

THE EMPEROR'S CLOTHES

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"South Africa has so far achieved internal order with ordinary methods."

'The Times', 15th June, 1959

"The Government in power has shown a devilish ingenuity in upsetting the balance of the nation. It has—there can be no doubt about it—wantonly used unnecessary force".

'The Times', 6th April, 1960

ON Wednesday, 4th May, 1960, Mr. Eric Louw held a press conference in London. It was attended by 137 journalists, all of whom were white, but nevertheless more hostile than they had been when confronted by Bulganin and Krushev. The representative of the *'Daily Worker'* was excluded from South Africa House. There was nothing else unusual, except that Mr. Louw had declared his intention of telling the truth about South Africa, and that he succeeded in increasing the fund of anger against his Government when everyone had thought this impossible. This was unusual, because the Minister for External Affairs said all the things he usually says. His Government would not relax its policies, which were approved by the great majority of 'Bantu'. Those policies were disliked by foreigners because they were misunderstood, and they were misunderstood because of reports on South African affairs published in the overseas press.

It may be that attacking the press is Mr. Louw's favourite pastime because the press always reports attacks made against it, and Mr. Louw has a reputation for collecting cuttings in which his name appears. If Mr. Louw were not theoretically the responsible representative of a Government, this state of affairs would be tolerated, perhaps even with the mild affection with which English people regard most oddities and anachronisms. But Mr. Louw *is* the representative of a Government, and it is therefore necessary to examine his accusations.

The charge, in its general form, was made by the South African Information Service, which falls under the Ministry for External Affairs. The Annual Report for 1957-1958 observed that

"the foremost factor engendering ill-will and even hostility towards South Africa (is) the newspaper press, which for years has been waging a sustained campaign, giving rise among the broad masses to a blind feeling of blunt aversion and antagonism."

This attack was not made on the sensational press, but on "what are regarded as the most reliable newspapers of the country". Seventy-four per cent. of the items sampled by the Information Service appeared in *'The Times'* and the *'Daily Telegraph'*. The conclusions drawn from all this were interesting.

"Some three-quarters of the items dealt with 'negative' subjects and subjects which, by their nature, create an unfavourable impression on a British reader: race policy and race relations (25 per cent.); party politics (11 per cent.); protest demonstrations (10 per cent.); the Treason Trial (8 per cent.); passports, censorship, police raids, etc. (8 per cent.)."

It seems, therefore, as if almost every important subject in South African life is either 'negative', or such as to excite indignation by its very nature. On its own admission, then, the State Information Office is faced with an impossible task in trying to present South Africa in a 'positive' light. An unconvincing attempt is made to show that malicious reporting has increased the unattractiveness of the subjects. The following sentence by George Clay in *'The Scotsman'*, is cited as an example:

"Mass arrests, followed by mild mass hysteria, have become a feature of South African life."

This was written at the time of the 1957 Reef bus boycott, when some 14,000 people had been arrested; but since this would make Clay's comment appear as the understatement that it is, it is not mentioned. The case could not be left to rest here, because it had not yet been made. The Report therefore goes on to make accusations in language colourful enough to suggest that it embodies the real reasons why the Information Service has been unable to impress people with its version of Sunny South Africa. Criticism of the Union grew as a result of

"the so-called new humanism which has taken root far and wide as an aftermath of the first world war.

Because it rests, in spite of its wholly human and ideological origin, on a basis of false and unrealistic values, this phenomenon is dangerous . . ." (p. 4).

"In many countries on all sides of the iron and bamboo curtains South Africa . . . is abused by the prejudiced and denounced by the ignorant" (p. 3).

"There is no panacea against suspicion, hostility and hatred which have their origin in the neurotic colour-consciousness (of) the Western World" (p. 7).

Statements as frank as these are, of course, usually reserved for

a political rally on the platteland. It is a pity that the publications of the Information Service are not widely read: they show conclusively that it is necessary only to give factual reports on events in South Africa in order to stir opinion up against them; and this, of course, makes nonsense of the charge Mr. Louw lays against the press.

A careful study of the British press during the past year bears this out. From June onwards, South Africa gained increasing attention. In June itself, the first of the Saracens arrived in time to witness the resentment of African women reach boiling point over police raids on their liquor supplies, the municipal beer-hall monopoly, the demolition of their homes, and, above all, the extension of the pass-book system to them. All papers carried pictures of the police conducting their celebrated baton charges against the women, many of whom had babies on their backs. Comment would have been superfluous; but in any case, there were few examples of 'sensational' reportage, and even in these, it was the technical layout, rather than the writing, that was adventurous. There was very close agreement between the news published in British papers and that which appeared in the South African press. (The Emergency had not yet been declared.) Sober accounts giving the background to the women's grievances were published in the serious Sunday papers.

An event which was widely publicised, and which earned the strongest comment, was the abortive attempt to banish Mrs. Mafekeng, though the banishment of Mr. Mnyanda from Durban at the same time passed unnoticed. The *'Daily Mail'* was alone in splashing across its front page the start of the Paarl demonstrations against the banishment. *'The Spectator'* published an article by the editor of *'Africa South'* on the farms to which people were banished. This provoked from South Africa House a letter in defence of the action against Mrs. Mafekeng—but this rare riposte was full of non-sequiturs and irrelevancies. It nevertheless stimulated a passionate denunciation of its writer by Bernard Levin (née 'Taper' of *'The Spectator'*), who compared the task of a South African apologist to that of the steward employed by a greyhound stadium to follow the dogs about collecting their droppings.¹ This, in turn, was pronounced by *'The Times'* to be abusing the privilege of criticism enjoyed by the press.²

The conduct of *'The Times'* during the past year deserves a

¹ November 13, 1959.

