

TURFLOOP TESTIMONY—

A COMMENT

by Alan Paton

In 1972 the Council of the University of the North appointed a Committee of Inquiry to investigate the causes of student unrest following the expulsion of Mr Abraham Tiro after his outspoken speech at the graduation of that year.

This Committee made one extraordinary recommendation. It recommended that note be taken of the "movement of black awareness", which it said, could be guided into channels to the advantage of everybody in South Africa.

Such a recommendation actually goes counter to the whole purpose of the black universities, which is not to foster black awareness, but to foster ethnic pride in one's own language, history, and culture.

Mr G. M. Mkondo, in his introduction to the book **TURFLOOP TESTIMONY** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1976), calls this "an underlying paradox". It is also the fatal flaw in the whole grand plan of Separate Development, which has, with the help of continental events, given tremendous impetus to the growth of black awareness.

There are two other paradoxes, closely related. In fact all three are closely related. The three of them taken together make it certain that such creations as the University of the North are doomed never to function as true institutions of higher learning.

The second paradox is that in one extraordinary sense, this was not a black university at all. From the point of view of power, authority, emoluments, amenities, it was a white university. It had a white Chancellor, a white Council, a white Registrar. Of its 35 professors, 30 were white. Of its 42 senior lecturers, 37 were white. Of its 61 lecturers, 32 were white. Only the student body was black.

It was a black university, but its overt message was one of white superiority. The higher positions were white. The higher salaries were white. In 1975 the ratio of white salary to black salary for the same job, was 100:80.

TURFLOOP TESTIMONY is the memorandum presented by the Black Academic Staff Association (BASA) to the Snyman Commission. From beginning to end it is written in a calm, objective, unequivocal tone. Reasonable people reading it would (in my opinion of course) say that the testimony rings true. It says outright that the White Staff had a patronising attitude towards the Blacks. Nor did they understand Black aspirations. That is why the Black lecturers finally formed a separate staff association, BASA. As for

friendly associations between Black and White, except in one or two instances, they did not exist.

White houses on the campus were superior. White staff had floodlit tennis courts, a swimming pool, a clubhouse. Blacks had none of these; and they noted with resentment that the White Staff did "practically nothing" to show its objection to this discrimination. Another cause of resentment was the payment of an "inconvenience allowance" to White staff for having to work so far from civilisation.

Professor F. J. Engelbrecht of the Department of Philosophy so little understood his responsibility as a white teacher at a black university that he published an article 'Tyd en Neurose by die Bantoe' which stated that the African tempo of life is too slow for rapid development. The authorities of the University understood their responsibility still less, for they published the article. Quite apart from these considerations, the words "die Bantoe" have become derogatory, in a sense that "the Afrikaners" and "the English" are not. The reason for this (or one of the reasons) is that the Afrikaners and the English gave themselves these names, but "die Bantoe" did not.

In other words, the University was two worlds. The students, and in a more controlled degree the Black staff, resented bitterly that the dominant conventions of White South Africa should become the dominating conventions of their own University.

Replying to a questionnaire, the White staff thought Black-White staff relationships to be excellent or satisfactory. The Black staff thought them bad in some cases and unsatisfactory in others. White staff thought that White staff-Black student relationships were on the whole satisfactory. The Black staff thought they were bad. It emerged clearly that there was a great gulf between White staff and Black students.

The third paradox is extremely closely related to the second. The Rector and Black staff members told the Snyman Commission of numerous examples of "senseless and deplorable behaviour by Whites" off the campus. If I might make an imaginative guess, I would say that there were many Whites in the neighbouring town of Pietersburg who would have resented the presence of black students in their town, who would have resented their dress, their lack of servility, even their standard of education.

And that of course is the bitter heart of the whole business. That is what Mr Justice Snyman meant when he said that the university itself was ensnared in a much broader and deeper problem than just a university situation—that of the situation between White and Black throughout the country.

One should note that Mr Justice Snyman did not go fully into this deeper problem. That would have meant going into the whole matter of Apartheid and Separate Development, and Government Commissions are not appointed for such a purpose. In fact a Government Commission has to assume that the fundamental theory is more or less sacrosanct. It can suggest improvements to the machinery, a little oil here and a new bearing there, but it cannot re-design it. Can this machinery possibly be improved? The Commissioner himself does not answer such a question, but he made some sombre observations.

He said that Black consciousness has made the Black man claim to be the White man's equal, yet the only practicable field where he may prove this, is politics. "He sought to escape from his situation of inequality by obtaining political power on the strength of numerical superiority". That is why an institution such as the University of the North can never function as a true University. It is seen by its students as a political training ground, a political nursery, and ultimately a political weapon.

It does university students a great deal of credit—and a great deal of good—when they concern themselves with the politics of their society. One can go further and say that it is their duty to do so, that they lose something when they do not. But when politics becomes the main concern, the university must suffer. It is hard to see how a black university can avoid an obsession with politics. And that means—in South Africa certainly—that its life is going to be characterised by unrest, conflict, and police interference.

It is true that the Afrikaner universities were also political training grounds. But the Afrikaner student had the world at his feet. At the age of 21 (and later at the age of 18) he would get the vote. Therefore his universities never suffered from political obsessions as acute as those that characterise the black universities. One may note the irony that he too sought to escape from a situation of inequality by obtaining political power on the strength of numerical superiority.

BASA, in replying to that part of the questionnaire which deals with Control and Administration, made the following observation:

If the University, for instance, came to be controlled by Black persons, this would give to the Black people in the

University a sense of dignity, a fuller sense of commitment and a role which might help to engage their lives much more fully than at present.

One would naturally give the fullest support to this argument and in fact it also received the support of the Commissioner. One should note here that the Commissioner recommended equal pay for all the teachers of the same rank, a majority of Blacks on the Council, and a joint Black-White responsibility for Administration and teaching. It recommended that the Council should control the finances, and that it should appoint whom it wishes, including the Rector. It recommended that all Black universities should be open to Black undergraduates of whatever ethnic group, and that all post-graduate students should be able to study at any university of their choice.

How far would these recommendations if adopted help to prevent the kind of unrest that brought the Commission into being? How far would the adoption of the BASA proposal relating to control, enable a Black university to escape the unrest that makes it so difficult to function as a true place of learning?

When I take into account the present political climate, I cannot give an optimistic answer. The third paradox remains, namely that this Black university under Black control will be much less free than a White university under White control. The reason for that is that the ultimate control, the ultimate source of funds, is a White authority, namely Parliament in Cape Town.

The granting of Black control at the Black university would certainly remove one of the gross anomalies in the policy of Separate Development. But in another sense it makes Separate Development still more separate. Furthermore, Black students will soon discover that their Black control is in certain respects totally impotent.

Is there any solution that still stops short of the total reconstruction of South African society, and yet might be called a step forward?

Yes there is, and that is to give all universities the power to admit whom they will. Will that contribute to a lessening of racial strife? Who knows? Yet nothing could be worse than racial strife between young men and women whose ignorance of their fellow-students of another colour is absolutely total.

Let the universities be open to all. The result of such a step can only be to bring out into the open those facts of life that we all need to know. □