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by

MRS FATIMA MEER

CAMP JONATHAN, ESTON, NATAL.

BELOW FOLLOWS THE ADDRESS GIVEN TO THE 46TH ANNUAL CONGRESS BY MRS FATIMA MEER

NUSAS IN THE 70's

Mr Chairman, delegates. I am honoured by your invitation to open this 46th Annual Conference of the National Union of South African Students. I am honoured because of the ideals NUSAS stands for and because of the courage with which NUSAS has defended these ideals and kept them alive. The wonder of NUSAS is that it exists at all and holds out the hope it does, the courage it does, in the atmosphere it does, so charged with law which place their victims beyond judicial inquiry and society's intervention. Despite six years of banning orders and deportations, withdrawals of passports and refusals of visas, detentions and expulsions; interrogations and a heavy blanket of intimidation, NUSAS survives and that fact alone is worthy of acclaim.

It has been predicted that this will be a crucial conference, that it is one which will determine whether NUSAS will survive at all in the seventies. NUSAS has faced a number of crucial Conferences and each has left its indelible mark upon it, and each has shaped it for better or for worse. The Conference was crucial in 1933, when the majority of Afrikaans students disaffiliated themselves from it and established their own Ossewa-Brandwag lead Studentebond and it was crucial in 1945 when it dropped its colour barrier and extended friendship to Non-whites, and it was crucial in 1960, when the Tribal Colleges were established, and NUSAS was barred from their campuses and its friendship with Non-whites threatened, and it was crucial in 1964 when, in the teeth of rapid apartheidisation, it seriously considered restructuring itself, so that its membership and its decision-making forum would be more representative of the population of the country and it would cease to be recognized as a white organisation. That was the most frightening idea ever to be projected from the heart of a white organisation in the Republic and so began the attacks and its era of retreat.

In 1970, NUSAS seems to say 'halt the retreat'. But the dilemma remains, what path to take, and what new identity to forge? If in 1964 it considered going Black, in 1970 the Blacks have declared that they want no part in it. Should NUSAS then swing back to the position it held prior to 1945 and become a union of English-speaking white students? or should it perhaps recoup its lost forces since 1924, come to terms with the ASB, and with it emerge as the greatest student power South Africa has ever seen - 70,000 strong with a paltry 9,000 Black students to contend with?

But to go White would be to lose itself and to lose the purpose of its present existence. It is to become the ASB, as the United Party has become the Nationalist.

But there is another alternative, indicated by sources of progressive Afrikaner thought. There are conjectures that the Afrikaner students are dissatisfied with the Nationalist Party and the ASB and are looking for a new identity. Perhaps NUSAS within the ASB can provide this identity. Perhaps the expedient and logical course is to ride with the Verligte wind and through it neutralise and liberalise Afrikanerdom.

What are the prospects of success in this direction? What is the Verligte hope that so many English-speaking South Africans and even a body of Non-whites speak so enthusiastically about? Is it a new phenomenon in Afrikanerdom or is it simply an echo from the past to which the ear strains in moments of helplessness, a Hertzog of 1933 with whom a Smuts sought hereneging and as a result capitulated the Cape African franchise, the Havenga of 1949 with whom a considerable body of UP leaders flirted hopefully. Is to be Verligte to follow John Vorster and oppose Albert Hertzog? Or to be affably disposed to Indians and Coloured, but not to Africans, or, in a Chris Barnard sense to be prepared to admit Indians and Coloured in the white structure but not Africans? Or does it simply mean that now that Group Areas are a fact, and Indians and Coloureds are safely compressed into their limited areas where they can constitute no economic threat, and with Africans exconced in their homelands, whites may communicate with Black across the barriers, under properly institutionalised and legally defined conditions.

Is not perhaps the verligte spirit more dangerous than the verkrampte after all, for whereas the latter - rigid, archaic, and illogical, would soon become destroyed by the economic forces against which it would pit itself in order to preserve its colour lines, the former would relax inconsequential economic and social barriers, knowing full well that such relaxations would have no effect whatsoever in changing the power position of the Black people. Whoever the verligte is, he must be distinguished from the Afrikaner who is motivated by a real concern for social stability and fears that Afrikaner domination threatens it. The verligte is very possibly only the new urban nationalist in search for more sophisticated, and hence more lasting techniques of domination. It is said that he continues to believe in a distinct Afrikaner destiny and speaks proudly, of his Afrikaner culture, and Afrikaner ethics, a special Afrikaner charisma which is the saviour of White, of Christian civilization in Africa and for the world. Imbued with this great faith in his own distinctive identity, which a careful analysis will probably show does not go beyond his nationalism, he cannot understand why others should not want to be loyal to their traditions, though he has rejected his own Plattel and culture. One suspects that in his exaggerated ethnocentrism, the Verligte has no place for Black dignity in his social scheme and sees the honourable Black person not as the one who offers his services for White domination but the one who opposes that domination and must therefore be halted.