² November 26, 1959.

study on its own, as the quotations heading this article indicate. It alternated its editorial statements between forthright criticisms of the South African regime, and criticism of fellow critics. On August 5th it dealt with the Treason Trial, suggesting that Mr. Louw might try explaining in what way the Trial was compatible with the British sense of justice. Until he could do that, he should not make rash assumptions as to why British people were critical of South Africa. Later in the year, it condemned the boycott of South African goods, and declared that Labour M.P.s who supported it were guilty of "the height of irresponsibility". Supporting its argument against the boycott by an appeal to the authority of Walter Stanford, a then Liberal Native Representative in the South African Parliament, it omitted to mention that Stanford's attitude had been repudiated in a letter to *The Times* written by the Chairman of the South African Liberal Party. This year, however, it gave prominence in a news report to the Boycott Committee's pre-campaign national conference. When the news of Sharpeville came through, it published an editorial which was strongly critical of the South African Government; but the next day it turned to attack Labour politicians along with people who were involved in demonstrations outside South Africa House. Hardly had it done this when it took the unusual step of publishing a footnote to a letter in its correspondence columns, explaining that its criticism of demonstrators should not be taken to mean that it had any sympathy with the Nationalists. Presumably feeling that this was not enough, it followed almost immediately with another editorial, more sharply critical of the South African Government than any it had published in the past. No one can now doubt where it stands, for it has gone so far as to state that Verwoerd cannot continue to assert that his Government is not responsible for the turmoil in the Union without at the same time knowing that he is lying.

Comment as outspoken as this in the responsible press was inconceivable before Sharpeville was hurled onto the front pages of the world press in some of the grimmest pictures I have ever seen. The effect of the pictures themselves was to shock people into an awareness that the authorities in the Union really were as brutal as critics had maintained. Sharpeville changed more than the Union. Before it, the *Sunday Times* felt able to publish Montgomery's eccentric survey of the Union, which succeeded only in decreasing still further the number of the Field-Marshal's admirers. After it, however, came Dame Rebecca West's serial,

which showed considerable insight into the situation in South Africa, and which turned rather sour only in the final installment. Whereas beforehand the liberal movement in the Union had had sympathetic attention mainly from *'The Guardian'*, the *'Daily Herald'*, the *'News Chronicle'*, *'The Observer'*, *'The Spectator'*, the *'New Statesman'*, *'Reynolds News'* and, snippet-wise, from the *'Daily Worker'*, only the *'Daily Express'* and Moseley's *'Action'* now have anything kind to say of the Nationalists; but as nobody with any intelligence treats the political views of these two with any seriousness, they may be tranquilly dismissed.

Why should Sharpeville have brought about this change? The principal reason is that public attention in Britain was already directed towards South Africa when the murders were committed. Two things in particular were responsible for this: the boycott movement and Macmillan's visit to the Union. The boycott movement had effectively publicised the fact that the liberation movement in South Africa was confronted with such formidable difficulties that it could not achieve its aims without tangible support from people in other countries. What happened at, and after, Sharpeville underlined this point. Macmillan's speech in Capetown, with its hint that Britain would no longer be able to support South Africa at the United Nations, gave people in this country a direct political interest in the Union.

The immediate outcome of the present tragedy is the unprecedented interest now being shown by British people in South African affairs. The extent of this interest was summed up by the *'News Chronicle'* when, on the day following the Chancellor of the Exchequer's last budget, it drew certain conclusions from a Gallup Poll, the results of which had just become public. This poll, it observed,

"proves the public is taking an unparalleled interest in the crimes in the Union. After Sharpeville, 99 per cent. of the public were aware of events in South Africa. For foreign news this figure is unique. On no important question have the 'don't knows' previously sunk to a fractional six per cent. Four people out of five can now state categorically that they find the South African Government's policy to be wrong."

The press matched this interest by paying unprecedented attention to South Africa. Throughout the siege of Langa, all the London evening papers printed special bill-boards headed 'SOUTH AFRICA—LATEST', with a space underneath for the headlines to be scrawled in. Neither the Budget nor the talks

at Camp David could drive the news off the main news pages of the national press. Even the provincial papers gave prominence to the near-revolution. The result is that ordinary people, not only in Britain, now know a great deal about South Africa; and ordinary men's feelings of disgust against the Union's practices and policies increase in direct proportion to their knowledge of them.

Less than two years ago, the South African Information Service, after its round-up of the press, toasted itself with this prospect for the future:

"There are, however, indications that more sophisticated opinion is reacting in our favour against the incessant noise being made by our 'liberal' detractors."

It spared itself the embarrassment of naming this opinion, which is not surprising in view of the fact that it would have to be more sophisticated than that of Sir Compton Mackenzie, Lord (Bertrand) Russell, Henry Moore, Pastor Niemöller, Dame Rose Macaulay, Sir Arnold Toynbee, and Laurens van der Post, who are among the many eminent people usually branded by the Service as "agencies of poison". The Service is now in the unenviable position of having emptied its armoury in order to commit suicide long before the full strength of its enemy was known. The simple truth is this: no analogous survey of the British press during the past year would reveal even a fraction of the 25 per cent. of items "favourable to South Africa" which were available less than three years ago to the research team in Trafalgar Square.

Increased knowledge of South African affairs was what made Mr. Louw's press conference seem so incredible. He answered questions blandly, as if the reign of terror conducted by his Government was in his opinion a quiet domestic affair. If South Africa's Minister for External Affairs thinks that the killing of more than seventy people and the arrest of a further 20,000 does not warrant every inch of space used in covering it, he has yet to do the homework he invariably accuses journalists of neglecting. Louw is more than a cliché; he has become a description.