



THE BLACK SASH

5 LONG STREET · MOWBRAY · 7700 · TEL. 685-3513 · 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. MONDAY - FRIDAY

OPENING OF NATIONAL CONFERENCE

March 2nd 1989

(Durban)

Presidential Address:

What does FREEDOM mean - and does it matter anyway?

"Show us the way to freedom, Mandela says 'freedom now'.
Show us the way to freedom in this land of Africa."

The word "freedom" rings out in the songs and rallying cries of oppressed people everywhere. The concept of freedom can inspire people to resist unjust rule and to unite, in spite of division, to oppose a common enemy. Yet it is often an undefined term, signifying merely to those who use it an immediate change in the relations of power and the removal of present rulers. It can even become little more than a slogan.

The challenge to me to consider more carefully what 'freedom' means came initially almost a year ago in the form of an invitation from Jews for Justice to speak at the annual Freedom Seder - to celebrate the Passover festival and that great act of liberation, the Exodus from Egypt.

The Israelites who lived in Egypt under the initial protection of Joseph were able to prosper - to be fruitful and multiply and to grow strong and numerous so that they became viewed as a threat to the Egyptians, who in turn "set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens . . . and the people of Israel groaned under their bondage" (Book of Exodus). Pharaoh resisted the call to "let my people go", but his power and strength were not enough to stamp out their need to live apart from his rule.

There is a powerful impulse in humankind to be free, to have some control over one's life and one's choices, to have rights which are respected and protected, and to play one's part in shaping and directing one's society.

This is what we seek, but in a time of repression and of restrictions, achieving it will take courage and determination. Like the Israelites, we are sometimes downhearted and "broken spirited". There is a temptation to be overcome by despair, and to let fear and prejudice be victorious. We look back over the past dozen years and see waves of popular resistance countered with ever stronger measures. The strategies of those in power become more sophisticated, and the bitter pill of bondage is sweetened by a coating of reform.

We look at the high cost of the conflict - a cost not only to stability, to the economy, to possibilities for education and

development, but also to the people, the human beings who are being hurt, detained, brutalised, killed. The temptation then is to acquiesce, to swallow the pill.

Perhaps, one wonders, it might be better to leave the field to the National Party to carry out its plans. Let the government

- 1 - deal with the right wing monsters which are the product of its own policies
- 2 - try to draw in support from the business world and the international community
- 3 - implement its reform programme pouring money into "oilspots" to reduce levels of dissatisfaction and dissent
- 4 - lure or persuade black partners into its governing structures.

Of course we would have to understand that this means continued and growing power in the hands of a small elite group, that it would continue to deny human rights to the majority of the population, that there would continue to be suffering for some people under the inevitable repression required to implement this.

But, one would ask in this broken spiritedness, is not a better quality of life the only important thing? What the people want is not not exactly bread and circuses, houses and jobs. If only we can get the economy onto the right track we can provide all the necessary benefits, and changes will generate their own momentum.

The fatal flaw in this scenario is the denial of democracy. There is a parallel in the thinking that informed a good deal of international policy-making about Latin America, particularly in the 1960's. It was widely believed that in countries struggling with the growing pressures of poverty, underdevelopment and with small but powerful civilian elites, the safest way to restructure society was through the "modernizing military". Supposedly nonpolitical, the military would be expected to maintain control over a population which threatened to erupt, and would thereby create the climate in which development could take place.

This view of military government as a bulwark against chaos (and often implicitly or explicitly against communism) was shared by many - by business people and policy-makers. It has proved tragically mistaken: the military regimes have in general failed to promote development; they have strengthened or established links with the national elites; they have fostered economic systems that are not labour-intensive nor focused on basic domestic needs; and they have frequently proved to be corrupt.

Alfred Stepan writes "We cannot fail to recognise the cost of forfeiting democracy for the illusion of order that a military regime imposes. Whether one counts this cost in terms of people dead or 'disappeared', or of institutions dismantled, or of ignorance fostered by censorship, or of reformers vilified, it amounts to a devastation no society would willingly bring upon itself."

He adds that in recent visits to South America what he has found instead of promilitary sentiment is "a new commitment to democracy, not as a means to some other end, but as an end in itself, a permanent value . . . the 'bulwark' has failed, and only democracy in its most ample sense, can protect nations from the suffering so many in Latin America have experienced or are still experiencing." (In With Friends Like These, the Americas Watch report on Human Rights and U. S. policy in Latin America, edited by Cynthia Brown).

I would also add that it is tragically evident that often when the task of government has been surrendered into military hands it is extremely difficult to effect the change to civilly elected government.

The lesson to be learned for us in South Africa is that we cannot afford to buy the reform plus repression package. We already see so many symptoms of a profoundly undemocratic society.

As we look back at 1988 and forward into this year already begun, we are confronted with:

- the denial of information: the continuing state of emergency regulations curb the freedom of the press; valued and courageous newspapers have been under attack: suspended, banned, warned; our own publications have been affected, with The Trial of the 13 declared "conditionally not undesirable" (i.e. distribution limited to registered libraries) and charges being investigated against our magazine SASH in terms of emergency regulations. Black Sash members have actively supported the campaign to SAVE THE PRESS.

