

The pipe-dream shattered

JOYCE HARRIS

Black Consciousness is an awareness of self — “I am, I exist” . . . It is an acknowledgement of one’s value in the eyes of God, one’s worth as a human being . . . It is a denial of the process of depersonalisation which has been inflicted on the Black people by 300 years of White racism . . . These were but a few definitions of Black Consciousness which were given at a recent symposium on the subject where the platform of speakers was Black — in varying degrees.

The Whites are deeply and bitterly resented. The use of terms like “Non-White” and “Non-European” are a sure indication to the Blacks that they are and have been viewed by Whites as non-persons, and over the years they have become conditioned to viewing themselves in the same light.

But Black Consciousness is changing all that, and how easy it is to appreciate the wonderful feeling of exhilaration and elation that this sudden sense of self-awareness and self-importance must give to people who are downtrodden, oppressed, regarded simply as cogs and numbers.

What an indictment it is of White-ruled South Africa, that the large majority of its citizens should have to seek comfort in a concept such as Black Consciousness — the only answer they have been able to find to the White Consciousness which has been thrust upon them in the guise of White superiority.

But unfortunately I am not Black, I am White. I say “unfortunately” advisedly, for I came away from the symposium feeling excluded, left out, rejected because of the colour of my skin — surely a new experience for a White South African though all too familiar to a Black one.

I was told that there was absolutely no way in which I could identify myself or be identified with Black Consciousness, should I so desire it. I was told that only Black people could “belong”. I was one of the “ladies and gentlemen” of the audience, not one of the “soul brothers and soul sisters”.

I was told that White people are irrelevant. That word, “irrelevant”, was used more than once and with the potency of a sledgehammer. So now we know that we mean even less to the Blacks than they do to us, for apparently not even our labour is important to them.

They have their path, they know where they are going. They do not feel violently disposed towards us — they do not have the time for such luxuries — but we simply do not matter.

A Black speaker from the floor said that Black Consciousness is a concept beyond the comprehension of many Black people, especially older ones, and asked that it be called what it really is: “Black Power”, which could readily be understood by any Black man.

The same speaker spoke with hatred and contempt of “White liberals” who have achieved nothing, who have no right to try to identify themselves with Black aspiration or to influence the Black movement, and whose only objective should be the conversion of White people to a liberal viewpoint. They, too, are irrelevant, but more dangerously so for they constitute a potential threat to Black exclusiveness.

Perhaps this is an extreme version of the opinions expressed; perhaps not all the speakers felt quite so strongly; perhaps there were some on the platform and in the audience who were more kindly disposed, but the general tenor of the meeting, despite smilingly spoken words of comfort and reassurance, was menacing, frightening, disturbing.

It is all very well to understand cause and effect, to be able to appreciate why Black people feel as they do, and to be able to applaud the growth of Black Consciousness because of its therapeutic benefit to people sorely in need of it.

But how is it going to be possible to draw a line, to extract only the benefits and to prevent the evils? For it seems to be quite inevitable that Black Consciousness will become Black Power if it has not already done so, nor is there any reason to believe that

Black Power will function any more acceptably than White Power has functioned.

For power corrupts, and power based on feelings of racial superiority corrupts even more, as history has shown.

The White man has set the pattern for racially-based colour politics in this country which have operated to the detriment of the Black man, so he should not be surprised when the tables are turned.

I was not surprised by what I heard at the symposium. I suppose I even expected it. But I had also been nursing my own little private pipe-dream that a non-racial, colour-blind state might still be possible in this country. I do not feel this any more.

I accept the reasons for Black Consciousness, I understand its merits and advantages, but I am terrified of its implications. It is a juggernaut constantly gaining momentum. How will the brakes be applied when it becomes necessary to do so, as it inevitably must?

To be a White liberal in South Africa is to be schizophrenic. To be torn between one's very real concern for the Black man and what has been done to him by the White man and one's gladness when one sees him taking matters into his own hands, taking pride in himself and his heritage, taking steps to secure a better life for himself; and then, in the final analysis, to find that one is White and vulnerable and irrelevant and expendable and human and frightened — this presents an apparently insoluble dilemma.

I was never more aware of it than during that symposium, for no punches were pulled, and I could no longer blind myself to what now appears to me to be an entirely inevitable racial confrontation. My own personal confrontation will, I fear, be between my own integrity of purpose and conviction and my instinct for self-preservation. This is not a choice I relish, and I can only hope that by some miracle of brotherly love I will not be called upon to make it.

CHIEF Buthelezi told the Assembly that the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, Mr. M. C. Botha, had "attempted to hold discussions with us" on the question of consolidation, in Pretoria on October 19 last year.

Chief Buthelezi said the talks had broken down. He said Mr. Botha had described the talks as "the most unsavoury discussion I have had with African leaders in 13 years."

Chief Buthelezi said: "We will not allow ourselves to be used as a facade. Your executive committee will not be a party to a fraudulent negotiation. We are not saying that the crumbs from the master's table will be rejected, but it must be remembered that we have our dignity apart from our poverty."

Rand Daily Mail. January 18, 1973.

