

Controversy over recent Sash editorial

Regional conferences are currently discussing the following correspondence which reflects the kind of debate which is ongoing. We would enjoy comment from our readers.



from Mary Burton

Dear Jill,

I hope you have had some peace and rest over the holiday period. 1984 was a hard year in so many ways, and I am not over-optimistic about 1985.

I was able to have a brief discussion with Sheena last month about the editorial in the latest edition of Sash, and I think I should put in writing to you some of the points made in often heated discussions in this region. I enclose a photocopy of an article by Barry Streek in the Cape Times (see page 5) which added to the concern expressed. Arguments were:

1 Objections were raised to what was seen as a 'thinly veiled attack' on the UDF. It was acknowledged that the Black Sash must speak out when violent tactics are used, but stressed that we need to document carefully with factual information and to identify those responsible (or at least not to suggest that some organizations might be responsible, especially if the leadership of, for example, UDF and COSAS have explicitly rejected violence as a strategy, which we understand is the case.)

2 The Editor of Sash is entitled to express her views in articles in the magazine, but editorials should reflect Black Sash policy. There was anxiety about whether the national President and/or Executive regularly see editorials before publication.

3 There was objection to the introduction of the Schlemmer/Kane Berman/ Welsh argument. There appeared no evidence of 'widespread anathematizing' of them, although there have been considerable differences of opinion.

4 There was a feeling that hard information about events such as those at Sebokeng, and about the critical situation in the Transvaal is what our members needed — information which is increasingly denied to us by the

² Mary Burton writes on behalf of her committee, not in her personal capacity.

commercial or government media. Our responsibility to our members is to provide them with information and to help them to work out the implications for the future. (That sounds rather vague — notes made during discussion! I think the idea was that the mood in the Transvaal, the anger and the demand for rights, which has not really been made so evident in the Cape, needed to be conveyed, and that Sash members at least should try to see inevitable rapid changes as part of a necessary process — uncomfortable but healthy in the long run).

On the other hand, I must also tell you that there were members of the Sash (and of the public after the Streek report) who were delighted with the editorial.

The different responses are all part of the on-going debate about how best to bring about the changes we all agree are essential. I hope this will have helped to explain how we see the function of the Sash and the magazine.

With love, but no hisses,

Mary Burton



Jill replies . . .

I welcomed your letter, for the debate will surely liven up the magazine for months to come. I must say that I do get irritated by signs of a basically authoritarian squeamishness about openly criticising fellow dissidents and/or ourselves.

You say, 'It was acknowledged that the Black Sash must speak out when violent tactics are used, but it was stressed that we need to document carefully with factual information and to identify those responsible . . .' The editorial was primarily about the risk of a new dictatorship in an atmosphere of riot and intimidation. Members of Cape Western cannot seriously be suggesting that one is not allowed to open up commonsense debate on complicated problems without first preparing dossiers which, however harmless they may seem, might run the risk of

benefitting the security police.

I gather that members felt we should avoid laying responsibility for violent tactics at the door of organisations which explicitly reject violence: but what if the leaders of those organisations (including our own) don't realise that some of their ideas and strategies contradict the non-violent principle? I would expect it to be the first duty of a human rights organisation to point this out and if those ideas have already become so habitual that they have entered the field of received wisdom, then the only way to counter them is vigorously and publicly and often.

Take for example the constant reference to 'the evil system.' You cannot negotiate with 'evil' only confront it. Add in the all-or-nothing ethic and you have a strong subliminal pull towards violence. Good-evil rhetoric is such an obvious dehumaniser and in times of instability one of history's killers. Just read half a page of Robespierre. Human rights campaigners, if indeed that is what they genuinely are, will always insist on looking at ordinary human beings and their mixed motives and needs and will shy away from emphasis on good or evil systems.

