

# THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF HOPE

The Black Sash ladies, M.P.Cs and M.Ps who collected the affidavits and pursued the cases described in this edition of Reality would prefer them not to be true. Like other farmers, estate agents and mothers with growing children, they would far rather believe that a handful of ambitious revolutionaries, inspired and financed from Moscow, are fomenting unrest, and that the security forces are engaged in rooting them out according to the rule of law and civilised policing practices. Like the rest of us, they would like to believe that the proper separation of functions between the police and the courts is being maintained and that the police do not judge and execute those whom they think may be offenders. Like the rest of us they would far rather believe that the mass of residents in the Eastern Cape townships appreciate the protection of the police, welcome the shifts in government policy and recognise that the alternative to the present regime would bring greater poverty and political anarchy. **But the evidence contradicts the beliefs of the hopeful and the wilfully blind.**

## Trapped

The mass of the people are trapped, and feel trapped, in a situation which offers them nothing but terror and increasing poverty. Wherever they turn they see only their own helplessness.

Do they seek work – let them tread the streets for days and in their thousands, accepting that ten years of education has qualified them to operate a pick and shovel if they are lucky, and still they will return home without a job.

## Employment.

Unemployment figures for the Eastern Cape are all more or less wild estimates – a popular guess is that for every three working there is another in search of a non-existent job. What is certain is that thousands of youths have not been offered jobs in the two years or more since they left school, and that with the cyclical contraction of the motor industry and the impending departure of much of Ford's assembly business to the reef, thousands of jobs are being lost.

Outside the metropolitan areas of Port Elizabeth and East London, the operation of the Urban Areas Act of 1945, as amended many times, still blocks the free flow of people in search of economic opportunities.

Do they try to make a living for themselves by producing and selling, recycling scrap, utilising skills acquired from trained relatives or from the jobs they held in better times – let them try to find a way through the jungle of licencing laws, health ordinances (pollution is unhealthy, starvation is not) and the violent harassment they face if they dare to do business outside "their own" Group Area.

## Free Markets.

The Free Market Foundation has a list of about five hundred laws and bye-laws which inhibit the free market economy. They range from the limited number of hawkers licences issued by local councils (which are often dominated by traders) to health regulations, zoning restrictions, urban land tenure rights for blacks, the Group Areas Act, the rules governing the membership of professional associations which monopolise certain services and the powers of statutory marketing boards. Some can be justified as protecting consumers, some are not racially discriminatory, nearly all protect the **status quo** and monopoly interests from economic penetration by those currently disadvantaged.

Is there an election or referendum called by the local or homeland government – let them know, or believe – which is much the same in practice – that their actions are noted and that if they did **not** vote or voted **against** the winners, then their access to licences, housing and other items of government patronage essential for their comfort if not their survival, will be put at risk. And if they **do** go to vote – let them know that their actions will be noted by other shadowy forces which have called for boycotts and solidarity and which, at war with the prevailing structures of society, do not feel bound by any of its laws.

## Free Elections.

Schlemmer (**Quail Report Feb 8, 1980** Conference Associates, 1980) found that "only a minority of Ciskei Xhosa anywhere, even in the Ciskei itself, support the idea of independence under circumstances prevailing at the present time." (p 189) A year later Lennox Sebe gained overwhelming support

in a referendum in favour of independence. One voter told me that her pass was marked to show that she had voted, a "teacher" in the polling station had showed her how to vote, and that she feared losing her house in the Ciskei if she voted "No". She had no clear explanation of why she feared for her home and no enthusiasm for independence. She just played safe.

How many "boycotters" in subsequent elections for Community Councils have done the same? When the vote means virtually nothing anyway, there is no purpose in risking anything to exercise it.

Q Is there a school boycott and protest march called – let them know that their children will not be allowed to study that day (or month, or year) and that they must march when the organisers call or risk assault and burned homes. And let them know that as a result a year's school expenses may be lost and that their children may return home injured by birdshot, or dead – or they may not return at all.

