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**THE BLACK SASH:  
A CASE STUDY OF LIBERALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA  
1955-1990**

THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF SOCIAL STUDIES,  
SUB-FACULTY OF POLITICS, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

TRINITY TERM, 1991  
NEW COLLEGE  
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## ASLIB ABSTRACT

### THE BLACK SASH: A CASE STUDY OF LIBERALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA 1955-1990

JENNIFER SCOTT

New College, D.Phil. Trinity, 1991

The understanding of South African liberalism in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly after 1960, has been impoverished by the scarcity of analyses of liberal political activity during this time. This study tries to redress this deficiency through an historical analysis of the Black Sash organisation, from its inception in 1955 until 1990. By means of a periodised narrative, this thesis examines the evolution of the Black Sash's liberalism as it encountered, and responded to, changing social, economic and political conditions in South Africa.

This study explores how the Black Sash prevailed in a political climate which was characterised by the almost complete decline of political liberalism. It shows how specific characteristics of the Black Sash's organisational identity, such as its white, middle-class, female membership, contributed to its resilience. It also shows how the particular focus of the Black Sash's activities, notably its concentration on extra-parliamentary politics and its nationwide network of legal advice offices, contributed to its political survival.

The thesis also illustrates how attempts to articulate liberal values in South Africa involved the Black Sash in a process of political evolution, where experience and debate contributed to the development of its political identity. The Black Sash sustained an ongoing critique of its liberalism, reinterpreting and adapting traditional liberal concepts so that they more accurately reflected its evolving understanding of the liberal ideal in the South African context.

This study concludes, that the experience of the Black Sash shows that liberalism can provide a flexible and dynamic framework for political activity, that may well be more relevant to modern South Africa than has generally been assumed.

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## ABBREVIATIONS USED IN TEXT

AFRA	- Association for Rural Advancement
AHAC	- Alexandra Hostels Action Committee
ANC	- African National Congress
ANCWL	- African National Congress Women's League
ARM	- Armed Resistance Movement
AZAPO	- Azanian People's Organisation
BAAB	- Bantu Affairs Administration Board
BAD	- Bantu Administration and Development
BC	- Black Consciousness
BCP	- Black Community Programme
CATAPAW	- Cape Association to Abolish Passes for African Women
CI	- Christian Institute
CLPP	- Coloured Labour Preference Policy
CNE	- Christian National Education
OOD	- Congress of Democrats
COSATU	- Congress of South African Trade Unions
CP	- Conservative Party
DPSC	- Detainees Parents' Support Committee
DWEP	- Domestic Workers' and Employers' Programme
ECC	- End Conscription Campaign
ERAB	- East Rand Administration Board
FAK	- Federasie vir Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings
FSAW	- Federation of South African Women
FOSATU	- Federation of South African Trade Unions
HNP	- Herstigde Nasionale Party
JODAC	- Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee
MK	- uMkhonto we Sizwe
MPC	- Member of Provincial Council
NAD	- Native Affairs Department
NIC	- Natal Indian Congress
NLAA	- Native Laws Amendment Act
NP	- National Party (prior to 1949 the Herstigde Nasionale Party)
NRP	- New Republic Party
NUSAS	- National Union of South African Students
PAC	- Pan Africanist Congress
PACSA	- Pietermaritzburg Association for Christian Social Awareness
PFP	- Progressive Federal Party
PRP	- Progressive Reform Party

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PFP	- Progressive Federal Party
PRP	- Progressive Reform Party

PSC	- Program for Social Change
PWW	- Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging
RSC	- Regional Services Council
SABC	- South African Broadcasting Corporation
SACBC	- South African Catholic Bishops' Conference
SACC	- South African Council of Churches
SACP	- South African Communist Party
SACTU	- South African Congress of Trade Unions
SADF	- South African Defence Force
SADPSA	- Society for the Abolition of the Death Penalty in South Africa
SAIRR	- South African Institute of Race Relations
SAP	- South African Party
SASO	- South African Students' Organisation
SALDRU	- South African Labour Development Research Unit
S.E.R.F.	- Sharpeville and Emergency Relief Fund
SPP	- Surplus Peoples Project
SPRO-CAS-	Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society
SWAPO	- South West African People's Organisation
TRAC	- Transvaal Rural Action Committee
TIC	- Transvaal Indian Congress
UCM	- University Christian Movement
UP	- United Party
WRAB	- West Rand Administration Board

## INTRODUCTION:

Scholarship on liberalism in South Africa in the post-war period has tended to take one of two main approaches. The first has been a concern with the detailed historical analysis of political liberalism, in order to understand how it manifests in the South African context. The other, more predominant approach has been an analysis of liberal theory and its application to South Africa.

The relatively few detailed historical analyses of liberalism in the post-war period are dominated by the work of Janet Robertson<sup>1</sup> and Paul Rich.<sup>2</sup> Both these writers trace the fortunes of the nineteenth-century "Cape liberal tradition" as it encountered the challenges of the twentieth century, including those of industrialisation, segregation, nationalism, authoritarianism and apartheid.

The Cape liberal tradition originated in the mid-nineteenth century, primarily as a strategy by colonial administrators and politicians for the political co-optation of certain economic sectors of the Coloured<sup>3</sup> and African populations.<sup>4</sup> By the turn of the century, Cape liberalism had become characterised by the advocacy

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, J. Liberalism in South Africa 1848-1963 Oxford: Clarendon, 1971

<sup>2</sup>Rich, P.B. White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism 1921-1960 Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984

<sup>3</sup>The use of racial terminology in this thesis is in the interests of historical accuracy only and does not imply endorsement of these forms of categorisation.

<sup>4</sup>Trapido, S. "The Friends of the Natives': Merchants, peasants and the political and ideological structure of liberalism in the Cape, 1854-1910" in Marks, S. and Atmore, A. (eds) Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa London: Longman, 1980

of the incorporation of "non-Europeans" into systems of government on the basis of "civilisation". This "civilisation" had two dimensions, social and economic, with liberal delegates to the National Convention of 1908-1909, arguing for a Union franchise restricted on educational and financial, but not racial, grounds.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Cape liberal tradition became associated primarily with the notion of "trusteeship" or guardianship, in which "non-Europeans" were guided towards the assimilation of European culture. Trusteeship was incorporated into South African politics after 1910 by J.C. Smuts, who joined the Covenant of the League of Nations in believing that "the lot, the advancement, the upliftment of the backward peoples is the sacred trust of civilisation".<sup>5</sup> At an extra-parliamentary level, trusteeship (strongly influenced by mission Christianity) was espoused by a small but significant group of South African liberals, who concentrated on addressing specific social issues and on providing means whereby blacks could assimilate European culture

For Paul Rich in particular, the post-war period is seen as signalling the extinction of the Cape liberal tradition, with the formation of the Liberal Party in 1953 serving as its swansong.

Rich thus argues:

the development of the Liberal Party after 1953 was only a somewhat tardy and defensive reaction by liberals concerned with the political consequences of the government's exclusive nationalism and an attempt to try to revive as much as possible of the old

<sup>5</sup>Smuts, J.C. The Basis of Trusteeship in African Native Policy Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1942 p7

Cape liberal tradition's interest in the incorporation of at least the educated African minorities in a single homogeneous State.<sup>6</sup>

Janet Robertson has been less dismissive, acknowledging that after 1953 the Liberal Party was the vehicle for significant developments in liberalism beyond the Cape liberal framework. However, she also concludes that, by the early 1960s (a period characterised by the radicalisation of resistance and the political triumph of nationalism), liberalism was a spent political force in South Africa. Although a recent study by David Everatt<sup>7</sup> has enriched both Robertson's and Rich's portrayals of the early years of the Liberal Party, there exist very few historical analyses of liberalism in South Africa for the period after 1960.

Despite the general scarcity of analyses of political liberalism in South Africa in the post-war period, there have been detailed studies of the Black Sash organisation by Mirabel Rogers,<sup>8</sup> Cherry Michelman,<sup>9</sup> and Kathryn Spink.<sup>10</sup> However, only Michelman's work concerns itself with the Black Sash in the light of political liberalism. Mirabel Rogers's book, published in 1956, is a straightforward and uncritical narrative covering the first year of the Black Sash's existence. It contains minimal theoretical analysis and does not construct the Sash as liberal organisation.

<sup>6</sup>Rich, P. White Power and the Liberal Conscience op. cit. p129

<sup>7</sup>Everatt, D. The Politics of Nonracialism: White Opposition to Apartheid 1945-1960 Unpublished D.Phil Thesis, Oxford University, 1990

<sup>8</sup>Rogers, M. The Black Sash: The Story of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League Johannesburg: RotoNews, 1956

<sup>9</sup>Michelman, C. The Black Sash of South Africa: A Case Study of Liberalism London: Oxford University Press, 1975

<sup>10</sup>Spink, K. Black Sash: The Beginning of a Bridge in South Africa London: Methuen, 1991



Although the book contains a wealth of historical detail, it suffers from its close proximity to events, which is clear in its tendency to romanticise the Sash.

A more recent book on the Black Sash by Kathryn Spink, although written from an outsider's perspective and a full 34 years after Rogers's book, also tends to adopt a romanticised rather than scholarly approach. Although she notes that the Black Sash had emerged in the late 1980s as a "human rights" organisation, Spink does not analyse the Sash in terms of political liberalism, with her study as a whole lacking a coherent theoretical framework.

In contrast to the work of Rogers and Spink, Cherry Michelman has produced a far more rigorous study of the Black Sash, covering the years 1955-1969. This work explicitly approaches the Sash as a liberal organisation. However, Michelman's study rests on the assumption that the liberalism of the Black Sash and organisations like it (including the South African Institute of Race Relations, the National Union of South African Students and the Progressive Federal Party) can be seen as essentially congruent with the prevailing form of "Western" liberalism. Michelman thus constructs the "liberal establishment" in South Africa as the outpost of a relative, unambiguous and generalised form of Anglo-American liberal morality. In keeping with this, she confesses to a "strong personal sympathy with its aims and principles."<sup>11</sup>

As a result of her relatively static and undifferentiated construction of "liberalism", Michelman's study of the Black Sash

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<sup>11</sup>Michelman, C. The Black Sash, op. cit. p10

does not offer strong conclusions regarding South African liberalism as such. Michelman does acknowledge that the so-called "liberal establishment" has difficulties expressing liberalism in the South African context. However, she does not pursue this theme towards conclusions regarding an indigenous South African liberalism, despite the fact that her research leads her in this direction. This means that although Michelman's study contains valuable historical material on the Black Sash, particularly in the years 1955-1959, it must be seen as relatively peripheral to the general corpus of historical analyses of South African liberalism.

In contrast to the paucity of scholarship on liberal activism, the study of liberal theory and its relationship to South Africa has dominated writing on South African liberalism in the post-war period. Perhaps the most obvious reason for its pre-eminence over more historically detailed writing, was the decline in the political fortunes of South African liberalism after 1960, which has been seen as so decisive by both Robertson and Rich. This apparent extinction of liberal activism was matched by a growing emphasis on liberal theory. Many of the individuals active in liberal and opposition politics in the 1950s and early 1960s retreated from the harsh political circumstances of the time towards the relative sanctuary of theoretical analysis, often within the confines of the traditional bastions of South African liberalism, the English-speaking universities.

Post-war analyses of liberal theory in the South African context were dominated by a concern to explain the "failure" of liberalism,

both as a political force and an analytic paradigm. Some liberals, many of whom had had personal experience of the demise of liberalism after 1960, suggested that political liberalism was, for one reason or another, historically misplaced in South Africa. Many of these theorists adopted a "pluralist" model to describe how high levels of racial conflict in South Africa had overwhelmed the liberal enterprise.

The theories of "social and cultural" pluralism that were advanced by writers like Smith, Kuper and Van den Berghe<sup>12</sup> in the late 1960s and early 1970s, did not follow the tradition of pluralist theories of political equilibrium that had their origins in the writings of de Tocqueville. Instead, they drew on the work of J.S. Furnivall<sup>13</sup> to construct a "conflict model" of colonial and neo-colonial societies rent by powerful and irresolvable divisions along the lines of race, ethnicity and culture. These essentially descriptive portrayals of profound cultural conflict, left pluralists with a pessimistic vision of liberalism in South Africa.

The pluralist position had been presaged as early as 1939, by the philosopher and prominent liberal, R.F.A. Hoernle, who noted in his famous Phelps-Stokes lectures on "South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit":

Liberalism has been defeated in South Africa, or is, at least, merely fighting rearguard actions as it loses

<sup>12</sup>Smith, M.G. and Kuper, L. Pluralism in Africa Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969. Kuper, L. The Pity of it All: Polarisation of Racial and Ethnic Relations London: Duckworth, 1977. Van den Berghe, P.L. South Africa: A Study in Conflict Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1965.