It would seem that the Afrikaners, whether verligte or verkrampte, neither expect nor hope to be loved since from their own experience they failed to love the English despite their relative generosity towards them after the Anglo-Boer war and so they rule, as they do, not soliciting love, but using their position of power and their tools of power to maintain domination and secure it forever. It seems too that they consider nothing more divine than their own authority and acknowledge no higher authority than that and so they proceed and succeed. So Strijdon was reported to have said in 1948: "But even if it's not lawful, shall we allow the white race to go under? The continued existence of white South Africa demands it and therefore we must".

If this then is the depth and breadth of the verligte spirit, can NUSAS ever be part of it. Can it forsake the conscience it has grown over the last years and allow it, like the conscience of a Smuts or a Hofmeyer, to become muddled and bemused by compromises?

In a sense NUSAS stands today where Hofmeyer stood towards the end of his life, taunted and tortured by the Afrikaners, forsaken by the English and rejected by the Blacks with whom he knew in his heart of hearts he should stand, but could not stand. There are important differences. Hofmeyer was for the most of his life in Government and in that strategic position could have done far more than he did. He did not face the intimidation that NUSAS faces. But neither did he gain the moral clarity that the youth of NUSAS have. Despite his deep Christianity, he failed to realise that Christian regard for the dignity of the individual meant that he had a responsibility to realise that dignity for every man, by providing him with equal opportunity to cultivate and express his talents. He may well have realised this, had he lived longer and travelled through the fifties.

Yet both the youth of NUSAS and the Deputy Minister of Smuts failed in the same way. They failed fundamentally because they could not communicate with Blacks, because they did not know how to, and so social equality remained mere affirmations and never became active forces. Hofmeyer believed in political integration, but not social and though NUSAS believed in both political integration, it has power only to practise the latter which it rarely did. Thus, in 1946, the Native Representation Council, the "toy telephone" broke and the conservative Councillor Moroka said "You can do what you like, you can shoot us, arrest us, imprison us, but you are not going to break our spirit".

Black students today have withdrawn from NUSAS with gentler words. Just as those who turned away from Hofmeyer in 1946 were not extremists, they are those who believe that NUSAS with its overwhelming White majority and hence understandably, White allegiance, cannot promote their aspirations, defined by their different and discriminatory educational and economic opportunities. They have chosen to withdraw in order to realise themselves, so that they can come together in strength. NUSAS, as presently constituted, threatens to swallow them up and swallow up their aspirations, for they argue that Whites, because of their vested interest in being White, cannot identify themselves with Blacks. They suspect that much white student support for non-white aspirations is motivated by a sense of adventure and the wish to keep up with the international Jones's rather than by a true concern for their welfare and that their enthusiasm will become quickly dissipated when they assume adult responsibilities and cast an easy vote for the Government or its official opposition.

In addition, overawed by the myth and material example of white superiority the Black student is often consumed by feelings of inferiority which finds him tongue-tied, shy, withdrawn and incapable of inter-racial communication even when he constitutes a majority and is offered full participation. NUSAS has failed to liberate him from that deprived psychological condition and so, too, he must withdraw and seek that liberation in isolation. There was something of this in the Afrikaner withdrawal from the British at the beginning of this century and it was expressed by Hertzog in 1912, when commenting on the prospects of Afrikaner-English unity, "unless the parties to it were strong, virile and self-respecting".

The withdrawal of Black students from NUSAS, however, is not a victory for apartheid, but an indication of its failure to achieve what it intended to achieve through its highly controlled Black centres of education. It is no accident at all that Wentworth is the centre of the Black movement, for Wentworth separated from Howard, is part of Howard and as such enjoys a measure of freedom of association that is denied to the "ethnic" colleges. No doubt, this is one consideration behind the Government's intention to affiliate this medical school to the Black University of Durban-Westville. But it is a serious indictment against the University of Natal that Black students after decades of association feel so far removed from their white counterparts that they should wish to break from them. And the reasons for this lie in the discriminatory treatment meted to them.

The University segregated Non-white students into separate and glaringly inferior dormitories, even before the Group Areas Act obliged such segregation, and students have continued to live in army barracks situated on low-lying swampy lands donated by the adjoining oil refinery ever since. For years the grounds showed little indication of gardening, and there were neither tennis courts nor a swimming pool. Separate student enrolment and freshers' representation ceremonies keep the students apart and Blacks are not present at the numerous socials organised in the Student Union Building and do not become involved in the many clubs and societies that operate on the Howard campus.

Faced with such predicaments, what should NUSAS do and how should it conduct itself in the 70's? The solution will, as it must, come from the student body at the end of its deliberations, which I am confident will be frank, serious and full. I stand here, privileged, however, to make some suggestions and so I take the opportunity to do so.