And when Allan Boesak says to a Black Sash conference, 'Non-co-operation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is co-operation with good,' is he not leading people onto dangerous ground, placing the stigma of immorality on anyone who seeks to use those painful, slow, organising, bargaining, pressurizing strategies which are essential to peaceful development and some of which involve the use of leverage within 'the system'? Clearly good-evil rhetoric has its place but not so fiercely and insistently that it pushes out the grey areas where creative political activity can take place. I would expect it to be the first duty of a human rights organisation to fret about this sort of thing.

The whole question of reactive violence, which didn't come into this particular editorial, will be debated at the March conference. The trouble is, when the Black Sash discusses violence it gets bogged down in explaining to itself what it already knows: that the structural violence of apartheid is the culprit. Those who chair our debates should learn to prevent this happening. Members join the Black Sash because they know all about apartheid as the cause of violence and counter-violence. We must start from this point, not argue in circles ending up at this point. We should also avoid going on and on about how the government hasn't had a change of heart. Forget about change of heart. We need to concentrate on finding non-violent ways of compelling change. The challenge is — and I again quote Ken Owen because he expressed it best —

'When moral leaders airily dismiss resort to violence as a "normal human reaction" they are, at best, omitting to warn that violence is not a solution but a deeper level of hell to be avoided even at very great cost.'

We urgently need to discuss creative ways of meeting this challenge. We will never do so during two-hourly debates at regional meetings and conferences at which people talk past each other. We need a series of long

and sober workshops.

And if we truly believe in democracy we should learn to watch out for a lot of those 'educating' notions which flutter around at our meetings (and everybody else's) which could so easily coalesce into the new dictatorship. When *any* action against an 'evil' regime gets the sanction of high morality; when you add the all-or-nothing ethic and speak scornfully about piecemeal change; when you insist on defining the origins and purpose of government and of institutions and deny the human truth that these mutate and change continuously; when you believe in an elite of ideologists politicising the masses; when you create that terrible myth called 'the will of the people' (which is a means of trapping people into a particular ideology and never allowing them to change their minds); when you downgrade the importance of the vote by dreaming of a one-party state; when you denigrate civil rights by balancing them against the need for 'economic justice'; when you develop an exaggerated belief in the power of the media — then you are slotting in on the ideas and strategies that have been spoken and used by authoritarians from Plato to Marx, Lenin and Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tsetung and politicians throughout East Asia, South America and Africa; and you are setting the stage for a fiercer and more destructive fascism than the one you are currently opposing. One only has to read the history of the mass murdering century to understand this.

Incidentally, I believe the UDF's stated discipline of internal democracy could save this country from the above nightmare — because when change comes slowly from the bottom up and not from an elite who have captured the high ground, *there* is that great hope for humanity for which so many agonised writers, writing in the wake of revolutions, have pleaded. That is what my editorial was really about.

Note: All editorials have to be approved by the National Committee before they go to the printer. On two previous occasions there has been no consensus and the editorials in question were published as articles by me, clearly marked as such. These were 'Onslaught on Human Rights (Vol 25, No 2, August 1982) and (Trying to defuse violence (spelt diffuse!) Vol 27 No 2 Aug 84.

Jill Wentzel



Mary Livingstone writes:

I just want to say that your editorial in the November Sash was the sanest thing I've read in months. You will probably know that before we in Cape Town had received our copies, Barry Streek picked it up and wrote a story on it in the *Cape Times* which gave the impression that the Black Sash was criticising the UDF (why not

anyway? No organisation is sacrosanct).

I feel that one of the difficulties is that the real extent of the troubles in the Transvaal is not appreciated here. You did not accuse any individual or group but simply drew attention to 'some disconcerting straws in the wind' about which many of us also have misgivings. The oversimplistic clichés and the double standards applied to our judgments of political friend and foe! You made a magnificent plea for us to hold fast to the principles which brought the Black Sash into being and which cannot be put into cold storage until the dawn of the Brave New World.



from Sheena Duncan

I have difficulties about your negotiation argument and the good/evil characterisation of our present situation. If ever an oppressed people has been prepared to negotiate it has been in this country. The whole history of black resistance has been a history of endless trust in negotiation and endless violations of that trust. Look at the present leaders in communities threatened with removal and their patient continuing with attempts to be granted meetings with the Minister or the Magistrate. You can certainly never accuse the Black Sash of attempting to prevent or dissuade them from their chosen course of action. We have always sought to facilitate it if that is what the people have decided to do.

