Helen Suzman Talks

to JANET SAHLI

Janet: Can you sum up your general impressions of this last Parliamentary session?

Helen: It was very disappointing. Although I was never optimistic that we were going to see much in the way of reform — I knew PW and Co. had been scared out of their wits by the support gained by the HNP in the April general election — nevertheless I always retain a sort of sneaking anticipation that something good will happen — even after 28 years! In the event, nothing whatsoever was forthcoming, with one exception in labour relations legislation. For the rest the government's behaviour — especially Koornhof's — over the Nyanga issue was utterly appalling.

Janet: You've anticipated my next question. The PFP has been strong in its condemnation of the government's handling of Nyanga. You yourself have said that the government must come to terms with the urban problem. How would you have handled the whole Nyanga question?

Helen: Well, you see Nyanga is the outcome of *the government's hopelessly unrealistic policy of* believing that it can stem urbanisation by influx control and failing to provide accommodation. This is particularly so in the Western Cape, where the 'Coloured' labour preference policy prevails.

The government has got to accept the fact that people are coming to the cities to look for work — there is none in the homelands — and adapt housing standards to the existing critical shortage by site-and-service schemes, core-housing etc.

Janet: Could you elaborate on your previous point about labour relations?

Helen: What it did was to remove three major deficiencies in the big Industrial Conciliations Amendment Act of 1979. Firstly, all workers can now join a registered trade union, including migrant workers. It is now a right, not something granted by a permit. Secondly, the Minister's permission does not have to be sought in order to form a multiracial trade union. Thirdly, sex discrimination has been removed from Wage Board determinations.

I don't belittle the changes, but if they are not accompanied by avenues for political expression the dangers are that industry will become a battlefield for political rights, as well as for the normal worker demands for better employment conditions.

Janet: Much time is spent in Parliament in what I feel to be wrangling, wasting time on points of order, such as the fuss about Mr Eglin's alleged visitor who disturbed one session. Isn't this a classic case of fiddling while Rome burns?

Helen: You must realise that these are dramatic incidents played up by the media. Most of Parliamentary discussion is routine and often boring.

● **Helen at Nyanga with Tjaan van der Merwe (left) and Roger Hulley (right), PFP MPs.**

These are colourful diversions and don't take up an enormous amount of time.

Janet: What are the implications of the Bill on private schools?

Helen: That's two-sided. On the one side it allows provincial administrations to subsidise private schools that take Black pupils. That, of course, is a good thing. On the other side is a Catch 22 provision. It enables the Minister to declare a private 'White' school Black if it admits any Black pupils at all. The repercussions of this could be pretty frightful in that 'White' schools are located in White group areas, and they could then, of course, be closed down.

Janet: To move away from the Parliamentary session, you have said that big business must bring more pressure to bear on the government. How do you envisage this being done?

Helen: Well, South Africa must be one of the few countries in the world where the men who provide the greater part of the revenue which flows into State coffers have so little influence over policies.

Here, unlike the US for instance, the government seems to ignore big business. The only lobby which functions efficiently is the farmers' lobby.

I only hope that at the second conference of captains of industry and the Prime Minister in Cape Town in November these tycoons will emerge from their cocoons and speak up in no uncertain terms.

It's high time that these people used their influence to tell the Prime Minister that they are disappointed at his failure to follow through on the Carlton Conference.

Marshalling free enterprise to solve problems means more than providing housing and services for urban Blacks on the shoulders of businessmen who have already paid heavy taxes precisely to provide for these. It also means releasing business from all the restrictions on the hiring of labour, such as the Planning Act, and from the operation of laws that prevent the vertical and horizontal mobility of labour.

Janet: What do you think of the granting of independence to the Ciskei?

Helen: A disaster — unmitigated, I mean — this independence is phony. Two-thirds of the people live outside of the Ciskei. Over 75 percent of the Ciskei's income comes from the earnings of migrants in the RSA and from grants from the central government in the RSA.

It means in effect that 2,1 million people will be deprived of their South African citizenship on December 4th. That means that all hope of participation in the political processes of the country in which they earn their living — ie the RSA — will disappear forthwith.

GROUP AREAS

KATHI JORDI AND ELEANOR ANDERSON

IT IS WELL that the Voortrekkers were a sturdy lot, for the roads named after them are usually long and need a good bit of trekking on before you get to where you want to be. Such at all events is Voortrekker Road in Vereeniging (meaning union, society, association, combination) which led us two Black Sash women to the south edge of the town where the Indians are being moved to a new, and nearby shopping area, comprising about fifty shops in a not especially impressive complex. Some South Africans reach for the tooth and the nail when change is mentioned, but the Indians are a sturdy lot too and have accepted the move with resignation, some indeed, the owners of very old shops, with satisfaction. The whole city block is to be demolished and the new development is to take in the adjoining park which borders Railway Street. White people are to be dislodged, too, the shopkeeper we are talking to informs us, and we look at each other carefully and nobody says 'Hah!'

It has been known for years that this was to become a 'White' area, though nobody could make plans because the new complex is just being completed. If our Government has a fault it is this apparent unwillingness to tell people likely to be affected just how they are to be affected. So often questions over the siting of a highway, the spending of money on a clinic, further investment in a business are met with the official response, 'We haven't decided yet' and this can be inconvenient and expensive.

The Indians seem to feel this too. They speak with courtesy to the sombre-faced officials who come in their GG cars to tell everybody what to do, but it is exasperating to have been promised a large shop and given a small one, or vice versa, or to be allotted a very obscure site when the one you had before was on a corner.

One trader is lucky to be moving from one big shop to another and is pleased that the African bus rank is to be moved near him, as most of his customers are Africans. But he shares the general apprehension about rents. These are to start quite low but will soon be doubled and may escalate so rapidly that only heaven will know the price. Subletting is not allowed, nor does there appear to be space for expansion.

'Will the new complex accommodate everyone who has to move?'

'We really can't say', comes the official reply.

''IS everyone to be moved?'

'We haven't decided yet'.

With these uncertainties in mind, and also cheered by recentish talk of reform in the land, one well-to-do trader has made enquiries of estate agents with properties to let in 'White' areas. They said they'd let him know if anything turned up. These things take time — a long, long time. Another shop owner is distressed because he'll have to move twice, once almost immediately, and a second time when permanent accommodation is available for him.

'Please may I not stay put a little longer and then have just one move?' 'No'.

'But why?' 'The answer is no'.

'You realise I shall have to pay about R3 000 for carpeting in the temporary place?' 'So?' replies officialdom.

We buy a coke and two bananas each for lunch and ask the cafe owner how's business in the new place. Surprised at our interest he says things are not too bad, after all people do need to eat and drink. We tell him we came along from Johannesburg to wish him well. His surprise becomes astonishment.

'You did? Well . . . er . . . thank you'. He stares at us again. 'Well, I never!' He calls to someone at the back and his wife joins us. 'These two ladies have come to wish us good luck', he tells her.

'Some of the people just moved have had a terrible time', she tells us, gesturing at a little jeweller's shop across the street. 'Bue we hope things will improve. Allah has always watched over us and now we shall need his protection more than ever'.