Johannesburg and drove in two motor convoys to Pretoria. Then, carrying banners which bore the name of every town and village where the petition had been signed, they marched silently up the steep hill to the Union Buildings. After a short service of dedication in the amphitheatre, a delegation of six women presented the petition to Mr. Schoeman in his office. He received them courteously, but made it quite clear that his Government had no intention of considering any request to alter the Senate Act.

The League's next move was to mount a two-day vigil in the grounds of Union Buildings, to demonstrate continued opposition to the Senate Act. More than sixty women slept in the open on that first bitter night; on the second night there were more than a hundred. The dramatic 48-hour vigil captured the imagination of the public, and



A cheering crowd at the Johannesburg City Hall welcomes the demonstrators after their 48-hour vigil at Union Buildings.

when the women returned to Johannesburg on the 30th June, they received a tumultuous welcome from the thousands of people assembled outside the City Hall to meet them.

That might have been the end of the story — it was actually only the beginning. The Senate Act had been placed upon the Statute Book, the petitions had failed, the vigil was over; but the women who had come together from the four provinces of the Union to oppose the threat to their Constitution were determined to remain together to fight the Act to the bitter end.

The Black Sash

On the 18th July, four women, representing the four provinces of the Union, began a vigil at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, a vigil that was to be maintained on every working day until Parliament re-opened in Cape Town in January. They wore black sashes across their right shoulders, bearing the words „Eerbiedig ons Grondwet” (Honour our Constitution). The following day, Mr. Eric Louw, then Minister of Finance and Foreign Affairs, was met at Jan Smuts Airport upon his return from Europe by twenty-four silent women, again wearing black sashes as a symbol of mourning.

From then onwards, Cabinet Ministers were constantly “haunted” in their comings and goings about the country by groups of “Black Sash” women, silently reproaching them for their part in dishonouring the Covenant of Union. The idea caught on, and day by day more and more women came forward to join the League, which grew and spread to towns and villages throughout the Union. The attentions of the ubiquitous sashers appeared to embarrass the Ministers, who went to considerable lengths to avoid them.

The Bull and the Sash.



Bob Connolly

(Rand Daily Mail)



The Great Protest Trek.

(Rand Daily Mail)

Demonstrations were planned for all important political occasions, especially those connected with the implementation of the Senate Act. On August 10th, when Transvaal Nationalist Party Senators were nominated, Black Sash women surrounded the Raadzaal in Pretoria, where the nominations were taking place. On November 12th, after the dissolution of the old Senate, demonstrations were held in thirty-five South African cities and towns. In the larger centres, thousands of women marched through the city streets, carrying great books, symbolizing the Constitution, draped with a black sash. This symbol was later adopted as the official badge of the Black Sash, and designed by Mr. Bob Connolly the *Rand Daily Mail* cartoonist. On November 25th, the day of the election of the new Senate, demonstrations were held in four Provincial capitals, while smaller centres held silent vigils.

When Parliament was re-opened on January 13th, 1956, nation-wide demonstrations and vigils were again held. The regular vigils were discontinued at the Union Buildings but resumed in Cape Town outside the House of Parliament, to provide a constant reminder to the Government and the public that the Constitution had been violated.

The Convoy to Cape Town

Soon after Parliament assembled, the Government introduced the South Africa Act Amendment Bill, which would enable them to remove the Coloured voters from the common roll. The Bill also took away the right of the Courts to test certain legislation. The newly constituted Senate assured the Government of the necessary two-thirds majority at a joint session of the two houses of Parliament, which they had been unable to obtain through the ballot box.

To coincide with the joint sessions, the Black Sash organized a large-scale demonstration. On the evening of the 12th February, convoys of over 100 cars, carrying Black Sash women from all over the Union, converged on Stellenbosch. Some had travelled over 1,000 miles, from the Northern Transvaal. Two days later, they were escorted by 50 cars from the Cape into Cape Town, where cheering crowds thronged the pavements as the procession of over 150 cars drove slowly up and down Adderley Street.

For the next 48 hours, relays of Black Sash women lined the railings outside Parliament in a continuous vigil, mounting guard over a large Book of the Constitution draped with a black sash. Simultaneously, demonstrations were held all over the country by members who had been unable to travel to Cape Town. During that week, mass protest meetings were organized in Cape Town, numerous Black Sash vigils were held, and the Convoy travelled throughout the Peninsula. Cape Town members of the Black Sash maintained an unbroken vigil outside Parliament until the joint session came to an end.

The Cape Town convoy was the biggest and most spectacular demonstration ever staged by the Black Sash, and roused great enthusiasm throughout the country. Nothing could deflect the Government from its course, however, and the

South Africa Act Amendment Act was passed at an all-night session on the 26th/27th February, with eight votes more than the necessary two-thirds majority. The devious objects of the Senate Act had been achieved, and there was nothing more to be done but await the results of the test case which the United Party proposed to bring.

The Black Sash itself had considered testing the legislation in the Courts, and its leaders had gone fully into the question, when the United Party's intention was made public, whereupon the organization gave full moral support, and modest financial assistance, to the United Party's case.

Development of the Black Sash

All these demonstrations were only the outward symbol of the work of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League. All this time, the membership was steadily growing, and the organization had formed itself into a number of Regions and Branches. A National Conference had been held in Port Elizabeth in November and a Constitution drawn up, defining the aims and objects of the organization and laying down rules for the conduct of its affairs.

When the United Party lost its test case against the Senate Act, and the Courts declared the Act legal, it was expected in some quarters that the Black Sash, having served its purpose in opposing



An early demonstration against the Senate Act, one of the many protests staged by the Black Sash on the Johannesburg City Hall steps, "Johannesburg's Traditional Forum". All gatherings on these steps have now been banned.

the violation of the Constitution, would be dissolved. But the organization had already embarked on a programme of action in line with its declared aims and objects, which were:

- (i) To conduct propaganda and enlist support and aid for the observance of
 - (a) Political morality and the principles of parliamentary democracy within the Union of South Africa;
 - (b) Civil rights and liberties.
- (ii) The political education and enlightenment of citizens of South Africa and other persons.

This was obviously a long-term policy, a programme of action directed against the undemocratic trends in Government legislation of which the Senate Act had been an extreme example. Country-wide demonstrations were held when the result of the test case was known, and in every large town and in many of the smaller centres groups of Black Sash women displayed posters which read: "THE SENATE ACT — LEGAL NOW BUT IMMORAL FOREVER."

Thereafter the organization, now known officially as the "Black Sash" a name given to it by the Press, continued in its acknowledged rôle as a political pressure group.

