

The Reprieval of Natal “Blackspots”

Early in June the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA) hosted a gathering of representatives of a number of Natal “Blackspots” in Pietermaritzburg. The occasion marked the launching of a campaign to secure the reprieval from the threat of resettlement of all the remaining black freehold areas in the province. “Black-spot” was a term coined in the Verwoerdian era to denote legally acquired black freehold land, in an area subsequently designated white, whose continued presence there was incompatible with apartheid’s grand designs. If this campaign succeeds, as it seems to be doing, it will mark the beginning of the end of one of the most sordid chapters in the recent history of South Africa.

Before the 1913 Land Act was passed, Africans, as individuals or as groups, had managed to get title to land, usually at great personal sacrifice, in a number of places scattered about Natal. After 1913 this became virtually impossible. After 1948 the Nationalist Party set out to reverse the process. Its intention was to remove every black freehold community from “white” Natal and resettle it in “black” KwaZulu. The implications of this act of madness were staggering.

In reply to a question in the House of Assembly in 1962, the Minister concerned announced that there were 250 ‘blackspots’ in Natal. It is doubtful if he really knew. Over the years the same question produced a series of different answers every time it was asked of anyone in the Government.

But let us assume that he was right. Four years earlier, in 1958, the Liberal Party had conducted a survey in 19 of the threatened areas. In a booklet on the “blackspots” published in the early 1960s it reported that the survey had shown “that the 19 areas were inhabited by some 30,000 people of whom 1,100 were land-owners. They contained nearly 7,000 homes, 55 churches, 28 shops and 26 schools. The inhabitants owned some 9,000 cattle. If these 19 areas represent a fair average of the 250 Blackspots, the Government removal scheme could mean the uprooting of some 375,000 landowners and tenants and the destruction of 85,000 homes, 680 churches, 350 shops and 350 schools in the province of Natal alone. At the most modest estimate a quarter of a million people will be moved and a staggering amount of their private and communal property destroyed.

“This property represents most of the life savings of the people who now live in the Blackspots and, in many cases, it also represents the savings of their fathers before them. Most of the Blackspots have been in existence for over fifty years, since the days before the Union of South Africa. The people who bought the land were often making their only investment. Apart from their livestock, all their money went into their land and their homes . . . and, as the stories which follow will show, they were encouraged to buy the land and to build those homes”.

“The stories which follow” were of three communities which were fighting for their survival at that time and which have since been destroyed. A few words about two of them, Kumalosville and Charlestown, are appropriate at this time, as the Reprieval Campaign gets under way.

Kumalosville was one of the first “blackspots” to go. The Liberal Party booklet has this to say.

“In January, 1908, a Mr Daniel Bester sold 250 acres of land to an African syndicate whose trustees were Chief J.H. Kumalo and Messrs. T. Kumalo and E. Lutango. Kumalosville was born.

“In October, 1963, over 55 years later, the demolition squads of the Nationalist Government’s Department of Bantu Administration moved in, and Kumalosville died.

“Mr Matsheni Hlomuka, the only surviving member of the original syndicate still resident at Kumalosville in 1963, described how the farm was bought. How the people who were members of the syndicate came together at a meeting, each one having been told to bring £5 (R10) with him, and how each man put his money into one of a pair of enamel dishes, until both were full. With this money 250 acres were bought from Mr Bester. The great attraction was not only that this was freehold land but that it adjoined the railway line, something which no other African land in the area did. The 250 acres were surveyed into 2-acre plots. Allowing for roads there were 102 of these, of which, in recent times, 91 were in African ownership and 11 in the hands of Non-Africans.

“Mr Hlomuka recalls that, when the land was bought, there were only three white farmers in the vicinity; Daniel Bester himself, his brother Jan, who lived a short distance away, and a man called McIntosh. In time all three sold up and left, their farms were sub-divided, and what had been three large farms became 12 smaller ones. The new owners found Kumalosville already in existence, but they do not seem to have liked this and, from the early days of their arrival, Mr Hlomuka says, they began to accuse the African residents of stealing their mealies and sheep and of being a nuisance. Mr Hlomuka recalls two occasions on which he personally was accused of being implicated in thefts.

