

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS by MARY BURTON

"FIGHTING OUT OF THE DARKNESS" OR MOVING GRADUALLY TOWARDS THE LIGHT?

The words of the first half of my title come from a member of a rightwing organization who told the Weekly Mail to remember "*that the Boers were the ones who invented guerrilla warfare. It's still in the soul of our people, that fighting out of the darkness.*" (Weekly Mail, Vol 6, No 6, Feb. 1990).

This is a sombre reminder of the legacy of anger, racism and bitterness which apartheid has bequeathed to South Africa - a legacy which will have to be reckoned with long after apartheid itself is truly dead. The white people who gather at rallies to support the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging and who attack black people and smash property come from the same cauldron of hate as the disaffected black youth who take advantage of mass marches to vandalize and loot. The militant cadres of Umkhonto we Sizwe and the well-armed factions of the white extremists could equally pose a danger to the precarious process of negotiating the transformation of the South African society into one united nation.

The heirs of this legacy of militarized conflict are the young. Will it be possible to convert their inheritance into one of unity and richness? We in the Black Sash hope that it will, but we recognise that there are no simple answers.

There is a bumper sticker to be seen on cars in Cape Town which reads "It's never too late to have a happy childhood." I believe that for thousands of young South Africans it IS too late. Their childhood is gone forever into a pit of conflict, repression and deprivation. The only thing to be done is to make reparation for its loss.

Are we at the point of being ready to do so?

It is exactly one month since the momentous February 2nd, when at the opening of Parliament the State President Mr F.W. de Klerk announced major steps towards breaking the political logjam: the unbanning and unrestricting of organizations and individuals, the amendment of the State of Emergency regulations, the release of some political prisoners and the suspension of executions.

It is less than three weeks since the release of Mr Nelson Mandela. He has been welcomed by rapturous crowds all over the country and has delivered a message of calm and expectancy. Suddenly the situation is transformed. The political terrain has shifted.

We welcome these developments wholeheartedly, and we welcome particularly the active presence in the country of those who are so badly needed: Mr Mandela himself, the others who were released before him, the Delmas trialists on the success of their appeal, and those political prisoners who have so far been released.

When a logjam is broken, the first thing likely to happen is that the loosened logs push and jostle and bang into one another, creating considerable turbulence and doing a certain amount of damage. This seems to be the phase we are in, but the skilled directing being done by both government and ANC representatives is minimizing the damage, and allowing hope to grow that a start has been made which will carry us towards the light - the goal of a just, united democracy, however far away it may seem.

The end of apartheid is indeed still far off: the "new" Constitution pushed through in 1984, which created the tri-cameral Parliament, is rigidly based on racial distinctness. What are to be the mechanisms for drafting the new one? When are we to have an election in which every adult among the 38 million or so South Africans can vote, including those in the "homelands" which have opted for "independence"? What kind of transitional government can be established, and who will establish it?

Even after these questions are answered, there is an enormous amount of legislation to be repealed, abolished or enacted, and a massive restructuring of the country's systems - educational, welfare, economic - to be accomplished.

Furthermore, there are still daily reminders of the repressive mechanisms which persist: the arrest of people involved in protest marches and demonstrations; the continuing powers to detain without trial; the scandalous revelations about the existence of the hit squads and the government funds secretly expended on the C.C.B.

At this Conference, we shall be considering what will be involved in some of the necessary changes, and what we can do to contribute to the process. Because of this shifting political terrain, and partly also because this Conference brings to an end the four years I have served as National President of the Black Sash, I propose to take this opportunity to look more introspectively at our organization than we usually do at our public meetings. We traditionally aim for an annual "state of the nation" assessment, but it seems that every political commentator in the country has been doing that since February 2nd. We do need to understand what state the nation is in, of course, in order to understand how we fit into it - but it is on

the second aspect that I want to focus.

Representing the Black Sash as part of its public face has made me acutely aware of the way it is viewed and the position it occupies. Because of the Black Sash I have been afforded the enormous privilege of travelling to several countries and meeting hundreds of people concerned about South Africa, who believe that we have valuable insights about it to share. Representatives of the Black Sash have participated during this past year in meetings or conferences in Harare, Lusaka, Bermuda, Amsterdam (the Malibongwe Conference), the U.S.A, Australia, Namibia and Paris. Because of the Black Sash too, I have been among the many Black Sash members who have been heartened and encouraged by our acceptance in a range of other organizations also dedicated to ending apartheid. I think every single member felt a special glow at the gracious mention of our organization by Mr Mandela in his speech to the huge Cape Town rally on the day of his release.

