

force can win a battle, but cannot hold a society together if most of its members are alienated.

Nor if — as would happen in this case — its use resulted in the total and active hostility of the rest of the world.

There is nothing to do but to get rid of racial discrimination — and to do it quickly. But what then? If it is done, it will be done to prevent a Communist take-over.

A surrender of power which leads to a Communist take-over anyway is therefore, ruled out.

Can the baby be saved when the bathwater is emptied?

This appears to be the object of the negotiations for a new, united and expanded opposition party. Such a party would be caught on the horns of a familiar old dilemma.

To have any hope of achieving power under the present dispensation, it would have to win the support of a large number of Nationalist voters, and to do that it would have to water down its non-racial principles to the point almost of non-existence.

If it stood by its principles, it would have no hope of achieving power. That is what happened when the old game was played according to the old rules. But the old rules are not likely to remain in force much longer.

There are two probable alternatives.

One is that the domestic violence and repression and the

foreign pressure will soon make a crack in the apparently rigid structure, which will then crumble as a revolutionary situation produces rapid changes;

The other is that the initiative for controlled, though far-reaching, change is taken by a section of the National Party, which then aligns itself with the other verligte elements, these together coming to power and quickly dismantling the apartheid structure.

If this could be done to the satisfaction of a substantial section of the black population, itself brought in to share the power, there might be a glimmer of hope.

I am not optimistic. A large verligte — very verligte — break-away from the National Party would not be in character. The tradition (now more than a century old) that all Afrikaners must stand together at all costs, the appeal of *stem Nasionaal*, the horror of *skeuring*, run too deep. But if there are not enough Nationalists able to rise above these traditions we shall see the strange and terrible sight of the self-immolation of a people, *Stem Nasionaal* would have become the swan-song of Afrikanerdom.

White South Africa in general, and the Afrikaners, in particular, would prove to have been no better than Louis XVI or Nicholas II — monarchs who, lacking intelligence and strength of character, went to their deaths without a glimmer of understanding of what had hit them. □

A NEW CONCEPT OF POVERTY

by Patrick Kearney

“ for the first time in history one will be able to give scientific proof that ‘blessed are the poor’ who voluntarily set community limits to what shall be enough and therefore good enough for our society.”¹

Poverty is looked upon as a scourge of the human race, preventing man from being all that he could be, and providing a constant provocation to violent conflict all over the world. It is therefore very strange to find a man actively encouraging poverty, and stranger still for a visitor to one of the world’s poorest countries anxiously reaching out for ‘development’, to tell the inhabitants that they ought to see poverty as an ideal. Yet this is what that redoubtable critic Ivan Illich did at a recent conference on development held in the Palace of King Moshoeshe II in Lesotho (March 8 - 13, 1976).

Of course there have been people like St Francis, who extolled “Sister Poverty” and freely chose poverty for himself and made it a condition for those who wished to follow him. Such freely chosen poverty has always been a feature of monastic life, drawing its inspiration from the Gospel injunction:

“Go sell what you have, and give to the poor, and come follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven.”² Members

of religious orders take a vow of poverty in order to obey this command more faithfully. At its best, this practice has provided a model for those who were not members of religious orders. But it has also had the rather unfortunate effect of leading the majority of members of Christian Churches to believe that only religious could take Christ’s invitation seriously.

What is significantly different about Illich’s words is that he is not only suggesting the need for all Christians to look seriously at poverty as an ideal, but that we have reached a global situation where such an attitude is essential for all people.

In this article I would like to examine this idea more closely, first of all by determining what Illich is not saying. He is, of course, not extolling that poverty of misery which the Church at one time seemed to condone by holding out the hope of heaven, almost as a distraction. The poverty of misery is now roundly condemned by the same Church: “ the Christian must be aware that in facing poverty he is facing no accident but something in our society which is evil. He is confronted by sin which has to be overcome in the Spirit of Christ. The response starts in locating in the structures of our society, what it is that brings about poverty.”³

¹ Illich, I. “How will we pass on Christianity?”