“In one instance a stolen sheep was finally found in the home of a local white railway worker and on the other occasion the accusing farmer’s own labourers were found to have stolen his corrugated iron.

“In 1952 Kumalosville was visited by two officials of the Bantu Administration Department and Mr Kidman, the Ladysmith lawyer who had been responsible for the sale of land at Kumalosville. The officials announced that the Government was anxious to buy the farm but that, in



A Relocation Camp

return, Kumalosville people would be given something bigger elsewhere. It was suggested that the residents should elect a delegation to go and inspect the alternative land, a farm called Hobsland, some miles away. A few days later one of the officials returned and took the men who had been chosen with him in his car to Hobsland. Four of these men have since died but two survivors, who were still living at Kumalosville in 1963, say that they were shown round Hobsland by a local African and that they were given to understand, by the official in whose car they travelled, that they would receive 4-acre plots there and that the rest of the farm would be the commonage for their use. Their impression was that Hobsland was about 3 times the size of Kumalosville and they were attracted by the offer of large plots and a commonage.

“However in 1954, in September, the Ladysmith Bantu Commissioner, Chief Walter Kumalo, a local chief, and another official came to tell them “things have changed” – and that there would no longer be compensation as earlier intimated, nor even compensation on the basis of 2-acre plots in exchange for the present 2-acres. This new Government offer was rejected and the conditions under which the people would be prepared to move were submitted to the Chief Bantu Commissioner through Senator Cowley, then Natives’ Parliamentary Representative, in February, 1955.

“The main conditions set out in Senator Cowley’s letter were:

- (a) That Kumalosville landowners receive 4-acre stands in exchange for their 2-acre stands at Kumalosville.
- (b) That they receive freehold title issued at Government expense.
- (c) That a water-supply be made available so that they would not later be accused of contaminating the Ladysmith water supply.
- (d) That there be an adequate commonage and dip.
- (e) That full compensation be paid for existing land and

improvements and free transport be provided for the move.

(f) That the Government re-erect any churches abandoned.

(g) That the Government erect a school to replace the existing one.

(h) That adequate recreational and transport facilities be provided.

“From 1955 to 1958 Kumalosville waited. Then there was another official visit. This time the true terms of the removal were announced. It seemed that, in 1956, the law had been amended. Now, only a man who owned 40 acres or more could expect to be compensated with land equal to what he was losing. Kumalosville landowners no longer qualified for “land for their land” let alone for the “something bigger elsewhere” which had been the inducement to move six years earlier. What the Government now offered was:

Compensation for land, improvements and what it called “inconvenience”.

A free ½-acre plot at Hobsland..

The right to buy a further ½-acre at Hobsland for R110..

It should be noted that, while in almost every respect Hobsland is a less desirable place to live in than Kumalosville, the Government offered R42 an acre as compensation at Kumalosville and asked R220 an acre at Hobsland!

“In late 1960 and early 1961 final notices to move were served. Many families refused to move. They said they were not prepared to go to Hobsland under any circumstances and they were not prepared to go anywhere else until they had been properly compensated for what they had built up over the years at Kumalosville. They put in counter-claims to the Government’s compensation offers, asking particularly why it was they were offered R42 an acre for *their* land while the Government asked

R220 for *its* land. Before the question of their compensation had been settled the families which remained at Kumaloville were expropriated by Government action and were made trespassers in their own homes. They still refused to move. They said they could not do so until they were paid their compensation. The Government told them to move to Hobsland. It would transport them there and then they would get their money. They said that under no circumstances would they go to Hobsland, where there was no adequate water supply, where no stock were allowed, where there was no school and where the nearest store with adequate stocks was several miles away. Why should they go somewhere so inferior to their present home? So they stayed. But in the middle of September, 1963, they were visited by the Bantu Commissioner from nearby Ladysmith. He told them that on October 1st he was coming with lorries to cart them to Hobsland. If anyone did not go he would come back on October 2nd to arrest them. At Hobsland a benevolent Government would give them a tent and half-a-bag of mealie-meal free!

