

A MESSAGE FROM UNDERGROUND

Bram Fischer

[Advocate Abram Fischer, Q.C. was detained in 1964 and was the main accused in a trial of 13 men and women in Johannesburg on charges of being members or supporters of the Communist Party. On January 22, 1965, he announced that he had chosen to forfeit his bail and leave his home in order to continue the liberation struggle from underground. The following message was sent by him from "somewhere in South Africa."]

In 1965 South Africa presents a surface of ebullient confidence: the ebullience of a white electorate basking in phenomenal prosperity; and the confidence of a Government which, during sixteen years, has with increasing violence attempted to crush every effort by the majority of the people to win human rights until today it appears supremely stable.

To the outside world, then, South Africa may seem to be another Spain: irrevocably set for long years of rule so tyrannical that all militant opposition can be continually and readily suppressed. A powerful body of conservative opinion — including the many British and American investors with a large stake in this prosperity — particularly appreciates the present Government's maintenance of "law and order" (regardless of the cost in human suffering below the surface) and argues that economic forces are breaking down apartheid.

These impressions and arguments need to be corrected.

South Africa may resemble Spain, but it is not another Spain. Apartheid, in a manner unique in history, arouses the abhorrence of all the United Nations except Portugal; not only the abhorrence, but the growing determination to bring to an end such racial domination. The view may be true that many investors in South Africa favour a strong Government, and hence resist any interference with the policies of such a Government which attempts to maintain law and order at all costs. This view may be true *at present*. It ceases to be true as soon as the Government's policy produces unrest and external threats. At that stage it must become increasingly apparent that it is in the interests

of the investor to support rapid change and the transfer of political power to a truly representative government which would establish racial peace and proper relations with the African States and the United Nations. In any event, can any government be truly stable where, in a multi-racial society, all non-whites, three-quarters of the population, are deprived of the vote and detest the racialist laws? Can any economy long be stable where its prosperity is reserved for a politically dominant white minority? Can any policy produce racial harmony where it imposes

economic and social degradation and a denial of human rights on the vast majority of people?

As for the argument that economic forces are breaking down apartheid, this is true only to a strictly limited extent. The law reserving jobs for whites and Coloured people is daily infringed as more and more non-whites are absorbed into skilled and semi-skilled work, while during the Nationalist Government's rule the number of Africans living and working in so-called white areas has more or less doubled. But — though their wages and living conditions improve — in face of the ever-rising cost of living, need, poverty and malnutrition remain the lot of the vast majority of non-whites in this prosperous country. Furthermore, the absorption illegally of Africans into semi-skilled or even skilled work is in fact leading to even greater exploitation of labour, as white employers hire them for so-called white jobs at cheap wages, safe in the knowledge that Africans have no right to organise and strike. But above all the argument that economics are defeating the politics of apartheid becomes fallacious in face of the mounting human and political repression that has accompanied the growing 'influx' of Africans, now more than 7,000,000 in the so-called White 87 per cent of South Africa. In short, the more educated and "industrialised" the Africans become, the more they are repressed.

It is not necessary to look far below South Africa's surface in time or depth to discover the reality. Protests against shocking social conditions, against the hated pass laws, against political and industrial oppression — whether peaceful or whether exploding into riots or sabotage — have equally been put down with violence.

Yet for fifty years, the senior African organisation, the A.N.C., followed a policy of non-violence. Even after the Sharpeville massacre, it still persisted in such methods. Not until the 1961 protest stay-at-home had been crushed by all the force of a modern well-armed State, did the leaders turn away with bitter regret from their policy of non-violence, and allow some members to join the *Spear of the Nation*. Even then the campaign of sabotage that followed was directed strictly at symbolic targets. Once again the reply of the exclusively White Parliament was not to repeal discriminatory laws. Instead, surely a unique occurrence in history, an elected body whose members must have known full well what the consequences would be, passed a law which legalised torture. Under the so-called 'ninety-day' law, which soon earned world-wide notoriety, a thousand of our best citizens were detained for indefinite periods of ninety days in solitary confinement, for purposes of interrogation. As was to be expected, this has been used (and, though suspended, can at any time be used again), not merely to inflict solitary confinement — in itself one of the cruellest forms of punishment, as I know from personal experience — but for actual physical torture; long hours of enforced continuous standing — forty hours, fifty, sixty or even more — during incessant interrogation; electric shock treatment and other forms of violent physical assault.

