

THE FINAL STROKE

To those who exercise power over the body of an outraged people, a flourishing free press constitutes an ever-present danger. It informs and so stimulates opposition, it expresses and so consolidates it, it proposes and so directs it. The printed word becomes the iron lung of liberty, keeping the body alive when all the normal muscles of breathing have been sedulously paralyzed. And they must seek to control it, those men who enjoy government by force and by fraud, or they cannot survive. When once they have the press of the country in their fingers, to manipulate as they please, democracy has suffered its final stroke, and they may sit down at last to consume the funeral breakfast.

On the 17th November, 1948, Mr. Strijdom, then merely Minister of Lands, proclaimed, in a speech to the Transvaal Nationalist Party Congress, that "anybody who purposely tried to upset the Government's plan to put into operation its apartheid policy or who failed to do their duty towards the realization of that aim, would be guilty of treason, just as those who refused to take up arms in defence of their country would be guilty of such a crime." It was a characteristic statement, unvarnished by hypocrisy and stark in its arrogance. And one might have suspected that the character of the man who made it would quickly captivate a party that had ogled the debaucheries of Germany throughout the war. There were many then who dismissed Mr. Strijdom as a sort of intellectual hyena, comfortably, as though South Africa was not yet ready for the picking. And it was with their help that he became Prime Minister in 1954.

Since November, 1948, much has happened. The Criminal Laws Amendment Act, the Public Safety Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, the whole wild pack of laws that have mutilated our Statute Book, stand guard against any real exercise of political opposition to the insanities of the Nationalist Government. It was only a matter of time before a law savaging the Press joined the others.

On the 17th November, 1954, just six years after Mr. Strijdom defined treason to the country, a Government Gazette Extraordinary announced the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry into Undesirable Literature, and at the end of September,

1957, the Commission issued its Report. Though the document is lavishly larded with inanities and an oddly indiscriminate hypocrisy, its parentage is plain. Mr. Strijdom reached identical conclusions on the freedom that should be accorded public criticism nine years ago.

From the very first, the Commission disports itself naked among first principles. "The free and responsible individual willingly respects the norms and interests of the community and then has a lawful claim to freedom as his inalienable right; the free and irresponsible person ignores the norms and interest of the community and thereby forfeits his claim to freedom." (The Nature of the Problem—A 2:61). If this means anything at all, peeled of its nail-polish, it means that a writer is free only once he has put himself behind the political and moral bars of his society; he may criticize only as long as he does not criticize. How much more simply Mr. Strijdom said it!

In South Africa, the norms and interests of the white community are frozen into an antarctic rigidity. Any fundamental tampering with the assumptions that crank white supremacy must bring the whole machinery of rule abruptly to a stop. And no distinction is permitted to exist between the policy of perpetual white dominion and the country that has been compelled to submit to it. An attack on the ideology is an attack on the state. The Report rolls up its venetian blinds altogether in another section. "As the torch-bearer in the vanguard of Western civilization in South Africa, the European *must be* and *remain* the leader, the guiding light, in the spiritual and cultural field, otherwise he will inevitably *go* under. The undesirable book can and must be drastically combated because it is obviously a spiritual poison." (The italics belong to the Commission.) How such principles can be consonant in any measure at all with that democracy which the Commission expends so much energy in adulating, the Report does not say. But then perhaps the Commission considered it unnecessary to devote space to the question. It is, after all, only the Cabinet that needs persuading.

To the foreigner, the relationship of political literature with pornography must seem a completely adulterous one. But the Commission is clear-headed enough to see that in South Africa they are indissolvably wedded together. For both, in their very different ways, drain away the spiritual vigour of militant white rule. Political literature—and the only literature of

any real significance being produced in South Africa to-day is political in cast—startles the intellect awake. And in a white community politically paralyzed by years of reacting to circumstance with its blood, the agitation of thought is likely to have radical consequences.