<sup>13</sup>Furnivall, J.S. Colonial Policy and Practice London: Cambridge University Press, 1948

one position after another, because its representatives, sharing the limitations of the classical liberal theory, were blind to the spirit of racial exclusiveness and domination among Whites - which spirit was strengthened, rather than abated, by the experiences of inter-racial contacts which were so largely inter-racial conflicts.<sup>14</sup>

Hoernle's central concern in 1939 was whether the "liberal spirit" could be reflected in the field of "native policy" in South Africa. He concluded that this was possible under any one of three artificial social conditions namely, parallelism, separation or assimilation.<sup>15</sup> However, he was forced to admit that:

of the three theoretically possible escapes into a social, economic, and political order more conformable to liberal ideals none is really practicable....<sup>16</sup>

Many pluralist thinkers after 1960 argued that liberal activists had little hope of giving political voice to liberal values in a context characterised by conflict rooted in profound ethnic divisions. Thus the sociologist Leo Kuper, who had been an active member of the South African Liberal Party, concluded in 1977:

There can be little doubt that liberals are not viable in extreme racial conflicts. They have no mass following, they have no skill in, nor inclination for, violence. In consequence they are easily emasculated by government repression, or liquidated by extremists on both sides.<sup>17</sup>

Thus too, Pierre Van den Berghe concluded of South Africa's

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<sup>14</sup>Hoernle, R.F.A. South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1945 p67

<sup>15</sup>ibid. p158

<sup>16</sup>ibid. p178

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Van den Berghe, P.(ed) The Liberal Dilemma in South Africa London: Croom Helm, 1979 p21

liberals in 1978:

Theirs was a glorious failure. Indeed the failure was not theirs, but the system's. The liberal ideal remains viable; it was the nature of South African society that made its implementation impossible.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the general pessimism among pluralists and others regarding liberalism in modern South Africa, some theorists adopted a more positive attitude, and attempted to remodel traditional liberal institutional structures in the hope of allowing liberal values to thrive in the particular social conditions prevalent in South Africa. In his consideration of "South African Native Policy and the Liberal Spirit", R.F.A. Hoernle had concluded that, given the impossibility of constructing social conditions conducive to the expression of liberal principles, an elaboration and adaptation of liberalism in accordance with perceived historical experience was perhaps the next best alternative. Thus, commenting on the fact of white racial dominance, he concluded:

This whole development lays on all who still value the liberal spirit a task which has, so far, been unduly neglected, viz., to re-examine and re-think the ideal of liberty and the problem of its realization in the modern world.....What none has done is to re-examine, in the light of the experience of a multi-racial society, like South Africa, what liberty means and how, if at all, it can be realized in that sort of society.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the most significant attempt to reconstruct liberal theory in relation to South Africa after 1960, was the Study Project for Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPRO-CAS). Established by the

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<sup>18</sup>Van den Berghe, P. "The Impossibility of a Liberal Solution in South Africa" in Van den Berghe, P.(ed) The Liberal Dilemma op. cit. p65

<sup>19</sup>Hoernle, R.F.A. South African Native Policy op. cit. p106

Christian Institute and the South African Council of Churches, and strongly influenced by both pluralism and theories of Black Consciousness, SPRO-CAS's findings reflected significant shifts in liberal thinking. The reports of the various SPRO-CAS Commissions, which emerged in the early 1970s, indicated a movement away from "common society" and individualistic liberalism, towards recognising the political, social and economic validity of groups in society. SPRO-CAS aimed to transform South Africa from a divided plural into an open pluralistic society.<sup>20</sup> Its political solutions were based on federalism and the devolution of power, and paved the way for consociational and federal theories of democratic reform in South Africa.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the relatively radical nature of the recommendations of its Economic Commission, SPRO-CAS failed to integrate the dynamics of class development with the idea of ethnic and racial groups. It did not consider the critique of capitalism that had emerged within the Black Consciousness Movement, with the Economic Commission suggesting piecemeal reforms within an evolving capitalist system. The weakness of SPRO-CAS's economic analysis revealed the soft underbelly of liberal theory which, from the early 1970s, became the target of scathing attacks from neo-Marxist "revisionist" theorists.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Randall, P. Taste of Power: The Final Co-ordinated SPRO-CAS Report Johannesburg: Ravan, 1973 Randall, P. (ed) South Africa's Political Alternatives Johannesburg: Ravan, 1973

<sup>21</sup>Inter alia Lijphart, A. "Majority Rule versus Democracy in Deeply Divided Societies" Politikon Vol.4 no.2 December, 1977 pp113-126. Lijphart, A. Power-Sharing in South Africa Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1985

<sup>22</sup>For a summary of the debate: Wright, H.M. The Burden of the Present: Liberal-Radical Controversy over Southern African History Cape Town: David Phillip, 1977

Revisionist analyses of South Africa were initially presented as an attack on liberal historiography, notably that in the Oxford History of South Africa, which emerged in two volumes in 1969 and 1971.<sup>23</sup> The Oxford History of South Africa attempted to explore racial and cultural interactions in South African history, and many of its contributors had been members of the Liberal Party or were close to it in outlook.

The basis of the radical critique was that liberal scholars, and by implication liberals, failed to understand that the racial order in South Africa was not antithetical to economic development, but that it reinforced the exploitative dimensions of the capitalist system. The revisionist analysis was infused with the characteristics of a political challenge, with radicals suggesting that the traditional liberal faith in the non-racial imperatives of capitalist development helped endorse an economic system that manifested as apartheid at the political level. Thus Chula Marks noted in a critique of the Oxford History of South Africa that its liberal scholarship was guilty of the:

...general failure to understand the realities of power and conflict in South Africa, and the structural importance of racism to all white groups....<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Inter alia Atmore,A. and Westlake,N. "A liberal dilemma: A critique of the Oxford History of South Africa" Race Vol.14 no.2 October, 1972 pp107-136. Marks,S. "Liberalism, Social Realities, and South African History" Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies Vol.10 no.3 November, 1972 pp243-249

<sup>24</sup>Marks,S. "Liberalism, Social Realities, and South African History" op. cit. p246

Whereas early theorists like H.J. Simons and R. Simons<sup>25</sup> and Brian Bunting,<sup>26</sup> writing in the 1960s, had allowed race a significance independent of capitalist imperatives, they were succeeded in the 1970s by thinkers who were strongly influenced by theories of neo-colonial "dependency" advocated by writers like Arghiri Emmanuel, Giovanni Arrighi, John Saul and Paul Baran. This school included F.A. Johnstone,<sup>27</sup> Martin Legassick,<sup>28</sup> and the earlier work of Harold Wolpe.<sup>29</sup>

These theorists argued that South Africa's racial hierarchy could be understood in terms of its functionality for capitalist accumulation. They assumed a basic congruence between race and class, accepting the former as an "ideological" manifestation of the historical evolution of the latter. They directed their attack particularly against neo-classical liberal economists such as Horwitz<sup>30</sup> and Hutt,<sup>31</sup> opposing the "conventional wisdom" that the system of racial domination was essentially "dysfunctional" to the development of the capitalist system. These theorists argued

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<sup>25</sup>Simons,H.J. and Simons,R. Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950 Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969

<sup>26</sup>Bunting,B. The Rise of the South African Reich Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964

<sup>27</sup>Johnstone,F.A. Class,Race and Gold: A study of class relations and racial discrimination in South Africa London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976, "White Prosperity and White Supremacy in South Africa Today" African Affairs Vol.69 no.275 April,1970 pp124-140

<sup>28</sup>Legassick,M. "Capital Accumulation and Violence" Economy and Society Vol.3 no.3, August, 1974 pp253-291. "Legislation, Ideology and Economy in Post-1948 South Africa" Journal of Southern African Studies Vol.1 no.1 October, 1974 pp5-35

<sup>29</sup>Wolpe,H."Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid" Economy and Society Vol.1 no.4 November, 1972 pp425-456

<sup>30</sup>Horwitz,R. The Political Economy of South Africa London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1967

<sup>31</sup>Hutt,W.H. The Economics of the Colour Bar London: Andre Deutsch, 1964



that South African capitalism deliberately kept alive and thrived upon pre-capitalist formations like the "reserves" and migrant labour, and all agreed that the articulation of the interests of capital was through the state, which was perceived as unified.

Liberal economists like Michael O'Dowd<sup>32</sup> responded to the radical challenge by arguing that, while racism might well be seen as an ideological manifestation of class, the changing economic imperatives of capitalist development would eventually render racial classification and domination redundant. This perspective was developed by liberal economists like Lipton<sup>33</sup> and Bromberger,<sup>34</sup> who argued that at certain stages of capitalist development, aspects of racism were functional for accumulation, but that these were not uniformly beneficial to all sectors at all times. These theorists argued that the erosion of apartheid would take place as its costs to the various capitalist sectors rose.

As the "radical-liberal" debate developed, it became clear that the divisions between the two sides were not as deep as the intensity of the debate suggested. Lipton in particular, had by the mid-1980s, developed a construction of South African capitalism that implicitly recognised many revisionist assumptions about the relationship between political and economic orders. Furthermore,

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<sup>32</sup>O'Dowd, M. "South Africa in the light of the Stages of Economic Growth" in Leftwich, A. (ed) South Africa: Economic Growth and Political Change London: Allison and Busby, 1974

<sup>33</sup>Lipton, M. "The Debate About South Africa: Neo-Marxists and neo-liberals" African Affairs Vol.78 no.310 January, 1979 pp57-80. Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa, 1910-1986 Aldershot: Gower, 1985

<sup>34</sup>Bromberger, N. "Economic Growth and Political Change in South Africa" in Leftwich, A. (ed) South Africa op. cit.

revisionist thinkers in the late 1970s such as Wolpe,<sup>35</sup> Davies, Kaplan, Morris and O'Meara<sup>36</sup> began to reconsider earlier categorisations of the South African state as the instrument of capital. Drawing on the work of Nicos Poulantzas, these writers suggested that not only might capitalist interests come into conflict with each other, but that ideological categories like race might also have an independent political role.

Despite the steady trend towards integration of many of the perspectives held by liberal and revisionist theorists, particularly at an economic level, the revisionist attack had severely damaged the legitimacy of South African liberalism. Many liberals and others inferred from the revisionist critique that liberalism was a misguided and potentially harmful political approach. As Douglas Irvine noted in 1986:

Liberals in South Africa are often accused of innocence - that is when more sinister motives are not being imputed to them. It has been said that they do not understand the dynamics of history, the imperatives of economics, or the strategic devices of power.<sup>37</sup>

Having become detached from any dynamic and active liberal tradition after the 1960s, many liberal scholars became embroiled in the defence of an idea of South African liberalism which owed its identity more to its Marxist detractors than to its historical

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<sup>35</sup>Wolpe,H. "Towards an Analysis of the 'South African State'" International Journal of the Sociology of Law Vol.8 no.4 November, 1980 pp399-421

<sup>36</sup>Davies,R. Kaplan,D Morris,M. and O'Meara,D. "Class Struggle and the Periodisation of the State in South Africa" Review of African Political Economy no.7 September/December, 1976 pp4-30

<sup>37</sup>Irvine,D. "The Liberal Party 1953-1968" in Butler,J. Elphick,R. and Welsh,D.(eds) Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospects; Cape Town: David Philip, 1987 p120

record. They emerged in the 1980s, not only with a pervasive sense of moral inferiority, but with a significant degree of confusion as to their political identity.

One of the most substantial works of liberal scholarship in the 1980s was a collection of papers by leading liberals entitled Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect.<sup>38</sup> The concerns of these papers revealed a strong sense of political insecurity among liberals and liberal theorists in South Africa during the middle of the decade. Discussions of dimensions of the radical/liberal debate provided the dominant theme in the book, while other papers focused on the history of liberalism and on how the theoretical tenets of western liberalism, including Rawlsian theory, might be applied to South Africa. The historical experience of political liberalism after 1960 was treated sparingly. Douglas Irvine's chapter on the Liberal Party stood out alone as one such contribution, supported only tangentially by analyses of the liberal tradition in law, the English-language press and certain educational institutions.

This study of the Black Sash is an attempt to provide some of the historical foundations of South African liberalism in the post-war period (and particularly the period after 1960) which have been largely neglected in modern scholarship on liberalism. It is an attempt to locate South African liberalism in political practice during a period in which it retreated towards concerns with theory. The Black Sash offers an example of people who sought, in

<sup>38</sup>Butler,G. Elphick,R. and Welsh,D.(eds) Democratic Liberalism op. cit.

practice, to employ liberal principles in South Africa in the post-war period and in so doing, changed and developed that practice. Thus this study approaches the liberalism of the Black Sash as an historical process, rather than from the perspective of contemporary theoretical debates. It is a periodised narrative which attempts to convey some of the political realities of the Black Sash's liberalism in the years 1955-1990.

As has been mentioned above, the main reason for the decline in historical analyses of South African liberalism in the post-war period, was the demise of mainstream political liberalism by the early 1960s. Although this study claims to be a case study of liberalism in South Africa, it is clear that the Black Sash represents a particular mutation of more conventional forms of South African liberalism. The mere fact of its organisational survival in the midst of the decline of liberal politics is testimony to its unique qualities and characteristics. However, as this study also shows, the experience of the Black Sash offers some insight into the nature of liberal activism after 1955 and into the more general relevance of liberal theory and practice to South Africa, in the period under study and in the future.

## **CHAPTER I:**

### **THE WOMEN'S DEFENCE OF THE CONSTITUTION LEAGUE: 1955-1956**

#### INTRODUCTION:

The Black Sash of South Africa began its existence as a pressure group called the Women's Defence of the Constitution League, which was formed to oppose the Senate Bill of 1955. The League was symptomatic of a reaction by a large sector of the white population to the ideology of Christian-nationalism, which had helped the National Party (NP) to win victories in the 1948 and 1953 general elections. The League initially drew its support from white women who, in the political climate of the mid-1950s, believed that Christian-nationalism posed a considerable cultural, economic and political threat.

#### THE POLITICAL TRIUMPH OF AFRIKANER NATIONALISM:

##### THE FOUNDATIONS OF AFRIKANER NATIONALISM:

The rise of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa in the early years of the twentieth century, was primarily a reaction to the dislocating and impoverishing effects of emerging capitalist relations on many sectors of the Afrikaner-speaking population. The turn of the century had marked the beginning of the proletarianisation of the Afrikaner. The Anglo-Boer War, disease, drought, the rationalisation of capitalist agriculture, and the effects of the Depression, resulted in an exodus of Afrikaners from the land. They migrated to the cities, particularly towns on the

Reef and Johannesburg, where the mining industry was centered.<sup>1</sup>

In 1924, General J.B.M. Hertzog's National Party won a general election in a "pact" with the small Labour Party. This new Pact government focused on domestic industrial protection, the subsidisation of Afrikaans-dominated agriculture, and the protection of the privileged status of white workers. The National Party's broad anti-imperialist and nationalistic ideological focus reflected the historical experience of economic dispossession and dislocation of much of its Afrikaans constituency.