This high regard from many different quarters gives us cause to be proud, but we remind ourselves that it is based on the work done for 35 years by those who have preceded us, and by our gallant teams of workers; and we are conscious that it needs to be earned in each succeeding year, and by all our members.

Not all judgements of the Black Sash are favourable, and we need to be reminded of the criticisms too. In Washington I was told of someone who had refused to attend a meeting at which I was to speak, because he had no time for white South African women who claimed to work for equality and justice, but paid their domestic workers abysmal wages. Echoes of this view are to be met in South Africa too. Our response is that much of our membership does indeed occupy a privileged position as employers and that part of our effort to learn to live as equals with our fellow citizens requires us to address employment practices, particularly our own. It is in this regard that we have much to derive from working closely with other women's organizations.

This does not mean that there is not a place in the joint task of changing South Africa for an organization which at this time in our history is still made up mainly of women who are classified white and who are educationally and financially among the privileged class. The question is what its part of the task should be.

One area on which we should concentrate more is the need to make opportunities to talk to our critics in the white sector, to address the doubts, hostilities and fears to be encountered in our peer group. Furthermore, we have not made adequate space in our organization for Afrikaans-speaking women who share our political perspectives.

If we are to know how the Black Sash can contribute to the process of change, we should try to clarify our essential purpose. Our aims as set out in our Constitution are "*to promote justice and the principles of parliamentary democracy in South*

Africa, to seek constitutional recognition and protection by law of human rights and liberties for all; to further the political education and enlightenment of South African citizens and others. The organization is "non-party political and undenominational" and "shall pursue its aims by non-violent and peaceful means." In 1978 we passed a resolution supporting universal suffrage and we remain committed to the principle of one vote of equal value for every adult in a re-unified country.

We know this means we are opposed to apartheid. We know we are AGAINST injustice, exclusion and repression. We need to know also what we are FOR.

The 1980's have seen considerable changes in the Black Sash: some are related to our internal growth patterns, such as a steady intake of new members, and such as the development of our work in new geographical areas, as well as a broadening of the aspects of our work (for example: court monitoring of political trials; a growing focus on women; capital punishment; militarization and conscription). The reports we will receive from our Regions will once more illustrate this growth.

The political context has also influenced the changes in the Black Sash. In the early 1980's we were committed from the earliest stages to opposing the new Constitution and the "Koornhof Bills". It was natural that we should find ourselves in close co-operation with the organizations that grew up in response to the Constitution and with the umbrella organization launched in 1983, the United Democratic Front. Although the Black Sash did not seek affiliation to the UDF, we were able to maintain a good working relationship with its National and Regional Committees and affiliates. These contacts brought to a greater number of our members, a hitherto unfamiliar opportunity of working closely with community-based organizations. After years of isolation, we began to understand the significance of growing resistance to apartheid and the powerful influence of the banned ANC. Gradually a consensus developed in the Black Sash, which viewed the Freedom Charter of 1955 in broad terms as an extremely significant document, as important to South Africa as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The government's response to the resistance was ruthless and harsh. The 1985 National Conference held in Port Elizabeth marked a turning point in the middle of the decade for the organization, bringing a stark understanding of the extent of the repression in the area (and exposing delegates to Matthew Goniwe and Mkhuseleli Jack, among others). On July 20th that year, after the funeral of Matthew Goniwe, Sicelo Mhlauli, Sparrow Mkhonto and Ford Calata, the partial State of Emergency was announced. When in 1986 the Black Sash Headquarters moved to the Cape Western Region, it had barely three months to settle in before the nationwide State of Emergency was proclaimed on June 12th.

In spite of state repression, or perhaps because of it, we strove to maintain contact with the organizations which increasingly

came to articulate the beliefs of the banned African National Congress. Our members gained the experiential awareness of what it could mean to work in non-racial structures with a strong commitment to democracy and unity.

Nevertheless, there also grew within the Black Sash many misgivings about the growing incidence of violent actions and the widespread evidence of an increase in the armed struggle. There were many debates about financial sanctions, academic boycotts and civil disobedience. The discussions about sanctions reflected the difference of opinion: on the one hand were those who believed sanctions and disinvestment would so damage the economy that the poor would suffer greatly and that white attitudes would harden; on the other side were those who argued that sanctions were the sole remaining non-violent pressure which could force the government to face the need for change; others also believed that since the mass-based organizations (and the ANC) were calling for sanctions it was necessary to support this call in solidarity with them.

These differing views continue to play a part in influencing Black Sash decisions, and they can best be summed up as the wish to demonstrate a commitment to unity and to support for the organizations that represent the majority of the people, in conflict with an insistence on the right to speak freely and to voice dissent.