"The final chapter in the story of Kumaloville is a bitter commentary on the way in which Nationalist officials of the Bantu Administration Department, supposedly concerned only with the welfare of their African "charges", deal with those charges. Kumaloville families who were faced with arrest at the end of September continued to insist that they would not under any circumstances go to Hobsland and that they could not afford to go anywhere else until their compensation was paid to them. They just could not afford to move. Their attorney finally persuaded officials of the Lands Department, who were responsible for providing the money for compensation, to agree to Kumaloville residents being paid out the Government offer of compensation in full and *without prejudice* to their claims for increased compensation, before they left Kumaloville. So, on September 27th, a Friday, the people of Kumaloville went to the Bantu Commissioner's office in Ladysmith at their own expense to collect their money. Officials told them they were too busy to pay them. They said they would be too busy on Saturday and on Monday and on Tuesday. On Wednesday, however, the Bantu Commissioner would come to Kumaloville to pay out the money on the spot. When they visited the Commissioner's office the African landowners took an attorney with them to examine any documents they might be required to sign. When they were told that the pay-out would be at Kumaloville they asked that their attorney should be there to examine documents and advise them. The Bantu Commissioner refused point-blank to have him there. The attorney then asked, on the morning of the pay-out, if he could examine the documents his clients were to be asked to sign, in the Commissioner's Ladysmith office before he left for Kumaloville. The Commissioner agreed. The attorney was astonished to find that the receipts to be signed made no mention at all of the money being accepted *without prejudice* to further claims for compensation; in fact they stated that the money was being received in full and final settlement of all claims. The attorney protested that this was not the agreement which had been arrived at. The Bantu Commissioner refused outright to endorse or in any way alter the receipts. He said he was too busy, that he did not have time to bother with such things."

CHARLESTOWN

"Before Union in 1910 Charlestown was a flourishing rail centre and customs post on the Natal/Transvaal border. With the coming of Union, however, the customs post closed, the railway workshops were moved three miles across the Transvaal border to Volksrust, and most of the town's white residents departed. Houses were left empty and there was no white demand for them. Charlestown, which had certain financial commitments to meet, faced bankruptcy.

"In order to meet the situation a Mr S.R. Higgins, who was a member of the Town Board, went out of his way to persuade Africans to come and buy land in Charlestown. There was no law to prevent their doing so and in 1911 the first plot was transferred to Mr Abraham Ngwenya. Mr Amos Coka, who arrived in 1914, says that there were only 12 white families living in Charlestown at the time. Other African buyers followed and settled down to buy or build their homes, establish their gardens and pay the rates which enabled the Town Board to meet its financial obligations.

"In 1953 the Chief Bantu Commissioner for Natal visited Charlestown and announced that all people who worked elsewhere would have to go and live where they worked and that all others would be moved to a place called Buffalo Flats, forty miles away and 18 miles from the nearest town of Newcastle. Following this meeting the Liberal Party had certain correspondence with the Chief Bantu Commissioner which elicited the following information.

- (a) Compensation would be paid to tenants and landowners who were moved.
- (b) Holders of Freehold title would be able to obtain land "under title" at Buffalo Flats.
- (c) If members of a family were employed in Charlestown but the head of the family was not, the head of the family and those members not employed would have to go.
- (d) there would be no compensation for loss of livelihood for any persons who had established businesses or trades in Charlestown.

"The Commissioner was unable to say how many trading sites would be available at Buffalo Flats, nor could he say what transport arrangements would be made there, nor what preparations would be made to receive the displaced people. The correspondence then concluded.