The demise of the Pact government was precipitated by Hertzog's attempt to assert South Africa's political and economic independence by refusing to follow Britain off the gold standard in 1931. However, this decision ultimately increased costs for both mining and agricultural capital, and helped precipitate political crises for both the ruling NP and the opposition South African Party (SAP). In 1932 Hertzog left the gold standard and in 1933 a coalition was formed between the National Party and J.C. Smuts's SAP. In June 1934, Hertzog's followers "fused" with Smuts's to form the United South African National Party. However, a rump of National Party supporters, resisted fusion with what they considered was the Party of imperial capital, and formed the **Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party (GNP)** under D.F. Malan, who had been leader of the National Party in the Cape Province.

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<sup>1</sup>Grosskopf, J.F.W. Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus Economic Report, Carnegie Enquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa, Stellenbosch: 1932 p185

The affiliation of Hertzog and his followers to the new United Party (UP), created the opportunity for a generation of Afrikaner intellectuals, active in journalism, universities, education and business, to take over leadership of the weak GNP in the Transvaal and Orange Free State and infuse it with their developing "Christian-national world view". The Fusion government only lasted five years. The UP split over the emotive issue of South Africa's involvement in the Second World War. Hertzog, declaring himself opposed to South Africa's alliance with Britain and in favour of a republic, left the UP and Smuts replaced him as Prime Minister. In 1940, Hertzog and Malan "re-united" to form the **Herengede Nasionale Party (NP)**.

The effective devaluations of the South African pound, and of the American dollar, against gold in 1933 stimulated a revival in gold mining and an expansion of secondary industry in the 1930s. The Second World War also had an impact on South Africa's economic development. It stimulated mechanisation and the use of advanced technology in industry. Secondary industry was boosted, partly as a result of increased demand from overseas. However, the profile of the labour force changed along with that of capital. There was a massive influx of Africans from the rural areas into the cities to meet the expanding demands for labour. The urban African population trebled between 1921 and 1946, with almost one in every four Africans urbanised by 1946.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>O'Meara, D. "The 1946 African Mine Workers' Strike and the Political Economy of South Africa" in Murray, M.J. (ed) South African Capitalism and Black Political Opposition Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman, 1982 p366

The African labour force had begun to be unionized and increasingly militant in the 1940s, threatening the privileged position of white workers. The white union movement failed to retain the trust of many workers, and was unable to resolve the dilemmas posed by the concern to protect white workers' employment and wages from black competition. Strikes among black workers became common and culminated in the August 1946 mineworkers' strike, when over 70,000 African miners stopped work.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, within the African National Congress (ANC) a younger generation began openly rejecting liberal principles in favour of an assertive African nationalism, which was articulated through the ANC Youth League, formed in 1944.

Since the mid-1930s, the UP government had become increasingly aware that the dual economy which had provided a supply of migrant labour to sustain South Africa's primary extractive industries, was decaying. The "native reserves" increasingly failed to provide the subsistence needs of their populations due to overcrowding, and impoverishment became widespread. The UP also recognised that the ascendancy of secondary industry demanded a restructured labour force, and consequently began to consider providing for a permanent black urban population, while continuing to recruit migrant workers from the "native reserves" and outside South Africa. The UP consolidated this position on African labour throughout the 1940s, with J.C. Smuts arguing during a Parliamentary debate on "native policy" on 16th August 1948 that:

"The Native is not confined merely to the reserves as his home, but he is part and parcel of industrial South

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p361



Africa....It has been that way for the past one hundred years and will be the course of history for the next one hundred years.<sup>4</sup>

Although the UP government's policies protected the interests of mining and industrial capital, they threatened to undermine white farmers' control over and access to their labour force, and the position of the white worker in industry. During this time, the popular perception of the UP as the party of "imperial" capital was sharpened as monopolies headed by English capital were strengthened by the UP's attempt to "rationalise" industry on the basis of low-paid African labour. In addition to experiencing acute economic insecurity, many Afrikaners felt politically alienated by the pro-British stance of the Smuts government during the war and by the fact that, after 1941, the UP appeared to soften on the issue of racial segregation.

As Dan O'Meara has observed, the drive towards Afrikaner unity in the 1930s and 1940s under the rubric of Christian-nationalism, served to unite disaffected groups such as workers, intellectuals, the petty-bourgeoisie and industrial and agricultural capital, under one ethnic banner, despite their disparate material interests.<sup>5</sup> Christian-nationalism was transformed from an intellectual ideology into a form of mass consciousness largely through the efforts of the Broederbond, a secret organisation formed in 1918 to promote the interests of the Afrikaner in South Africa. At its

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Kruger, D.W. South African Parties and Policies 1910-1960 London: Bowes and Bowes, 1960 p412

<sup>5</sup>O'Meara, D. Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1938-1948 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983

inaugural meeting on 2nd July, 1918 the Bond had declared itself to be:

A melting together of Afrikaners....To serve the interests of Afrikaners at all times. To bring Afrikaners to consciousness, to create self-respect and love for our own language, history, country and **volk**.<sup>6</sup>

The Bond began to extend its influence by consolidating Afrikaans cultural movements under the auspices of the **Federasie vir Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings (FAK)** in 1926, and set about directing the promotion of Afrikaans language, history, and culture. This included a drive for mother-tongue education, and the development of Afrikaans organisations parallel but separate to their English counterparts such as the **Voortrekkers**, which was formed as an alternative to the Boy Scouts. Perhaps the most dramatic attempt to mobilise Afrikaners around a common cultural identity was the 1936 celebration of the centenary of the Great Trek. A symbolic oxwagon trek from Cape Town to Pretoria captured the imaginations of Afrikaners across the country and stimulated unprecedented nationalist fervour.

The Bond also attempted to enhance the status of the Afrikaans petty-bourgeoisie within the capitalist system. At an **Ekonomiese Volkskongress (People's Economic Congress)** in 1939, the Bond, in alliance with the Afrikaans insurance-house **SANLAM**, embarked on a programme to mobilise Afrikaans capital. All Afrikaners were exhorted to contribute towards a **Reddingsdaadbond (Rescue Action Society)**, in order to build up a

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<sup>6</sup>Wilkins, J. and Strydom, H. The Broerabond New York: Paddington, 1979 p141

capital base for large-scale enterprise. The Bond also worked to co-opt Afrikaans workers to the cause of ethnic rather than class struggle. It focused its energies on the white Mineworkers' Union, and formed a separate South African Confederation of Labour, whose segregationist unions were successful in recruiting white manual workers in mining and in nationalised industries like steel and railways.

On a political level, the Bond recruited and nurtured politicians and provided ideological substance for the GNP's rhetoric. For example, the Battle of Blood River centenary celebrations in 1938, which were coordinated by the Bond, provided D.F. Malan with a platform already charged with cultural symbolism from which he could speak of a second Blood River facing Afrikaners where "Today black and white jostle together in the same labour market."<sup>7</sup> The Bond also played an important role in reuniting Malan and Hertzog under the *Verenigde Nasionale Party's* banner of Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

The republican ethos, although having its roots deep in Afrikaner cultural history, was given new potency by the ideology of Christian-nationalism. The republican ideal had been a rallying-point for Afrikaners opposed to South Africa's involvement in both World Wars. A "Draft Constitution for the Republic of South Africa", formulated by Broederbond members and published in Die Transvaler and Die Burger in January 1942 on the authority of D.F. Malan, had given a clear indication of the scope of Nationalist

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Moodie, T.D. The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975 p199

<sup>8</sup>O'Meara, D. Volkskapitalisme op. cit. p122

republican aspirations. The Constitution emphasised autonomy from British rule and gave the Afrikaans language priority over English. The Draft Constitution also emphasised the need for a State President with wide executive powers, the total exclusion of blacks from political power, and strict racial segregation at all levels.<sup>9</sup>

The policy of apartheid for which the NP government was to become infamous, was very loosely formulated prior to 1948. It was only in the 1960s that the NP evolved comprehensive plans for the complete separation of races. In the 1940s neither the NP nor the UP questioned the basic principles of racial segregation and white tutelage. Differences over racial policy primarily involved the extent to which burgeoning industrial capital should be nurtured, and capitalist agriculture disadvantaged, through the establishment of an urbanised African population. Whereas the UP favoured the creation of a permanent urbanised African population, the NP wanted to reverse the drift of Africans towards the cities to placate the fears of Afrikaans workers and to redress the shortage of labour in the rural areas.

Although NP election rhetoric in 1948 focused on the themes of "swartgevaar" (black danger) and "oorstrooming" (flooding/swamping), the Party was not simply fighting against black labour migration. The NP vision was far more holistic, and was dedicated to achieving the political, social and economic hegemony of Afrikaans-speakers in accordance with the central

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<sup>9</sup>International Commission of Jurists, South Africa and the Rule of Law Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1960 Appendix: B

dictates of its Christian-national ideology.

#### THE EARLY YEARS OF NATIONAL PARTY RULE:

Malan's NP, in coalition with Havenga's Afrikaner Party, won the 1948 general election by five seats. The new government immediately set about restructuring the economic system to ensure an increase in the supply of African labour available to farmers and a decline in the wages of urban Africans. The Group Areas Act of 1950 restricted Asian and Coloured trading to the advantage of white business interests, and capital in general benefited from the lower African wages. Government patronage extended throughout the civil service, military, police and state sector, with Afrikaners receiving employment and positions of authority in all these hierarchies.

The new government acted swiftly to repress black and trade union militancy. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 prohibited the furtherance of communism, broadly defined, and provided for restrictions on political and trade union activity and on the civil rights of "named" communists. Through the Bantu Education Act of 1953, the government took control of African education. These actions precipitated a realignment among opposition movements, manifest in the 1952 Defiance Campaign and the 1955 Congress of the People at Kliptown. At the latter, the Freedom Charter was adopted and the Congress Alliance was formed, uniting the ANC, the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses, the white Congress of Democrats (COD), the South African Coloured People's Organisation and the nascent South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).

Throughout the early 1950s the UP and the NP retained the basic features of their earlier discourse on the issue of black political rights. During this time, a small but high-profile group emerged, made up of a backbone of white and black intelligentsia, who constructed themselves as inheritors of nineteenth-century Cape liberalism. This group, which formed the Liberal Party in 1953, was dedicated to the creation and preservation of liberal values in South Africa. However, the Party's platform failed to appeal to either the white electorate or the majority of black South Africans.

After 1948, Malan's government was driven as much by the need to satisfy the material needs of its diverse constituency as to protect and evangelise the Christian-nationalism that cemented it into a political unit. Parliamentary conflict in the 1950s centered, not on "native policy", but on the government's extension of its political culture, characterised as it was by an assertive Afrikaner nationalism. As the NP's first term of office wore on, the UP began to fear that the new government would attempt to legislate the pattern of socio-economic development in South Africa to the direct detriment of non-Nationalist whites. As a result, parliamentary conflict centered on the nature and consequences of Christian-nationalism for non-Nationalist whites, effectively sidelining the emerging racial policies of apartheid.

The focal point for parliamentary confrontation during the 1951-1955 period, was the debate over the status of the Union

Constitution. On a practical level, the matter involved NP attempts to remove Coloured voters in the Cape from the common electoral roll. This became a vehicle for the expression of deep antagonisms felt towards the NP by a significant proportion of the white population. The Women's Defence of the Constitution League emerged as a political vehicle for these feelings in 1955, as the constitutional battle was drawing to a close.

#### THE CONFLICT OVER THE ENTRENCHED COLOURED VOTE:

The Separate Representation of Voters Bill, promulgated in 1951, was intended to remove Coloureds in the Cape Province from the common voters' roll. On the one hand, it was part of a series of attempts at political gerrymandering by the NP after 1948, which had included enlarging the NP majority by creating six new seats for South West Africa in the Assembly and four in the Senate. The 1948 election had given the NP a majority of only five seats, and the 50,000-strong Coloured vote could be seen as decisive in seven Cape constituencies.<sup>10</sup> The government's action was also intended to defuse the demographic time-bomb that many Nationalists saw waiting in the Coloured vote. The issue also involved the assertion of Afrikaans political identity as a specifically white identity.

The Coloured vote in the Cape was guaranteed in the Union Constitution along with the clause guaranteeing equal language rights for English and Afrikaans. These clauses could only be amended with a two-thirds majority in a joint sitting of

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<sup>10</sup>Goldin, I. Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa London: Longman, 1988 p81

Parliament. The NP ignored the entrenchment and attempted to get the Separate Representation of Voters Bill passed by a simple majority in the House of Assembly. This was not simply a blatant disregard for the mechanical checks and balances of an "imperial" Constitution. The NP contended that Parliament was sovereign over the Constitution because the 1931 Statute of Westminster had conferred upon Dominion Parliaments the power to amend or repeal any British Statute insofar as it formed part of the law of the Dominion. The government concluded that, as the Act of Union was technically a British law, it could after 1931 be freely altered by the Union Parliament. Thus when the Separate Representation of Voters Bill was introduced on 10th April 1951, the Speaker ruled that it was in order.

When the Bill was passed with a simple majority, the Opposition was outraged. The UP knew that its constituency could be counted on to rally around the issue of the Bill's legality, particularly as the NP action was seen to be charged with authoritarian menace. Rather than focus on the Coloured people's loss of political rights, the UP chose to do battle with the republican face of Christian-nationalism, and insisted on the primacy of the Constitution over an Act of Parliament. The UP immediately announced that it would challenge the Separate Representation of Voters Act in court. In so doing, it asserted its belief in the right of the courts to rule on the legitimacy of Acts of Parliament, a mechanism alien to the republican ethos. Delivering his judgment in the ensuing case of **Harris v. the Minister of the Interior**,<sup>11</sup> Chief Justice

<sup>11</sup> *Harris v Minister of the Interior* The South African Law Reports 1952(2) Cape Town: Juta, 1952 Appellate Division, pp428-472



Centlivres ruled that although the Statute of Westminster had removed the legislative supremacy of the British government, it had left the entrenched clauses of the South Africa Act intact. Thus the courts had the power to declare an Act invalid if it was not passed in conformity with the provisions of the Constitution.