Pressure Group

At the time of the initial two-day vigil at the Union Buildings, the members of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League were simply South African women from all walks of life. Although some of them were lawyers, politicians, historians and social workers, the majority had up to then taken little interest in politics as such, and had little knowledge of the historical and political background to their Constitution. Forty-eight hours of close association at the Union Buildings, however, had roused in them the desire and determination to learn more about the political affairs of their country. The immediate result was the organization of a series of public lectures on constitutional matters, for the information of themselves and others.

Soon they began to realize that the constitutional issue in South Africa was only a part of the pattern — that the real problem which the country had to face and resolve was its attitude to race relations. "Apartheid" legislation began to be seen for what it was — restriction on the freedoms of a section of the population which would sooner or later recoil upon all sections.

From then on, the Black Sash kept a close watch upon the policies of the Government, and legislation or its implementation which had the effect



Again the Johannesburg City Hall steps — the Senate Act is declared legal.

JOHANNESBURG



Part of a demonstration against the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1957. A deep-toned bell, tolling at intervals, was used in this demonstration.

of limiting the rights of any section was vigorously opposed at every stage. Through the years that have followed, innumerable protests and demonstrations have been launched against the Group Areas Act, the Pass Laws, Race Classification, banishment without trial, University Apartheid and the Government's Education policy, etc. Since the apartheid legislation of the Nationalist Government has borne more heavily on the non-Whites than on the Whites, a great many of these protests appear to have been made on behalf of Africans, Coloureds and Indians, but, in fact, the Black Sash early perceived that freedom is indivisible, and all its protests were based on that principle.

The Pass Laws

These laws, which have been described as "the greatest single cause of African unrest", are the mainstay of the apartheid system. They apply only to Africans, and under their provisions all Africans over the age of 16 are obliged to carry "passes" at all times. This obligation was extended to African women in February, 1963, after many years of widespread protest, especially from the Africans themselves, under a measure ironically called the Abolition of Passes and Consolidation of Documents Act, which "abolished" passes merely by re-naming them "Reference Books".

Together with the associated influx control regulations, which control the entry of the African into certain prescribed urban areas, restricting his free movement and his right to seek work

and to reside where he chooses, the pass laws are a source of tremendous hardship to the Africans. Failure to produce a pass upon demand by any policeman or official may result in summary arrest, followed by imprisonment or a fine. Official figures given in Parliament some time ago showed that over 3,500,000 Africans were convicted of pass law offences during the ten years 1951-1960. These are merely statutory offences, but the offenders are treated as criminals.

For many years the Black Sash has waged constant war on these laws, mounting innumerable demonstrations to draw attention to the hardships caused to Africans: the break-up of family life, the constant harassment by police, the drain on pitiful economic resources caused by fines or imprisonment, with consequent loss of employment. One Black Sash slogan used was "Money for food becomes money for fines". Numerous articles have been published, pamphlets and leaflets issued, meetings and symposiums held, in efforts to awaken the public conscience to the evils of these laws and their cost in human suffering as well as their cost to the country in cash and manpower.

Recently there has been some relaxation in police demands for the immediate production of passes, but the Pass Laws remain a very heavy burden upon the African.

CAPE TOWN



A protest outside Parliament against the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill. The passer-by is Dr. Margaret Ballinger, who was a Native Representative for 25 years, until African representation was abolished in 1960.

The "Volunteer" Farm Labour System

One of the by-products of the Pass Laws was the "voluntary" farm labour scheme, which engaged the attention of the Transvaal Region of the Black Sash for many months some years ago.

The attention of the Black Sash was drawn to this system by a Johannesburg member, whose African gardener's young son "disappeared". After extensive inquiries, the boy was traced to a farm in the Eastern Transvaal, where he was serving a "sentence" of farm labour for non-production of a Reference Book, although he was not yet of pass-bearing age. The Black Sash was greatly assisted in these inquiries by a Johannesburg lawyer who had been making investigations on his own account into the operation of various farm labour systems. A writ of *habeas corpus* was obtained, the boy Moses was brought back to Johannesburg along with an even younger boy, and the whole iniquitous business was brought to light.

It appeared that a semi-official arrangement existed between certain farmers on the one hand and the police and Bantu Affairs Department officials on the other, whereby Africans on the Witwatersrand arrested for pass offenses were given the option of appearing in court or serving a "sentence" of several months' farm labour. It was

one way of easing the congestion in the prisons and at the same time providing the farmers with much-needed labour, at a very low cost. The conditions under which these prisoners laboured on the farms was found upon investigation to be deplorable in many cases, and in some cases they were treated with the utmost cruelty.

The system seemed to have been in operation for some time, as the Africans knew of it, and referred to the process as being "sold" to the farmers. Although they were supposed to be given the option of "volunteering" for this labour in lieu of an appearance in court, most of them obviously did not understand this, and there is reason to believe that it was not always explained to them.

The Black Sash investigated the position thoroughly and publicized its findings. The Press co-operated and full publicity was given to the case of the boy Moses and to the whole system, stress being placed on the by-passing of the courts, the arbitrary nature of the "sentences", the lack of official supervision on the farms and the inhumanity of the whole scheme, whereby men could be whisked away at a moment's notice, to disappear for months, without being given the opportunity of notifying their families.

As a result of the publicity, the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development ordered



A demonstration in Johannesburg against the Group Areas Act, one of the many protests against this measure staged by the Black Sash at different times, in various parts of the country. Shortly after this demonstration, a group of Indian women, staging an orderly protest march and appeal to the Prime Minister at Union Buildings, were dispersed by police dogs. A Black Sash deputation lodged a written complaint with the Prime Minister protesting against this inhuman treatment of women.

the immediate suspension of the scheme, and instituted a departmental inquiry. The Black Sash, among other organizations, was invited to make representations. A comprehensive memorandum was drawn up and submitted to the Commission of Inquiry and a Black Sash delegation was subsequently invited to appear before the Commission.

The findings of the Commission were never made public, and the Black Sash was unable to obtain a report, but the "Volunteer" Farm Labour Scheme was abandoned by the authorities.

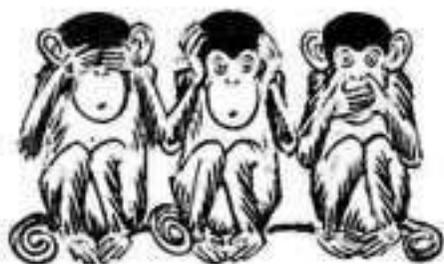
Magazine

In pursuit of their aim of enlightening themselves and others on political matters, Black Sash groups in all parts of the country have organized lectures, forums, brains trusts and public meetings.

