

OPENING ADDRESS BY SIR RICHARD LUYT AT THE

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE BLACK SASH

IN PORT ELIZABETH ON THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 1985

1. Thanks for the privilege, indeed the honour, of being invited to deliver this address at the opening of this 1985 Annual Conference of the Black Sash. In recognizing this honour I should emphasise that I have not accepted it on behalf of any organization or institution. I am here tonight just as Richard Luyt, speaking for myself only, even if drawing on experience with various bodies, and even being still closely involved with some of them.
2. Congratulations on being 30 years old and on 30 years of courageous, dedicated effort and achievement, in the ever-continuing struggle for a more just and peaceful way of life in our country.
3. I wasn't in South Africa when the Sash was born but I read and heard of it frequently and gratefully as I watched and discussed from afar South Africa's agonies, so often self-inflicted. As an increasingly senior colonial administrator, particularly in the sixties (possessed of ministerial responsibility for internal security and the Police Force in Northern Rhodesia 1962-64, and then of overall responsibility when Governor of British Guiana, for the peace and progress of that multi-racial and turbulent territory 1964-66.) I wasn't always so sure that I welcomed seeing pictures of your silent standings with placards of protest, appeal or uncomfortable reminder. Pictures of such vigils went round the world, and while such stances elsewhere may not have been caused by Sash initiative, the example here in South Africa certainly put a stamp of respectability on similar activity elsewhere. And don't think that authorities anywhere are unaffected by such vigils. As a colonial Governor I would pretend I didn't really notice them, or that I was more amused than offended, but I was never happy to note the influence on others or to contemplate the strength of feeling and character that motivated the protesters. I always felt easier and less under pressure when not being picketed. Fortunately there was also some humour in the Guyanese drafting of placards. (recount the "Luyt go home" and "Partition Guyana" experience).
4. The presentation, in Section 3 of the Black Sash constitution, of the aims and objects of the organization, starts with the inspiring words "To promote justice ...". What finer aim, particularly in South Africa, could there be - - to do what is right, what is fair, what is just? Tonight, ever mindful of your primary aim, I am going to speak mainly on the need, the vital need, for an end, an early end, to compulsory military service in our country. This subject in its many and far-reaching ramifications for those who must serve, and indeed for the rest of society, impacts so strongly on what is fair and just that I am not surprised to know that an organization whose basic aim is "to promote justice" should have been the first national body to call, by resolution of your 1983 National Conference, for an end to conscription for military service.

5. And perhaps it is a convenient coincidence that 1985 be the International Year of Youth, in which it is specially appropriate to be considering something so tremendously important to young lives, even though it is of course also important to all of us.
6. At the outset I should perhaps make clear from what point of view I will be urging the abandonment in South Africa of conscription. It will help you the better to put my arguments in perspective and to judge them. Let me start by emphasizing that I am not a pacifist in the sense of believing that being part of a military machine that takes life cannot be justified. I have respect for many pacifists but their standpoint is not mine. Not only did I voluntarily serve as a fighting soldier for five years of World War 2, but I had earlier while a student at the University of Cape Town, with the Nazi menace on the horizon, opted for military training, and I received it. Furthermore, I had cause to be grateful during that war for the intensive cadet training that I had earlier been given at school at Bishops. During the war I loathed and detested the actual fighting, but there was also much that was fine in my military experience and which I recall with gratitude.

Later, as Governor of a colony I used military force to defend my borders when attacked from without and also to assist the civil power within when internal insurrection seemed likely to take over. I was exceedingly grateful for the availability of the battalions.

Clearly, then, I am not speaking as a pacifist. Military force has a place in the affairs of men and to me the reality is to recognise that fact. I speak therefore as one with such recognition.

7. But while the existence of the military is necessary it is vital always to bear in mind that it is no more than a shield to safeguard, or permit the development of, all that is good and important in the strivings of men, including things of the spirit, of the intellect, things which promote human rights including safety of the person and property, the pursuit of well-being, access to justice and the exercise of conscience. The military has a role to play, a purpose to fulfil for the safety and benefit of all people in the country that it serves. That is its role. The military is not an end unto itself, and as a one-time trained soldier I hope I have always recognized this. All soldiers should.
8. There are other principles that underpin my attitude towards conscription for military service. These are of general, and not merely South African, application although you are free to - - and no doubt will - - apply them to our local situation as I describe them. But weigh them also for their general validity.

Firstly, I accept that a country has a right to possess security forces in quantity and training sufficient to defend itself against external aggression and to support the police in emergency situations in the maintenance of internal order; although I also see it as the concomitant duty of a country's government to adopt policies which aim at justice and fairness for all, internally and externally, and thereby minimise

the chances of violent conflict and the need to use its military forces.

Furthermore, those military forces while justifiable, could often be volunteer-based and not dependent on conscription.

Secondly, it is unacceptable to me for a government not based on the choice or approval of the majority of the people, in other words a minority government, to compel people, even those who do have a vote, to become part of the military forces of the country. I am not, in stating this principle, insisting that before conscription of all or part of the people is acceptable, there must necessarily be a government chosen on a "one man one vote" common franchise system.. In populations made up of diverse ethnic groups there are a number of ways, federal and other, by which a government can be chosen with all participating and with majority support.