The government's response to the judgment was to introduce the High Court of Parliament Bill in an attempt to override the courts. This Act transformed Parliament itself into a High Court, and the Appeal Court's judgment was duly reversed by a majority vote in the House of Assembly. The UP then challenged the validity of the High Court of Parliament in the Appellate Division in November, where the High Court of Parliament was ruled invalid.<sup>12</sup> Malan accepted the ruling, and instead turned his energies towards using the Coloured issue as a platform in the 1953 elections, hoping to gain a legal two-thirds majority in that way.

In the 1953 election, the NP faced a challenge from an alliance known as the United Democratic Front, made up of the UP, the Labour Party, and a powerful pressure group called the War Veterans' Torch Commando. The Torch Commando (TC) was an organisation established by a number of ex-servicemen in April 1951, and was in many ways a forerunner of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League. Although its identity was far more highly coloured by the war against Nazism and fascism, the TC drew on roughly the same constituency for support, and its interests and concerns were so similar to those of the League that

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<sup>12</sup>Minister of the Interior v Harris The South African Law Reports 1952(4) Cape Town: Juta, 1952 Appellate Division, pp769-797

the two were often equated in the public mind.

The TC based its protest on the unconstitutionality of the government's actions in removing Coloureds from the common roll, and focused on ousting the NP from power in the 1953 general election. The TC's rank and file was mainly comprised of men who had returned from fighting in the Second World War, only to witness the ascent to power of an anti-imperialist, republican, Afrikaner nationalist government. Many subsequently struggled to establish themselves in an economic climate infused with government patronage towards Afrikaans workers and commercial and industrial enterprises. The experience of the war had made many TC members virulent opponents of authoritarianism, and they resented the wartime activities of many Nationalists in organisations like the Ossewabrandwag, which had openly supported fascism and National Socialism. "Sailor" Malan, a legendary World War I fighter pilot and National President of the TC, noted at the organisation's launching:

Our aim is to defeat the Government, which is fascist in spirit.<sup>13</sup>

The Nationalist disregard for the entrenched clause on Coloured voting rights, not only signalled a dangerous disrespect for mechanisms the TC saw as integral to a democratic system, but also prompted many of its supporters to wonder whether the other entrenched clause, guaranteeing the equal status of English and Afrikaans, might not soon fall as a prelude to the hegemony of Afrikaners over other white South Africans. By 1952, the

<sup>13</sup> Cape Times 2/6/1951. Quoted in Robertson, J. Liberalism in South Africa 1948-1963 Oxford: Clarendon, 1971 p52

membership of the TC was well into six figures. The emotive nature of its rhetoric, tinged as it was with wartime stereotypes, provided many otherwise unpoliticised individuals with a popular articulation of what they had dimly opposed in the NP government. In Natal, the TC achieved a membership total that was over twice that of the UP.<sup>14</sup>

Much like the UP at the time, the TC suffered from a crisis of legitimacy because of an inherent contradiction in its attitude towards race. While it espoused liberal values in the defence of the Constitution, it was nevertheless clear that the TC did not wish to extend equal rights to blacks. Rather, it saw in the Separate Representation of Voters Act a threat to its own rights and liberties. Noting that its chief weapon was the vote, the TC maintained that the conflict was essentially a matter between whites.<sup>15</sup> The TC's attitude was such, that in November 1951, Coloured ex-servicemen announced their withdrawal from the organisation on the grounds that it was involved in: "The White man's fight."<sup>16</sup> When the UP was defeated in the 1957 election, the TC lost the main focus of its activism and dissolved shortly afterwards.

In November 1955 D.F. Malan, then eighty years of age, resigned as Prime Minister. He was succeeded by J.G. Strijdom, a dedicated republican who openly favoured white dominance or *baasskap*.

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<sup>14</sup>Carter, G. The Politics of Inequality: South Africa Since 1948 (3rd ed) London: Thames and Hudson, 1962 p322

<sup>15</sup>ibid. p309

<sup>16</sup>ibid. p309

Strijdom was far less concerned with constitutional restraints and procedural niceties than Malan had been. His first salvo in the battle over the Separate Representation of Voters Act, was to increase the size of the Appeal Court for constitutional appeals from six to eleven by means of the Appellate Division Quorum Act, thereby allowing the government to pack the Supreme Court with its own appointees.

Then on 13th May 1955, the Minister of the Interior, Dr. T. Dinges, introduced the Senate Bill. This Bill enlarged the Senate from 48 members to 89 and based Senatorial appointments on the simple majority vote rather than the traditional proportional representation for each Province. This meant that the government, having a majority of MPs in all Provinces except Natal, enhanced its majority in the Senate and could thus obtain a two thirds majority in any joint sitting.

When the Senate Bill was tabled, many of the UP's worst predictions regarding NP authoritarianism appeared to have been realised. During debate on the Bill on 27th May 1955, Prof. I.S. Founie (UP Edenvale), argued that *baasskap* was no longer confined to blacks, but was now being applied to a large section of the white population and added:

Today there is widespread reaction among the Europeans because they realise that their own freedom is beginning to be affected.<sup>17</sup>

A huge public outcry followed the tabling of the Senate Bill and in a prominent article in the Sunday Times shortly after the Bill was

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<sup>17</sup>Rogers, M. The Black Sash of South Africa Johannesburg: Polonews, 1956 pp23-

introduced. the liberal Arthur Keppie-Jones warned:

The Bill may make it impossible for the electorate to turn the present Government out of office even if an election went heavily against the Nationalists. It marks the twilight of parliamentary government in South Africa.<sup>18</sup>

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE WOMEN'S DEFENCE OF THE CONSTITUTION LEAGUE:

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK:

The Women's Defence of the Constitution League originated at a small gathering of white women in a home in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg on the afternoon of 19th May 1955. Six friends had met to discuss the Senate Bill, which had been tabled six days before. Two of them, Ruth Foley and Jean Sinclair, were well versed in the issues of white politics. Ruth Foley had been Secretary of the Houghton Division of the UP and a member of the Witwatersrand Provincial Head Committee of the Party for seven years, while Jean Sinclair was Chair of the Parktown Women's Branch of the UP, as well as having been elected as a UP member of the Johannesburg City Council in 1954. The women shared a strong "sense of outrage", and felt the need to register what they were sure was widespread popular opposition to an apparent attempt to subvert the democratic process in South Africa.<sup>19</sup>

The women had good reason to believe that their outrage was shared by many others. In Johannesburg alone, thirty-one petitions had been drawn up calling for a public meeting to discuss the Senate Bill, and many prominent citizens had publicly denounced

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<sup>18</sup>ibid. p13

<sup>19</sup>ibid. p14

the government's actions. Among the latter were thirteen Pretoria academics, who argued that the measure violated the basic principles of parliamentary government. They were part of a small but significant Afrikaner backlash against the Bill, that spurred opposition and helped create the belief among many English speakers that there was white consensus over opposition to Nationalist methods.

As far as the six women were concerned, popular opposition had to be coordinated into protest swiftly and efficiently, as the Senate Bill was to be read for the last time on 25th May. Jean Sinclair was aware that petitions had been presented asking the Mayor of Johannesburg to call a public meeting over the Senate Bill. She suggested that the women organise a protest to coincide with this gathering. It was decided that a silent march of women would be arranged for 25th May. Initially, the restriction of the march to women was an attempt to register the depth of popular opposition to the government's action, as women were conventionally a silent majority in white South African politics. In addition, it was hoped that their "unpoliticised" status would indicate that the protest was not intended to achieve advantage for any one political faction, but rather to oppose a fundamental wrong done to the entire polity. On a more practical level, the six women, having little time and few organisational resources, turned naturally to their friends and peers for support.

The women initially formed a loose organisational structure and immediately began recruiting friends to help with the march

through a cell system of telephone contacts. On 23rd May, the English press began to provide what was to become extensive publicity for the League's activities, by announcing that there would be a march of women through Johannesburg in opposition to the Senate Bill on the 25th of that month. On 24th May the women held their first public meeting, and on the following day over 2,000 marched to the City Hall, where they joined a crowd of about 18,000 who voted unanimously in favour of the motion: "Withdraw the Senate Bill".

The meeting was addressed by, among others, Dr. Agnes Hoernle, wife of Professor R.F.A. Hoernle, who had had a profound influence on liberal thought in South Africa. Dr. Hoernle helped articulate many of the women's fears when she stated:

...everything points to one section of the Afrikaans population arrogating to itself overwhelming power to mould South Africa to its particular liking, irrespective of the ideals and wishes of the other sections of the Afrikaans- and English-speaking peoples, not to speak of the millions of non-Europeans....We are not willing at this stage in our history to submit ourselves to a baasskap, a dominance which wishes to order the structure of our country solely on the interests of one group and in a way that will lead to disaster for us all.<sup>20</sup>

Despite nationwide protest of this nature, the Bill was passed on 25th May and became law.

Many of the women who had joined the march were profoundly moved, both by the surge of popular opposition and the words of the speakers. As a report in the Black Sash magazine of January 1956

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<sup>20</sup>Rogers, M. The Black Sash op.cit. p19

recalled:

Overseas newspaper and cameramen were deeply impressed, but not more so than the women. So deep was the emotion aroused in that historic march, so great the resentment at this piece of political cynicism, that a meeting was called a week later to consider further action.<sup>21</sup>

At this meeting, a draft constitution for an organisation to be called the Women's Defence of the Constitution League was drawn up. Ruth Foley was elected Chair and Jean Sinclair Vice Chair of the League. By this time, Foley and Sinclair had emerged as the leaders of the organisation. Sinclair decided not to contest Foley for the chairmanship because of concerns that this position might clash with her existing obligations and loyalties to the UP.<sup>22</sup>

The Chairmanship suited Foley's somewhat autocratic approach towards the administration of the League, which often inspired awe and occasionally fear in the organisation's more inexperienced recruits.<sup>23</sup> Foley's personal assertiveness was invaluable in guiding and sustaining the League in its infancy. Furthermore, she invested a considerable amount of her private financial resources into enhancing the efficacy of her Chairmanship, including embarking on visits to League branches nationwide. However, as the League began to develop a more secure organisational identity, Foley's style of leadership became too rigid for many, precipitating some internal conflict.

#### The objects of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League

<sup>21</sup>Anon "The Story of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.1 no.1 January, 1956 p6

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Jean Sinclair, Johannesburg, 19/4/1989

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Nettie Davidoff, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989



were specified in its draft constitution as:

To conduct propaganda and to enlist support and aid for the observance of:

- ✓1) Parliamentary Democracy within the Union of South Africa
- ✓2) Moral pledges and constitutional safeguards of the compact of Union.<sup>24</sup>

The powers of direction and management of the League were vested in the members of the Johannesburg Committee, and membership was opened to all women in South Africa who were eligible to vote. This membership qualification, which excluded all black women, was illustrative of the narrow scope of the League's early political vision. ✓ The women were fighting to defend the political status quo and their concerns at that point did not encompass the extension of these rights and privileges to those who did not have them. ✓

#### THE PETITION CAMPAIGN:

At its first meeting, the League resolved to organise two petitions. The first would be addressed to the Governor-General, Dr. Jansen, appealing to him not to sign the Senate Act. If this petition failed, a second would be sent to the Prime Minister, Dr. Strijdom, asking him to repeal the Act or resign from office. The preamble to the petition to the Governor-General was drawn up within two days, and in a covering letter to the Governor's Private Secretary, the women emphasised:

...we, the petitioners, are not confined to membership of any one political party, but are loyal women of South Africa, who are deeply disturbed by the attempt made manifest in the Senate Bill to tamper with the spirit of the Constitution of South Africa.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>A862/E1 Constitution, Sash Archives.

<sup>25</sup>MIC A862/1 File 1 "Letter to the Governor-General", Rhodes House Collection.

That weekend, the women worked round the clock to send out petition sheets to 290 towns in the Union, often to unknown persons, to be filled with signatures. The public response was enthusiastic, and within ten days over 100,000 signatures had been collected from women throughout the Union. Ruth Foley embarked on a lightning tour of the country during this time, visiting all the main centers and mobilising support for the petition. In Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and East London, branches of the League were set up to coordinate canvassing. On June 16th, after a highly publicised race against time to get as many of the signatures as possible counted, the Secretary of the League flew to Cape Town to present the petition to the Governor-General. Despite this impressive expression of opposition, Dr. Jansen signed the Act on behalf of the Queen and it became law.

The seemingly impossible time constraints on the petition campaign helped create a sense of dedication and even heroism among the women involved. Local and foreign press dramatised these dimensions and the League's popularity soared, with hundreds of new members signing up in the space of two weeks. The League's resources were strengthened immeasurably by this organisational effort. Many new branches were started in the course of coordinating the campaign, with the result that the League found itself established on a nationwide basis less than three weeks after its inception.