² Matthew 19:21

³ Weston, A. “Poverty: the Christian Response,”

The poverty that Illich is advocating is rather that of the man who says to God and to his neighbour: "Never, never let anything get between me and you."⁴ What has led him to consider such a desperate imperative that it needs to be preached to all men, whether they believe in God or not? And what has led that severely practical economist, Lady Jackson (Barbara Ward) to say in similar vein: "The vows taken by religious bodies, of poverty, obedience and loving restraint . . . are symbols of the kind of vow whole societies have to consider."⁵

The answer is very simple: that amalgam of problems which confronts mankind in our age: the resource crisis, pollution, inflation, food shortages, racial discrimination and gross inequalities. The combined effect of these is to threaten the survival of man.

Each one of these problems calls for the exercise of some sort of restraint by individuals and societies. This is what Illich would call the setting of limits. This is a novel idea: in South Africa, as elsewhere, an attempt has been made to focus upon minimum wage levels for everyone, by publicising widely such figures as the Poverty Datum Line, and employers have been urged to pay at least that amount or else to have on their consciences a serious degree of malnutrition suffered by worker's children. The "Effective Minimum Level" is a slightly more generous index, taking account of a few expenses beyond the barest needs for survival. But one hears no discussion of what might be called the "Wealth Datum Line" or "Effective Maximum Level", that level of income which the majority agree should be the *highest* allowed to anyone in a society. Illich's argument is that unless we focus on such maxima not only in the sphere of wages but in all aspects of societal organisation, the *minima* will always be impossible to achieve.

He derives this idea at least partly from the famous report of the "Club of Rome" entitled *Limits to Growth*⁶. This book represents the findings of a team of outstanding scientists, educators, economists, humanists, industrialists, national and international civil servants. The title is intended to be understood in both its meanings:

- (i) The earth's resources are limited, and the way they are presently being used by nations which believe in unlimited growth can only lead to major ecological disaster. Thus, in this sense of the title, there are inherent limits to growth in the fact that the earth's resources are limited.
- (ii) If an ecological disaster is to be avoided, then the earth's resources must be used in a totally new way. Societies must agree to restrict their use of these resources: by democratic process they must impose limits or maxima.

In terms of the purpose of this article I would like to focus rather on the limits or maxima that individuals should impose on themselves rather than upon such societal limits. In Illich's thinking the individual 'anarchic' action may help

to usher in the societal change.

"The change which has to be brought about can only be lived. We cannot plan our way to humanity. Each one of us and each of the groups with which we live and work must become a model of the era we desire to create."⁷

Speaking in Melbourne in 1972 in response to a questioner who had asked with some anguish what individuals could do about the steadily growing world crisis, Illich replied:

" decide with a few friends what you personally can do without. There are many things which you can do without — not because you want to give them to somebody else — but simply because these things which you need increasingly make it impossible for you to do things in a way which is really human and which most people could share. I am speaking of voluntary poverty as the only way to own the earth, on a personal level."⁸

It is clear that Illich is going very much further than the Club of Rome. He is not calling for voluntary poverty simply in response to the resource crisis but also in response to the institutional crisis of our times. The resource crisis is brought about by a consumer mentality — Illich sees such a mentality as rooted in western institutional life, and particularly the school. Thus when he suggests that people should try to determine what they "can do without", he is referring, not simply to personal possessions, but patterns in the use of institutions e.g. spending an extra year at University at great State expenditure which may be depriving the poor of the most elementary learning opportunities or making use of certain kinds of modern medicine which are also only accessible to the rich. He holds that the institutional patterns by means of which education, housing, transportation and health are provided for people as commodities, inevitably lead to inequalities and shortages quite apart from their paralysing effects upon the self-reliance of their client. Those who believe in equality must withdraw their support from these institutions, and attempt to house themselves, to move, to heal and to learn autonomously in ways that *can* be shared by the majority of the earth's people.

A less radical and somewhat different approach to the question of voluntary poverty is that of the "Self-Tax Movement" which, beginning in Europe and the United States, recently made its appearance in South Africa. In some places, it is called the "Life Style Movement". Some of the more important concerns of this movement are expressed as follows:

- "1. Living more simply than others may simply live, recognising that our greed denies another's need.
- 2. Deciding what to buy, how much to spend and what to do without in the light of the urgent need to conserve the Earth's resources and to distribute them more fairly.
- 3. Deciding on what percentage of our net disposable income we are going to give away for the benefit of those in need.

