

THE MULTI-RACIAL CONFERENCE

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1957 was a year of increased racial tension in South Africa. Following closely upon the Treason Trial arrests and the resulting demonstrations came the Alexandra Bus Boycott. Then Parliament was confronted with the Native Laws Amendment Bill, seeking to prevent by law all contacts across the colour line.

When this Bill became law, many well-meaning "realists" had serious misgivings about organizing a multi-racial conference. They argued that the Minister of Native Affairs would regard it as a challenge to official government policy and would in all probability ban the gathering. In any event, people who might otherwise be prepared to attend would be intimidated from doing so.

If the Conference was considered as a challenge, the Minister refused to accept it. True, Special Branch representatives were present outside throughout the proceedings, but this is the accepted pattern at almost all political gatherings in South Africa today. During the 3 days of Conference held in early December at the Witwatersrand University there were no incidents to justify "realist" fears.

Conference proved to be the most representative multi-racial gathering ever held in South Africa. True, there were no representatives of either of the two major political parties, nor of the Dutch Reformed Churches. But this absence had nothing to do with intimidation. All the other religious groups were well represented, as were all the other political groups, both White and non-White.

The Conference has not issued any official report, nor can it do so. It was an exploratory conference, consisting of individuals representing only themselves and responsible to no permanent organization. It passed no resolutions, but issued factual findings instead. The comments which follow are thus a personal attempt to assess its achievements and to suggest lines of future activity.

Discussions at the Conference revealed a surprising degree of unanimity reflected in the findings. Inevitably there were

compromises, but the areas of agreement were large. Certain themes recurred in all the discussions. The *status quo* in South Africa is untenable. The alternatives are either a bitter and uncompromising struggle between White nationalism and Black nationalism or a non-racial democracy based upon the concept of a common society. Professor McCrone's scientifically based conclusion that "when a society consists of a dominating group and subordinate groups, the reaction of the latter is invariably one of two: either submission to domination or resistance to it, and this resistance often expresses itself in a will to counter domination" was unanimously accepted. Indeed it formed the basis of all Conference discussions.

Conference agreed that colour discrimination in the religious, economic, educational and political fields should be eliminated. Universal adult suffrage on a common roll was the only political objective which would meet the needs and satisfy the aspirations of all the people of this country. Conference further considered that the basic human rights of individuals should be safeguarded by means of a Bill of Rights which should be an integral part of the Constitution.

The findings on the discussions on religion contain the following important paragraph: "Conference recommends that religious communities make use of all available means to achieve the ends of moral education in social and racial matters, namely, the pulpit, the religious press, religious schools, classes and meetings; that reference be made to specific and concrete issues; that the situation of those depressed and frustrated by social injustice be brought home forcibly to the more fortunate; and that practical applications of inter-racial collaboration be fostered in worship, discussion, social exchanges and in charitable and cultural undertakings."

Conference did not, nor indeed could it, provide a new Charter for South Africa. It did not present a tight blueprint for a new multi-racial society. Its task was rather to explore the outlines of a society acceptable to people of different racial and colour groups and of widely divergent political approaches.

The holding of the Conference was in itself an affirmation of faith in a common future. At the Conference much of the suspicion between individuals and organizations was broken down. People differed in emphasis and approach. But there was a respect for opinions sincerely held and a readiness to emphasize points of agreement rather than of difference.

Conference must be regarded as a beginning rather than an end. It has had an effect upon both White and non-White public opinion, the full effects of which will probably only be felt when the artificial emotional tensions engendered by the imminent General Elections are out of the way. It has established the framework of a new bridge between White and non-White.

Whether this bridge will become a permanent and durable structure or remain an inadequate skeleton will depend upon how soon, and how assiduously, the next steps are taken.

Those who met at the Multi-Racial Conference must keep together and start now making plans for the next stage, practical implementation. The conclusions of the Conference must be taken to a much wider group. Commerce, Industry, the Dutch Reformed Churches and the two major political parties must be brought into the orbit of these discussions. Public opinion must be built up to understand the inevitable alternatives—racial co-operation or racial clash.

A new conference must be convened soon. It must be organized in such a way that it may take concrete decisions directed towards the broad goals and make plans, however slow and hesitant, to implement such decisions.

Clearly this will be no easy task. It will require infinite patience and much application. Many disappointments will be encountered; prejudices and habits of thought will have to be broken down; fears and misunderstandings will have to be allayed.

But the task may not be as difficult as many people expect. White South Africa's "traditional" colour policy is under constant fire; pressures and challenges are growing. Economic reality is already forcing change. The rapid extension of political independence to colonial areas in Africa is having an important effect on the thinking of South Africa.

Already the adherents of 'apartheid' have switched to the defensive. There is little faith in its practicability for any length of time. They are beginning to realize that its inevitable consummation will be an irreconcilable clash between White and Black.

The Multi-Racial Conference has postulated a positive alternative to White supremacy or White leadership. It may be too radical now for the dominating White South African, but under the impact of mounting pressures it cannot for long be ignored.

Those who participated in the Multi-Racial Conference must go forward, whatever the difficulties and whatever the outcome.