Having failed to stop the Senate Bill from becoming law, the

League decided to organise a large demonstration around the presentation of the second petition to the Prime Minister in Pretoria. Dr. Strijdom was unable to meet the women and appointed the Minister of Transport, Mr. Schoeman, as his deputy. On Tuesday 28th June, about 1,000 women, wearing black sashes in mourning for the "death" of the Constitution, marched up the long hill towards the Union Buildings in Pretoria. At the meeting with Mr. Schoeman, the League's delegation was told that the government had no intention of repealing the Senate Act. Schoeman related the Act directly to the Separate Representation of Voters Act and emphasised the need to remove the Coloured vote because the Coloured people would, "in five or 10 years time, obtain the mastery of the Cape."<sup>26</sup>

Ruth Foley then announced to the Minister that the women would remain at the Union Buildings for 48 hours as a mark of protest. That night, one of the coldest of the highveld winter, 80 women camped out on the lawns in front of the Union Buildings. It was a dramatic sight and the local and foreign media relayed it throughout South Africa and abroad.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF A POLITICAL IDENTITY:

The 48 hours at the Union Buildings gave many League members their first real opportunity to exchange views and to consolidate a set of political beliefs. They contributed to a broadsheet called The Voice of the Women in which, for the first time, they attempted to outline their convictions and the motives behind their

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<sup>26</sup>Rogers, M. The Black Sash op. cit. p35

actions.<sup>27</sup> Strong themes included a sense that many white South Africans were increasingly afraid of the arbitrary authority of the NP government. A woman from Natal, the only Province not under control of a NP local government, wrote:

In Natal we do not feel the same sense of dread that appears to permeate the rest of the Union - yet. But we know it may come: we know the days when newspapers can record freely, people speak their minds, and choose their own way of life, are numbered.

Many saw echoes of Nazism in Nationalist rule. As one woman from the Eastern Transvaal noted:

I went through years of hell in Germany. I have seen before all this that is happening now. I do not want ever to live in a country where arrogance and the "Herrenvolk" ideal can suppress the freedom and honesty of any group of people.

Tied in with this, was a sense of increasing polarization between supporters and opponents of Afrikaner nationalism which, to many of the women, had a disturbing racial dimension.

The League's remarkable ability to mobilise thousands of mostly apolitical white women in a matter of weeks derived in part from its use of particularly appropriate strategy and ideology. The organisation's basic ideological premise was that its political objectives were not "political" at all. Most of the women who mobilised behind the League believed that they were doing so, not to the advantage of any one political faction, but to defend the institutions that preserved "civilised" political discourse.

Drawing implicitly on the Western liberal democratic tradition, the

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<sup>27</sup> A862/N The Voice of the Women, Sash Archives.

League understood the Union Constitution as a form of social contract. It was for them the framework within which political competition could legitimately take place. As such, it was seen to be necessarily above internecine political strife, forming as it did a bastion against descent into a chaotic state where brute power ruled supreme. In her opening speech at the inaugural meeting of the League, Ruth Foley emphasised that the new organisation was concerned with "morality" rather than politics and argued:

The moral code is the foundation on which the whole structure of civilisation is founded. The observance of this code, which entails mutual faith and trust, has been essential ever since men agreed to live together; in fact ever since they were able to come within a stone's throw of each other.<sup>28</sup>

The League took pains to invest the Union Constitution with the status of a social contract. Most of the organisation's members, whose roots were in the Westminster tradition of government, were quite satisfied that the Constitution established and guaranteed an essentially just political order, characterised by democratic process, equality before the law, limited government and the guarantee of basic individual freedoms. The League argued that the Constitution gained its legitimacy as the "Will of the People" through its formulation by representatives of both the Afrikaans and English at the National Convention of 1908-1909. The organisation went to great pains to emphasise this point, particularly because the government constructed the Constitution as the work of the British Parliament. Thus the League noted in an early edition of its magazine:

The South Africa Act is entirely the work of South

<sup>28</sup>MIC A862/1 Reel 1 Foley, R. "The Link Between the Immorality of the State and Our Defence of Civil Liberties", Rhodes House Collection.

Africans, brought into being by South Africans and freely and fairly accepted, by overwhelming majorities by the four colonies that now form the Union.<sup>29</sup>

The League's insistent focus on "morality" not only simplified the issues involved, but provided a means through which women who were relatively unpoliticised could express their disquiet over what they saw as the chauvinism of the NP government. At the same time, because the issue was elevated above the everyday cut and thrust of party politics, many women who were traditionally politically passive found the confidence to express their demands publicly. As an early League member wrote of the petition campaign:

Many of the women who came forward so eagerly and so cheerfully to sit at tables in the cold, and to send out batches of petitions to their friends in every part of South Africa, had never before stirred outside their domestic or social routine.<sup>30</sup>

Another early member of the League, Nettie Davidoff, recalling the organisation's inaugural meeting, noted:

Not that they were politically minded, except Jean Sinclair who was a member of the United Party...the other women just felt that it was, what they began to call very smartly; "the rape of the Constitution" and they felt that definitely a harm was being done.<sup>31</sup>

Although the League's constituency had been politically inert, it was by no means politically powerless. Much of the organisation's early success resulted from its early ability to develop strategy

<sup>29</sup>"Fact and Fiction" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.1 no.2 February, 1956 p8

<sup>30</sup>Rogers, M. The Black Sash op. cit. p41

<sup>31</sup>Interview with Nettie Davidoff, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989

which, while appreciating the general passivity of its members, still utilised the powerful resources that they had at their disposal. Most of the women who were to provide the driving force for the League were prominent in the upper middle class white community and had extensive and influential social networks from which to draw support. In addition, the organisation's leadership was personally resourceful. Most of the first Executive possessed relatively advanced academic qualifications and were on the whole articulate and self-confident. Many came from an English political tradition steeped in the rights of the individual and had faith in the legitimacy and strength of popular opinion.

Many of the women who became involved in the League had the advantage of commanding public attention by virtue of their own or their husbands' prominence in the white community. Thus women who associated themselves with the League's early protests included Dr. Ellen Hellman, an acknowledged expert on race relations, and Lady Oppenheimer, wife of the Director of the Anglo-American Corporation, Sir Ernest Oppenheimer. Certainly any public protest by white middle class women was highly newsworthy and the League could count on extensive and favourable publicity in the local and overseas English press. Thus the Illustrated London News had noted that the League's first procession on 25th May 1955, had included "3,000 Transvaal women of considerable distinction."<sup>32</sup>

The women also had relatively substantial material resources at their disposal. Many had sufficient private financial reserves to

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<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Rogers, M. The Black Sash op. cit. p21

give their organised protest an important degree of strategic flexibility. Many were "housewives", and often had the time to devote themselves to League activities because they were relieved of the more onerous household duties by the plentiful supply of cheap domestic labour. Ruth Foley, in her first Presidential Address to the League, noted that one of the reasons the League was composed of women was that:

South African women, being blessed with domestic help, still have time to give to public service and political work.<sup>33</sup>

Many of the League's members had been involved in charity and welfare work, as well as in the South African war effort, and were thus familiar with organisational structures and techniques. Politically, the bulk of the League's membership was part of the UP's constituency and of a socially and economically, if not politically, dominant class.

From its inception, the League directed its protest exclusively at the Senate Act, and the passage and implementation of this piece of legislation defined the limits of its action for the first nine months of its existence. Strategically, this made a great deal of sense. The Act was a highly effective rallying-point because, not only was it an obvious legislative wrongdoing, but in its authoritarianism it also encapsulated the tenor of NP rule that many whites found so disturbing. Thus, while limiting itself to this relatively narrow issue, the League drew support from many women who were troubled by the sense that the cultural, political, social and economic order in South Africa was threatened.

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<sup>33</sup>A862/D1 Presidential Address, National Conference 1956, Sash Archives.



### THE ELABORATION OF OPPOSITION:

Upon their return from the vigil in Pretoria, the League's leaders decided to extend the 48-hour vigil outside the Union Buildings. So every working day from 18th July, four women (representing the four colonies that had signed the original Act of Union) stood in vigil outside the Union Buildings. In addition, it was decided that individual Cabinet Ministers would be "haunted" in their public duties by ranks of silent women with bowed heads and wearing black sashes in mourning for the Constitution. "Haunting" proved extremely effective, not least because of the social status of the protesters. It was naturally popular with the English press, which delighted in giving these activities extensive coverage and which gleefully reported, in derisive terms, any attempts at evasive action by hapless government Ministers.

"Vigils" and "haunts" were apposite to the League's political character and the nature of its membership. Convinced of the righteousness of their moral position and public recognition of this fact, the League saw little need to dispute issues and was thus comfortable with predominantly silent protest. Certain that the South African Constitution was an adequate and just form of social contract, they "mourned" its passing with sincerity and, believing that this betrayal of democratic principles was the work of a power-hungry junta, they had no compunction about having singled out only Cabinet Ministers for their "haunts". In addition, League members had the time necessary for these forms of protest and the resources to track down Cabinet Ministers as they went about their daily business. The passivity of the protests suited the

temperament of most of the women, and earned them a reputation for dignity and restraint. Paradoxically, the League was, in many ways, protesting from a position of power. It had many, if not a majority, of sympathizers in the higher echelons of business, commerce, the churches, academia, the local and foreign press, and even, in the early days, among certain sectors of the civil service. It was this authority that the League was fighting to preserve and the organisation employed the strategic and political advantages it gave to the full. ✓

In addition to organising haunts and vigils, the League also began an educational programme. The need to increase the general political awareness of both its own members and the public at large had become clear during the petition campaign, where it was evident that the majority of women had only a sketchy understanding of the structures and workings of government. The League began to organise a series of lectures on the nature of government, civil rights and the NP, in addition to disseminating information to the public through leaflets, posters, advertisements and public meetings.

Despite maintaining the close link between its programme of protest action and the Senate Act, the League soon recognised the need for a more elaborate strategy to protect the so-called "Spirit of Union" which had given rise to the Constitution. Its first attempt to restore the pre-1948 political environment was an effort to improve relations between English and Afrikaans South Africans. The League believed that the government drew much of

its support from an appeal to racial exclusivity and cohesion. It reasoned that if this nationalistic identification could be broken, the government would be without the legitimacy necessary to sustain its attempts to restructure the political system according to a republican blueprint.

✓ The League constructed an ideology of unity between Afrikaner and English in a wider "South Africanism" in an attempt to deracialise white political discourse. It idealised and mythologised the historical cooperation between Boer and Briton in drafting the 1909 Act of Union in an attempt to encourage opposition to the exclusivity of Christian-nationalism. As an editorial in the Black Sash/Swart Sero magazine explained:

We are saddled with a government composed almost entirely of people who are, for their own political reasons, determined to see that we do not recapture the 1910 spirit....The present government appeals to the meanest, least constructive elements in our natures. It exploits all our fears. It trades on our fear of the black man and it blatantly trades on the Afrikaner's fear of the Englishman.<sup>34</sup>

Soon after the vigil at the Union Buildings, the League drew up a set of six principles in which the racial issue figured prominently along with the desire to re-establish the pre-1948 political climate. The principles stated:

1. The League is a pressure group, to be used for the restoration and encouragement of political morality and the preservation of Constitutional Government.
2. The League wants to make people realise their personal responsibilities in a democracy. ✓
3. The League wishes to inform its members on political matters.

<sup>34</sup>"The Spirit of Union" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sero Vol.1 no.8 August, 1956 p2

4. The League wants to draw the two sections of the European population together.
5. The League is a bilingual group and wishes to encourage bilingualism.
6. The League wishes to disseminate news about its activities.<sup>35</sup>

By September 1955, the League had attracted a nationwide following and boasted a membership of over 5,000. The largest concentration of members was in Johannesburg, closely followed by Cape Town. The Joint Executive Committee, which had been set up at the end of May in Johannesburg, continued to act as a National Executive. It made statements on behalf of the League, organised national demonstrations and dictated the political direction of the organisation. However, Cape Town members in particular began to feel that this relatively simple and unrepresentative organisational structure was inadequate for the needs of the League. In addition, leaders of the League in Cape Town wanted more autonomy to embark on political initiatives in their region, such as protest activities centered on the Houses of Parliament.

In September 1955, the Cape Town Branch urgently requested a meeting with the Johannesburg Executive "in order to have a full discussion on policy, tactics and organisation".<sup>36</sup> The Johannesburg Executive hurriedly invited representatives from as many of its other branches as possible to the meeting. At the meeting, it was decided to affiliate branches in various areas into regions, with the main branch in the largest town acting as

<sup>35</sup>The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.1 no.1 January 1956 p1

<sup>36</sup>A862/Laa/1 Minutes, Conference of 11th and 12th September 1955, Sash Archives.

regional headquarters. The regions were to be: Western Cape, Northern Cape, Central Cape, Eastern Cape, Border, Natal, Orange Free State and Transvaal.<sup>37</sup> Each branch would pay a levy to the Regional Headquarters which would in turn pay a levy to the Central Executive. This was the beginning of a federal organisational structure that was to develop within the League. At the Regional Conference however, it was decided that the Johannesburg Executive would continue to act as the guiding executive for the immediate future.

At the September Conference, the League was at pains to emphasise its political independence, particularly from the UP. In an attempt to counter mounting accusations that it was a front for the UP, the League resolved:

That this League does not support nor associate itself with any other movement unless there is agreement of three-quarters of the delegates at a conference elected according to membership.<sup>38</sup>

Although most of the League's membership had their political home with the UP, the organisation's success depended on its strategic focus on the one issue of constitutionalism and its leaders knew that it would lose many members if it strayed into the complexities of party politics. The League thus avoided party affiliations, hoping to galvanise opposition to the NP by highlighting an issue that was of such profound "moral" importance that it would unite South Africans across party lines.

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<sup>37</sup>MIC A862/4 Reel 4 Letter: Hon. Secretary of the League to main branches 20/9/1955, Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>38</sup>A862/Laa/1 Minutes, Conference of 11th and 12th September 1955, Sash Archives.