- detentions: in the first two months of this year renewed attention has been drawn to the estimated 1000 or more people still in detention (some of these still under 18 years of age). The rapidly spreading hunger strike, the public pressure it elicited and the real danger of deaths, led to an unprecedented meeting between lawyers (who were fasting themselves), church leaders, and the Minister of Law and Order, Mr Adriaan Vlok. Assurances of a "substantial number" of releases have resulted in the release of under 100 detainees to date, and pressure is mounting once more to demand action. It must be said that the courage and commitment of the detainees did effect a significant shift in the government's attitude - a clear example of the pressure that can be generated by the action of those who seem to be least free and most powerless. Once again, Black Sash members have been detained during the past year: Janet Small, Janet Cherry, Kerry Harris.

- restrictions: 33 organisations have been restricted, and so have large numbers of individuals. Minister Vlok gave a figure of 135 in Parliament, and many of the detainees released in the past fortnight have been heavily restricted. Restriction notices can now simply be published in the Government Gazette and there is no recourse against this decision. There is an urgent need for a massive campaign against this measure which condemns people to a half-life of conformity to petty restrictions as well as to a major denial of rights.

- deaths and disappearances: assassinations and mysterious disappearances occur increasingly. Sometimes the murderers are frighteningly blatant - such as Barend Strydom who shot and killed seven people in Pretoria; sometimes they are, equally frighteningly, never found. The deaths of Dr Abu Asvat and "Stompie" Moeketsi Sepei have made headline news, but we need to remember too the 1000 or more who have died in the mortal conflict in Natal.

- lawlessness, bombs, arson: we note an increase in the levels of attacks directed both at government or pro-establishment targets and also at anti-apartheid organisations, including our own and the churches. The inescapable conclusion is that we slip daily further into conditions of civil war.

- police presence: this was the year when police adopted much more visible attitudes at meetings, packing rows with a blue-uniformed presence, setting up video cameras and tripods to film speakers and audience. When they almost outnumbered those present at a small meeting organised by the Free the Children Alliance in Cape Town to discuss children's rights under the law, they created a palpable atmosphere of life in a police state. In many situations their arrogant bullying attitudes do no credit to a force whose task should be to protect, not intimidate the public.

- militarization: the prospects of peace in Angola and independence in Namibia have not resulted in a decrease in the militarization process, nor in the duration of military service. The restriction of the End Conscription Campaign has left a serious gap in this field, but other groupings have acted to call for alternative service options at least - significantly, gatherings of women have taken up this call.

- capital punishment: this was a matter of major concern for us at our national conference last year, and members have strongly supported the re-establishment of the Society for the Abolition of the Death Penalty. 29 members of the Black Sash were arrested last March for demonstrating outside the Houses of Parliament in a plea for clemency for the Sharpeville Six. There were 117 executions in 1988 and there are some 270 people awaiting execution on Death Row.

- political or treason trials: we look back towards the extraordinary outcome of the 'Delmas' trial and the seemingly contradictory views of the judge as he sentenced men he acknowledged to be important leaders; and we look ahead towards the likelihood of more "treason" trials, possibly in the Eastern Cape.

- the judiciary and the law: at a time when the role of the judiciary, and also that of lawyers, in an undemocratic society is being seriously questioned, the appointment of Mr Justice Corbett as Chief Justice has been widely welcomed as a step towards reclaiming some of the lost respect for the courts. Nevertheless, the judiciary still has to operate within the seemingly impossible constraints under the emergency regulations, "vague and unreasonable" though they have been judged to be, and under the weight of precedent set by past judgments. The various conferences dealing with issues of the law, human rights, a Bill of Rights, and the ANC's new constitutional proposals, have done a great deal to encourage lawyers themselves and lay people concerned with the law to take a renewed interest.

- legislation:

(i) last year our concern was particularly centered on the laws being put before Parliament which were designed to maintain control over the allocation of land and housing in order to manage the process of urbanization and to perpetuate the segregation of residential areas. Nowhere is the longevity of apartheid more evident than in the allocation of land and the process of forced removals. The Free Settlement Areas Act makes no material difference to this situation; the new Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act provides for more cruelty, humiliation and deprivation than ever; we await the fate of the Group Areas Act with trepidation.

(ii) the Promotion of Orderly Internal Politics Bill (to control funding) was withdrawn after national and international opposition, only to be succeeded this year by the Disclosure of Foreign Funding Bill, which also contains entirely unacceptable provisions for information-gathering into the affairs of organisations, and control over their work. The SACBC and the SACC have already announced their intention of disregarding this Bill if it becomes law.

