

THE WHITE LIBERALS AND THE TREASON ARRESTS

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SOUTH AFRICAN whites tend to think of opposition to the governing party, i.e. political opposition, in the purely parliamentary sense. But with the increasingly ruthless removal of the political rights which the non-whites at one time enjoyed¹, another opposition has been steadily growing up—an extra-parliamentary opposition, increasing in strength as each new group found itself shut out from normal parliamentary channels of political expression.

At first this extra-parliamentary opposition was exclusively non-white and white liberals never identified themselves actively with it in any of its protests. In the twenties, with the formation of the Communist Party, a few whites joined its ranks. Although their numbers were small in relation to the total white group, the importance of their participation was to give this opposition a truly inter-racial character, i.e. to lift the conflict out of the racial into the ideological field.

The process gathered momentum in the thirties when white trade union leaders became active in the formation and creation of both non-white and mixed trade unions². The war years saw a decline in activity on this front. But by the mid-forties there was a rebirth, and after the election of the Nationalist Government in 1948, the inter-racial political front gathered considerable strength. The 1952-53 Defiance Campaign brought together groups, mainly African and Indian, which had hitherto kept a mutually suspicious distance. The threat to the Coloureds of removal from the common electoral roll, and their final removal last year, completed the non-white united front.

Throughout this period the white liberals, who until 1953 had

¹ The Indians were disenfranchised in the Natal Colony in 1896. The Africans of the Cape were removed from the common roll in 1936 and given 3 European seats in the House of Assembly. For the entire Union a system of electoral colleges was devised which entitled Africans to send white representatives to the Senate. After the passing of the Senate Act the Coloureds were removed from the common roll and are to be given separate representation.

² Deprived as they are of parliamentary channels of political expression, non-whites have used trade unions as political pressure groups. African trade unions to this day are not legally recognized. This does not apply to the Indian and Coloured unions.

no real political home³, tended to function outside this front. For example, in the anti-Pass campaign of the 'thirties, the resistance to the famous Hertzog Acts of 1936, and the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign of the Indians to the "Pegging" Act, those whites who did participate, small in numbers, were for the most part members of the then still recognized and legal Communist Party, close fellow travellers and militant liberals whom "respectable" liberals tended to disown.

The term liberal, in the South African context, is a very elastic one. Its definition in South Africa is primarily based on a repudiation of the colour bar and the repressive legislation which enforces it, and the term would cover those with possibly widely differing views on other national and international political problems. And it covers both "political" and "social" liberals. Political liberals are those prepared to enter the political arena, both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary. The social liberals prefer to work in the non-political field, for example through organizations such as the South African Institute of Race Relations, the Penal Reform League, the various welfare organizations and church bodies, believing that in this manner more can be achieved for the liberal cause. The former are more militant than the latter, and there is frequently a marked division of opinion between the two, particularly regarding tactics and method.

Militant liberals have always been very small in numbers, but this has not prevented them from wielding an influence out of all proportion to their numbers. All of them are well known household names to-day: for example, the Reverend Michael Scott, Father Trevor Huddleston and Mr. Patrick Duncan. Each, in his own way, has identified actively with the non-whites in their struggle. The activities of Father Trevor Huddleston are legion and number amongst them one of the bravest and most effective protests against the Bantu Education Act. The Reverend Michael Scott's name will long be linked with that of the Bethal farm labourers and the 1946 Indian Passive Resistance campaign. Mr. Pat Duncan went to jail for an act of "defiance" during the 1952 Defiance Campaign.

The Nationalist Government's administrative and legislative actions have made it perfectly clear that it is prepared to adopt extreme measures against those groups of persons or individuals

³ In that year the Liberal Party of South Africa was formed. It is the only political party with an inter-racial membership, which now totals some 1,700 South Africans.

it regards as its opponents. It has taken to itself arbitrary powers of punishment and adopted insidious but most effective techniques of intimidation. This has placed the white liberal in particular in a dilemma, as will be shown later. Nonetheless the process of identification of liberals with non-white groups has both increased and gathered momentum.

