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## A Democrat among the Republicans

WILL SENATOR ROBERT KENNEDY's first (and probably last) visit to South Africa have more than momentary significance? The immediate impact of his whirlwind tour far surpassed the expectations of his hosts, the National Union of South African Students, and the worst fears of the white establishment who opposed his entry into South Africa. But does the South African government really have much to fear from Senator Kennedy's visit, once the undoubted boost to the morale of its liberal opponents has begun to subside?

The National Union of South African Students (Nusas) has in recent years become the target for fierce attacks by the Minister of Justice, Mr. John Vorster; he has repeatedly threatened them with reprisals for what he terms provocative action (by which he means only that they exist) and the severe restrictions placed on Mr. Ian Robertson, the national president, shortly before Mr. Kennedy's visit were intended not merely to silence him, but also to intimidate other student leaders and to throw the student community into confusion. The student reaction to the banning orders placed on their president was strong and unequivocal, so much so that their sustained protest forced the Minister to meet a deputation of student leaders. The Minister is not obliged to give reasons for banning orders under the Suppression of Communism Act, nor did he give the students any explanation. It has become clear, however, that the Government has severely underestimated the determination of the students to retain their independence: most liberal commentators have been surprised by the solidarity and coherence of student protest, and within the student world itself the drift away from Nusas among non-white students has been reversed.

Against this background the response among students to Senator Kennedy's warmth and vision is more easily understood. The timing of his visit could not have been more opportune: the revival of militant leadership and the coalescence of substantial mass support within the universities has been strengthened and stimulated by Senator Kennedy's idealism at a

time when all liberal bodies in the Republic face new onslaughts from the regime. Senator Kennedy's words found greatest response among students and young people generally and it is here that the effects of his tour will be most lasting. Uncowed by intimidation, students will continue to emerge from the liberal universities, committed to principles of democracy and aware to some degree of the measure of change which is inevitable in this country. Yet it would be totally wrong to deduce from this that student politics and student involvement in political life here is evolving in the pattern of more volatile countries where students have brought down regimes or forced concessions from their rulers. The intolerance and intransigence of students at the Afrikaans universities is more truly representative of the mood and purpose of the dominant white group in South Africa, at least for the foreseeable future.

One inevitable result of Senator Kennedy's visit is not merely that he will be unlikely to be admitted again but that other distinguished visitors will be refused visas to enter South Africa: the more someone embodies the values of Christian humanism the less likely is he to be given the opportunity to challenge the bases of established white supremacy. At one of Senator Kennedy's meetings he was asked how the dialogue he advocated was genuinely possible when one of the parties was not only participant but also judge and prison warden in his own cause. This is the crux of the matter and Senator Kennedy was no more able to resolve the dilemma than are those who struggle endlessly to find more genuine ways of bringing about peaceful, but radical, change in South Africa.

Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of Senator Kennedy's visit was its style: idealists who are professionals are very rare in South Africa: further, Liberals have been in the wilderness for so long that they do not have solid political achievement, like Senator Kennedy's as Attorney General, to buoy up flagging spirits after half a generation of deteriorating race relations and shrinking liberties.

Only implicitly did Senator Kennedy touch upon

what is probably the crux of the South African situation, that change will come about only when those who are most oppressed begin to recognise that not merely do they have rights, but that they have the duty to claim those rights. Benevolent paternalism can never restore the dignity of those who are oppressed: only total commitment open to sacrifice and suffering can do this. Surely this is the lesson that the Church in the United States is learning—an experience which could be shared with the Church in South Africa. Has any real consideration been given in the United

States as to how American Catholics might aid and strengthen the Church in South Africa?

What then of the long-term significance of Senator Kennedy's visit? His speeches and actions were a total repudiation of racial superiority and were so recognised by those who opposed his presence as much as by those who valued it. If greater frankness and understanding can follow from the clear statement of totally opposed viewpoints then Senator Kennedy did all he could do in four days. But two parties are necessary for dialogue.