### OPPOSITION TO THE LEAGUE:

The League maintained a hectic momentum through September, October and November, developing new forms of protest and concerning itself almost exclusively with strategy. The organisation was never far from the public eye and its membership and reputation grew steadily. The League's first real confrontation with opposition occurred at the Orange Free State NP Conference in Bloemfontein on 14th September 1955. It was widely reported in the press that League members were jostled and threatened by members of the Jeugbond (the NP youth) as they stood in lines at the entrance to the Conference hall. ✓

During the Conference, Dr. Strijdom accused the League of being partisan and party-political and commented:

They say they mourn for the Constitution. They mourn for the death of the United Party.<sup>39</sup>

In his address to the Conference, the Minister of Justice was, even more forthright, saying:

I want with the greatest resolution, to declare that this ridiculous action by these people will only make us more determined to go forward with the contemplated steps to put the Cape Coloured voters on a separate roll and to restore the sovereignty of Parliament beyond all doubt. ✓ Furthermore, it makes us more determined than ever to see to it that these people will never again come into power. And we shall, in spite of them, yet get a Republic.<sup>40</sup>

The League remained largely oblivious to the fact that to many whites as well as blacks, it had rallied to the defence, not of

<sup>39</sup>Quoted in Rogers, M. The Black Sash op. cit. p59

<sup>40</sup>Star 14/9/1955

justice but of vested political interests. In many cases, League members' intimate association with bourgeois values and English post-colonial hegemony, prevented them from fully appreciating the fears and aspirations that fuelled the nationalist ethos. For example, Nettie Davidoff, a member of the first Johannesburg Regional Executive, recalled that when she heard of the hostilities between the League and Jeugbond members at the NP Conference, she immediately telephoned UP MP Harry Oppenheimer, whose father was Chairman of the giant Anglo-American Corporation, to ask him to provide an aeroplane to take League women from Johannesburg to Bloemfontein.<sup>41</sup> He refused, but the League nevertheless chartered two light aircraft to carry reinforcements to the NP Conference protest.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the degree to which the League was associated with English capital in many minds was given in April 1956 by Conservative MP Mr. Blaar Coetzee, who had been part of a right-wing breakaway from the UP in 1953. He announced in Parliament that he had evidence that the League was organising an underground campaign of boycott against all Afrikaans firms, adding that one of the firms singled out for boycott was in direct competition with a company in which Ruth Foley, President of the League, held a substantial number of shares.<sup>42</sup> The League was somewhat compromised in this matter by the fact that it had discussed boycott at a regional level,<sup>43</sup> and by a motion tabled by the Welkom Branch for discussion at the League's upcoming

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Nettie Davidoff, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989

<sup>42</sup> Rogers, M. *The Black Sash* op. cit. pp220-221

<sup>43</sup> BC 688 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 12/2/1956, Cape Western Archive.

National Conference which stated "That we support those shops that support us." Fortunately Coetzee's accusations were based on obviously false evidence and despite an uproar in Parliament, Ruth Foley could confidently deny the charges. The Welkom motion was quietly withdrawn from the Conference agenda.

Criticism of the League also began to emerge from black commentators, such as Can Themba, a journalist at the Golden City Post. Commenting on a Sash protest which he had witnessed in Johannesburg in early November, Themba noted:

I went to the City Hall and found about 20 women standing around a big replica of a book. It looked like a funeral. I felt like a stranger - unwanted. That is odd, because one would have thought that the issues involved would interest a non-European particularly. But I knew that if, for instance, I had taken my sister, draped a black sash around her, and stood her before the book, some people would have thought I was showing low taste....<sup>44</sup>

As the League wound down its activities in anticipation of the Christmas holiday season, criticism of the organisation also began to come from those on the left of the UP. It was mainly directed at the League's neglect of the issue of non-European rights. In an editorial on 8th December, the New Age urged the League to extend its scope and to read the Freedom Charter which had been drawn up at the Congress of the People at Kliptown in June of that year. The journal of the Congress Movement, Fighting Talk, condemned the political programmes of the League and organisations like it, stating:

<sup>44</sup>Quoted in Rogers, M. The Black Sash op. cit. p130



it is not a return to the spirit of 1908 that South Africans need for survival, but a break with that spirit, a surge forward to a new spirit. The old brings only a constant variation of a dying theme... To many White voters, propositions of the extension of democracy to the non-Whites are unpalatable, unthinkable. But the alternatives are self-destruction.<sup>45</sup>

However, the League had not mobilised behind the issue of black rights and was not likely to change its focus to include these concerns. The organisation's position was captured in an editorial in the Johannesburg Star which noted:

Within the League itself there may be many opinions about such matters as the Coloured franchise, but there is only one view of the actions of a Government who do not stop at creating a bogus majority in Parliament to circumvent a constitutional safeguard which was the basis of Union and to which many of them had pledged their solemn word.<sup>46</sup>

The League was extremely wary of associations with organisations to the left of the parliamentary opposition, particularly COD and the Federation of South African Women (FSAW). FSAW member, Helen Joseph recalled that when she and Violet Weinberg joined the League at the 48 hour vigil in Pretoria because they wished to represent black women at the protest, they were regarded as extremists, and that all early attempts by the Federation to develop ties with the League were politely rebuffed.<sup>47</sup> When COD brought out a pamphlet on the Constitution in early 1956 which

<sup>45</sup>ibid. p84

<sup>46</sup>Star. 11/11/1955

<sup>47</sup>Interview with Helen Joseph, Johannesburg, 18/4/1989. Joseph, H. Tomorrow's Sun: A Smuggled Journal out of South Africa London: Hutchinson, 1966 p64

showed the emblem of the League on its cover, Ruth Foley hurriedly issued the statement:

I wish, emphatically, to disclaim any association whatsoever with the South African Congress of Democrats.<sup>48</sup>

Helen Joseph recalled that the League tended to shy away from both FSAW and COD because it saw them as communist organisations, although relations between the leaders of FSAW and the League were never antagonistic.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to the perceived threat of communism from organisations on the left, the League knew that its membership had not been mobilised on the basis of the struggle for equal economic, political, or social rights for blacks, and that to introduce these issues might be tantamount to destroying the organisation. The League understood the issue of the Coloured vote as primarily a Nationalist attempt to divide whites. As its magazine noted in early 1956:

The deliberate attempt on the part of the present Government to make this [the Coloured vote] a racial issue between White South Africans and not to treat it as a practical one, is to create an artificial fog under cover of which the main object is lost sight of - the seizing of dictatorial powers from a democratic people.<sup>50</sup>

## ORGANISATIONAL CONSOLIDATION:

### THE CONVOY PROTEST:

League representatives met at a Conference in Port Elizabeth on

<sup>48</sup>Rogers, M. The Black Sash op. cit. p134

<sup>49</sup>Interview with Helen Joseph, Johannesburg, 18/4/1989

<sup>50</sup>"First Things First" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.1 no.4 April, 1956 p2

29th and 30th November to discuss the structure and policies of the organisation in the light of its rapid growth and the changing political climate. At this Conference, a draft National Constitution was submitted and a sub-committee was appointed to examine and modify it. It was decided that until such time as the Constitution was accepted by National Conference, the League would be administered by a National Executive which would include Foley as National President and Sinclair as National Chair. Regional divisions were increased from eight to twelve, indicative of the League's rapid growth. As had been the case in September, much of the meeting was devoted to strategy, particularly publicity and education. Many League members were firmly convinced that ignorance was the reason more people did not oppose the government's actions, and the Conference resolved that:

The League make a priority of spreading knowledge of the Constitution.<sup>51</sup>

In the new year, the League did not change its tactics or to extend its political concerns. The organisation marked the opening of Parliament with demonstrations and announced on 31st January that members of the League from all over the Union would form a convoy of cars, which would converge on Cape Town at the same time as the Parliamentary joint session sat to consider the Separate Representation of Voters Act Amendment Bill, which would finally remove Coloureds from the common voters' roll. The potency of the convoy image in Afrikaner cultural history was not lost on the members of the League or the public. It echoed the symbolic oxwagon trek orchestrated by the Broederbond in 1938,

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<sup>51</sup>A862/Laa/1 Minutes, Regional Conference November 1955, Sash Archives.

which had stirred profound nationalist emotions among many Afrikaners. The English press immediately dubbed the convoy, "the Great Trek in reverse".

The convoy was planned and executed with military precision. Sixty cars departed from Johannesburg, meeting up with convoys from the Northern and Eastern Transvaal, the Reef and Pretoria on the way to the Orange Free State. There they met with cars from Potchefstroom, Welkom and Natal. A convoy from the Eastern Province travelled along the coastal Garden Route to Cape Town. All the convoys distributed pamphlets and held meetings and demonstrations along their routes. The convoy received a great deal of attention from the English and foreign press. It fell well within the tradition of League spectacle and contained all the dramatic elements of an epic journey. Very few places in the Union were able to remain ignorant of the women's activities, and local newspapers such as the George and Knysna Herald and the Queenstown Daily Representative reported extensively on the League's visit to their areas. The Bloemfontein Friend said of the convoy's stopover in the city:

Few who saw the vigil of the Black Sash women in Hoffman Square last night could have remained unmoved by the spectacle or failed to ponder its deep significance....these women of South Africa, voicing the true spirit of their freedom-loving ancestors, Boer and Briton alike, will continue to enjoy the wholehearted support, encouragement and admiration of all who still hold freedom dear.<sup>52</sup>

Eventually, 321 women in 86 cars converged on Stellenbosch, where regional representatives held an informal meeting. At this

<sup>52</sup>Friend 10/2/1956

meeting questions were raised about the League's role after the Separate Representation of Voters Act Amendment Bill became law. ✓ Some of the women felt that the League should try to broaden its scope, and the meeting finally resolved that the organisation would protest any Acts and future legislation which deprived South Africans of their liberties.<sup>53</sup> ✓ Although the League committed itself to opposing any political action that threatened democracy ✓ as it existed in South Africa prior to 1948, its members were not ✓ yet ready to consider the extension of the rights they were trying ✓ to guarantee for themselves to other South Africans.

On 13th February, 150 cars left Stellenbosch for Cape Town. At 11:15am they entered Cape Town: along the foreshore, and drove to the top of Adderly Street watched by large and supportive crowds. A mass vigil, which was to continue until the end of the first joint sitting, was started by Cape Western members outside the Houses of Parliament at 11am. During charged and often heated debate inside the House, J.G. Strauss, the leader of the UP, expressed the feelings of many members of the League when he asked:

What security would there be, after the passing of the present legislation, for language equality in the country? Where was the guarantee of language and political rights?<sup>54</sup>

The NP appeared more concerned throughout the sitting, with the question of black political power. Addressing Parliament in the course of the debate, Dr. Strijdom declared:

The Coloured vote to-day hangs like a sword of Damocles over the Europeans and that sword we shall

<sup>53</sup>MIC A862/1 Reel 1 Minutes, Transvaal Regional Committee Meeting, 22/2/1956, Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>54</sup>Star 28/2/1956. Quoted in Rogers, M. The Black Sash op. cit. p206

remove.<sup>55</sup>

League members stayed in Cape Town for three days, attending the debate, holding public meetings, vigils, and local convoys. When the House finally rose after the first sitting, about 300 League members stood in silent vigil outside Parliament. The mainstream English press was rapturous in its tributes to the women and their organisation, which had by this time been dubbed the "Black Sash".

The Natal Mercury editorial of 16th February stated:

Democratic South Africa today salutes these courageous women who have demonstrated to the world that freedom and honour are still precious attributes among the ordinary people of this land.

In contrast, Die Vaderland printed a cartoon of a coven of "black sashed" women, stoking a cauldron of "ergenis" (offence, annoyance).<sup>56</sup>

#### THE CHALLENGE OF LIBERALISM:

In March 1956 the League held several regional meetings, and it became clear that the organisation was beginning to shift its focus. The passing of the Separate Representation of Voters Act Amendment Act had been the climax as well as the closing chapter of the League's protest against the Senate Act. The organisation had lost its battle against what it termed the "rape of the Constitution" and along with it the object of its protest. Jean Sinclair, recalling the aftermath of the convoy protest, noted:

Coming up in the car from Cape Town afterwards we didn't know what to do. The Senate was enlarged and the Bill was passed...and we didn't know whether to

<sup>55</sup>Band Daily Mail 17/2/1956. Quoted in Rogers, M. The Black Sash op. cit. p200

<sup>56</sup>Die Vaderland 20/2/1956

pack up or what to do....<sup>57</sup>

If it had only been casually acknowledged before, it was an unavoidable fact to the women involved in the convoy protest, that the Voters Amendment Bill, which they had protested against on the grounds that it represented a breach of faith between the two white groups, was in fact a direct attack on Coloured political rights. As an article in the liberal journal *Forum* noted of the Senate Act protests:

the intense emotions do not really belong to the conflict with which they are consciously associated. They arise from the existence of another problem, from which the combatants prefer to avert their gaze....This is not to say that the constitutional problem is not in itself of supreme importance. The point is rather that it can never be resolved apart from "the question of the Natives". Those who think they can separate it from that question are entertaining a dangerous illusion.<sup>58</sup>

After the Act became law, it was challenged in court by the UP. The League, regarding the matter as sub judice, decided to temporarily halt protests against the Act. The organisation was then faced with the dilemma of whether to suspend its activities altogether, or to broaden its scope. The Johannesburg Executive seemed determined to extend the League's protest against political "immorality". On 26th March it distributed a "Statement on the Policy of the Black Sash" to the regions which argued that:

The Black Sash stands for morality in public life....Liberty is indivisible. If any one section of the population loses any of its freedom, then we ourselves

<sup>57</sup>Interview with Jean Sinclair, Johannesburg, 19/4/1989

<sup>58</sup>Kepple-Jones, A. "The Logic of Apartheid and Integration" *Forum* Vol.4 no.8 November, 1955 p14

have, in fact lost that freedom....there is one standard, and one standard only of political morality. A thing is either morally right or it is morally wrong.. It matters not who, or what section of our population is threatened with discrimination, injustice, or loss of liberty. we shall protest on moral grounds.<sup>59</sup>

League Chairman Jean Sinclair was in no doubt as to the appropriate direction for the League, and it was largely due to her conviction and strength of character that the organisation managed to evolve and avoid extinction after 1956. At an Extraordinary Meeting of the Johannesburg Region on 27th March she announced that, as the Separate Representation of Voters Act was sub judice, the League would direct its protest towards three other pieces of current legislation, namely the Deportation Bill, the Prohibition of Interdicts Bill and the Cape Coloured Voters Bill. She argued that now was the League's chance:

to broaden our protest, and not only protest against the Senate Act, but against the deprivation of all our liberties, which are being taken away from us one by one.<sup>60</sup>

Sinclair's suggestion was enthusiastically received at the time, although ideas as to how it might be implemented were not forthcoming.