- education: racially separated, with distribution of the budget still severely skewed in favour of white pupils, seriously flawed in quality, particularly in schools for black children, and hampered by inadequate resources there too - the education of South Africa's youth is totally inadequate to prepare today's generation for the challenges of tomorrow. Access to knowledge and to different points of view is an essential element of freedom - and most of our youth are denied it. It is no wonder that disturbances in township schools are endemic - no wonder, but deadly serious.
- government in disarray: the illness of the State President and his retirement from the leadership of the National Party has created an atmosphere of uncertainty in the government. At the same time, evidence of large-scale corruption has come to light. The National Party government lacks vision, courage and leadership. The official opposition's racism and fanaticism is allowed almost entirely free reign. The new Democratic Party is trying to accommodate the three constituent parties, and it cannot be an easy task.
- labour: the trade unions are up in arms over the Labour Regulations Act, and campaigning vigorously against it. The efforts of COSATU and NACTU to work for unity are to be valued.
- poverty: people are becoming poorer, and the economy is in decline; decreasing wages and growing unemployment can weaken the unions' bargaining power. Our advice offices see hundreds of cases of poverty and destitution.

All this adds up to a dismal prognosis, far outweighing any reform process. We are forced to conclude that the needs of the population cannot be met by following where the government would take us, and that rights and freedoms are more important than scattered crumbs from the table of the governing party.

HUMAN RIGHTS:

The 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stimulated a remarkable re-awakening of interest in human rights, not only in South Africa, but worldwide. The celebrations were not only a commemoration, but a recognition that the Articles have a validity that has stood the test of the passing years. Other concerns (particularly social and economic) have been added in subsequent conventions and agreements, but the original aims still hold good.

In South Africa the Human Rights Commission was established on 20 September in Johannesburg, with Frank Chikane, Max Coleman, John Dugard, Sheena Duncan and Smangaliso Mkhathshwa as Commissioners. Its on-going monitoring is of great value.

The Human Rights Trust in Port Elizabeth held a conference in December, during which Di Bishop was one of the speakers.

We joined with other organisations in arranging programmes to mark the anniversary and to take forward the Campaign for Human Rights Now.

International attention was stimulated by the Amnesty Concert tour, by the presentation of awards to human rights activists, and by special meetings at the time of the anniversary.

The Human Rights Watch held a special gathering of 35 human rights monitors from 29 different countries in New York and Washington, and launched its second annual report on the Persecution of Human Rights monitors - a worldwide survey. "Human Rights Watch believes that our most important task is to protect those around the world who monitor human rights abuses by their own governments. It is only by helping to ensure the freedom of citizens to gather and disseminate information on human rights practices in safety that we believe it is possible to secure respect for human rights by the governments of the world," reads the cover of the report.

Taking part in that gathering gave me a deepened awareness of what our task should be in this regard. As the report says, "human rights monitors are armed only with information". What impressed me in addition to the non-violent, meticulously factual approach of all the monitors who were present, was the fearless impartiality of the Human Rights Watch itself. The report says, "The advent of civilian democratic government should not be equated with the advent of respect for human rights." Among the monitors were some who worked in countries whose governments were military or right-wing dictatorships and others whose people had succeeded in overthrowing oppressive rule but who still encountered and opposed violations of human rights in the new society.

If we are to pursue the aim of being workers for human rights, these will be some of the requirements:

- that 'fearless impartiality'. Our traditionally non-aligned status as a small but independent organisations can lend weight to our testimony which will be valuable now and in the future society in which we continue to work. We should regard this as a service we can offer to the process of liberation.
- a commitment to sympathetic, participant involvement in the struggle for freedom.
- active empowerment of ourselves and others to carry out this work.

These are broad goals, and they are entirely consonant with our own founding principles: to promote justice and the principles of parliamentary democracy; to seek constitutional recognition and protection by law of Human Rights and Liberties for all; and to further the political education and enlightenment of South African citizens and others.

How can these goals be implemented?

1. We need to work out ways of overcoming the hindrances of the state of emergency regulations to keep ourselves well informed.
2. We need to document, publish and disseminate our information more widely than ever.
3. We must continue to work in alliances with other organisations, for example on children's issues, capital punishment, militarization.
4. We can seek common ground in order to overcome the divisions of our society - for example, the experience of womanhood, motherhood, interests, and skills.
5. We can learn to abide by majority decisions in joint project work, while not being afraid to state differing views.
6. We must exercise humility and be willing to test and question our own preconceptions.

7. The conscious empowerment of our own membership is a prerequisite for this work; we need to know who we are, how to build on our strengths and minimize our weaknesses. There is a bounty of resources and skills locked up in our members which must be set free to be shared.

8. "Black empowerment" has become a catch phrase with a variety of interpretations. It remains an imperative. If we are to help it to come about we must be informed about needs and we must be sensitive to the wishes to those we seek to support.

This brings me back to the question of rights and freedoms.

The freedom which we seek is a freedom from stereotypes, from arbitrary classification, from prescribed views. It is a freedom based on responsibility to our society and its future. The freedom of that society must be based on discipline, cooperation, consultation and mutual regard. It must be based on the recognition of human rights. It will be built on the foundations we lay down now. That kind of freedom does matter indeed.

Freedom is in your hands - our hands. Together we must work for it, nurture it, and one day we shall rejoice in it.

Mary Burton.