I think there are times when to enter into negotiation is just another trap. Negotiation is not negotiation at all when one of the parties has nothing at all to bargain with. Someday I would like to have time to analyse the result of our 1979 meeting with Dr Koornhof which actually immobilised us for approximately 18 months because he had promised to attend to certain things such as administrative procedures at pension payouts and to recruitment of skilled and educated people from homelands. He did nothing at all about any of the things he promised and we were too polite and courteous to attack while we waited for him to carry out his stated undertakings.

Negotiation is going to be a big issue again now with whatever arrangement the State President is going to come up with following his opening address to Parliament. Should people agree to try yet again? They have tried so often before in Representative Councils, Advisory Committees etc and they have always been defeated because they entered into conversations with trust and belief in law and honour while the other side had no intention of moving forward but only of emasculating the black leaders while consolidating their own power.

If you study Gandhian strategies of non-violent coercion there was always love and concern for the opponent, but negotiations came only when there was some kind of balance of strength.

I do think you can only confront evil. It is the method of that confrontation that is all important and you know very well that evil methods of confrontation have been rejected solidly by the Black Sash always.

I think the real cause of all our troubles in white liberal circles at the moment is that we are not victims. We stand on the outside and can maintain high moral positions because we are not watching our children die, our mothers being evicted from their houses because someone has bribed someone else, our husbands denied UIF benefits, our daughters and sons refused permission to work or to make the most of their abilities. This is what causes our confusion.

I personally find it difficult to come out with high-sounding righteous statements about good and evil, right and wrong. You do not pay any attention at all to the solid, sacrificial hard work done by active members of the Black Sash to further non-violent and effective strategies of opposition. In all Regions you find us engaged in encouraging, exploring, teaching the law and structures to enable people to find effective ways of insisting on those rights they have and to find strategies for gaining rights they do not have. I do think we expend almost all our resources of time, talent and energy on 'finding non-violent ways of compelling change.'

and Jill . . .

Re negotiation and the Black Sash contribution to non-violent means of compelling change: you are quite right. I and every other Sash member agree with everything you say, having spent many years doing the work you describe. In addition I have written on this theme in almost every issue of *Sash* that I have edited, especially in relation to the leaders of communities under threat of removal. In August 1983 I made it the theme of the removals issue of *Sash* — 'this repetitiveness in our history, representing the continuous failure of whites to respond to the challenge of black moderation and desire for negotiation and co-operation.'

For this reason I didn't think it necessary to spell it all out. I keep on hoping we will learn to *start* a debate from this point. You say 'negotiation comes only when there is some kind of balance of strength.' Precisely. The tragedy may well be that *NOW* when the government has seen that it has to respond to a combination of pressures which did not exist previously, opposition organizations seem to be imprisoned in the rhetoric which better fitted past decades.

If people persist in believing the government is evil rather than a confused amalgam of different personalities with different motives and perceptions, then chances for peaceful manoeuvre are going to be missed in favour of an armageddon philosophy. There are all sorts of straws in the wind which could coalesce one way or another. I am only concerned that we look critically at ourselves and others constantly reassessing where we are going.

I agree with you that our great strength is the fact that our work is rooted in the lives of ordinary people.

I am only concerned that we hold onto this strength. That is why I am worried about the effects of disinvestment, for example. We all cringe, do we not, from the faces of unemployed people in our advice offices? That is why I am concerned about our silence when people get their ears sliced as punishment for going to work during a stay-away. I know these are not easy matters. I just want us to worry about them.