Co-operation between the five main organizations concerned in the Treason arrests⁴, has been a matter of course and policy over the last five or six years. Though each, apart from S.A.C.T.U., represents a particular racial section of the South African community, they have joined issue on all matters affecting the non-whites. Many of their members have either been "named" or banned or both, and a very large number went to jail during the 1952-53 Defiance Campaign. They form the core of the militant extra-parliamentary opposition. On the fringes have stood the churches, both white and non-white, and political parties such as the Labour and Liberal Parties. The latter co-operated on certain specific issues, but on the whole preferred to maintain their identity as separate groups, issuing separate statements and taking separate action when and if deemed necessary. It would probably be very near the truth to say that differences in outlook, in regard to the interpretation of the South African scene, but more particularly, differences in emphasis concerning the most suitable action to be taken at any given time and place, kept these two currents apart: the one militant, and joined from time to time by a few militant liberals, the other more cautious and hesitant.

Nonetheless examples of co-operation between these two streams were becoming more and more a matter of practical politics. An admirable example of this co-operative effort is to be seen in the opposition to the Group Areas Act and its implementation. In Natal the N.I.C. called a Group Areas Conference in July last year. The Conference was opened by Mr. Lovell, Labour M.P., and attended by a strong Liberal Party delegation, including its National Chairman, Mr. Alan Paton, its two Deputy-Chairmen and a number of office bearers. A result of this Conference was the formation of a very active Vigilance

⁴ The African National Congress (A.N.C.); the South African Indian Congress (S.A.I.C.) with two branches the Natal Indian Congress (N.I.C.) and Transvaal Indian Congress (T.I.C.); the 'white' Congress of Democrats (C.O.D.); the South African Coloured Peoples Organization (S.A.C.P.O.) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (S.A.C.T.U.). These five organizations are generally referred to as the Congress Movement.

Committee representative of the Liberal Party, N.I.C., A.N.C. (Natal Branch) and C.O.D. Its task ever since has been to make a close study of Group Areas' proposals, to keep the people concerned informed, and to awaken white opinion in particular to the hardships and injustices of Group Areas implementations.

A week before the Treason arrests a protest march of women against the extension of passes to African women was staged in Pietermaritzburg. Women came from all over Natal and though by far the greater proportion were Africans, Indian, Coloured and European women (all active members of the Liberal Party), participated. By some oversight the organizers of the march had forgotten to obtain the necessary permit to proceed through the city, as a result of which 623 women present were summarily arrested by a police officer and taken to the local charge office. It was later discovered that the bye-law in question was *ultra vires* and all charges were consequently withdrawn. The effect of this mass arrest, the largest in the Union's history, was electric. The whites' readiness to identify to the hilt with Africans in their protest and to face the consequences immediately made for a warm atmosphere of solidarity which no amount of talking could previously encourage.

Following the Treason arrests liberals all over the Union came to the fore. Co-operation with the Congress movement was immediately effected without question. There was a job to be done and to be done quickly. In Durban a Civil Liberties Defence Committee was set up on the day of the arrests. On it sat members of the Liberal Party, N.I.C., A.N.C., C.O.D. and other individuals. Meetings were held, funds were collected for the immediate needs of the accuseds' dependents and bail, an information and public relations service was started, and so on. A week later the National Treason Trial Defence Fund was launched, sponsored by leading South African citizens of all races representing the clergy, the legal profession, universities, members of Parliament and representatives of the Federal, Labour and Liberal Parties.

Though not exactly part and parcel of this process of identification of whites and non-whites, but nonetheless relevant to it, was the Bloemfontein Conference called by the Inter-denominational African Ministers' Federation in October of last year. There, 394 African delegates, drawn from all parts of the Union and representing all shades of African political opinion, gathered to

discuss soberly and study seriously the Tomlinson Report. A few liberal whites attended as observers. The result was the issuing of that masterly and statesmanlike document, the Bloemfontein Charter⁵. It is a call to South Africans, be they black or white, to oppose more positively the doctrine of racial separation, in the belief that it is only on the basis of racial co-operation that the problems of this country can be effectively and peacefully solved. From this has emerged the idea of an inter-racial "United Front." Although its structure is still nebulous and its final form still a matter of speculation, the idea of this front has captured the imagination of all liberal South Africans concerned about the future of their country.

Analysing in brief these developments, we find that the stage is being steadily and surely set for an ever greater and increasing amount of inter-racial co-operation, and this despite vigorous Government opposition and an ever widening net of intimidatory measures.