For a white South African, however carefully he insulates himself, there is no real escape from the colour problem. He wakes up with it to the sounds of a servant in his kitchen and goes to bed with it when he latches the door at night. Assiduously it follows and catches him up. Some refuge, however temporary, is vital, a little while to fill his eyes and ears with something else. And this is found, by a staggering proportion of the population, along the technicolour passageways of the more lurid magazines and the crime-and-pornography paper-back. The existence of a flourishing literary underworld is cause enough for the concern of any government. But to the government of the Union, it bears the features of a catastrophe. Slush novels, horror comics and strip-tease serials provide a dangerous diet for a dedicated master-race. And throughout the Report, the Commission's horrified awareness of this fact stalks steadily. "The Europeans will be able to remain the leaders in this country only if they give guidance in the cultural, moral and religious sphere, i.e. if their cultural, moral and religious standard is high. . . . Disturbing signs of decadence are, however, already discernible; and there are also disquieting symptoms of inner decay. And the extent and nature of the undesirability of some of the publications which are produced, distributed and tolerated in the Union, constitute one of these danger signals of decadence—one of the ominous symptoms of inner corruption." (The Nature of the Problem—A 3 : 198.)

The Commission has excellent reason for its disquiet. In reaction to the implications of its racial policies, the white population of the Union is bursting out in moral boils. There is a terrifying white crime rate in the larger cities, and violence is simmering within the sealed-off suburbs of the whites as it has simmered for so long, with intermittent boiling over, in the shanty-towns of the blacks. The unbearable insecurity and frustration that produced the "tsotsi" are busy breeding the "teddy-boy"; South Africa is generating a white gangsterism as well as a black one, and for much the same reasons. Where economic pressures erode the blacks, moral pressures erode the whites. A fundamental fear of the future washes gullies

in both communities. Class grows no hedges. A startling proportion of those arrested for stealing motor-cars and an aimless destruction of property is prosperous in background. Teen-agers with pocket-money to spare picnic on theft. And dagga provides an extra tickle at parties.

What the Commission so fervently fails to see is that the growing market for pornography and cheap crime books among the whites is not a cause, but just another symptom, of the general decay. It is conceivable that paper-backs contribute to the spread of crime by glamourizing the criminal. But it is unlikely that they do more than bolster a tendency. The white community in South Africa is decaying morally because it is morally decayed, the rot is self-inflicted. If the government kills the conscience of a community, it should not be astonished to find it dead when suddenly it calls on it. It would be a strange man indeed who casually starved his servant to death with the approval of his neighbours and then shrunk from the prospect of stealing someone else's motor-car. No legislation can give a moral sense to a community the whole condition of which is dictated by its capacity to do without a moral sense altogether. The real printing-presses of the pornographic magazines and the paper-backs are the government benches of the South African Parliament. The crime wave swells up from the Statute Book.

It was hardly to be expected, however, that the Commission would recommend a retreat from the spiritual devastations of "apartheid". Committed to the lunacy itself, the objective of its Report is to commit everyone else. That in attempting to accomplish this, it should be prepared to bludgeon into a common grave all the principles of Western Protestant culture is signal evidence of the tracks South Africa has already made in the jungle of the mind.

The principal recommendation of the Report is the establishment of a special Publications Board to exercise control over the publication, importation and distribution of all books, magazines and newspapers. No periodical may be published unless it has been registered as a magazine or newspaper by the Board, no person may publish a book unless registered by the Board as a publisher, no person may sell a book or periodical unless registered by the Board as a bookseller, and no person, with the soothing exception of the Railways and Harbours Administration, may conduct business as a distributor without being registered by the Board as a publisher or bookseller.

To simplify the process of Censorship, the Board may, at its own discretion, declare certain classes of publications to be (a) 'exempted', when they may be distributed without scrutiny by the Board; (b) 'submitted', when they may not be distributed before a copy of each edition of every such publication has been submitted to the Board for inspection; and (c) 'controlled', when they may not be distributed before the Board has examined each edition of every such publication and expressly granted its permission.

The section of the Report devoted to Liability and Penalties is a piece of work that even the Prime Minister might envy. For here, in all its pure disfigured detail, is the landscape gardening of the Third Reich. The Board itself is to be possessed of the power to prohibit any publication that contains undesirable matter, with the right to appeal against any of its decisions conceded by the establishment of a special Publications Board of Appeal independent of the Courts. Newspapers published locally may only be prohibited by the Courts, but this can hardly be regarded as a surrender to normal democratic practice. For newspapers are newspapers only for as long as the Board chooses to consider them such. The Board may register newspapers as magazines and magazines as newspapers whenever it considers it necessary to do so. And, as though this were not enough, the Report recommends that the Board should be consulted as the expert witness in any Court action over the banning of a newspaper.