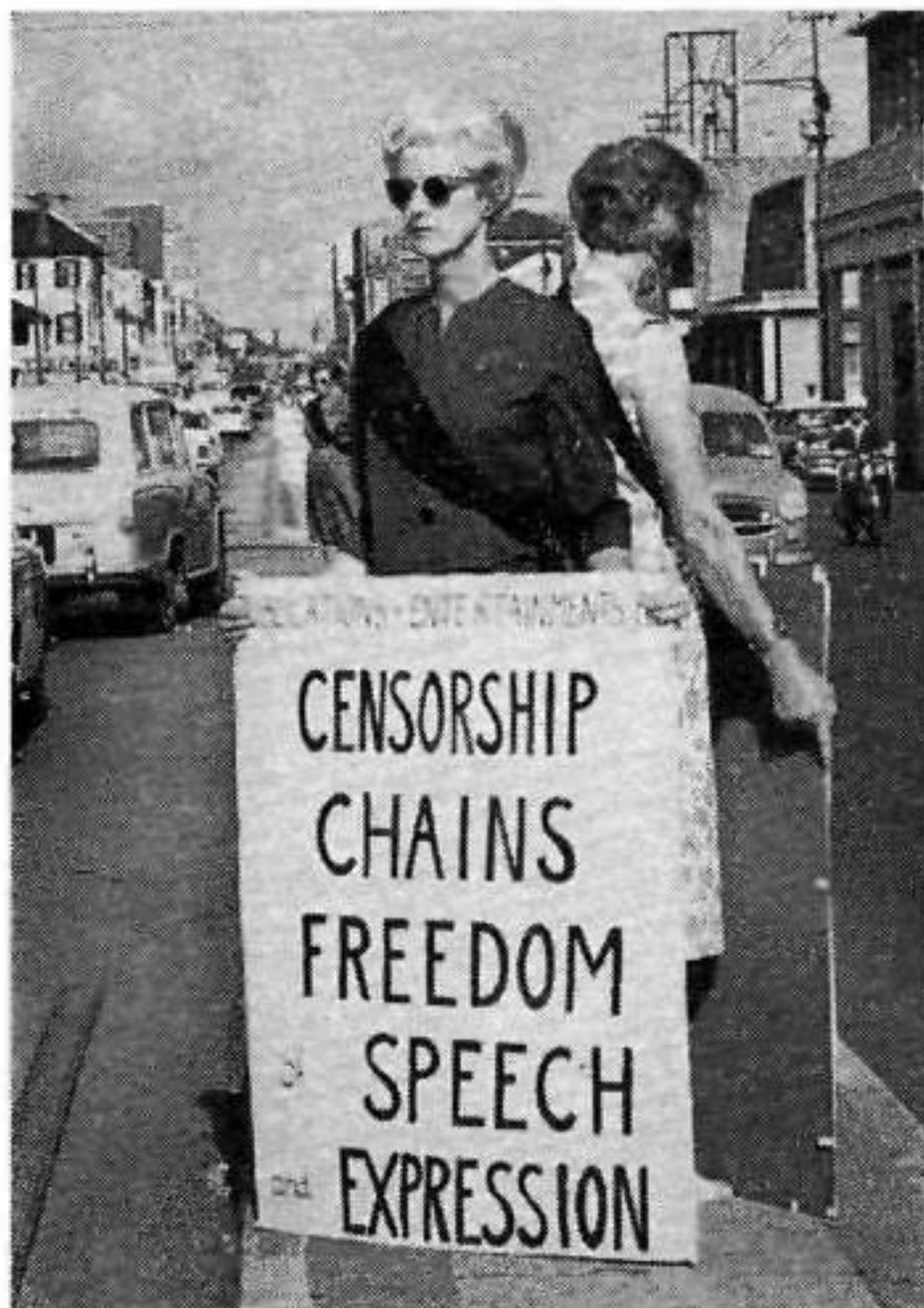
They have made investigations into such matters as induced farm labour, group areas, political banishment, the pass laws, the operation of the Native Commissioners' Courts, and in many cases made representations to responsible bodies. They have consulted and worked with other organizations on education, the Pass Laws, the Group Areas Act, malnutrition and censorship and publicized their findings.

Since January 1956, the organization has published a printed Magazine, "The Black Sash", which has been widely read in our own country and also overseas. Originally registered as a newspaper and published monthly, the magazine is now issued quarterly, and contains articles on a variety of political subjects of general interest or of special interest to the Black Sash, articles on topical and controversial matters and reports on Black Sash activities.

Special issues have been published from time to time: one devoted entirely to articles on educational matters reached a wide public, and an outstanding special issue on the implementation and effects of the Pass Laws provided a valuable aid to our campaign to draw attention to the inhumanities of these laws and the hardships that result from them.



What is evil? De Klerk will tell you.



A protest in Cape Town against the Publications and Entertainments Bill. In a demonstration against this Bill in Johannesburg, badges similar to the sketch at the bottom of the page were handed to members of the public.

The Athlone Advice Office

As has been pointed out, the Abolition of Passes and Consolidation of Documents Act, far from abolishing the Pass system, actually extended it to African women, in spite of long-continued protests by the Africans themselves and by many White people who understood how strongly the Africans feared and resented any interference with their womenfolk. As a slight concession to these protests, the Government agreed to suspend the implementation of this provision until such time as the other population groups were compelled to carry Identity Cards. The date upon which these regulations came into effect was 1st February, 1963.

In spite of this concession, however, officials in the Western Cape demanded production of Reference Books by women, or permits to be in the area, before the fixed date, and used the system to carry out the Government's "Eiselen Line" policy (under which it is proposed to remove all Africans ultimately from the Western Cape). African women whose reference books or permits were not in order were arrested and summarily

imprisoned, often leaving small children at home uncared for. The Athlone Advice Office in Cape Town was originally established by the Black Sash in 1958 to help some of these women to obtain bail, so that they could return to their homes and children.

Since then, the removal of Africans from the area has been speeded up, and thousands of men and women have been summarily "endorsed out", i.e. ordered to leave the area and return to their "homelands", regardless of the fact that most of them have been living and working in the Cape for many years, and have lost all touch with their place of origin. Indeed, many of them were born in the Cape.

The Athlone Advice Office is now being run jointly by the Black Sash and the S.A. Institute of Race Relations, and has widened its scope to provide advice not only for men and women "endorsed out" or in other difficulties with the influx control regulations, but also for people with a variety of problems arising from the mass of legislation that affects the lives of the non-Whites. Some seek assistance because of exploitation by unscrupulous employers, who take advantage of anomalies in the contract system, others have housing or rent problems, or wish for advice on

how to obtain pensions or compensation due to them.

There are troubled women who come for advice on how — or whether — to divorce their husbands, who have been "endorsed out" of the urban area. These are women who qualify in their own right, by reason of birth, long residence or length of employment, to remain in the area. As married women they lose these rights, and must leave with their husbands, but by obtaining a divorce they regain their own rights of residence. Thus they have before them the heart-breaking choice between deserting their husbands and retaining their own rights and those of their children, or following their husbands into exile, to areas where there may be no amenities — no houses, no schools, possibly not even opportunities for making an adequate living.