Your argument about sitting comfy and passing judgment can be turned on its head. It's just as bad to sit comfy and forget how awful it must be to be caught between police violence on one hand and intimidation by a highly politicised elite on the other. I speak about this not from some lofty theoretical ivory tower but from contact with people who have explained to me in graphic detail what it is like to live like this. I have two black students who intermittently live with me who don't know whom to fear most and who want to emigrate to America!

Sash warning on new 'dictators'

By BARRY STREEK

THE Black Sash has warned against the "ominous" potential for dictatorship among black communities where leaders are not elected.

It has also urged the United Democratic Front (UDF) to adopt strategies in which the government was presented with demands it could meet.

The creation of strong constituencies for organization and negotiation would never happen if leaders allowed themselves to be guided by self-interest and ideology "rather than by the needs and aspirations of ordinary people", the Black Sash said.

In an editorial in the latest issue of the organization's journal, Sash, it said: "One result of denying the vote to the majority of citizens is that there are no properly accepted structures for the expression of discontent or bargaining or management of day-to-day living.

"But now we are glimpsing signs of a more ominous, less recognized consequence, which is the potential for dictatorship that exists among the disenfranchised masses; for when leaders are not elected, they are free from responsibility to their constituencies and even from the necessity of having constituencies."

When the government could prohibit meetings, either by banning or the refusal of permits, "you are asking for a situation where any determined group can order masses of people around by means of posters, leaflets and strong-arm tactics".

The article declared also that there were some disconcerting straws in the wind which needed to be discussed by the UDF and all opposition organizations.

Boycotts

Substantial numbers of people now wanted to get on with their lives and schooling, and they did not see what was being achieved by endless boycotts. The kind of rhetoric which invoked "the wrath of the people", together with statements that collaborators only had themselves to blame for violent attacks on them, "do not exactly create a suitable climate for frank and free discussion", the editorial continued.

The editorial suggested that "strategies must surely be worked out whereby the government is presented with demands it can meet. The consequences of the all-or-nothing ethic need to be looked at".

From Cape Times, November 28, 1984

Rural blacks in the western Cape

Sue Joynt

In Ceres — a small Boland town — the prescribed areas defined by the government for the purpose of 'ordering' the lives of blacks, is divided into a municipal and a divisional council area. The former covers the town and the latter the surrounding farming areas. Mr D J was born (he claims) in the town of Ceres where for many years he has worked for a dairy. The Development Board officials claim that he was born in the divisional council area of Ceres and therefore needed their special permission to work in the municipal area. This he was given, together with a place in the single quarters in the black township.

Problems arose when he married a coloured woman — her family are happy for him to live with them in the coloured township but this is not allowed. Because his wife was with him in the single quarters after repeated warnings that she was to leave, his permit and accommodation in the municipal area have now been cancelled and he has been told that he must find a job in the divisional council area of Ceres. The employer, meanwhile, would like to continue employing him but would have to provide him with housing which is not possible.

In Robertson there are families with qualifications for permanent residence in the area but no residences for them to occupy and no obligation on the part of the authorities to provide any.

Mr and Mrs O have lived on a farm in the Robertson district since 1962. They therefore have qualified under Section 10 (b) of the Urban Areas Act to live and work there permanently. All their children were born there. Because no provision is made for schools for black children in the area, they had to be sent to boarding school in Transkei. When Mrs O returned from taking the children to school, she found that they had been moved out of their house on the farm and her husband was in the single quarters. As she has no other home, she moved in with him. They have twice been arrested — she for being where she is not permitted to be and he for harbouring her. The magistrate feels that this is not a matter for his Court but the authorities are not compelled to house them. (Robertson is theoretically served by a small township — Ashton) nor is the employer (in this case the Dept of Nature Conservation). Where are they meant to live? No other farmer can provide them with accommodation unless they are registered as working for him and the township has no room.

In Swellendam the position is even worse. Many blacks have lived and worked there for 20 or more years but there is no township at all. Thus a place to live in the area where a black is qualified to be is totally dependent on