What effect have the Treason arrests had on the inter-racial political front and more particularly, how are they likely to affect white liberals?

It would be idiotic to suggest that radical changes are taking place. Nonetheless the very removal of 156 recognized leaders inevitably has made for internal adjustments within the five organizations concerned. It has also necessitated the drawing in of new elements to fill the void, in part from groups which had hitherto not fully identified themselves with the Congress movement. Many groups of people or individuals who have hitherto refrained from positive participation in the inter-racial political front are having to make a serious decision.

It is perfectly obvious that active participation in the inter-racial political front is a serious, in fact dangerous, business. A white liberal who decides to join forces with non-whites and thus both strengthen and widen the front, must inevitably expose himself to the many punishments which the Government, under its large array of vindictive legislation, has the power to inflict: "Naming" and/or banning under the Suppression of Communism Act, passport refusal and possibly the imposing of jail sentences.

The present Nationalist Government bases its whole political ideology on the premise that white and non-white interests are

⁵ Vide AFRICA SOUTH, vol. I, no. 2, pp. 22-26.

absolutely and for all times irreconcilable. Nothing therefore incurs its displeasure to greater measure than the identification of whites with non-whites, particularly if and when this identification assumes a positive and active form. Most of the Government's legislative and administrative programme since 1948 has been designed therefore to prevent and prohibit contact, be it political or otherwise, between whites and non-whites. Were it not for the participation of whites in the extra-parliamentary front, the conflict could become a purely racial one, and it is the dangerous and important task of white liberals to help keep it at the ideological level.

It is clear then that any white who wishes to become part and parcel of a truly inter-racial "United Front" must be prepared firstly to identify fully with the non-whites and secondly to accept readily any hardships or restrictions on his personal freedom which the Government may see fit to impose. The conditions of active service are laid down by the non-whites and it is precisely this which arouses the Government's strongest indictment.

There is yet another aspect of the South African situation which makes the choice for the white liberal even more difficult and problematic. It has to do with the very status of the white in South African society. By nature of his whiteness, whether he wishes it or not, the white finds himself in a privileged position—financially, socially, professionally or occupationally, residentially, recreationally.

Political involvement of the type earlier described may mean his having to forfeit all or some of these privileges and possibly his job too. A white who gets so involved, rightly or wrongly, is immediately regarded by other whites—and that means 99.9% of the white population—as an extremist, a "red," and "commy," and so begins the slow and painful process of ostracism from his own racial and, at times, social group. The fact that his action may be acclaimed by many non-whites and the greater section of the outside world cannot fully compensate for his sense of loss, his immediate unhappiness, his loneliness. Non-whites who become so politically involved stand to lose as much in the material sense—jobs, income, and so on. But rather than becoming outcasts in their own community, they become the acclaimed leaders, the heroes, and the martyrs.

Such then are the many problems which beset white liberals in South Africa, such the challenge of the situation and more

precisely, the challenge of the Treason arrests. What of the future?

The call issued by the Africans at the Bloemfontein Conference for a "United Front" must be answered. If the whites of this country, and the onus is on the white liberals, fail to rally to this call, South Africans may well miss their last opportunity to co-operate with non-whites in seeking a non-racial solution to their country's problem. The white liberals therefore have a heavy responsibility to shoulder and one more precisely formulated since the removal of so many of the leaders in the inter-racial front. At the same time liberals recognize that the Government is more than likely to use the tools, hitherto used to silence the ideas and voices of thousands, to silence them, too.

This is the critical hour for all South African liberals. What is their response likely to be? Their immediate response following the early hours of "Treason Day," 5th December, was magnificent. They were shocked into a state of busy activity. To-day the sense of urgency is no longer so compellingly with us and all have been given time to think. It is not for us to prejudge but rather to suggest a serious consideration of the stirring call issued at Bloemfontein last October.

"We call upon all South Africans who realize the dangers and effects of apartheid to take a positive step to break down the colour bar in their group relations. We urge them furthermore to ensure that democratic and Christian opinion expresses itself on discriminatory legislation in ways most likely to impress on the mind of the people of South Africa the urgent need for a positive alternative to apartheid or separate development."