I suggest that the present weakness of NUSAS lies in the fact that it has no firm ideological commitment. The germ of all action is the idea. Human behaviour is founded on and flows from systems of ideas. Without ideas, without thoughts, there can be no social behaviour. We plan and act in terms of some rationale and that rationale forms the basis of our action. Behaviour is confused and without purpose or goal when it is not motivated by a clearly appreciated, clearly integrated system of ideas. The generating force of all epoch making behaviour has been founded.

Yet strangely, there are many enlightened people who recoil from ideological commitment and see such commitment not as a state of personal and social resolution, as it is, but as an abandoning of intellectual freedom, as if freedom means living in a state of mental inertia. Those who recoil from an ideological commitment are in effect those who are alienated from the official ideology and are either groping for an alternate one, or have in helplessness, or fear, or both, given up such a search. So they show a cultivated disdain for the 'dirt of politics'. In truth of course they are motivated by the idea that their personal survival, or the survival of their group depends on abandoning freedom, in compromising or remaining neutral, or silent, and there are those who rationalise such behaviour as being realistic.

Realism lies in recognizing that all humans have the same needs and the same rights to realise those needs, and that if these rights are denied, there is tension, and no matter by what awe-instilling laws such tension is contained, sooner or later it bursts all bounds and explodes in violence. Realism lies in realising how such tensions can be alleviated, so that fear may be dispelled, violence avoided and social stability established and society be moved in the general direction of peace. Realism lies in understanding what you want for South Africa and projecting it in a clearly observable, clearly understandable framework of ideas, and then pursuing those ideas with unflinching dedication.

The United Party lost its historical 1948 election not because White South Africa rejected what it offered, but because White South Africa never knew what it was it offered. The Nationalists won because White South Africa knew what they offered and they have continued to win on that fundamental score. If Hofmeyer represented the liberal hope then, he did not know its terms - he could neither adequately project them nor defend them, let alone realise them. He responded to the demands of "practical realities" as if these were things outside his thoughts and outside his mind, and so he failed, even in his position of power, to implement his ideas.

So the absurd became the real in 1948, and everything that Smuts and Hofmeyer had considered impossible, because it was impracticable, has become possible.

It was perhaps just as difficult for the Nationalists, at the end of the last war, with the world's great disgust for Nazism and the racialism it perpetrated, and a world ecstatic with notions of freedom, equality and democracy, and a South Africa brimming with returned heroes who subscribed to all these ideals, to realize apartheid, as it is for NUSAS now to realize the ideals it holds. But the Nationalist, and foremost among them Dr Malan, held on to their ideas, even when General Hertzog tended to discredit some of them, and they clung to those ideas for decades and they clung to them in times when they were neither fashionable nor popular, and appeared to be beyond realisation.

If NUSAS has any serious intention at all, it will sort out its ideas, its system of values, its frame of theoretical priorities, and hold these out clearly and strongly so that all may see them and be inspired by them and be guided towards them. If NUSAS finds itself alone in South Africa, it should bear in mind that the Nationalists are alone in the world, if it finds itself against traditions which have solidified over centuries, it should remember that it has the support of traditions which have survived millenias. The most persuasive idea and one that has occurred repeatedly in the minds of intellectual giants and inspired great permanent followings, is the idea of the equality and the brotherhood of man. It is the central idea in Christianity, in Islam, in Hinduism and in Buddhism. By its very persistence, it has become the right idea and has the status of a universal truth. How much easier is the task of NUSAS working to such an idea than the task of Afrikaner nationalism working against that idea.

As a body, pursuing student interests, NUSAS must emphasise student responsibility to the academic structure and the academic demands of the University. As a body promoting student welfare, it must insist on free and inquiring minds and create opportunities for free and uninhibited dialogue on all issues, with all fellow students: as the training ground of the architects of South Africa, it must keep alive the idea of a non-racial society and it must do so, even if it finds itself to be the only body doing so, and it must do so because it is worth doing so. It must try wherever it can and whenever it can to teach and to practise non-racialism, and it will find that despite the many restrictions, many opportunities exist. It must seek out Afrikaner and African, Indian and Coloured, and inspire them to work together and act together for the change that must be if we are to survive with dignity. This is the hope for the future and it is a hope that is present even among Afrikaner students in Pretoria, for what else do the changes in their attitudes to "relational problems" (verhoudingsvraagstukke) mean.

The great fear is that the effects of "centuries of wrongs" will become so firmly entrenched that there will be no escape from them and the retribution of each succeeding country will be more terrible than the preceding one. The shackles of those centuries must be shaken off and a new society founded on trust, not on the bitterness of the past. NUSAS is strategically placed to realise this, for never before has youth desired so keenly to break with the past as now and this desire is the true meaning of the generation gap, symbolised in the distinct dress and "culture" styles.

No idea is unrealisable, not even the prophecy of Isaiah when he said:

"The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the colt and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them."

With these ideas and these hopes, I declare open the 46th Annual Congress of NUSAS. Let this be not only a Congress of affirmation, but also one of realization.

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