Six Black Sash Advice Offices

The Black Sash now runs six Advice Offices in various parts of the country, opened as and when the need for them became apparent.

The Athlone Advice Office is still by far the busiest, and deals with thousands of cases a year; but the Transvaal Region Advice Office opened in Johannesburg early in 1963 is already dealing with



South Africa leaves the Commonwealth, 15th March, 1961.

a considerable number of cases, and the volume of work is steadily increasing as the existence of the office becomes more widely known and the "endorsements out", unhappily, increase. The four other Advice Offices, opened early in 1964 in Durban, Port Elizabeth, East London and Elgin, Cape, are still feeling their way.

All six offices are being run on the lines established by the pioneer Athlone Advice Office. No financial assistance is given, but all advice and help are given free of charge. It is carefully explained to those who seek advice that no attempt can be made to evade the law, but that every effort will be made to establish their rights within the framework of the law.

Voluntary workers check up on their legal position, advise them of their rights, arrange interviews for them with officials, assist them to apply for permits to remain in the urban area — in short, do all in their power to help them to establish the limited rights to which they are entitled within the vast and complicated structure of the Bantu laws. And these laws are indeed so complicated that even the officials themselves have difficulty in interpreting them. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the people who come to the Black Sash for advice are deeply confused, ignorant of their rights and harried by regulations they do not understand, especially as many of them are illiterate.

The Black Sash has made it its business to protest against unjust laws, and although it has been unsuccessful in changing them so far, an attempt is being made in the Advice Offices to see that those affected at least do not lose the rights they still possess, and to direct them towards such assistance as is available to them.

"The Crime, Apartheid—the Penalty, Isolation"

After the first wide and enthusiastic publicity given to the Black Sash demonstrations against the Senate Act, interest in the organization here and overseas waned somewhat, but revived from time to time when anything of particular interest occurred. For instance, the march in protest against South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1961, when the Black Sash was the only organization to protest openly, received much publicity, especially in overseas newspapers.

The slogan used on that occasion, "The Crime, Apartheid — the Penalty, Isolation", was chosen to underline the fact that our country's growing isolation was the direct result of her apartheid policies. In the years since then, South Africa has withdrawn or been excluded from one international organization after another, and apartheid has been condemned throughout the world. The slogan has become even more apt than it was when it was first used, and the Black Sash has used it as the central theme of two magazines, a National Conference, and several demonstrations. For the demonstrations, posters were used listing the many inhumanities which add up to the crime, apartheid, and the many ways in which South Africa has already been isolated.



Petition table in Cape Town.

Petition against slanted broadcasts

Towards the end of 1961 and early in 1962, the Black Sash again came into the news when it organized a country-wide petition against the use of the S.A.B.C. as an instrument for propagating Government policy. Tables were set up at various points in towns and villages, and the Black Sash confidently expected to get hundreds of thousands of signatures in a very short time, as people everywhere were complaining about the biased and distorted broadcasts. In the event, they experienced great difficulty in obtaining signatures as a result of public apathy and fear. Twenty-five thousand radio subscribers were, however, sufficiently concerned about the position to sign the petition.

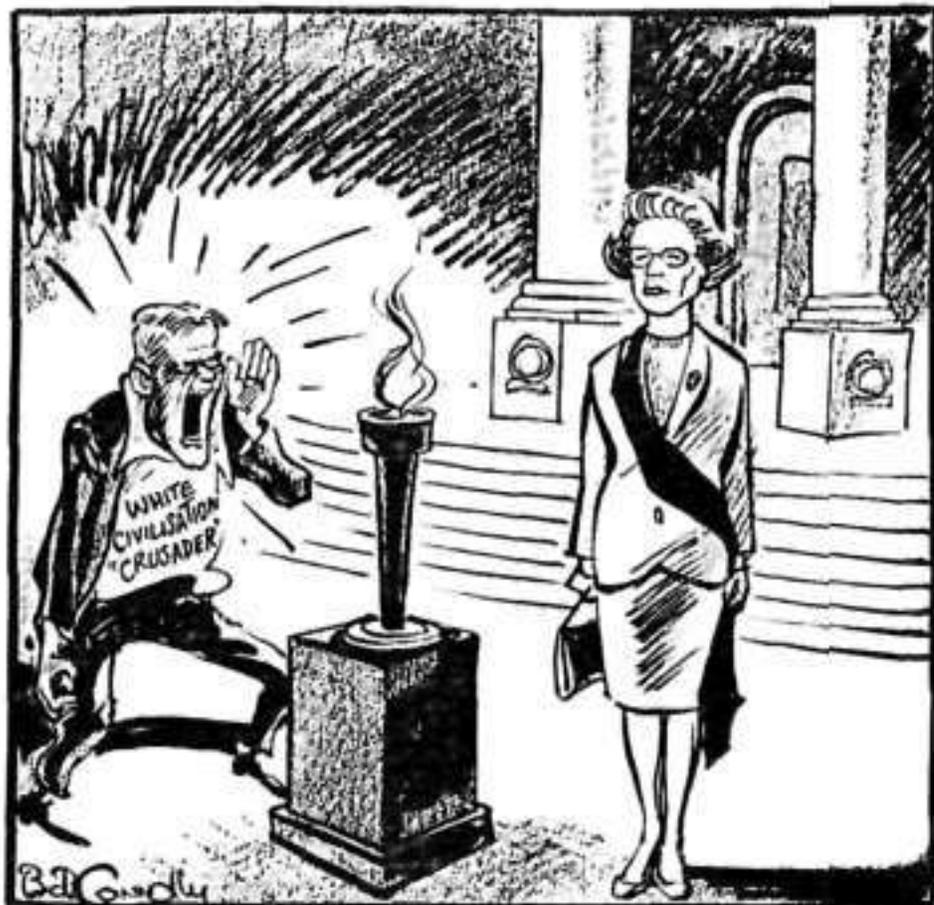
The petition was sent to the Prime Minister, and was shortly afterwards acknowledged in a petulant letter signed by his Secretary, to the effect that the Government had no confidence in the Black Sash, and could therefore not be impressed by any petition sponsored or instigated by it. In a

leading article, a prominent Johannesburg newspaper pointed out that the implication of this unceremonious rejection was that the Government would only take cognizance of the views of those with whom it agreed; and that "the essence of the democratic system and the characteristic which distinguishes it from all others" — the acceptance that the rights of minorities must be as jealously guarded as those of the majority — clearly went by the board when there was a refusal even to consider the views of those who thought differently.