The League held its first National Conference in Bloemfontein from 26th to 28th April. At the time it had over 10,000 members spread over 12 regions throughout the country. A constitution was accepted by delegates which ratified the existence of Regional

<sup>59</sup>A862/D2 National Conference 1956, Sash Archives.

<sup>60</sup>MIC A862/1 Reel 1 Minutes, Extraordinary Meeting of the Johannesburg Region, 27/3/1956, Rhodes House Collection.



Committees which would control the activities of branches within their geographical boundaries. A National Council was established, composed of the members of the Central Executive, the National Chair, and a representative from each region. The National Council was to be elected by National Conference and was to meet at least twice a year. Between meetings the Central Executive would act on its behalf. National Conferences would lay down the policy of the League for interpretation and implementation by the National Council and Central Executive.<sup>61</sup> ✓

At the Conference, delegates discussed the possibility of extending the League's activities to include issues that were part of the broad impact of Afrikaner nationalism on the white population. For example, many League members, as mothers of school-going children or as teachers, were disturbed at the nature of the new Nationalist educational system which was being introduced into white schools in the Transvaal, Orange Free State and Cape Province. Although delegates expressed dismay at the apparent standards and tone of this "Christian National Education", they were unwilling to involve themselves in issues controlled by Provincial Administrations.

Debate at the Conference indicated that the League was facing the question of whether or not to directly oppose NP legislation as such. This would have clearly identified the organisation's political agenda and would have eliminated the shelter of its "moral" crusade. Not only would this mean that the League would have to be more specific about its interests, but that it would have

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<sup>61</sup>A862/D2 Minutes, National Conference 1956, Sash Archives.

to develop a more coherent political programme which would provide concrete alternatives to NP policies. Furthermore, the most urgent issue emerging in South African politics in the mid-1950s was that of "native policy" and the League was extremely wary of incorporating thoughts on this issue into its programme. It had recognised that, like the UP, it was unable to stand clearly on the side of either multiracialism or apartheid, having always tended towards a gradualist, incorporationist stance.

It was during the debate over the "Statement of Policy" that had been pioneered by the Johannesburg Executive in March 1956 that the question of black rights emerged to reveal serious contradictions in the League's thinking and divisions within the membership. The debate was precipitated by two resolutions from the Johannesburg Region and one from Stellenbosch. The latter stated, "That the League should take a definite stand on the matter of non-European policy." Stellenbosch began the debate by noting that the question of white attitudes towards blacks had recently become an important and controversial one. It therefore called for a broad statement by the League as to whether or not it would extend its concerns to violations of the rights of blacks. The regional delegate cautioned that the motion "was not asking for anything more specific than this, as that would be "beyond the scope of the League" and "could divide our ranks as many had divergent views on non-European policy."<sup>62</sup>

The Stellenbosch resolution elicited only a vague commitment from the Conference to one standard of morality for all. However, the

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<sup>62</sup>ibid.

difficulties inherent in the substance of the resolution reemerged in the debate over the Johannesburg motions, which stated: "That we broaden our stand to include all Acts which have deprived us of our liberties and Bills which threaten to deprive us of our liberties." and "That this movement stands for one and only one standard of political morality for all the inhabitants of South Africa."<sup>63</sup> Introducing the second of these, Mrs. W.M. Cluver, a founder member of the Liberal Party, said that she felt she had to bring up the issue of the franchise. She asked that, in keeping with the ideal of one standard of political morality, "Should not the vote be given to every adult, to those able to use it with discrimination?"<sup>64</sup>

For the first time, the League had seriously to consider the logical consequences of its moral stance. It soon became clear that very few delegates were prepared to accept any extension of the franchise, let alone advocate it. Jean Sinclair tried, unsuccessfully, to defuse the situation by arguing that:

The Non-European is still in the process of evolution(sic) and development, and it is not our function to lay down a policy which would make us party political.<sup>65</sup>

However the logic of Mrs. Cluver's statement was relentless. Eventually, three regions admitted that they had not considered the "Statement of Policy" in this light, and delegates agreed that the League did not really understand the full meaning of "political morality". Finally, a compromise was reached. The League decided

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<sup>63</sup>ibid.

<sup>64</sup>ibid.

<sup>65</sup>ibid.

that it was prepared to accept what was morally right in principle, but was not prepared to advocate its immediate practical implementation. As a result the Johannesburg resolution was accepted as a "general attitude" by 44 votes to 0, with several abstentions.

The League had finally begun to explore the practical political implications of its professed liberal "morality". The struggle to articulate these ideals in the South African context was to occupy the organisation from that moment on. On a more immediate level, the organisation had begun to recognise that apartheid was becoming the most authoritarian and pervasive manifestation of NP policy. As a result, its activities came to focus less and less on the racial divisions between the two white groups and more and more on the suffering apartheid was visiting on blacks. In confirmation of its political renewal, the Conference delegates voted unanimously to change the name of the organisation from the Women's Defence of the Constitution League to that of the Black Sash.

In September 1956 The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers printed a reader's letter which captured the essence of the transition that lay ahead of the organisation:

You could not restrict your activities to issues concerning Whites and Coloureds alone without betraying the whole moral basis of your stand. The Torch Commando said that "what was morally wrong can never be politically expedient", but yielded to expedient timidity, as many feared you were about to do....As you enter this new and wider political life, you will, of course, shed some members, who were

prepared to fight for an all-white constitution (with token non-white representation) but not to incur the odium of standing up for non-white rights as such....You will also meet a number of new problems about which you will have, at best, very confused views....You are returning to the mainstream of Western Christian civilisation, which South Africa has deserted.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Letter from C.W.M.Geli, The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.1 no.9 September, 1957 pp10-11

## CHAPTER II

### THE CONSOLIDATION OF BLACK SASH IDENTITY 1956-1961:

#### INTRODUCTION:

The somewhat exclusive Christian-national political agenda which had distinguished the first few years of NP rule, gave way from the late 1950s to a more co-optive strategy, based on the ideal of white supremacy. Many voters formerly opposed to Afrikaner nationalism began to rally behind a government promising them security and prosperity, despite mounting black aspirations. The Black Sash was profoundly challenged by this consolidation of white political opinion in the second half of the decade. The organisation's professed liberal principles became increasingly anathetical to the immediate political interests of most of its members, who ultimately chose to repudiate the values enshrined in the organisation's liberal "political morality".

The Black Sash resisted being absorbed into the white consensus of the late 1950s in part because of the nature of the liberal convictions of many of its leaders. These women insisted that basic liberal values had to form the moral framework within which the business of politics was conducted. This allowed them to resist NP policy from a "moral" perspective rather than a strictly pragmatic one. As a result, the Sash emerged as a political conscience, distanced from involvement in direct competition for political power. This cushioned the organisation from the kinds of confrontations with the NP government which eventually

contributed to the decimation of most of the opposition movements of the 1950s.

The Sash also maintained its organisational momentum as a result of its experiences of the mass resistance of the late 1950s. Sash members who were involved, however peripherally, in anti-apartheid protest during this time, were given a privileged insight into the nature and implications of the emerging racial order. Some were motivated by simple compassion to continue working to help alleviate the suffering they witnessed. Others were alerted to growing contradictions within South African politics, which they felt they had a duty to try to prevent from becoming irrevocably schismatic.

#### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

In the second half of the 1950s, and particularly after its 1958 election victory and the succession of H.F. Verwoerd to the premiership, the government began to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards non-Afrikaans whites. The NP's anti-imperialist rhetoric, so pervasive in 1948, was replaced by an emphasis on the need for whites to unite to preserve the standards and values of "Western civilisation" in the face of increasingly radicalised extra-parliamentary opposition. On a less benign level, the NP government also attempted to evangelize its political programme among the broader white population through various forms of propaganda and social control.

White support for the NP government increased simultaneously

with an upsurge in extra-parliamentary resistance to apartheid among blacks. Mass mobilisation among black South Africans during this period was largely a reaction to the government's harsh enforcement of apartheid using legislation constructed in the earlier days of segregation and **baasskap**. The influx control legislation of the early 1950s had not differed greatly in principle from pre-1948 "segregation" policies, in that it was primarily designed to control, rather than halt or reverse, African urbanisation.<sup>1</sup> Only with the Promotion of Bantu Self-government Act of 1959, was there an attempt to integrate the control of African labour with a policy of territorial and political separation. Prior to the implementation of this scheme, the Department of Native Affairs (later the Department of Bantu Administration and Development - BAD) attempted to halt urban influx by enforcing the often inadequate pass laws with increasing rigidity and brutality. The combination of intensified pass controls and mounting urban poverty among blacks created a highly volatile political situation in the late 1950s.

Despite the legislative crackdown following the 1952 Defiance Campaign, black opposition had remained buoyant, and throughout 1954 and 1955 had steadily accumulated mass support. However, in 1959, after bitter internal debate between the Charterist and Africanist factions which had developed within the ANC after 1955, the Africanists split away to form the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) under the leadership of Potlako Leballo and Robert Sobukwe. The PAC, with its relatively unsophisticated African

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<sup>1</sup>See: Posel, D. Influx Control and the Construction of Apartheid from 1948-1961 Unpublished DPhil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1987



nationalism and loose organisation, provided an unsteady vehicle for the articulation of simmering discontent among Africans. PAC mobilisation over the issue of passes resulted in shootings at Sharpeville and Langa in March 1960, which were followed by nationwide unrest.

In the wake of this political violence, there were calls for a representative national convention from almost all opposition groups. This was indicative of a widespread loss of faith in the institutions of the South African state and a growing fear that these institutions were being subverted to the sectional interests of the NP. In December 1960, a meeting of African leaders in Orlando, called for an "All-in Conference representative of the African people" to agitate for a national constitutional convention.<sup>2</sup> This led to the Pietermaritzburg Conference of March 1961. The Conference was addressed by ANC leader Nelson Mandela, who announced nationwide demonstrations at the end of May 1961, including a three day stayaway, if a convention was not called.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time the Coloured community also began to agitate for a convention aimed at constitutional reform, partly in reaction to Nationalist attempts to create a separate political identity for Coloured people. In April 1961, the fledgling Progressive Party also called for a "fully representative National Convention". This demand was echoed by students and staff at Rhodes University, the University of Cape Town, Natal University and the University of the

<sup>2</sup>Lodge, T. Black Politics Since 1945 London: Longman, 1983 pp231-2

<sup>3</sup>Contact Vol.4 no.9 4/5/1961 p2

Witwatersrand, as well as by the Methodist Church and the Civil Rights League. The Liberal Party organised the Multi-Racial National Convention in Pietermaritzburg in April 1961, which called for a national convention.<sup>4</sup>

Attempts to encourage negotiation were soon shattered by repressive government action. Widespread police raids on 3rd May 1961, resulted in the arrest of key members of almost every organisation suspected of sympathy for the stayaway which Mandela had called for at the end of the month. The stayaway itself was greeted with the mobilisation of troops, massive police action, and legislation banning meetings. This contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of siege which led to widespread panic among whites.<sup>5</sup> Despite precipitating critical thinking about apartheid among some Nationalist supporters, mass resistance in the early 1960s intensified white reaction and it was not long before state repression had virtually eliminated black political opposition.

### THE INTERNAL CONFLICT OVER "LIBERALISM":

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LIBERAL CHALLENGE:

At its 1956 National Conference, the Sash had resolved to go beyond the Senate Act to seek out and oppose any future government legislation that offended its sense of political morality. Although this was seen as a victory by liberals, it was clear that for the vast majority of Sash members this was no more than another means of attacking the NP for its disruption of vested

<sup>4</sup>Horrell, M. Action, Reaction and Counteraction Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1963 p39

<sup>5</sup>Contact Vol.4 no.11 1/6/1961 p4

political and economic interests, and was not an indication that they intended an alternative to the pre-1948 status quo ante.

In the months following the 1956 National Conference, the Sash was hesitant and cautious. It was continually haunted by suggestions from erstwhile supporters that, having exhausted its function, it should disband.<sup>6</sup> The spontaneous debate that had erupted during the Conference over the issue of universal franchise had alerted the organisation to the fact that its political morality was potentially more radical than members had ever imagined, and it was wary of exploring further. Fortunately, the Sash was at this point a huge organisation with over 10,000 members and fifty branches nationwide. The work involved in maintaining this organisational structure was considerable, and many members were content to occupy themselves with non-controversial and sociable activities such as fundraising and organising local branch meetings.

On a theoretical level, liberals in the Sash tentatively explored the extension of its political morality throughout late 1956. In June, a Circular from the Central Executive to all regions noted that, at a recent public meeting in Johannesburg, Sash members had found it very difficult to answer questions regarding "our attitude to Africans".<sup>7</sup> The Central Executive went on to draw up a proposal entitled: "The Non-European Question: The principles that should guide us in evaluating any political scheme for the solution of the Native question".<sup>8</sup> The document argued that the integration of

<sup>6</sup> *Inter alia*: Letters in the *Star* 29/11/1956 and *Friend* 2/10/1956

<sup>7</sup> MIC A862/3 Reel 3 HQ Circular no.8, 13/7/1956. Rhodes House Collection.

blacks into Western economic systems gave them some claim to participation in the corresponding political structures. It also argued that the Western liberal tradition, "drawn from the ethics of Christianity and democracy", could not be applied selectively and urged members to consider that:

Every white man is to us different from every other, but black men are treated like ants, a mass without separate individuality. Yet we have seen the basis of Western civilisation is the value of every individual, and we are denying this by our continued regard of them only as a group.