And why do I argue that even those who do have a say in the choice of a minority government should not be forced into compulsory military service? Because in the circumstances of minority government,

- (a) it is doubly important that the merit and morality of what it stands for should be good enough to attract volunteers to man its security forces; if the merit and morality cannot attract volunteer support the policies and, indeed, the government do not deserve to survive; and
- (b) it is inevitable that significant, possibly substantial, numbers of the minority governing group do not approve of the government's philosophy towards the majority and should not be compelled, as sometimes happens, to impose it, where it is not welcome, by force of arms; and
- (c) it is wrong for a government not based on the choice or approval of the majority of the people to spend vast sums of money, drawn from all taxpayers, into putting all the young men of a minority group or groups under military training and under arms; and
- (d) it is highly likely to be resented by the majority group or groups and to be damaging to race relations; and
- (e) it is reinforcing a racial pattern in the military forces which is unhealthy for the future (more of this anon).

It may be thought to be morally wrong to impose conscription on other groups who have no say in the choice of the government. To that argument I would say the answer is obvious and is not the confining of conscription to one group, or indeed the maintenance of conscription at all.

Thirdly, I concede that there can be circumstances where compulsory military service is justified, usually in a homogeneous or near-homogeneous society, and certainly only

where all citizens have a hand in choosing or approving their government, where there is some potential danger and where alternative forms of national service are reasonably available to those who cannot accept being part of the military machine on established grounds of conscience or religion. But in my view the reasons for conscription and its application need to be very sound and widely accepted before it can be justified. Conscription creates painful moral dilemmas; it is expensive; it is unpopular; it disrupts the economic and social life of individuals and of the community and it doesn't provide the most efficient military force; perhaps worst of all; it generates a militaristic attitude and atmosphere in society which is not conducive to a constructive and peaceful approach to the settlement of problems.

Of course, there are certain benefits to be derived from military training, and thus from conscription. Some of the discipline is healthy; there is physical fitness and bearing, team spirit, camaraderie and loyalty. But these can be obtained outside of compulsory military service and without its disadvantages.

A fourth and final principle underlying my attitude towards conscription is that the military force of a country should be drawn from all the communities or ethnic groups that make up the total population, and that this can and should be achieved on the basis of volunteers. Indeed, special care should be taken at all times to ensure that the security forces of a country are reflective in their composition of all sections of the total populace; otherwise it is difficult to engender and maintain confidence in them in the public mind and heart. In British Guiana I had great problems in this regard, in that the security forces, although based on volunteers, were not healthily balanced racially. The ethnic group that predominated in both Police and Army was reluctant to allow me as Governor to change things - the situation was traditional and entrenched - and other groups remained embittered and distrustful. It was ultimately only with the help of the much respected International Commission of Jurists as advisers that change became possible. The lesson is that if the ethnic composition of the security forces goes askew - and this almost certainly happens with the conscription of one group and not of others - the forces themselves lack general public support and are not ideally manned to perform all their tasks. Nor is it easy in any short period to correct a distorted position.

Perhaps I should mention here that I see the ideal military force to consist of a substantial element of professionals, i.e. career soldiers, supported by part-time volunteer national servicemen, to make up whatever total numbers are required at any time; and both sections of this ideal military force should reflect the ethnic composition of the total populace, or at least be moving purposefully towards such reflection.

These are my concepts in broad. I must now apply them to South Africa. I have recognized the right of a government to have military forces strong and competent enough to defend its country and to assist in maintaining order internally during crises. The respected publication of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, "The Military Balance", tells us in its 1984/85 issue that South Africa currently has an army of approximately 67 000 persons, an airforce of 10 000 and a navy of 6 000. The airforce and navy are already predominantly made up of professionals with a minority of conscripts, but the army has 50 000 conscripts, or 74 percent

of its strength; and of course these conscripts are all whites. If the professional element in our army were to be increased, at the same time redressing the racial imbalance, and the reduced non-professional requirements converted from white conscripts to volunteers of all race groups, we would in nearly all respects be on a healthier way forward and, in particular, be relieved of the great conscription incubus.

A few months back when the leader of the N R P and I appeared together on the radio programme "Microphone In" on this same subject, I felt that he conceded most of my arguments against conscription, except that he feared there would be insufficient volunteers to provide the necessary manpower for my kind of military force in South Africa. Assuming there are needed at most 40 000 volunteers (and I would hope it could soon be much less) from our total population of about 28 million, there must be something very wrong somewhere if this number fails to offer themselves and if those offering are not suitable. Maybe it is the emoluments and conditions of service that need reviewing, but maybe it is public disapproval of the purposes for which our army is used, e.g. Namibia, and African townships, that would have to be given further consideration.

It can be argued, and often is, that our adverse education system, for blacks particularly, and our pressing demand in other sectors for schooled manpower, will make it impossible to find enough suitable volunteers for our military forces. Against this however, can be argued that an early ending to the Namibian problem - surely mainly in our hands - and political moves to reduce internal unrest could reduce the need for our present large army. And let us not forget the vast voluntary enlistment of blacks into the East and West African forces during World War 2, and what efficient and reliable soldiers they made.