The Black Sash has since come to the conclusion that the launching of the petition was premature, for less than twelve months later public indignation at the now blatant party political propaganda had risen to such a pitch that thousands more would have welcomed the opportunity to protest. No public protests have been made, however, and gradually listeners are becoming inured to the slanted broadcasts, and the insidious propaganda is having its effect.

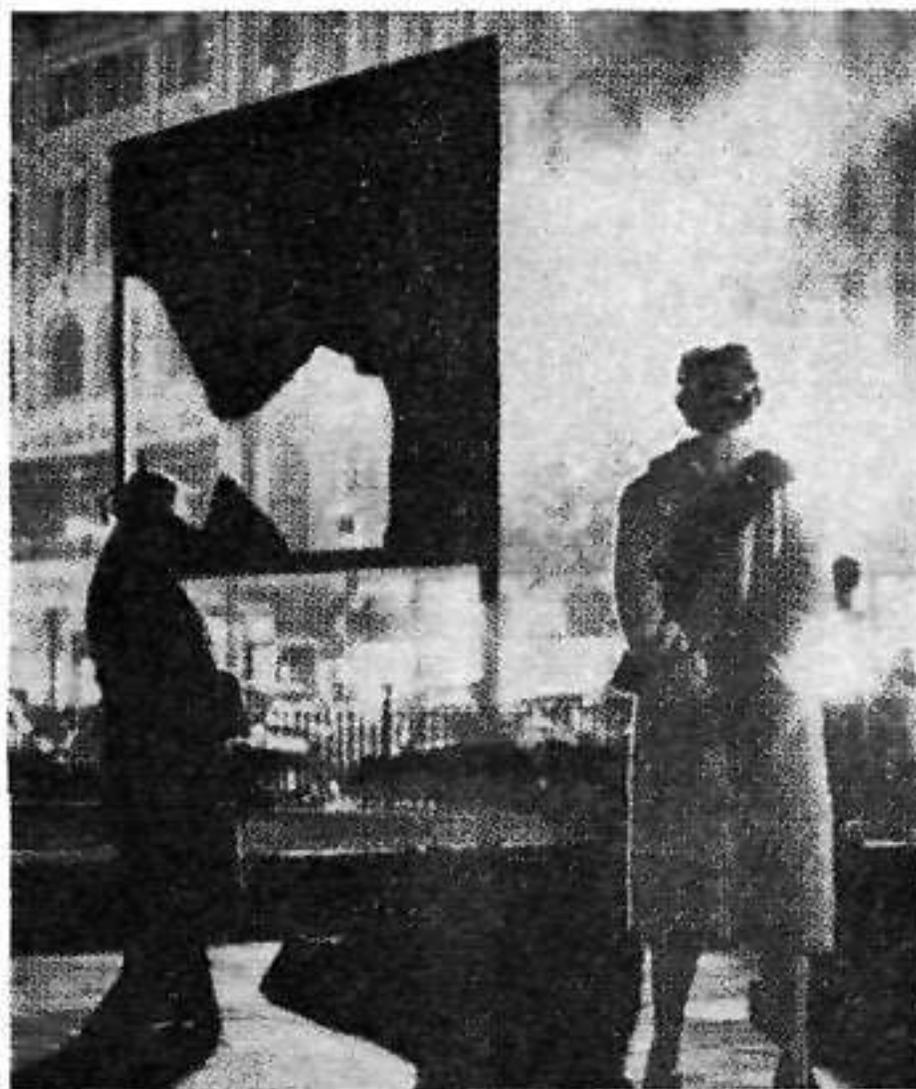
The "Sabotage" Bill

In May 1962, almost exactly seven years after the formation of the Black Sash, the protests against the "Sabotage" Bill again focussed worldwide attention on the organization. The General Law Amendment Bill of 1962 was published on the 12th May, and for a day or two the country considered the implications of its drastic and far-reaching provisions. Then the protests began, and newspapermen, politicians, businessmen, churchmen, lawyers and laymen all combined to condemn the wide terms and definitions and the harsh penalties of the Bill, and point out the danger of placing wide and arbitrary powers in the hands of one Minister and his unknown successors.



The Contrast.

(Rand Daily Mail)



The damaged poster.

The Minister of Justice claimed that this was a measure to combat sabotage and curb communism. The Black Sash, as an organization, had repeatedly declared its opposition to the creed of communism, and accepted that it was the duty of a responsible government to deal severely with any person found guilty of sabotage or violence. Nevertheless, it considered that this Bill constituted a threat to fundamental democratic freedoms and principles, and therefore decided to hold continuous vigils to demonstrate total rejection of the measure.

The Flame of Freedom

The demonstration in Johannesburg started at dusk on the 16th May, with the ceremonial lighting of the "Flame of Freedom" on the steps of the City Hall. Relays of Black Sash women guarded the flame night and day, and a poster was displayed, reading, "Reject the Sabotage Bill, the Bill to end all liberty".

The first night passed without incident, but on the second night a gang of White hooligans "discovered" the demonstrators and extinguished the flame — which was promptly re-lighted. For the next three days and nights groups of hooligans baited the women with foul abuse, screamed obscenities at them, pelted them with eggs, tomatoes, raw fish and other missiles, contemptuously lighted cigarettes at their flame and tried to put it out, and twice destroyed their poster, which had to be replaced. The women stood firm and silent, offering no response and no resistance.

On the sixth evening, when an ominous-looking crowd began to assemble, the National President decided, upon the advice of City officials, to withdraw the women for the night, for their own protection. The Flame of Freedom was carried proudly away, and the Johannesburg vigil came to an end, after five days and nights. To the joy of the women, however, Cape Town members of the Black Sash commenced their round-the-clock vigil that same evening, to mark the beginning of the second reading debate in the House of Assembly. As the "Rand Daily Mail" said, "a flame died, but another flared." The Cape Town members lit their flame of freedom outside the gates of parliament, with posters reading "**Vorster's Bill Stifles Legitimate Opposition**". An unbroken vigil was maintained there for a full week, until the end of the debate.

The Johannesburg vigils on the City Hall steps were continued in the daytime for two more days, but as the hooligans intensified their attacks, and scenes of violence involving passers-by followed, it was decided to seek other venues. Daily vigils were therefore held at various points in the city until the second reading debate came to an end.

In the meantime, Black Sash members in the other large centres had been holding their own "Flame of Freedom" vigils, but all demonstrations came to an end at the same time.

When the provisions of the "Sabotage" Act were later implemented at various times, mostly through impositions of house arrest, further Black Sash protest demonstrations were held throughout the country, again with the flame.

