

WHAT THEN SHALL WE DO?

To the Editor of the Black Sash

PARLIAMENTARY democracy has ceased to function in South Africa. Some people believe that this is for lack of a critical electorate, but this is only a small part of the truth.

The basic reason is that it never existed. At best, the Union had an elective oligarchy composed virtually of Europeans only. Sooner or later, parties elected by a white electorate, will appeal to the sectional, racial prejudices of such voters; and then even the limited virtues of benevolent paternalism (of Christian trusteeship), as it affects the unenfranchised majority of the South African population, will disappear. That has now happened. Differing only in degree, not kind, both main parties stand for white domination.

However, if this were all, it is conceivable—**theoretically, at least**—that a pressure group or popular movement like the Black Sash, dedicated to the universal moral principles of a common humanity, could in time persuade a majority of white voters that their self-interest, no less than their professed ideals, requires a rather less immediately selfish approach to the problems of a multi-racial society.

But in South Africa today there is no chance of the will of such a majority of voters prevailing, even if, as is far from certain, they could be so persuaded. The main reason for this is the far more even spread of Nationalist voters throughout the country, compared to huge, useless Opposition majorities in a diminishing number of city areas. The loading of the vote against the towns adds slightly to this same end. Secondly, by its tight hold on the education of Afrikaner youth in Church and segregated schools, by its fervent appeals to blood, emotion and group-patriotic sentiments (the Blood River celebrations, the Voortrekker movement, the Pretoria centenary, etc.), by its calculated campaign against the un-South African (and un-Afrikaans) influences in Press, cinema, radio and its refusal to consider introducing television (whose programmes would have to be largely imported), Nationalist leadership has done much to isolate Afrikanerdom culturally. The effect of this shows in the much higher percentage of Afrikaner youth that is Nationalist than is the case with their parents. In time Afrikaners will pay a terrible price for the extent to which they have been cut off from the twentieth century world. But, for the foreseeable future, the grip of political Nationalism on the largest and most prolific of our white groups will not be shaken.

Finally, even if these two factors of the spread of voters, and Afrikaans political and emotional isolation, could be remedied in some unforeseen way, there is ample evidence to believe that the Nationalist Party would rig the vote—either by new delimitation

of constituencies, further loading, disfranchisement of "un-South African elements" or other forms of electoral gerrymandering—so as to prevent an adverse "will of the people" finding its expression in a parliamentary majority. For the present such measures are not at all necessary. The Government is immensely secure, in terms of votes, within the present electoral framework, and the United Party is deluding itself, if no one else, when it pretends to the contrary. As things now are, the Government can retain a bare parliamentary majority with as little as 35 per cent. of the total poll. In 1948 it obtained 42 per cent. In 1953, when the Opposition had more funds and enthusiasm than it ever had before and may ever have again, the Nationalists still advanced to 46 per cent. of the votes cast. Today there are good reasons for supposing they could top 50 per cent. The swing needed to get them out is enormous and unlikely to be achieved for many general elections.

Even if, therefore, there were more signs than there are that the Opposition really wishes to oppose **all** the immoral policies of the present Government, affecting non-whites as well as whites, parliamentary democracy is dead in South Africa today. For to be alive it requires, among other things, a reasonable possibility of ousting the Government by the normal electoral process. That is not a prospect before us today.

What then shall we do? To protest against every unjust and immoral law is necessary, however tedious, lest the nation's conscience succumb to the sheer weight of repetition and apathy. To try and convert the present parliamentary "shadow-boxing" into a real fight over fundamental principles, it is essential to force the United Party to cease "fence-sitting," even at the risk of considerable immediate electoral injury. It cannot win anyhow. Its choice is between hanging on to its declining support and ambiguous policies, in which case it has a comfortable minority for the present and no future; or clearing the dead wood and ambiguity, losing some more ground now, and eventually earning a stake in the future.

This is the same choice that, in a different way, faced the Black Sash. Formally protesting against Government laws and Opposition weakness is not enough. If we are sincerely convinced that parliamentary democracy has broken down, we must seek extra-parliamentary methods of action, or deserve the Government we have got. Thus I am sure that the Black Sash has done right in following the logic of its initial stand against the Senate Act.