The most bizarre punishments are proposed for imposition by the Courts. If anything in any issue of a periodical publication is found to be undesirable, the Courts may, in addition to any other penalty they should consider necessary, withdraw the registration of the periodical for a period not exceeding two years, during which time the owner may not apply for the registration of any other periodical. And if registration is withdrawn because anything in any one of its issues is found to be 'communistic', the periodical becomes forever ineligible for re-registration, and its owner may not apply for the registration of any other periodical until five years after the date of the withdrawal. Editors who slide once may find themselves expelled from their profession, for the Courts are to be empowered to prohibit them from any work on any periodical publication: for a period of two years, if any issue of any periodical they edit is found to contain undesirable matter, and for a period

of five years, if the undesirable matter is 'communistic'. If a distributor is discovered handling an undesirable publication, he may lose his registration as a publisher or bookseller for a period not exceeding two years, and, if the undesirable literature is 'communistic', for a period not exceeding five years. Booksellers face similar penalties. Prison terms of up to five years and fines of up to one thousand pounds are also recommended for various infringements of the proposed law or failure to comply with its provisions. But in the company of the techniques of economic terror evolved by the Commission, these ordinary methods of punishment tend rather to lose their lustre.

It is difficult to treat that section of the Report defining the undesirable with any of the wide-eyed consideration that it deserves. The whole reads like a broad and highly improper burlesque of itself.

"In general, printed matter or other objects, or any part thereof, shall be undesirable if they are deemed indecent, offensive or harmful by the ordinary, civilized, decent, reasonable and responsible inhabitants of the Union."

(The Proposed Provisions 2 : 1.)

Since, on the Commission's own showing, the ordinary, civilized, decent, reasonable and responsible white-skinned inhabitant of the Union—it is improbable that the Board would choose a black-skinned inhabitant as its witness—gorges himself with growing appetite on the most lurid crime and pornographic paper-backs while showing an increasing repugnance to serious literature, it would appear that all the wrong books will be banned and only the flesh-coloured monthlies left on the register of periodicals. This, however, is clearly not the objective of so high-minded and politically vigilant a Commission. So it is safer to assume that the ordinary, civilized, decent white-skinned inhabitant of the Union will be summoned to give evidence only once and that the search will then be narrowed down to a pursuit of the reasonable and responsible. It is to be feared though, that any reasonable and responsible inhabitant of the Union will regard most of the Board's objectives with revulsion, and, with reason and responsibility sent the same way as civilization, ordinariness and decency, the Government itself will be forced to undertake the work of the Publications Board.

"In particular, printed matter or other objects, or any part thereof, shall be undesirable if they—

- (b) are subversive of or endanger, or tend to be subversive of or to endanger, the morals or moral conceptions cherished and respected by the ordinary, civilized, decent, reasonable and responsible inhabitants of the Union . . . or
- (e) eulogistically depict, represent, describe or portray, or tend to eulogize, miscegenation, sexual relations, intermarriage, or other intimate social intercourse between Europeans and non-Europeans; or
- (f) tend to engender or have the effect of engendering friction or feelings of hostility between the European and non-European population groups of the Union or between its various non-European racial groups; or
- (g) propagate or tend to propagate the principles of communism, or promote or tend to promote the spread of communism, or propogate or further or tend to propagate or further the achievement of any of the aims of communism." (The Proposed Provisions 2 : 2.)

The effrontery of it is rank. One wonders what sort of argument could be produced, even by the Commission, against declaring the Report undesirable under (b), (f) and (g). The Board, however, is likely to be much less discriminating in its choice of victims. Since statutory communism in South Africa covers any agitation against the present structure of society and (b), (e) and (f) cover everything else in sight, the only way publications critical of the government will be able to survive is not to appear at all.

In South Africa to-day, those in power remain in power only through the ruthless exercise of force against an increasingly hostile population, and they hear in any criticism made or reported by the press the voice of that population raised in inflexible protest against them and what they are doing. They would silence that voice, because they are stupid men and they believe that if they can kill the voice of the opposition, they can kill as well its will to overcome them. That is not so. And how can it ever be so? As long as there are men and women alive in South Africa to whom the right to live lives free of fear and violence, the right to possess and to enjoy, the right to preach and to pray are rights without which life is void of value, so long will a free press survive in the hearts and minds of South Africans, however deep its public grave is dug.