The City Hall Steps

The publicity given to the "Flame of Freedom" demonstrations and the attacks on the Black Sash by the hooligans focussed a good deal of sympathetic attention on the organization, at home and abroad, while the "Sabotage" Bill came in for much additional adverse comment. Perhaps this was one reason why the Minister of Justice decided to ban all gatherings on the City Hall steps.

The ban closed a chapter in the history of the Black Sash, which may be said to have opened on the City Hall steps over seven years before when the 2,500 women who had marched to the City Hall in protest against the Senate Bill received the inspiration that led to the formation of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League. In the years that followed a good deal of the history of the Black Sash was played out on those steps: innumerable meetings and demonstrations were held there, starting with demonstrations against the Senate Bill, continuing over the years with protests against various pieces of unjust and restrictive legislation, and ending just one week before the imposition of the ban with a demonstration in defence of the freedom of the individual, arising from the provisions of the "Sabotage" Bill.

The Black Sash did not always find it easy to obtain the use of the steps, which were looked upon as "Johannesburg's traditional forum" — in fact they had to fight very hard at times for "the freedom of the City Hall steps", as permission to hold meetings there was sometimes withheld by the City Council for various reasons, and only Black Sash persistence won the day.



The Flame of Freedom flares in Cape Town.

However, there were never disturbances at any of these meetings and demonstrations, until the protest meeting against South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, when White hooligans made unprovoked attacks upon non-White bystanders. Hooligans were again responsible for the disturbances arising from their sustained attacks on the Black Sash demonstrators against the "Sabotage" Bill, so perhaps, as a Johannesburg newspaper said, Mr Vorster's decision to ban meetings on the Johannesburg City Hall steps could be claimed as a notable victory — for hooligans. It was tragic, however, as the newspaper said, "that their victory should now get Government approval".

The ban on the City Hall steps lapsed after a year, but was renewed shortly afterwards in a more restrictive form, banning all gatherings "in the vicinity of the City Hall". In between the bans, however, the Black Sash managed to stage a demonstration, again with the "Flame of Freedom", using a poster which read, "We continue to protest against injustice and discrimination". There were no incidents.

The 90-day detention clause

In 1962, when the Minister of Justice was questioned in Parliament about the very extensive powers he was asking for under the General Law Amendment ("Sabotage") Bill, he explained that he did not want to keep on coming back to Parliament for more and more "necessary" powers. Yet in 1963, and again in 1964, he introduced further General Law Amendment Bills giving him still greater and even more arbitrary powers, again to deal with "sabotage and Communism".

The General Law Amendment Bill of 1963, the "No-trial Bill", burst upon the country so suddenly and was so hastily enacted that it had become law almost before anybody had time to protest. The Black Sash did protest, however, and so did numerous other groups and organizations, against its harsh and arbitrary provisions and its encroachments on the rule of law. However, the acceptance by the official Opposition that it was "necessary" for the preservation of law and order ensured its speedy passage through Parliament, and this draconian measure was placed upon the Statute Book.

Since then hundreds of South Africans have been detained under the now notorious "90-day clause", which enables any police officer to arrest and imprison any individual without warrant and without trial, and to keep him in prison for questioning for up to 90 days until such time as he has "satisfied" the authorities. In spite of assurances that nobody would be detained for more than 90 days, many people have been imprisoned for two and even three periods of 90 days, and kept in solitary confinement.

There have been constant and widespread protests against this clause: churchmen have protested on moral and humanitarian grounds; lawyers have protested against the abrogation of the



(Daily News)

rule of law; a group of 60 psychiatrists, psychologists and physicians protested on grounds of the dangerous effects of solitary confinement on mental health; but all protests have been dismissed by the Minister of Justice as coming from "leftists and near-Communists".

At the time of the passing of the Bill, a prominent Member of Parliament, Mr. Hamilton Russell, resigned from Parliament and from the United Party in protest. Since then he has travelled all over the country campaigning for the repeal of the 90-day detention clause.

The Black Sash has protested constantly and vigorously against the measure. Before the Bill was passed, prolonged vigils were held in all regions, with posters which read "Detention without trial is not justice", "The Minister of Justice Destroys Justice", and "Protest against Vorster's Bill". As a last resort, a telegram was sent to the State President, asking him not to sign the Bill, but in vain.

Deeply disturbed at the application of the 90-day detention clause and its effects upon detainees and their families, the Black Sash and the National Council of Women planned a joint campaign to urge the repeal of the clause. To this end, a memorandum was drawn up dividing objections to the clause into two sections, humanitarian and legal; and this was submitted to the Minister of Justice, with a letter asking him to receive a deputation from the two organizations. The Minister

refused to receive a deputation, and sent a discourteous reply through his private secretary, brushing aside these two well-known women's organizations as "leftist", and implying that they had no regard for the safety of the State.

Undeterred, the Black Sash and the National Council of Women went ahead with plans for a campaign in 1964 to have the clause repealed when it came before Parliament for review at the end of May. They supported Mr. Hamilton Russell in his campaign, and organized well-attended meetings in all the larger centres which were addressed by Mr. Russell in memorable and hard-hitting speeches. The Churches were drawn into the campaign, and they took the lead in calling public meetings all over the country, which were addressed by leading churchmen of the various denominations, all urging repeal of this obnoxious measure.

Yet in spite of all these protests, and in spite of pressure by the Opposition when the clause came up for review at the end of the 1964 session of Parliament, the 90-day detention clause was renewed for another twelve months.

In view of the Government's claim, after the Rivonia trials, that all underground activities had been scotched, it had been hoped that the clause would be considered no longer necessary. But the Minister of Justice asked for its renewal, hinting, however, that it might be possible to repeal it within a short time.

