# From Lisbon to Soweto

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THE significance of the disturbances which began in June last year in Soweto and other areas cannot be fully assessed (nor freely commented on) until after the judicial commission of inquiry has made its report. But in trying to understand them, it is also necessary to recognise the specific conjunction of the changes which were being registered locally and internationally by early 1974.

The collapse of the Portuguese dictatorship (intimately connected with its inability to stop the rot in its colonial empire) exposed South Africa to stronger winds of change than the formation of independent states during the sixties had done, partly because of the strategic situation *of the former Portuguese colonies, but also be*cause they are not simple successor states, and promise a radical departure from the post-colonial states constituted in much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

The impact of these developments might have been less marked had it not been accompanied by the economic crisis which began spreading through the industrial countries during the early 1970s and which deeply affected third world states. Within a few years the dominant political order was stripped of two protections — the strategic and military cocoon provided by the Portuguese colonies and the expansion of its industrial economy which brought some measure of international neutrality.

Furthermore, industrial expansion served to secure the acquiescence of large groups of Whites, apathetic at best towards the Government. It also permitted the Government some room for manoeuvre in responding to pressures from particular groups of Blacks, in that affluence placated White working class opinion, which in harder times might be expected to resist attempts to tamper with the protection offered by apartheid legislation.

The particular conjunction of the changing economic situation with the shift in the regional balance of power has therefore thrown timetables for piecemeal change radically out of kilter. The pressure for much more rapid, far-reaching and significant change now concatenates with heightened resistance to change.

Of course the relationship between Government and its constituents has also been changing. The industrial development of the 1960s brought a self-confident and aggressive Afrikaner middle-class to prominence. With some exceptions the Afrikaner working class has become relatively less militant. Agriculture is much more centrally organised and controlled. The bureaucracy enjoys a more powerful role in allocating resources.

In brief, the state is much less the instrument of the forces which brought it to power, and symptomatically the old populist formulae which linked Party, Volk and State is less often heard — Government has become more remote from its *other bases than previously.*

But it is a long way from finding any roots in alternative groups in society. Indeed the most confident prediction is that authoritarian measures will be increasingly necessary.

Mechanisms such as the development of self-government in the homelands were never successful, even in favourable conditions, in substituting tribe-based political structures for the universalist goals formulated by the Black nationalist movements prescribed during the early sixties. The Transkei, for instance, has operated for 20 years under the protection of Proclamation R400, which empowers the executive to detain those of its opponents which it finds threatening.

Perhaps underpinning the authoritarian structure of the homelands' governments is a desperate matter of survival — any political group which gets its hands on the rudder of the state and the resources which go with it is not likely to be fussy about the methods it uses in order to keep in power.

The tension in these areas between pro-Government elites and other groups is likely to be heightened by changes both in the economy and in the international situation. The Black rural areas contain the most impoverished groups in South Africa, and their condition is likely to deteriorate markedly — indeed there are signs that this deterioration is already alarming.

Secondly some of the homelands lie in problematic strategic areas — Eastern and Western

Transvaal; Northern Natal. Their inhabitants are men of the periphery in terms of their situation in both economy and policy.

The situation in the rural periphery is often contrasted with that in the urban areas, but the latter is both continuous and intimately connected with the former. The simplest and most obvious connection between them is that rural landlessness and impoverishment supply the force impelling Blacks into industrial employment. While the crisis is not likely to provide a basis for common political action between Blacks in the urban industrial areas and on the land (at least not in the foreseeable future) the situation is likely to produce mutual repercussions.

It has long been a postulate of White critics of the Government that urban Black industrial workers stratified into classes might generate, somewhat on the model of the industrial states of the West, a basis for alliances between White middle class and Black skilled workers, and that to this end measures like granting property rights and lifting of racial employment codes were necessary to depolarise racial conflict.

Implicitly this position assumed that one danger to White hegemony lay in the possibility of an alliance between rural and urban Blacks.

To the exponents of such a position, the Government's position, which denied the permanent existence of Blacks in the cities, must have been exasperatingly obtuse, but in fact the Government resisted pleas for a "multi-racial" solution of this kind for two perfectly rational reasons.

Firstly, to end racial discrimination would put the interests of much of its support among the White working classes at jeopardy. Secondly (partly connected with the important source of Government support in agriculture), its position flowed from the State's critical function in standing command over the rural hinterland of South Africa's industrial enclaves.

For ultimately the control of labour to the mines, to industry, and to "White" agriculture is the central economic function of the South African State. In this it duplicates the functioning of the "market" in early capitalist states, and resembles the activities of the Japanese and Prussian states during their coercive drive to industrial development.

Mainly for these reasons the option to liberalise its policy in urban areas was largely closed off. Yet, to look at the matter again from the perspective of the controlling interests within the urban areas, the need to make some gestures towards liberalisation was imperative.