Our police State, now arming itself to the teeth, has used this law with barbarous intensity to try to break the forces striving for basic human rights. Today there are over 2,500 political prisoners in our jails, including most of our non-white leaders. The State thinks it has crushed the liberation movement, but it has not. As we know from history — including the history of South Africa — if the struggle for freedom is smothered in one place or for the time being, it flares up again before long. In 1960, with the mass arrests during the Emergency, it seemed as if the struggle had been crushed. But this was not so. There was a resurgence in the movement for liberation. Now of course the set-back has been more profound and widespread. But 'set-back' it is, and the struggle will surge forward again. It is in this that the real danger lies. If South Africans have to perform the task by themselves, they will inevitably be driven by the terrorist methods of the State into a violent and chaotic form of struggle. And the more prolonged the daily, incessant humiliation meted out by the majority of whites, to the millions of non-whites, the fiercer the bitterness being created in millions of souls. This bitterness is understood, indeed overtly shared, by people of colour everywhere. The fury recently vented in the United Nations over the Congo will seem trivial by comparison to what lies ahead in relation to South Africa. Though it is at the moment beyond the powers of the African States to launch any direct attack they cannot indefinitely tolerate our gross insult to man solely because of his colour and their existing influence in the United Nations can but grow and, in its turn, influence the countries with heavy investment in South Africa.

Immediately, world opinion has positive and constructive tasks to perform. It must prevent torture from being used again in a country which counts itself civilised. World opinion has already helped to bring about the suspension of the ninety-day law, now it must work for its repeal. The law still exists and the Minister of Justice has already threatened to reimpose it at a moment's notice.

World opinion should work for the release of our thousands of political prisoners and, until this is achieved, must insist that they are not, as at present, treated as ordinary criminals of the lowest category. The wives and dependants of these prisoners must be cared for; their children educated. We in South Africa are quite incapable of looking after 15,000-20,000 dependants.

But, most important, is the extension of human rights to all citizens. Democracy will eventually be won, of that there can be no doubt. The question is whether it can be achieved peacefully or only by violence.

A peaceful transition can be brought about if the Government agrees to negotiation with all sections of the people and, in particular, with the non-white leaders at present jailed on Robben Island or in exile. Prospects of such negotiation seem desperately remote. The Government presents a "granite" attitude. Not one of the three Prime Ministers produced by the Nationalist Party since 1948 ever met or talked with a single non-white leader.

Yet this is no static situation. This is no Spain. It is 1965 — not 1935. If the combination of predictable and unpredictable forces leads to large-scale violence or war, the consequences would be so disastrous in loss of life, in suffering, in economic disruption, in a legacy of bitter hatred and in the threat to world peace, that I believe that white South Africans must at some stage be brought to realise that their own long-term interests lie not in maintaining race supremacy but in extending human rights to all.

Although the Nationalist Party appears supremely confident, its spokesmen show some awareness of the hopelessness of their struggle in their warnings that if apartheid fails, multi-racial democracy must follow.

The United Nations can bring home to white South Africans the recognition that the maintenance of white supremacy is doomed. I doubt even whether it would be necessary to apply sanctions, boycotts, embargoes. I have no doubt that if white South Africans really believed that certain fundamental sanctions would be imposed after the lapse of some specified time, they could well rid themselves of apartheid, and thus avoid bloodshed more fearful than ever occurred in Algeria.

And knowing them as I have grown to know them from twenty-five years work with the A.N.C., I have no doubt that our African people will gladly bear any hardships that would be caused by sanctions, rather than achieve their freedom by violence.

With *all* South Africa free, at long last our country will fulfil its great potential — economic, political, cultural and educational — internally and in African and world affairs.