The experience of Black Sash delegates to conferences where a large number of organizations were represented, has epitomized this tension: when issues were debated where they wished to express dissent, or even to raise questions, they were sometimes - not always - given to understand that divisions were not acceptable. The purpose of the meetings was then seen to be not discussion, but a show of strength, the creation of an atmosphere of unity.

We understand that building unity was vital if resistance to apartheid and to the increasing repression of the State of Emergency was to be strengthened. The Defiance Campaign required discipline and commitment. And as the outside world witnessed what the South African government had to do if it wished to keep itself in power, the external pressure was stepped up, together with sanctions and isolation. The influence of the ANC grew, and so did its status in the world as the representative voice of the disenfranchised majority.

I have no doubt that this was a necessary process and that without it we would not have reached the stage where the country is now. The State President's decision to unban the ANC and other organizations and to release Mr Mandela must be seen as a response to that unified resistance and to the international pressure which grew from it. The process can be compared to the way in which SWAPO was recognised by the international community, both east and west, as the sole and authentic voice of the Namibian people. In Namibia too, the independence which is about

to be celebrated might never have happened without the tremendous support given to SWAPO.

Nevertheless, the Namibian elections demonstrated that SWAPO was by no means the only party with support in the fledgling independent state. It has been extremely encouraging to witness the spirit of cooperation and commitment which has enabled the new Constitution there to be drafted so swiftly and with so little animosity.

In forging new systems of government which aspire to justice and democracy, it is essential that all points of view should be given due consideration. We wish to pay tribute to the steps taken by the ANC leadership in the Eastern Cape, in Natal and in Soweto to create opportunities for open discussion and for dealing with conflict. In Soweto Mr Mandela has met with leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement and AZAPO; in Natal his speech to the 200 000-strong crowd at King's Park last Sunday (25.2.90) stressed the need for an end to the conflict with Inkatha; and in Uitenhage ANC and PAC leaders have joined forces to bring an end to the brutal battles there. These are urgent attempts to reduce violence and competition. They will need support from all quarters, for individual leaders alone cannot reverse the forces which have led to the widespread "fighting from the dark".

There is evidence too, that there is a serious intention on the part of the leadership of the major organizations ranged against the present system of government to nurture possibilities of reaching broad agreement. Last year the process of planning the Conference for a Democratic Future was clearly designed to include representatives of ideologies other than those of the Mass Democratic Movement. These efforts were hampered in that case, as they have frequently been on other occasions, by the difficulties of transmitting that intent to the organizations' supporters throughout the country, while operating under a State of Emergency with many leaders in prison. Now that the major organizations are unbanned they are faced with a huge backlog of political organization and education which must be dealt with.

It will be a matter of concern for all who seek a successful outcome to the present developments to ensure that this can happen. Negotiations at the top by representatives of the different groupings will be an empty exercise if they cannot depend on the agreement of their supporters.

Negotiations are also unlikely to bring about lasting solutions if they do not recognise the diversity of views which prevail. Working alliances or coalitions are more realistic than attempts by the anti-apartheid political groupings to reach for a fragile and artificial unanimity. The government appears to be trying to set up a process in which it and the ANC will be the negotiating parties. This is a dangerous simplification of the issues at stake.

We must not minimize the difficulties for an organization like ours to decide what part it must play in these developments. Our own commitment to non-racialism runs deep, and it makes the organizations of the Massé Democratic Movement our natural allies.

Our commitment to democracy and freedom makes us recognise too the value and the rights of other groupings. Our increasing conviction that our task is that of monitoring and fostering human rights, rather than seeking political power or influence, makes us aware that absolute independence is essential for this role. We frequently find ourselves drawn by our desire to be an integral part of the mass-based opposition to racial and ethnic division into the temptation to throw our unconditional support behind the African National Congress. Yet we believe that the most valuable contribution we have to offer to the struggle for change is precisely our integrity and our non-affiliation to any political party.

We shall be discussing these issues during our Conference. There is a valid argument to be made for working within the structures of a political party. I believe that in the future many of our members will decide to belong to the ANC, just as those who have belonged the Democratic Party will continue to do so. I believe, however, that our organization, the Black Sash itself, should retain its 35-year long independent status, supporting issues rather than parties, and joining campaigns or alliances rather than other organizations.

In the turbulent times that lie ahead, no political party will be able to adhere consistently to the absolute principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. An organization like ours will best serve a future government that represents the majority of South Africans if it can uphold the ideal, regardless of party political constraints. It will do so most successfully if it reflects within its membership a broad spectrum of the total society, so that what holds it together is neither colour, nor class, nor gender, but common values.

If the Black Sash is to succeed in this ambitious task and to survive, we need to look very closely at what we mean by human rights and how we intend to foster and uphold them.

