

THE BLACK SASH

NATIONAL CONFERENCE 1984

Presidential Address

The trouble with having to make a speech on a fixed occasion which recurs annually is that one has to look back at what one said the year before to guard against repeating the same theme. One also has to try and measure what has changed since that time.

Tonight I could very well repeat almost everything I said at the 1983 conference. For us and for the people with whom we work, nothing has changed except to become worse. The process of exclusion of the black majority through removals and new influx control provisions continues apace. Poverty and deprivation outside the walls of our cities deepens while the foolish illusions about reform are propagated on all sides.

For us, working in the Black Sash and in this country, life is always lived on two levels. There is a kind of surface level on which changes occur, and there is a much deeper level where we move slowly in the darkness of deep waters, where changes are measured in terms of increasing pressures and the heaviness of trying to progress along the seabed against strong currents, while people drown all around us.

Some of the things which concerned us last year, like the constitutional proposals, are now matters of fact. The Referendum has been and gone, the August 22nd elections will come and go. By the end of the year the new Parliament will probably have met for the first time. We will see social changes in housing, education, health care, for some communities.

Our newspapers will be full of earnest discussion about, and analysis of, what this statement by the leader of the House of Representatives or that statement by a member of the opposition in the House of Delegates means. We will spend a good deal of time wondering who will be the chairman of the House of Assembly or who will be appointed to hold the portfolios in the Councils of Ministers.

We will speculate about who will be the first South African ambassador to the state of KwaNdebele. We might even have some suggestions to make. We are sure that the current expert on mobile homes in the present Cabinet

would have much to contribute to an independent State whose citizens are almost all refugees and used to carrying their homes on their heads as they move "voluntarily" from one place to another.

All these things will go on as usual and thousands of trees will be cut down to ensure that our morning newspapers will be delivered to our front doors to bring us the most up-to-date news possible.

Some of the words will convey matters of greater import. Reports of the developments in the relationships between ourselves and our neighbours in Southern Africa will tell us something of what we need to know but we still will not have access to all the facts we need to come to an informed opinion. Lack of solid facts leads to too much dangerous and uninformed speculation in a very precarious and sensitive situation. If the people who live on the other side of our borders can only live for a while in peace we will be thankful. We can only pray that this will be so.

But not many words will be written about the places where we spend our days or the things that happen there. Down on the seabed all that is somewhere up above in the distant sunshine.

The real life in this country goes on in places like the destroyed ghost village of Magopæ which six weeks ago was a joyful thriving community and is now a waste of destruction, a monument to the ruthlessness of the people who whizz around in their power boats on the surface.

Real life goes on in places like Ezakheni, Ekuvakeni, Onverwacht, Atamelang, Frischgewald, Khamaskraal, Eerstehoek, Pachsdraai - the dumping grounds in what someone has aptly called the backyards of apartheid.

Real life goes on in the ghettos of the metropolitan centres where overcrowding grows worse as expensive houses are built for the few who can afford them but little is done to provide shelter for the homeless poor.

Real life is Khayalitsha, a concentration camp in the fairest Cape where soon will rise the new Parliamentary edifice floating on an ocean of human suffering.

Real life is lived by those wives and children from whom their rights to family life were brutally wrenched in 1983, only last year, by a quiet amendment to the Urban Areas Act. And this happened just at the moment when a long, hard, nineteen year old battle seemed to have been won.

Real life is lived by those who are retrenched and who are not permitted to look for a new job, and those who are not permitted to work in any job they might find for themselves.

Real life is people watching their children go hungry to bed because they are not permitted to work to feed them.

Real life in South Africa has nothing to do with what we hear on radio, or watch on Television.

"Reform" and "change" in South Africa have brought nothing but increased suffering to the majority of people in this country.

About a year ago we received a letter from a man in the Eastern Transvaal. He is one of the dispossessed whose property and freehold rights had been taken from him and who had been cheated of his inheritance. He asked in his letter, "Is the law not a protection anymore?"

The answer is "No; the law is not a protection anymore." It is the law which takes away people's land, their citizenship, their right to family life, their homes, their freedom of movement.

The law does this in South Africa and every day it does it to more and more people. The law is not a protection. It has become an oppressor.

It is in this light that I want to consider tonight what the Eloff Commission has had to say about the South African Council of Churches:

"The S.A.C.C. would better serve the needs of the nation if it were steadfastly to preach against violence as a means of effecting change.

Participation in civil disobedience is a very dangerous operation which can easily lead to incalculable harm"

The Eloff Commission does not attempt to answer the question,

"When law is no longer a protection what are we to do?"

The Commission does not even pose the question.

The Eloff Commission is not alone in this. Over and over again during the Referendum campaign, during the black local authority elections, in discussion of the August 22nd elections, we are told that participation in government created institutions is the only alternative to violence. We are told that we must obediently tread the path laid down for us, a path that is designed to preserve and protect the essential structures of the apartheid system. It amounts to being told that we must co-operate with evil-doing because it is the only alternative to using violent means to bring about change.

That argument is totally unacceptable to us and to the majority of people in the country. We cannot and will not co-operate with the evil-doing but nor do we wish to take up arms or to use violence against fellow human beings for any cause at all.

We have to start by declaring that we will not co-operate with those who present this choice to us in their pretence that there is no other choice for us.

We are obliged to continue to seek a third way as we have done in the past.