⁴ Illich, I., *ibid.*, pg. 16

⁵ Ward, B., "A New Life in Us," *Pro Veritate*, February 1976, pg. 12

⁶ Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers, J., and Behrens, W. W., etc. *The Limits to Growth*, Potomac, London, 1972

⁷ Illich, I., *Celebration of Awareness*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, 1971, pg 90

⁸ Illich, I., "Ivan Illich in Australia" in Lister, I. (ed.) *Deschooling*, Cambridge University Press, London

When circumstances allow, joining or helping to start a "Life Style Cell". These cells . . . meet regularly for mutual support, study and action."⁹

An American group with similar aims is the Shakertown group who have become well known for the so-called "Shakertown Pledge". The more significant of the clauses of this pledge, are the following:

- "1. I declare myself to be a world citizen.
2. I commit myself to lead a life of creative simplicity and to share my personal wealth with the world's poor.
3. I commit myself to lead an ecologically sound life.
4. I commit myself to join with others in reshaping institutions in order to bring about a more just global society in which each person has full access to the needed resources for their physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth."¹⁰

The argument of the Johannesburg group which has started the "Self Tax Movement" in South Africa is summed up in these words" . . . people throughout the world are becoming more and more sensitive to the extreme contrast of poverty and wealth in which people live both from country to country and within countries . . . It is because of the structures of society that only a small section possesses most of the wealth of an ever-prospering nation. Whereas White South Africans in the main enjoy one of the world's highest standards of living, the income of most African families is more than 10 times less than that of Whites and below the Poverty Datum Line . . . The response of a number of concerned Whites is to recognise that they have become unwillingly the recipients of money by an unjust distribution and the exploitation of others. A fundamental principle emerges: they have to either diminish their savings and/or regard themselves as persons of integrity . . . Thus these persons strongly desire to redistribute that which does not belong to them, and primarily to the exploited Black community of this country."

Built into this scheme is the sensible awareness that the White standard of living does not provide a realistic model for all in a future, more just society; that if justice is to be achieved then it will not be enough simply to make it possible for blacks to have an equal opportunity to be as affluent as Whites. Justice can only be *possible* if the affluent choose to (or are compelled to) live differently, and if those who

are desperately poor do not have models of unrealistic affluence placed before them.

It comes as rather a shock to discover the extent to which even an intelligent man like Mr Harry Oppenheimer can believe that such wealth is possible for the majority of people in a country. In speaking at the same Lesotho Conference as Ivan Illich, he made it clear that he thought it would quickly become possible for the mass of Basuto people to live in the same luxurious style as the expatriate managerial class who came to set up industries. Such was the tempting illusion he dangled before the Basuto. Surely by now there is sufficient evidence available to prove that this simply is not so?"¹¹

The idea of a dignified poverty freely chosen is surely very relevant at the present time in Southern Africa, where the global conflict between capitalism and communism has recently come into very sharp focus. The great majority of White South Africans are violently opposed to Communism, and there is no difficulty in identifying the evils of that system. There is much less awareness of the evils of the Capitalist system. Both systems err — the one in over-stressing the rights of the individual, the other in over-stressing the rights of the group. Both are failing to provide solutions in this last quarter of the 20th century: some other alternative will have to be found, that will also lead to a dramatic redistribution of goods while safeguarding the rights of individuals. Such a redistribution gives the only hope of lasting peace in Southern Africa. Perhaps those who freely choose a life of dignified poverty will be able to light the way ahead, provided that they do not see this as the limit of their political involvement, and continue to work for sharing of land, power and wealth on a national level. The great problem with Christianity, according to Bernard Shaw, is not that it has failed, but that it has never been tried!□

⁹ Frontier Notes, *Frontier*, Spring 1975, pgs. 36, 37

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pgs 35, 36

¹¹ One particularly good analysis of the relationship between capitalism and poverty is: Frank, A. G. *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*.