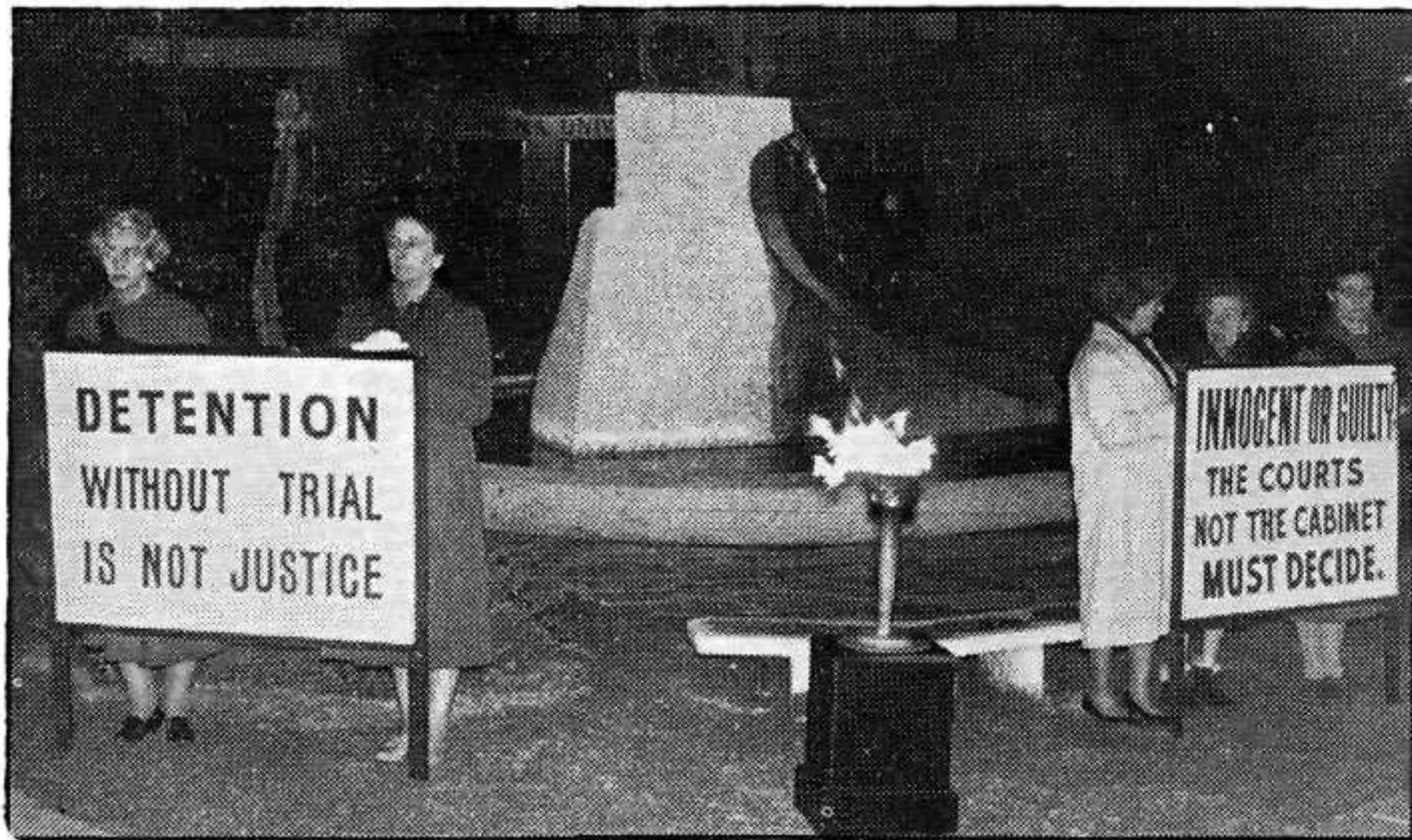
Yet hardly had the session ended before there was a further wave of arrests under this clause in

the Transvaal and the Cape, together with a series of dawn raids upon the homes of hundreds of people, including numbers of distinguished citizens, well-known anti-Communists whose respectability and regard for the law could not be questioned. The arrests and raids continue, and nobody knows when they will end.

There have been further outbreaks of sabotage, including the recent bomb outrage at the Johannesburg station. The Black Sash has always condemned violence and sabotage, and believes that those who perpetrate these crimes must be brought to justice. Nevertheless, it does not believe that arbitrary 90-day detention, which is outside the rule of law, is defensible. The public cannot know whether there is evidence of subversive activity against all those detained, or whether the Government is using its powers to silence those who openly and legally oppose its policies. Only when individuals are charged and brought to trial in open court can the full facts become known, and justice be seen to be done.

The Bantu Laws Amendment Bill

Early in 1963, the Minister of Information held a special Press conference to give advance publicity to a Bill drawn up by the Bantu Administration Department. Mr. Waring had not yet read the Bill, but he represented it as a measure designed primarily to promote healthy race relations, to eliminate obsolete and overlapping provisions of existing Bantu legislation, and to ease the lot of the African worker. When the



The Transvaal Region of the Black Sash begins a 48-hour vigil against the implementation of the General Law Amendment ("No-trial") Act.

draft Bill was published a few days later, its provisions were found to be harsher and more oppressive than ever, while it gave the Government drastic and far-reaching powers to control all African labour.

Comments upon the Bill prior to its revision by the Cabinet were called for by the Department, and many organizations and individuals availed themselves of this invitation, mainly attacking the Bill on the grounds of its inhumanity, its interference with labour and with the powers of local authorities, and the hardship and inconvenience it would cause both Black and White citizens.

Deeply disturbed about the implications of the proposed legislation, the underlying purpose of which was to establish the Africans permanently as a migrant labour force with no rights of residence in the "White" areas, Black Sash women all over the country spent endless hours studying the draft Bill and the slightly modified version which was later placed before Parliament. Two memoranda on the draft Bill were submitted, one from National Headquarters and one from Cape Western Region, attacking the Bill mainly on the grounds that it would lead to a further breakdown in the already unsettled family life of the Africans; remove the small measure of security hitherto enjoyed by them in the urban areas, creating an insecure and rootless people; interfere with the free movement of labour, and increase racial friction while causing economic uncertainty.

Large-scale demonstrations were planned in every Region to coincide with the second reading debate, posters were prepared, informative pamphlets were printed. Not since the days of the protests against the Senate Act had so much endeavour been concentrated upon a single measure.

In the meantime Black Sash Headquarters sent a telegram to the Prime Minister, asking him for an interview so that their objections to the Bill might be explained and amplified. He referred them to Mr. de Wet Nel, Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, who replied asking the Black Sash for a Memorandum setting out the basis of their objections. At short notice, therefore, a third Memorandum was drawn up by Headquarters with the collaboration of Cape Western Region, and sent to the Minister.

Shortly afterwards, however, the Government decided not to proceed with the full 143 clauses of the Bill during the 1963 session, and an abridged Bill of 33 clauses, which omitted many of the provisions which gave the greatest concern, was placed before Parliament and duly enacted.

The Black Sash received a letter from Mr. de Wet Nel saying that the discussion with the Black Sash could take place "at a later date".

Many people, including members of the Black Sash, regarded the withdrawal of the major and most contentious parts of the Bill as a hopeful

sign that the Minister was at least prepared to consider objections to its provisions. A Black Sash deputation was in due course accorded an interview with the Minister and his advisers, and given an opportunity of expressing Black Sash views and presenting concrete evidence of individual cases of hardship, gleaned from the records of the Athlone Advice Office. They were listened to with courteous and careful attention, congratulated on their thorough study and understanding of the legislation, and the Minister expressed shock at some of the case histories related, asking that in future individual cases of hardship be referred to him personally. (This has since been done in many instances.) They left the interview with high hopes that their representations would have the effect of ameliorating future legislation.