Exactly where this will lead you, and how, cannot now be foretold. You could not restrict your activities to issues concerning White and Coloureds alone, without betraying the whole moral basis of your

stand. The Torch Commando said that "what was morally wrong can never be politically expedient," but itself yielded to expedient timidity, as many feared you were about to do. You are surely wise to extend your operations to the whole field of government, central, provincial and municipal.

As you enter this new and wider political life, you will, of course, shed some members, who were prepared to fight for an all-white constitution (with token non-white representation) but not to incur the odium of standing up for non-white rights as such. You will encounter not only obloquy and abuse from expected quarters, but distrust from those with whom you now want to fight but who are not yet certain of your bona fides. You will also meet a number of new problems about which many of you will have, at best, very confused views. You will have to straighten out your ideas gradually. There will be new friends to help you, who have passed this way before, and who will be content to let you find your own pace, once they know you are travelling the same road. There is no need to fear the taunt of "fellow-travelling." You are returning to the main stream of Western, Christian civilisation, which South Africa has deserted.

Above all considerations, you will find in your own consciences a new freedom from all the tangles of

the past. It will not come at once, because new confusions will replace our "traditional" compromises with principle. But as these are resolved, it will come beyond doubt. I can best illustrate it by asking some of you to read the Hansard report of the debate on the Banishment Bill last session. There you will see not only the presumptuous and arrogant prevarications that served the Government for arguments, but also the split-mind of the official Opposition, even in one of its best performances. With these you can contrast the ease with which the tiny Labour and Liberal parties rebutted the Government's case, because their own basic assumptions were morally sound.

I would commend to you especially Mr. Hepple's calm acceptance of the term "agitator," on the grounds that all the rights and freedoms for which we fight today were won for us by the agitators of the past among our own ancestors. Now leaders of our non-white peoples are seeking those same liberties and rights, status and opportunities for their descendants. They, and we, are all "agitators" today. Let us accept the title in the hope that we shall prove worthy of it in the fight for the soul of South Africa.

C. W. M. GELL

THREADS FROM THE SASH

A writer from **Port Elizabeth** says: "I met a pro-Government gentleman yesterday, who said after quite some discussion, "Well now, I understand better. Why do you not put these aims of yours into the Afrikaans papers?" I said that no letter of ours had been accepted by "Die Oosterlig." He said his father worked in "Die Burger" and was sure that he would publish them. How to get our aims across to them is hard. He actually asked, "Why don't we wear a white sash for white unity!"

* * *

WRITING of a Black Sash tour of the **Transkei** recently, my correspondent says of a well-attended meeting at one town: "My friend and I had never in our lives spoken in public before, and we had not anticipated meeting more than three or four for an informal talk, so it was something of an ordeal. . . The response almost overwhelmed us . . ." Later, in a larger town, they were introduced to an audience thrice that number, but having gained courage at their first encounter they spoke out bravely! My correspondent says, "It was wonderful to see the interest in our audiences' faces—it brought out something unexpected in oneself, for normally I would have gibbered with nerves at having only my own voice sounding among all those strangers."

We of the Black Sash know well this metamorphosis from timid shyness to courageous public avowal—whether it be the wearing of a Black Sash or the public statement of our beliefs. South Africa will one day be as proud of our women, as we are proud of them now.

The **Cape Eastern Region** continues to forge ahead. We hear that new branches have now been formed at Plettenburg Bay and Redhouse, and that great hopes are being entertained about Jefferies Bay, Mossel Bay, and Oudtshoorn.

If you glance at a map and see the extent of the spread of the Black Sash from Mossel Bay to Grahamstown, you will realise why we so admire the dynamic group which controls this region!

* * *

ON one of our haunts an elderly lady from **Holland** said that she and her husband had immigrated out here, only to return to Holland after three years. Whilst they were there, they read about the Black Sash movement, and were very impressed with the cinema newsreel of their demonstrations. They became so enthusiastic that she said to her husband, "There is something that we can do. We will go back to South Africa, and I will join the Sashers!" And she did.

* * *

A MOST successful haunt, composed of members of **Estcourt, Mooi River, Ladysmith and Pietermaritzburg** Sashers, was held in Weenen when Mr. Sauer paid that historic little place a visit last month. It had to be seen to be believed to what lengths a Minister will go to avoid walking past the accusing eyes of Black Sash women. He not only avoided them by using the back entrance of the hotel, but even jumped into another car, and made the occupants of that car get out and get into his car from which the pennant was flying!