Yet while there are arguments against ending white conscription soon which need to be met, as I believe they can, they all seem to be given a totally wrong position in the importance ratings compared with what conscription of whites deserves and requires. This conscription, with exemption only for religious objectors is, in our troubled and highly contentious South Africa, a denial to those conscripted of the right to exercise freedom of conscience as to whether or not to serve in the S A D F. And this in a society where the contentious issues often go to the very roots of a man's moral standards of life. A draconian prison sentence follows if he refuses to serve and cannot establish an acceptable religious objection. And how agonised are the many who decide that military service is at least less dreadful than six years in prison! Is it surprising that one sees so much manoeuvring among conscripts for soft or non-combatant jobs?

And remember that South Africa went through two world wars without conscription, when the views and feelings of our many dissidents were respected, and when the military forces relied for their successful volunteer support on the worthiness of the cause in which they were campaigning. What conclusions must one draw from this? And can our apartheid way of life, our policy towards Namibia, be maintained only by employing the maximum white military enforcement possible? If this is so, our future is indeed bleak.

If not so, why is white conscription with all its controversy at home and its adverse image abroad maintained? What other reasons can there be? Think of the price. We have lost some thousands of young white South Africans, often of our best, who have on grounds of principle emigrated rather than serve in the S A D F in our circumstances. There are others failing to report for service; there are those whose service is grudging, resentful and thus surely unsatisfactory. And there is the well-known question of the games-playing serviceman compared with the different treatment of the non-games player. I never cease to be amazed at the ease with which talented sportsmen obtain postings where sports opportunities are best and where sporting appearances seldom seem to be blocked by such matters as service on the distant border.

The increasing involvement of the army and thus of national servicemen in security duties in African townships is further cause for anxiety. These duties often stem from the implementation of highly controversial policies, of which the very morality is questioned by many. Men should not be forced to be thus involved. Ponder also the implications where young whites and blacks have been happily and constructively at school or university together in contented friendship, and later the one, armed, uniformed and representing unpopular policy and authority, invades the township of the other.

I have said nothing of the possible extension of conscription to the "coloured" and Indian groups. I hope it never happens but logically, those groups being now possessed of a vote and in Parliament, it should. Is our government going to turn a blind eye to principle and going to duck or postpone the issue because of its uncomfortable implications? And indeed the implications are highly uncomfortable in the potential damage to relations between blacks and the "coloured" and Indian people, and also in the potential resistance of "coloureds" and Indians to being called up. Is it not so much simpler to abandon conscription for all and to rely on volunteers from all ethnic groups?

Is hesitance to do this based on doubt of the loyalty and support of many of our people? It is true that the then Minister of Defence argues in Parliament in 1977 that the S A D F "cannot distribute arms on a very large scale to blacks without the necessary control measures". This attitude has roots far into our history, but if it still exists in 1985 must South Africans in general and our government in particular not consider why this is so and effect change? A way of life which all our races find worthy of support by arms or otherwise, must be our aim. Again, conscription has no role in this. It must be achieved voluntarily, out of conviction that all is well fundamentally in South Africa.

Am I being excessively idealistic and impractical? I believe not and I speak as a one-time senior soldier and administrator. The continuance of conscription will generate greater problems than its abandonment. It is, of course, true that for some people the opportunity to perform military service, even when conscripted, is an honour and a demonstration of patriotism; for others it poses deep moral dilemmas, desperate issues of conscience and ghastly alternative choices. To the former I would say the end of conscription opens the way to demonstrate patriotism even more strongly as a volunteer; for the latter only the end of conscription can remove his agony.

I know that large numbers of white South Africans never stop to question the rightfulness of our conscription. I plead to them to do so, and to think deeply on the subject. It demands the deepest thought. I plead to all of you in the audience to weigh such issues very carefully, and to those to whom the media (perhaps that will be mainly here in Port Elizabeth) carry my arguments. These arguments are, I hope you will agree, neither emotional nor selfish, but directed at the greater interest both of the individual and of South Africa.

Before leaving this subject of conscription I must pay tribute not only to the Black Sash for its role in pressing for its end, but also to the Conscientious Objector Support Group and to those who work in the End Conscription Campaign, both of whom help many towards a better understanding of the issues involved, and both of whom are responsible for splendid publications. I commend these to you.

I had thought of touching also on some other important issues in our South African lives, such as Namibia and education. The former links with my earlier career interest, and indeed the basis on which South Africa assumed its role as mandatory power and the extent to which it has been loyal to that basis over the long years, are fascinating to consider, as also is the present critical situation. And education (the core of my later career) with the current and officially adopted aim of equal opportunities for education, including equal standards in education for every inhabitant, being the purposeful endeavour of the state, is a subject requiring constant vigilance and attention. But there is no time for these things now, even though I hope you will, as part of the "promotion of justice" by the Sash, keep your minds on them.

If tonight I have done no more than to add weight to the Black Sash's call for an end to conscription, the evening will have been tremendously well spent.