But it was not to be. The Bill that was introduced in Parliament during the 1964 session was substantially the same as the original Bill. The Black Sash protested, and many other protests and objections were made inside and outside Parliament, but little attention was paid to all these protests, and the Bill was passed with only minor amendments.

This legislation is obviously an essential part of the Government's whole apartheid policy, the complement of the Bantustan "independence" plan. As the "Rand Daily Mail" pointed out at the time of the publication of the draft Bill, the measure gives the Minister 'complete control over the movement, residence and occupation of every African living outside his "homeland" . . . it is a *quid pro quo*, a strict bargain. Limited self-rule in the Bantustans, and, in return, nothing at all in the White areas.'

It was recently pointed out to the Black Sash that one of the provisions of the Bill, which enables officials to send "idle" Africans to camps where they can be offered "suitable" employment which they are more or less obliged to accept, is in effect a legalization of that old enemy of the Black Sash, the "induced" farm labour system.

"Meddling old women"

Like many other responsible citizens and organizations in South Africa the Black Sash has for many years been deeply concerned about the effects on the African of the group of laws known as the "Pass Laws", which bear only on the African, and are generally acknowledged to be one of the main causes of racial friction in the country. From time to time, the Black Sash has made representations against these laws to responsible authorities, and these have, in the main, been courteously received.

At the time of the publication of the draft Bantu Laws Amendment Bill, feeling that the ever-increasing severity of these laws and their implementation constituted a serious danger to race relations in South Africa, the Black Sash decided to make a further appeal to the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development to relax the



Black Sashed.

(Rand Daily Mail)

existing laws and reconsider the proposed legislation.

Accordingly, a well-considered letter was addressed to him, pointing out the evil effects of these laws from every point of view. The letter was dismissed in a curt reply from the Minister's Private Secretary, accusing the Black Sash of "meddling" in a matter of which it knew nothing.

Some time later, when the Minister was being questioned in Parliament about his decision in the Mapheele case, he complained that he was being hindered in his work by "meddling old women", referring to the Black Sash Advice Office workers. He repeated his complaint on a second occasion, and even accused the Black Sash of unlawful and immoral practices, suggesting that it might be "furthering the aims of Poqo". These charges were refuted by the Black Sash in a letter to the Press, and have not since been repeated.

The Black Sash opens its ranks

When the Black Sash first came into existence in a spontaneous explosion of moral indignation caused by the Senate Act, that political manoeuvre which removed rights from South Africans of colour to the advantage of the Whites, it seemed reasonable and proper to most members that the Black Sash should be an organization of women voters, and therefore White women. They saw themselves as the conscience of the White electorate whom they held primarily responsible for the state of affairs which had been allowed to develop in South Africa.

In the years that have followed, the Black Sash has continuously campaigned for justice for all South Africans. In the course of this work members have learned that the basic injustice in our

country is the policy of discrimination on grounds of colour; and that while the rest of the world is rejecting racial and colour discrimination more and more, South Africa alone is intensifying it and perpetuating it by law.

With their own categorical rejection of the principle of racial discrimination came the question as to whether they could remain a body of voters, an organization of White women, since the franchise in South Africa is restricted to Whites. There was a decided division of opinion on this point.

The members of the Black Sash had come to realize that a happy and peaceful future for their country depended upon a broad concept of South African nationhood embracing all its peoples; and many of them felt that the Black Sash should give expression to this concept by opening its ranks to all South African women. They felt, too, that since all legitimate avenues of protest had been closed, one by one, to non-Whites, non-White women should be given an opportunity of sharing in the peaceful and legitimate activities of the Black Sash.

Yet there were many other members, who, while they fully subscribed to the Black Sash rejection of colour discrimination, still sincerely believed that they would have a better chance of righting wrongs brought about by the arbitrarily enfranchised Whites if they remained the "conscience" of the White electorate, a **voice of protest from within**. They felt that as a group of privileged White women obviously seeking no material advantage for themselves in their work for justice, the Black Sash would have greater strength than as a mixed group in which many women would be fighting to establish their own rights.

And after nearly four years of discussion and soul-searching, the issue was decided in October, 1963, at the Annual National Conference. By a majority of more than two-thirds, the Black Sash decided to open its ranks to all women of the Republic of South Africa.

Spirit of protest

In response to the many inquiries we are constantly receiving about the origin of our organization and the reasons for its continued existence, we offer this brief outline of the history of the Black Sash. It is of necessity brief, and many aspects of our work have been merely touched upon, or omitted entirely. But it will, we hope, give some indication of the present scope of our activities and objectives, and at the same time provide an answer to those people who think that the only activities of the Black Sash lie in its now somewhat sporadic public demonstrations.

These public appearances are now only a part — yet still an important part — of our work. It is a long time since we expected our Black Sash demonstrations, no matter how well-timed, how emphatic, or how long sustained, to have any real

effect upon the unjust legislation against which we protest; but they do provide a visual reminder to the public of the need for constant protest, and visible evidence that the spirit of protest is still alive in our country.

Achievement

And what has the Black Sash achieved? It is true that, in practical terms, we can claim no spectacular success, and much of our hard work over the years seems to have come to nothing. However, we can and do claim material success in at least two instances — our protests against the iniquitous induced farm labour scheme in the Transvaal a few years ago led to the abandonment of the scheme; and the small successes of the Black Sash Advice Offices, particularly the Athlone Advice Office, have brought comfort to some of our less fortunate fellow citizens. If the Black Sash has achieved nothing else, this help to the helpless, little though it may be when measured against the appalling defencelessness of the Africans in general, more than justifies its existence.

But something else has been achieved. It is a remarkable fact that many of the women who started out with the Black Sash more than nine years ago are still as active and as enthusiastic as ever. These women have grown and developed with the Black Sash, and have learned many

valuable lessons — to think honestly and objectively about the problems of their country, to accept changing ideas in a changing world, to try to cast aside prejudice and intolerance, to protest against injustices wherever they find them, and to uphold their principles firmly yet without violence. And surely the development of such a group of women is a real and worthwhile achievement in a country torn with racial prejudice and intolerance, where change is resisted by the dominant group, and where men are turning to violence under stress of unbearable injustice?

History

In this brief outline of Black Sash activities, we have dealt in some detail with the legislation on which our protests are based, mainly because we believe that these laws are influencing South Africa's destiny. Memories are short, and we wish to preserve a clear record of Black Sash motivation and actions in these momentous years.

And so we play our small part in the history of our troubled country as it unfolds before our eyes. When that history comes to be written, no matter how little we women of the Black Sash may be found to have influenced the course of events, perhaps it may be remembered that all our work and protests were based solely on moral issues, and, in the words of our Dedication, "History and our children will defend us."



The last demonstration on the Johannesburg City Hall steps.