

A REVIEW OF THE MULTI-RACIAL CONFERENCE

by W. SISULU

The people of South Africa witnessed with profound interest the coming together of the leading men and women of different racial groups at the Great Hall of the University of Witwatersrand in what was correctly described by the "Rand Daily Mail" as "South Africa's biggest multi-racial conference since Union".

Briefly, the multi-racial conference was the direct outcome of the All-In African Conference held in Bloemfontein in October, 1956. That Conference not only rejected the Tomlinson Report which it had met to consider, but went further to call for a united front against the apartheid policy of the Nationalist Government and suggested that the first step should be a conference of all races in the country.

This idea was enthusiastically received by political parties, church leaders, trade unions, individuals and Non-European national organisations.

The interest shown by those who welcomed the conference was due to the fact that it was a correct idea at the correct time. The country was in a ferment due to the misrule of the Nationalists. Many serious-minded people among Europeans realised that the time had come to face the truth that South Africa cannot be governed by one racial group and that peace can only be secured by the co-operation of all racial groups.

The sponsors of the conference were from the initial stages faced with various problems. The Institute of Race Relations, with considerable influence among the liberal-minded Europeans and other organisations were so keen to see SABRA and the DRC included; and were prepared to wait until these supporters of the Nationalists were convinced; whilst others felt that no time should be lost. As a result the Institute did not take part in the preparation for the multi-racial conference. The DRC leaders made attempts which amounted to undermining the calling of the conference by writing to .D.A.M.F. suggesting a multi-racial conference which would not attack apartheid and the government. But all these manouvres failed. The multi-racial conference was held.

The "World" seemed to have been an organ of those who wanted to undermine the multi-racial conference before and after the conference. It went all out to discredit the conference and published malicious stories about it; but to their disappointment the Conference was a resounding success.

Describing the Conference, delegates both European and Non-European felt that the University premises were a "world of its own" according to Ruth Matseane, who said, "We were just South Africans, not Europeans or Africans and we felt it." There was a spirit of friendship, of brotherhood between the professors and the workers, the Roman Catholic Bishops and the Moslems.

The delegates made sure from the start that they shaped the Conference and they were determined to see a new South Africa emerging. They were not going to leave things only in the hands of those who prepared speeches, nor were they going to leave things to the sponsors and the Planning Committees. They challenged the Chairman who said that the Conference was neither anti-government, nor anti-apartheid.

There were many controversial issues during the Commission discussions, but the people had one spirit.

In the Educational, Religious, Economical and Civic Rights and Political spheres the findings of the Conference were unambiguous in their straight-forward rejection of discrimination and domination. Summarising the findings of the Conference, the Bishop of Johannesburg said in respect of the economic and civil rights, the findings of both these subjects are a clear indication of the deep concern of the Conference in these matters.

"We are convinced that if our community is to be healthy it must be re-ordered that the basic civil rights of all people are adequately safeguarded. For this reason, we urge the repeal of all laws denying or restricting these rights, and the entrenchment of the basic freedom to which all the members of a democratic society are entitled in a written constitution.

"It is urgent for us to continue to give serious attention to the formulation of an economic policy which will provide adequate opportunities for Indians, Africans and Coloured, as well as Europeans, and give to those of all races a share in the wealth they have produced and the facilities they have created."

The first two articles on the political report state "This Conference has as its fundamental aim the creation in South Africa of a common society."

"Conference is convinced that only universal suffrage on a common roll can meet the needs and aspirations of the people of this country. It appreciates, however, that there is disagreement as to the ways and means of achieving the transition from white supremacy to a non-racial democracy in which these franchise rights may be exercised."

One of the wisest decisions of the Conference was that of establishing a continuation committee to popularise the multi-racial idea to all corners of South Africa and to include in the continuation committee representatives of organisations who after all are in contact with the masses of South Africa.

We have every reason to be proud of the decisions of the multi-racial conference which means widening the democratic force, bringing it nearer and nearer to the Freedom Charter; particularly when we consider the organisations and associations the delegates represented at Conference. The Nationalist Government and all their followers have been alarmed and shaken by the Conference. It is this achievement, with the possibilities for a successful struggle for democracy which should make the Congress Movement consider seriously methods of consolidating this ever-growing power, and the new steps to be taken in getting wider sections of the South African population to embrace the spirit and the outlook of the multi-racial conference. This means taking the findings of the Conference to the masses of South Africa. This is an immediate task which must not be shelved even for an hour. If this is properly handled it could within a short space of time transform the whole South Africa situation.