The South African Council of Churches is exhorted to steadfastly preach against violence as a means of effecting change. The problem is posed in that statement. We are expected to condemn the violence used by the victims and to condone the violence of the oppressor. All the clamour of voices raised in the condemnation of violence is strangely silent when the violence of the State is made manifest.

Where were those voices which condemn violence and criticise those who seek alternative ways of addressing conflicts when conscription was extended to white men up to the age of 55? Where are they now as more legislation is discussed to enable the sons of white immigrants to be conscripted? We do not hear them declaring that preparation for war is preparation for violence or that such very serious steps need the

same careful consideration as does the preparation for what the Eloff Commission calls "a very dangerous operation" in referring to civil disobedience.

Where were those voices when a soldier was recently fined R50 for spit roasting a man in Namibia?

Where are those voices when tear gas and batons are used against squatters in Katlehong or K.T.C.?

Where are those voices when police in camouflage uniform carrying guns, set up road blocks in city streets?

Where are those voices when policemen in dirty tee shirts and jeans throw people into vans for not having a pass?

Where were they when Magopa was surrounded by armed police in the dead of night; when the people were forcibly removed from their homes, against their will to a strange, unwelcoming place?

We did not hear them even whisper about violence then.

Civil disobedience and non co-operation with the laws of a State is a most serious matter. It is not to be undertaken lightly. It is most certainly not to be undertaken wantonly. It is a last resort for those who believe that the means one uses to create a new situation shape the ends one will achieve. It is the answer, as a last resort, for those who believe that violent means used to achieve change tend to create a new kind of violent society in which the victims of the old oppression will also be victims of the new one. It is certainly not to be considered in any situation where the law can be invoked to protect the rights of the people.

But what is one to do when the law is no longer a protection?

What is one to do when law-abiding people patiently await the outcome of long drawn out, often much delayed, legal battles which drag on for years, to establish legal rights which are then removed by new legislation designed to nullify judgements of the Appeal Court?

What is one to do when the law provides no protection against the predations of the State?

What is one to do when there is no redress for wrongs done and nothing at all one can lawfully do to prevent the State from doing wrong against people?

What does one do when the State becomes the adversary instead of being the embodiment of the will of the people?

There are choices and hundreds of thousands of people in South Africa have made their choice.

Some have given up and wait for death to give them rest.

Some have chosen to take up arms.

Some rely on God to intervene on their behalf and to visit vengeance upon their oppressors. As one of the people of Magopa said last month, "God will punish those who throw His children around like stones." It is doubtful whether the Prime Minister heard these words as he busied himself in preparing for the national day of atonement and prayer for rain held just one week after the wanton but lawful, oh yes, lawful destruction of Magopa.

Tens of thousands of people in South Africa have had another choice thrust upon them. They cannot and will not obey the laws which seek to destroy them.

They are present in all our cities without papers or permits, working and living amongst us, motivated by the struggle for physical survival and by love for their families who must eat.

They are in all the squatter settlements all over South Africa, living unlawfully in order to maintain family and community.

They are in our prisons and in our pass courts, in all those black spots and urban townships where people are refusing to obey the law and to move to places where the law demands that they are taken.

Must we turn our backs on them and preach to them the dangers and wrongfulness of civil disobedience?

We cannot do so when laws have become humanly impossible to obey.

Deep thought needs to be given to these issues and there is a great need for open debate about them. If we are to condemn violence is it not an obligation upon us to find alternative and more effective ways of creating a just society?

It is understandable that authoritarian governments should fear disciplined non violent action. Guns and tanks, bullets and bombs cannot prevail against the principles of truth and love, sacrifice and discipline which are inherent in such action. Also inherent in the thinking of those who are struggling with the morality of civil disobedience is love and concern for the opponent and the desire that he shall not be defeated but be won over into understanding of the justice which underlies the demands made upon him. It is surprising that the Attenborough film about Ghandi has not led to more serious and wider consideration of these issues of violence and non-violence in our society.

It is much less dangerous to debate these things openly than it is to pretend that nothing is wrong and to go on condemning violence in thoughtless acceptance of what is being done around us.

We should be listening to those few voices in our society which are urging us to consider what we are doing and which are asking us to think deeply about where we are going, which are warning us of the inevitable consequences of our neglect.

War is a very terrible thing and civil war is the most terrible kind of war there is but it is not enough just to state that and to settle back hoping for the best.

If we think that war is terrible and that violence is to be condemned then we have an obligation to find other ways of effective action.

This government has itself destroyed the concept of law by continuing

to use the law to prevent legitimate opposition, by continuing to make laws which deprive people of their citizenship, their land, their family life, their ability to shelter and feed their children.

They have made disobedience to the law the only way out of an intolerable situation for many thousands of the people of this country. On them lies the responsibility for this.

On us lies the responsibility to find the way in which we may begin to recreate a society in which justice and tolerance and peace will prevail.

I personally find it increasingly difficult to believe that that way can be found in obedience to the law. I personally find it impossible to believe that I must be obedient and that I must not support and encourage those who have chosen disobedience or those on whom disobedience has been forced by the very laws which they are expected to obey.

More than this, I personally find it difficult to any longer avoid the obligation thrust upon me to refuse to obey laws which demand that I must co-operate in the oppression of the men and women and children around me.

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Johannesburg  
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