Despite the devastating effect of security legislation on the expression of nationalist and (*sub voce*) socialist aspirations, and on attempts by workers to organise effective machinery for industrial action and negotiation, political activity in Black areas achieved expression, notably in the Black consciousness movements and worker activity.

The response from various White groups, sometimes with connections among Blacks, was both unusual and significant. It was to attempt to inculcate the assumption that a trajectory of developments, different from that projected by either the state or the most "militant" Black groups, was a possibility which could be worked for.

The areas in which this latent potential for change could be developed were legion, but attention centred heavily in three areas: industrial relations, education and urban housing. There was room in each area, it was implied, for the realisation of a harmonious and equitable relationship between the races, at least in urban areas, which would avoid the "excesses" of the most instransigent Whites on the one hand and the Pandora's box which might be opened should Black nationalists or militant unionists succeed in gaining a significant following.

Education seems to me to be the area in which the most interesting processes can be observed at work, which encapsulated most perfectly the assumptions of the reformers, and which links together most characteristically the diverse aspects of the crisis which has been generated over the last two years or so.

The central function of modern education has become the production of the different components of an industrial society's work-force through schools, universities and technical institutions (including agricultural schools geared to realising the industrial potential of agriculture.)

Educational establishments are simultaneously central in propagating the ideology of industrial society — they inculcate not only the skills valued in the industrial economy but also the habits of deference, the competitive compulsion, habituation to the edurance of tedium and other traits of inustrial man. Supremely, however, they serve to inculcate the central tenet of industrial civilisation — the belief in social mobility.

The general assumption that intelligence, hard work and perseverance will be rewarded with an improvement in living standards and life styles is carefully inculcated in the school system. The belief in education as a means for achieving upward social mobility has become in some societies a major agency of social control and of political stability.

Yet, by an inversion which is perfectly easy to understand, such an assumption is also potentially a major stimulant of conflict. In a situation in which the belief that education opens opportunities jars agains the reality of shrinking employment prospects, it is possible to envisage a sharp political crisis when people find their certificates do not get them jobs.

This general observation throws some light on the political issues which have been developing recently in South Africa. Three points should first be established.

Firstly, Black education reflects the general point only obliquely and in a somewhat crooked fashion. The Bantu Education system explicitly did not promise upward social mobility — at least not in the urban areas. It was for this reason long resisted by Black parents. Yet they eventually acquiesced in the system because (presumably) of the calculation that an inferior education was preferable to no education. This calculation extended presumably also to the use made of separate Black universities which were in part designed to form the administrative and technical infrastructure for the homelands' governments.

Secondly, this acquiescence — or relative acquiescence — there were many scuffles in the Black schools and universities before 1976 — reflected a real improvement in the job opportunities of Blacks with some education. The development of private financing of schools, as through The Star's Teach scheme, is evidence of the demand for schooling by Blacks and the feeling even among conservative Whites that this demand should be met.

The shift in the economic climate redounded powerfully on this situation. Here it should be stressed that conditions in rural areas are very significant. One of the conditions for relative stability in urban areas lay in the stratification of opportunities between urban-dwellers and rural Blacks. (Parenthetically it should be added that the term stability simply means that the level of force required to maintain control does not escalate sharply.) That is to say, it could be expected that the possibility of stability rested in part on there being relatively low pressure on jobs in urban areas, and that these should become available to people with fairly high educational qualifications in preference to rural people (educational opportunities are inferior in most rural areas.)

One of the most important symptoms of the general economic crisis during the last two years has been massive decline of work opportunities in rural areas as well as unemployment in industrial areas.

While it is possible that government and industrial concerns can ensure some measure of stratification, through influx controls and other methods, the likelihood is that one way or another the mutual concatenation of rural and urban unemployment is likely to have an impact on a wide range of issues — on wage levels for instance. These effects are difficult to calculate without a better command of the relevant material.

They are in any case merely illustrative of the trauma which is precipitated in a society which has developed and centralised its industrial capacity without developing equivalent political machinery for resolving directly the endemic conflicts between the major classes brought into existence. The method of smothering such conflicts by combining Draconian repression with the manipulation of elites which cannot be disposed of is not likely to work much longer.

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THE Black Sash mourns the death of **MR ROBERT SINCLAIR.** This was a man in a million — warm, friendly, charming, with twinkling eyes, a delightful sense of humour, and a deep and abiding strength and integrity. He enjoyed the well-merited love and respect of everyone who was privileged to know him.

His role in the Black Sash was a vital one, though he often jokingly suggested that we did not recognise it. We did! Without his constant and unfailing support it is unlikely that his wife, Jean, our National President for 14 years, could have functioned as effectively as she did and I think that he knew that, and knew that she and we knew it too. Certainly he must have known that we all loved him.

We shall miss his smiling presence at all our functions. We shall miss him greatly. We extend our deepest sympathy to our dear Jean, to his daughter, Sheena Duncan — our National President — and to all the members of his family.

**Joyce Harris**