"Mr Abraham Ngwenya was the first African to buy land in Charlestown. He bought a plot and a house from a white owner in 1911 and he went into business as a blacksmith, doing most of his work for surrounding farmers. Shortly after the Chief Bantu Commissioner's 1953 visit, Mr Ngwenya told a Liberal Party investigator "I am 80 years old. I am too old to do more than repairs. This move to Buffalo Flats has knocked me down and I feel almost too old to get up again. I would rather die soon and escape this bitter ending to a hard but happy life. Nor can I understand why the farmers and the Government wish to do this to me. I never cheated them and they never cheated me." Mr Ngwenya's wish was granted. He died in 1959.

"Mr Jeremiah Mdakane is over 70 years old. He bought his land in Charlestown in 1925 from the same Mr Higgins

who had first persuaded Africans to move there. He says "When I received my title deed, I settled down with full confidence and established my home". Having settled his family where they could, he thought, live undisturbed, he went off to Johannesburg where he worked as a waiter. He continued to work there until 1947, coming home whenever he had a week-end free or leave due. But in 1947 he was taken ill and he returned to Charlestown to retire and to live on what he could grow in his garden and the cattle he was entitled to run on the commonage. Until the Bantu Commissioner's visit in 1953 he looked forward to a quiet but happy ending to a hard life, spent with his family from whom he had been separated so often during his working days.

"Mr Ngwenya was a man who lived and worked in Charlestown all his life. Mr Mdakane came home to retire there and is now settled permanently. There are other, younger men who still work away from their homes in other towns. Mr Job Hadebe is one of them. He came to Charlestown to escape from life as a farm labourer. If an African lives on a farm in South Africa he must work for the farmer and Mr Hadebe did not want to do that. So he bought land in Charlestown, settled his family as Mr Mdakane had done and he too went off to Johannesburg. He has a good job there and, by careful saving, he has now built a lovely house, which cost him £800 (R1,600), on his plot at Charlestown. The Nationalist Government tells him he must sell it and either go and start again at Buffalo Flats, or go and live in a "location" where he works.

"These are only some of the stories of Charlestown. There are many others for which there is no space here; Mr K. Thabete, over 70 years old, who built up a brickmaking business on the commonage, Mr Piet Shabalala who is a coal merchant, a building and transport contractor and a very able man in many fields and who, after the move was announced, was offered £20 (R40) for his £750 (R1,500) house by a contemptuous white man".

Charlestown did not capitulate easily and it was not until the mid-1970s that Piet Shabalala, the last survivor from its black landowners, was finally driven out.

The Northern Natal African Landowners' Association

These are only some of thousands of similar stories of what apartheid has done to Natal's black freeholders. During the early years of their fight against resettlement they formed themselves into the Northern Natal African Landowners' Association, an organisation, sponsored jointly by the Liberal Party and the ANC. Almost all the threatened communities (not only those in N. Natal) eventually affiliated to it. Its support was such that in 1963 it was able to call a two-day protest and prayer meeting at Roosboom, near Ladysmith to which over a thousand representatives from all over the province came. The Government's response was to ignore the protest and to systematically ban those most active in the Association.

The Reprieval Campaign.

Nearly thirty years later the campaign which failed then is being revived again with great hopes that this time it will succeed. This June's meeting demanded:- i) official Government notice of the reprieval of all threatened communities, ii) withdrawal of expropriations, iii) restoration of land to its rightful owners iv) compensation for past suffering, v) security for tenants, vi) development to make up for past neglect, vii) the recognition of existing local structures of representation, and viii) representation at regional and national levels.

Already the first two demands are starting to be met. Four of the communities involved in that June gathering have received official notification of their reprieval. There seems no reason to believe that it won't follow for the others, and for the many more which still live under the resettlement threat.

The next step in this campaign will revolve around the return to their lost homes of resettled families who wish to do so, and a programme of development in those places and in those which have now been reprieved, but which have been neglected by the State for generations.

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