#### Student Protests (1)

"I am a pupil who passed St. 6 in 1984, and am aged 16. On 11.1.85 all the schools in Uitenhage were boycotted. I was at home and heard the students singing in the street. I left my house and walked towards the singing. Two hippos came up M Street behind the group of students who were walking in the direction of the school. Tear gas canisters were thrown from the hippos in the direction of the group of students. I ran into a nearby house. I then decided to go back home. I found my ten year old sister in the crowd, took her by the hand and started to return home. There is a square in M Street where vendors sell vegetables. When I saw the hippo I took my sister and we ducked down behind one of the vendor's tables. Sis V.G. came past the table carrying a loaf of bread. There were still shots coming from the hippo truck which I thought were gas canisters. But then I saw Sis V.G. fall. When I saw her face and neck spattered with blood and her face suddenly swell up I knew that she must have been shot. There was terrible confusion. A car stopped and we got into it with Sis V.G. We drove to the day hospital where some staff came to attend to us straight away.

We heard later the same day that she had died. (On the way home from the day hospital) I saw a hippo coming up M Street and ran to the corner house. I saw students in the street running. (A bus was burning not far away). I also saw M.M. who I knew to be mentally retarded. He did not run like the other students, but when they called loudly to him to run, he turned and jumped. Suddenly I saw his body covered with blood and he collapsed. The hippo passed by with the policemen carrying on shooting from the top of the vehicle. M.M's body was full of pellets. I accompanied him to a private doctor (by taxi). His parents arrived at the surgery and took him home. They were afraid to go to the hospital because the police were reported to be there.

I heard later that M.M. died on Mon. 14/1/85.

I went to M.M's house with other students. We had taken a financial contribution to the family. The

house was surrounded by police vans. Policemen shouted that if any of the students ran, they would be shot. Many policemen emerged from the vans and converged on the students. I was the first to be hit with a pick handle on my head. Then I remember being picked up by the left arm and thrown into the van. As we were taken from the van to the police station we were beaten.

I was questioned about the names in an exercise book that the police had found on me. I explained about the money but they said I was lying and that we were attending an illegal gathering. I was continually beaten during the questions.

The police then asked me to be an informer. It was more of a demand than a request. I was told to bring the police information. I was then taken home."

Q Is there a stay away from work called – then let them know that if they go to work (even cross the backyard of their employer's home from their living-in quarters to answer the telephone) they may be noted as "scabs" and their lives or homes be at risk. And let them know that if they stay at home they may lose their jobs (or at least their pay for the day) and run the risk of a visit from a police unit which will break in, terrorise everyone and continue on its way "in search of troublemakers."

#### Stay Away.

From "Concerned" to the **Eastern Province Herald**. The recent wave of unrest in the townships is proving to be a golden opportunity for spiteful and jealous persons to intimidate others.

A case in point. My maid stayed away from work during the stayaway. While she was away there was a phone call for her. Not wishing to admit that I was all alone in the house, I told the caller she had gone out for a short while.

Now rumours are being spread that she was at work and she is terrified that her house will be burnt down. What should she do? (7th May 1985)

In Grahamstown, when a stayaway was organised for the 9th Nov. 1984, some workers in government jobs were warned that they would be dismissed if they did not come to work, and over fifty were fired. "I told them (employers), they do not know how serious this thing is. But I won't see myself being butchered by the youth for nothing. If they do not give me leave from work, I simply will not come to work. He (employer) did not give me a reply. I do not know what to do." (Fingo villager on the eve of the stayaway).

Q Is there a funeral for somebody killed in a futile exchange of bottles and stones for gas and bullets with the police (or simply killed by a random rubber bullet in his eye or buckshot in his back) – then let them know that if they fail to "show respect" for the dead, they could lose their homes, and if they march with the crowd they could be shot, detained or beaten up.