In my address to last year's conference, I examined the importance of the right of all people to freedom, to participate in electing their government and shaping their society. I argued that there was a crucial flaw in the National Party's plan to introduce certain reforms and improve the living conditions in selected areas (the oilspot technique), while at the same time strengthening the suppression of dissent: the flaw was that human beings have a deep-seated need for a degree of independence and choice, and that when governments are not accountable to the people over whom they rule, they are unlikely to address their real demands. The past year has proved yet again the failure of the State of Emergency to destroy opposition.

Nevertheless, a heavy price has been paid for the changes which have been won. The hunger-striking detainees, the arrested marchers, the Defiance Campaign's move onto beaches and into hospitals, the suffering of those who encountered the full force of the state in the days before the Sept 6th election - all these formed the coinage which bought the amazing volte-face of the peace marches marking the dawn of a recognition of the right to freedom of assembly.

We spoke last year also of the two-fold task which still faces us - breaking down the old order and rebuilding the new. The protests and demonstrations, the opposition to injustice, have been part of the former. What of the preparations for the building process?

The right to free assembly, to freedom of speech and of the press, to freedom of movement, to protection from arbitrary arrest, detention or exile, to protection from torture, to a fair and public trial, to a nationality, to equality - these are the "first generation rights" which have been written into constitutions and bills of rights in many countries of the world. The special definitions of these rights have come down to us most directly from the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the American Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Bill of Rights. In this century, these rights which limit the powers of governments and seek to guarantee the liberty of the individual against the state, have been written into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The drive towards these first generation civil and political rights underpins the work of the Black Sash; but we also know that social and economic deprivation is a denial of freedom. In a country like South Africa, with enormous disparity between the rich and the poor, attention must be directed towards the "second generation" rights - to social security, to education and training, to work opportunities and to adequate and non-discriminatory wages and working conditions.

The day-to-day experience of our Advice Offices and our rural work demonstrates how far we are from attaining these rights for all South Africans. At this Conference, we shall be receiving reports on the appalling administration of pensions for example. We know of the inadequacy of medical services. The whole country's education system, particularly the fragmented departments intended to serve black scholars, is in disarray. There is massive unemployment, much of it due to a lack of proper training, so that artisan skills must be lured from countries abroad, such as those of eastern Europe. The shunting about of whole communities of people in accordance with apartheid ideology has left us with a crisis of living conditions for millions of homeless people in urban and rural areas.

Some of the solutions to these problems lie in the political realm and will form the basis of the changes which must come. Surely we cannot continue with "own affairs", racially separated

health and welfare services and education systems. Our first task here will be to maintain the pressure to undo the bureaucratic and financial disaster of separate and very unequal government departments. Even when this is achieved, there will be great difficulties: the inequalities and injustices of the past have to be eradicated, and this will require major reorganization and also a considerable increase in state expenditure in these areas.

Then there is the question of land and housing: if there is to be any reality in the changes to come the Land Acts and the Group Areas Act will have to be repealed. Will new mechanisms be introduced? Who will have access to land for urban or agricultural development? And who will pay? The present government must not be allowed so to privatise the provision of housing and of services such as SATS, nor so to tax basic foods that these are denied to those who most need affordable shelter, transport and food.

We must develop a clearer understanding of how the essential reforms are to be financed in a future society. We must consider how to foster the growth in the economy which will lead to greater employment and will generate the necessary funds to provide protection for the needy and to redress the injustices and imbalances of the past. It is more than time that all South Africans should be able to feel that they share in the country's wealth - in producing it, in deciding how it is allocated, and in deriving benefit from it.

These socio-economic issues are the foundation stones on which the third generation rights - to opportunities for development, to a clean and healthy environment, and to peace - can be built. This is the edifice that we all seek to establish for the sake of the South Africans of the future.

These rights can be written in a new constitution, in a Bill of Rights or in specific Charters, such as a Workers' Charter or a Women's Charter, or by signing international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the International Convention of the Rights of the Child. This would be a great stride for South Africa. But more importantly, these rights must be inscribed deep in the minds of South Africans. Only by learning to place faith in them, to recognise that these are what protect and nurture the whole society, will we learn not to seek our security in group identity and ethnic divisiveness.

I firmly believe this can be done. I do not believe it will be easy. Anger and suspicion and fear will tend to stand in the way of change. The foundations on which our present society are based will be difficult to dig up, and it is by no means clear that those who hold power and influence are willing to let the digging take place.

All our efforts must be directed towards making sure that the false foundations are dismantled, and that the new society can be

built on a solid and unified base. The rewards will be immense, as we emerge from the darkness and move into a future brightly lit with the promise of common citizenship, guaranteed civil and political rights and an economy designed to meet human needs and permit the development of peace and prosperity.

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