

# MAJORITY RULE?

By JOYCE HARRIS

**I**T SEEMS TO ME that the label, "majority rule", and the political concept to which it is attached merit examination. It is a label and a concept much in vogue at present, the label being bandied around with scant regard to what it implies.

Rule by the majority, as it is conceived in Britain, is essentially a democratic concept, where the will of the majority prevails. But a vital element of this concept is the possibility of change, as it has manifested itself through the years in Britain with alternating Governments which reflect the pendulum swing of public opinion. It is the possibility, nay, the probability of change which safeguards "majority rule" and gives it its symbolic image of democratic government.

But "majority rule" is not to be confused with democracy. It is not synonymous for democracy. It can, in fact, become the very essence of tyranny when it lacks the possibility or the probability of change. It is a label which should be used with care, for it can well mean different things to different people. In a homogeneous society it is an admirable concept, for it ensures that the broad will of the people is expressed in government, guarantees that the prevailing majority opinion will win the day, and protects the minority whose own day will inevitably dawn.

However an entirely different picture presents itself when the society is not homogeneous, when the differences which exist within it will persist for all time, like skin colour, and when the term, "majority rule", is used in relation to that permanent difference. This implies that the division remains permanent, that the particular majority will rule for all time, and that the minority will remain a minority for all time without the protection inherent in "majority rule" in a homogeneous society, that is the protection of possible and probable change. Under such circumstances of permanence the concept of "majority rule" could well lose its democratic implications and become a weapon of tyranny and repression of a helpless minority.

It is my belief that the constant use of this label by Britain in her dealings with Rhodesia has been and remains a tragic blunder, for it seems to be used in the context of a non-white majority and a white minority, one which will naturally be rejected by the white minority which sees itself threatened. It is this same concept

which helps to make white South Africans so fearful, and it is surely not what Britain means to imply. With her democratic heritage of alternating party government she must be able to see the pitfalls of a majority based for all time on colour, and thus established for all time.

This is not a democracy, nor does it give recognition to the possibility that "majority rule" in a non-homogeneous society need not necessarily mean that one group remains in power in perpetuity on the basis of its numerical superiority. Surely it is possible to conceive an harmonious non-homogeneous society where the will of the majority will prevail, but where it is fluid, as it is in Britain, and where it is based upon community of interests and not upon skin colour? This may well be what Britain means when she talks about "majority rule", and what the United Nations mean when they talk about "majority rule", but in the context in which they use this label this is not understood by the white minority of Southern Africa, who resist it instead of trying to give expression to it by attempting to establish an harmonious, non-racial society. It might be possible to persuade the white people of Rhodesia and of South Africa to work towards the establishment of a non-racial society in which the interests of the majority will prevail — a truly democratic and non-rigid form of society which holds out hope for all concerned — but they are unlikely to commit what they regard as group suicide by agreeing to a form of "majority rule" which they interpret as Black Majority Rule for ever more, and it is unrealistic to expect this of them.

Britain and the United Nations are defeating their own ends by plugging this label, believing it to be synonymous for democracy. It is not, because it is open to too much abuse. They may be thinking in terms of a non-racial democracy, and I trust that they are, for there is little purpose in substituting black nationalism for white nationalism — this solves no problems, either in Africa or in the world at large — but this is not what their words imply, and the sooner they start talking about a "non-racial democracy" instead of about "majority rule", the sooner they are likely to succeed with the objective and the more co-operative they will find the white people of Southern Africa — at least I hope so.

Words are potent weapons in a world which is striving to avoid the use of more lethal ones, and it is imperative that they be used with clarity and understood without ambiguity.

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