### One Man's Langa Massacre. (2)

On 21st March 1984 I came to 24th Square in order to go to the funeral in Kwanobuhle. I did not know that the funeral had been postponed. There were police in the square, both black and white. They were telling the people not to get into the buses. They did not tell us why. People in the crowd were saying, "Let us go on foot to the funeral." There were at that stage about two hundred people who started walking, but others were coming and joining from behind. I did not see any of them carrying sticks, spears or petrol bombs, but I do not know what a petrol bomb looks like. I saw no bottles. People were talking to each other. There was no singing or shouting. We got to a dip in the road with a rise ahead. A hippo truck was parked across the road with police inside with guns. Two police, one white, one black, were on top. At this time I saw we were being followed down the road by another hippo. There was thus one hippo behind us and one in front of us. The police did not speak to us with loudspeakers. While we were walking a youth, maybe sixteen years, was riding his bicycle ahead of us. All of a sudden a shot rang out and the youth fell off his bicycle, he fell and did not rise again. The police then opened fire on the crowd. The people turned and started to run away. The shooting did not stop. I kept running and did not stop until I got home.

What then are the ordinary people to do?

#### Millenarian Vision

A classical solution to the problem of "damned if you do, damned if you don't" is to seek recourse in ritual or in millenarian fantasies, of which the Cattle Killing is the most famous South African example. There has been some evidence of this in the widespread destruction of schools over the past decade in protest against inferior education for blacks — apparently in the belief that new and better schools would be built out of the ashes of the old and wretched. In many cases new structures have appeared, and the older generation has become sensitive to the taunts of the younger, "You cried and got nothing, we burned and got progress." Grieving parents are assured that every drop of blood shed in the struggle is watering the Freedom Tree, and the idea has taken root that out of the present suffering political salvation will come.

**How** it will come, and how much suffering must be endured before freedom dawns with its rewards of justice, employment, education and a redistribution of wealth, is not questioned; **that** it will come on the yonder side of pain is an article of faith reinforced by each new violent outburst, each new personal tragedy. Those who would doubt the force of this seemingly irrational faith need look no

further back in history than to the Iranian revolution and collapse of the Shah, despite his mighty army, ruthless police and influential American friends. Those with a longer view may look to the foundations of Christianity, the millenarian cult of colonial slaves which appropriated the throne of the divine emperor.

#### The Pragmatic View

For those who are less emotional, more pragmatic and, in many cases perhaps, have more to lose in a revolution, the best chance for survival is to be found in blowing with the wind — obeying the immediate order backed by the threat or reality of force. It is a short term expedient, as short as the time that it takes for a policeman to take aim and fire, or for a flame to consume the wooden frame of a house. But, as one can say with chilling and literal truth, in the long term we are all dead. From well behind the barricades of white privilege, sustained by the arms and the men whose excesses so appal us, it is easy to shout good advice and to offer idealistic solutions.

#### What Hope?

What hope there is lies in that handful of people whose words can still be heard across the tumult of the warring factions, whose courage and presence compels calm and an element of trust, however much those hell bent on conflict seek to undermine and destroy them. Desmond Tutu, Molly Blackburn, a score of Black Sash ladies, a few thousand unsung relationships between people who can say, without posturing or patronising, "This is my friend," and so transcend the human frailties which continually threaten division — these are the basis of a small indomitable hope. Old Testament scholars would call them "the Remnant" — as if in some dream time they were the whole. Their hope is that their sane words will be heard sooner rather than later:

- that peace is not achieved by the violent suppression of the majority by the minority, nor by the violent suppression of the minority by the majority.
- that peace is not achieved without justice, and that as long as there is no equality before the law; no equality of opportunity, access to education, living space or means of making a living, there can be no justice.□

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Abstract from affidavits attached to the **Report on Visit to Uitenhage** compiled by Errol Moorcroft M.P. and submitted as evidence to the Kannemeyer Commission of Enquiry.
2. Idem. (Some contrary evidence was led by the counsel for the S.A. Police, and at the time of writing the judge's findings had not been made known.)