This relatively radical but somewhat detached analysis was given substance by a Circular in October which addressed Sash activities directly.<sup>9</sup> It argued that, "to play down the loss of freedoms and to try to bring the Black Sash back to the narrow path of the Senate Act would be beating a retreat" and urged members to try to apply the political principles behind the Senate Act campaign to other concerns. Noting that there seemed to be "confusion" as to what this involved, the Circular suggested that the organisation should fight for "human rights" and "human dignity".

Despite widespread conservatism in the Sash in early 1957, both the Southern Transvaal and Cape Western regions began to radicalise their activities. Both were based in large urban centers where conflicts between black and white and the repressive control mechanisms of the apartheid state were starkly evident. Furthermore, the leadership cores of both regions were influenced during this time by broader liberal debate, particularly within the

<sup>8</sup>MIC A862/4 Reel 4 "The Non-European Question...." Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>9</sup>A862/Fbb/1 HQ Circular no.13, 3/10/1956, Sash Archives.

Liberal Party.

The radicalisation of the Southern Transvaal Region began with the Alexandra bus boycott. Alexandra was a freehold area, inhabited by some 80,000 blacks and located in the midst of the wealthy white suburbs to the north of Johannesburg, where many members of the Southern Transvaal Region lived. The bus boycott was in response to a penny rise in fares on the route between the township and the center of Johannesburg, nine miles away. The boycott began on 7th January 1957, with thousands of workers walking to and from the city every day until the 15th of April of that year.<sup>10</sup> Significant support for the boycotters developed among whites in Johannesburg, many of whom realised the dimensions of black urban poverty for the first time as a result of witnessing the protest. As the activist Ruth First noted:

Here was no protest by Africans hidden among the dusty squares of the segregated locations, but an army of protesters, voting with their feet, it has been said, before the eyes of White Johannesburg and the Reef.<sup>11</sup>

The government focused on crushing resistance through harassment, coercion and arrests, while boycott committees and employers' organisations tried to negotiate through the mediation of the Johannesburg branch of the Liberal Party. The UP, usually on the side of capitalist interests, equivocated, unwilling to adopt the mantle of liberalism in racial matters that compromise with the boycotters implied. Particularly at the parliamentary level, the

<sup>10</sup>Horrel, M. Action, Reaction and Counterreaction op. cit. p27

<sup>11</sup>First, R. "The Bus Boycott" Africa South Vol.1 no.4 July-September, 1957 p55

Party avoided alienating conservative supporters by remaining largely silent on what many of them saw as a question of white political authority.

The equivocation on the part of the UP prompted Jean Sinclair, National Chairman of the Sash, to resign as UP member of the Johannesburg City Council and from the Party itself. UP failure to back up the City Council's attempts to resolve the boycott was the last straw for Sinclair, who had become progressively alienated by UP timidity in the face of emerging racial issues.<sup>12</sup> By March 1956 there was a distinct change in the mood of the Southern Transvaal Region and with it the Central Executive as a result of the boycott. The Regional Conference that month specifically discussed the subject of "Enforced Apartheid" and the Regional Chair in her address noted that while apartheid "in its widest, loosest sense", was "the traditional policy of South Africa", a fair and just distribution of political power was the only real means of preventing a decline into tyranny and exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this movement towards a consolidation of Southern Transvaal's opposition to apartheid, political veterans in the region, notably Jean Sinclair, exerted a moderating influence at the time. Sinclair was aware that most members of the Sash supported the ad hoc segregationism of the UP and would be alienated by an openly non-racial stance on the part of the Sash. By 1957, Ruth Foley had begun to oppose the more liberal members

of the Southern Transvaal Region along just these lines, threatening to resign over points of policy on numerous occasions. Furthermore, even liberals like Sinclair were unsure of how to oppose apartheid without being seen to advocate what would have been, to them, an unacceptable restructuring of the prevailing racial order. As a result, the Central Executive emerged at the time as a force for reconciliation between liberal and conservative members in the Sash.

#### THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

With Southern Transvaal Region moderated by the Central Executive, it was Cape Western Region which took the lead in radicalising the Sash's political character after 1956. The region, which contained many Liberal Party members, became increasingly impatient with the Central Executive's cautious approach to political liberalisation. This led it to try to secure greater autonomy for regions within the organisational structure of the Sash. Cape Western hoped to limit the powers of the Central Executive and escape constraints imposed upon its activities by representatives from more conservative regions in the National Council.

Throughout 1956 and 1957, Cape Western Region responded to the vagueness of the Central Executive's political programme by associating itself more closely with liberalism in the Cape, which was dominated by organisations like the Liberal Party and the Civil Rights League. Cape liberalism had a tendency to exhibit a far greater concern for civil rights than for the mechanics of power

and placed a strong reliance on moral appeal, which attracted Sash members. It was far removed from the mass militancy and liberatory ideologies which characterised protests at the end of the decade.

Partly as a result of its growing identification with liberalism in Cape Town, the Cape Western Regional Council decided, late in 1956, to adopt the principles laid down in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, as suitable "ultimate goals" for the Sash. South Africa, Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union and its satellites had refused to endorse the Declaration, which called for non-racism and political, religious and intellectual freedoms. The Declaration had however been adopted by the South African Congress of Democrats as its statement of principle in 1953.<sup>14</sup>

Cape Western's liberal sentiments were not however shared by Sash members in other regions and, when the region suggested that the Declaration be accepted by the organisation as a whole, it was unenthusiastically received, and rejected outright by the rural regions.<sup>15</sup> Many Sash members, who lived in areas where racial divisions were profound and entrenched along class lines, were implacably opposed to multi-racialism and knew that to advocate it even indirectly would alienate the vast majority of whites from the organisation. They feared that the proposal would force "liberalism" on members, with Lowveld Region noting that "while Cape Western's proposal shows splendid idealism, it is entirely

<sup>14</sup>Everatt, D. The Politics of Nonracialism: White Opposition to Apartheid 1945-1960 Unpublished D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1990 p144

<sup>15</sup>MIC A862/3, Reel 3 Minutes, National Council Meeting, November 12, 13 and 14, 1956. Rhodes House Collection.



lacking in realism."<sup>16</sup>

Despite objections, Cape Westerr. brought up the issue of the Declaration at the 1957 National Conference, where it met with unconcealed hostility from conservative members. Debate centered around the emotive issues of mixed marriages and mixed schooling, which most members refused to risk advocating by associating themselves with the Declaration.<sup>17</sup> The Declaration was rejected and was only endorsed in 1960, after the Sash had been abandoned by over half its membership.

#### THE NATIVE LAWS AMENDMENT ACT:

The conflict over the Declaration of Human Rights was relatively minor compared to that precipitated by the issues of the Native Laws Amendment Act (NLAA) of 1957 and the Sash's party affiliation prior to the 1958 general election. Both issues brought about a massive confrontation between liberals and conservatives in the organisation, which culminated in mass resignations and the complete reformulation of the Sash's political identity in late 1959.

The Native Laws Amendment Bill was tabled in the 1957 Parliamentary session. It contained more than fifty clauses, which fell into two main groups, namely the removal of powers over urban Africans from local authorities to the Department of Native Affairs, and the reduction of individual freedom of movement and

<sup>16</sup>A862/Fba/1 Minutes, Meeting of the Central Executive, 11/3/1957, Sash Archives.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Noel Robb, Cape Town, 20/1/1989.

association. The legislation not only tightened Section 10 restrictions but imposed limits on racially mixed gatherings (the so-called "church clause"), thus having serious implications for multi-racial organisations.

The NLAA became of particular concern to the Sash due to the political activities of its Cape Western Region. This region had wanted to take part in multi-racial demonstrations against the Bill in Cape Town as early as April 1957, but had been severely restricted by the Central Executive in Johannesburg, which was nervous both about potential defiance of the law and the reaction of more conservative regions. In the Cape Peninsula, where multi-racial political activity was far more established and had fewer revolutionary implications, most members supported a regional decision to disregard the law. Thus, despite an injunction not to raise the issue at the 1957 National Conference, Cape Western introduced the resolution:

That in those instances where the Black Sash finds its work is affected or its principles outraged by the Native Laws Amendment Act, it may feel itself morally bound to disregard the prohibitions made under the Act.<sup>18</sup>

This resolution had important strategic implications for Cape Western and the region also wanted the Sash to add its voice to those supporting the principle of freedom of association which the Act violated. The Central Executive split on the matter, with some of its members arguing that, as the Sash was not in fact a multi-racial organisation, the resolution might be seen as

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<sup>18</sup>A862/D3 Minutes, National Conference 1957, Sash Archives.

hypocritical.<sup>19</sup> Conservative regions like Cape Midlands strongly opposed the resolution and Border predicted that if it was passed it would lose the Sash "hundreds of members". An inadequate compromise was reached in that the resolution was passed with a rider attached stating that legal advice had to be sought before any action could be contemplated. In so doing, the Sash tried to take a stand on principle but to avoid its practical implications thereby, it transpired, satisfying no-one.

Early in June 1957, the Central Executive received a letter of resignation from the Cape Midlands Region Chair over the NLAA resolution. Noting that the Sash had become "too complex and alien", she said it was clear that liberal factions in the Sash were prepared to oust conservative members to preserve their political ideals.<sup>20</sup> This was followed not long afterwards by a letter of resignation from the Middelburg Branch Executive in the Cape, calling the resolution a "shattering breach of faith".<sup>21</sup> Their position was strongly supported by the Graaff-Reinet Branch and the Lowveld Regional Executive.

The rural regions were very resistant to the extension of Sash political ideology to include opposition to legislated racial divisions between black and white. Sash members in the rural areas had far less experience than the urban regions of economic tensions manifesting at a political level, and remained

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>A862/Fbb/1 Letter: M. Gillfillan to the Central Executive, 8/6/1957, Sash Archives.

<sup>21</sup>A862/Fba/1 Minutes, Meeting of the Central Executive, 10/7/1957, Sash Archives.

conservative in matters of race relations. They also lived and operated in the heartland of NP power in small, close-knit rural communities where their protest was not afforded the luxury of anonymity. Many women were under increasing pressure from their husbands to stop Sash activities for this reason. In addition, the UP constituted the only political opposition in most rural areas and it was becoming increasingly conservative itself in matters of race. Because Sash activity was generally seen as synonymous with UP activity in these areas, the Sash's NLAA resolution threatened to damage UP credibility as the 1958 general election drew nearer.

At the 1957 Regional Conference, five regions had opposed the Sash breaking the law on multi-racial gatherings, but Cape Western continued to lobby the Central Executive. By August the Executive, unable to reconcile its principles with its doubts about the realities of both multi-racialism and civil disobedience, had split on the issue and many feared that the Sash was on the verge of disintegration.<sup>22</sup> The solution offered by the Central Executive was a classic compromise between maintaining ideological integrity and recognising political limitations. It noted that any ban on a multi-racial gathering by the Minister of Native Affairs could be invalidated if the relevant local authority refused to endorse it. Thus the Executive urged Sash members to exploit this loophole and put pressure on the more liberal Councils by mobilising the white electorate.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>A862/Laa1/1 Minutes, Regional Council and Branch Chairs' Meeting, 16/8/1957, Sash Archives.

<sup>23</sup>ibid.

The Executive's solution failed to satisfy Cape Western, which resolved to ignore the Act, "as it would be affecting our work and we were morally bound to act in this way otherwise we would never be trusted again."<sup>24</sup> At the same time the upheavals over the NLAA contributed substantially to the collapse of conservative regions like Lowveld and the Orange Free State, with the Chairman of the latter capturing the feeling of the rank-and-file membership when she submitted that:

members of my Region now belong to a movement which has slowly gravitated away from their convictions and from their original conception of the Sash....<sup>25</sup>

#### ASSOCIATIONS WITH THE UNITED PARTY:

The Sash's reorientation towards a concern with broader political issues precipitated a painful schism between it and the UP in 1958. Late in 1956, the popular perception of the political status of the Sash among many non-Nationalist whites was made clear in an article in the Johannesburg Star entitled "Future of the Black Sash". The article noted that the UP promised to be more dynamic under the new leadership of Sir de Villiers Graaff, and suggested in the light of this that the Sash "should reconsider its position."<sup>26</sup> The Star argued that the many UP members in the Sash should direct their energy towards "revitalising the party and making it the powerful electoral force that it should and can be." It argued

<sup>24</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council Meeting, 19/8/1957 Cape Western Archives.

<sup>25</sup>A862/Fa/5 Annexure A: Minutes, National Council Meeting, September 1957, Sash Archives.

<sup>26</sup>Star 7/12/1956

that the real fight was an electoral one and the Sash should "not allow itself to become a divisive force at a time when only a solid, united effort can achieve results."

This argument resonated strongly within the Sash. Many members believed that they had only acted independently of the UP in protesting the Senate Act because the Act had attacked parliamentary processes. However, the Sash and the UP were responding to the maturation of apartheid policies in different ways. The Sash, free from the constraints of an electorate, was able to be less compromising in the application of its political morality and by 1957 the organisation's imperatives began to differ markedly from those of the Party. The UP had always based its platform on maintaining white tutelage and, as the NP entrenched white authority, the UP had little on which to base its opposition beyond the relatively minor inroads made by Christian-nationalism into the liberties of white South Africans.

After a breakaway in 1953 by its conservative faction, the UP actively tried to woo "moderate" Afrikaners by adopting much of the Nationalist lexicon of group identity and race rule. Thus it promised to preserve both white supremacy and Afrikaans ethnic identity, with UP leader Sir de Villiers Graaff stating in an election speech at Roodepoort:

...the UP's roots are firmly and deeply implanted in the history of the Afrikaner and his culture(sic) struggle.<sup>27</sup>

This "Afrikanerisation" programme was coupled with UP unwillingness to oppose the racist dimensions of most Nationalist

<sup>27</sup>Contact Vol.1 no.3, 8/3/1958 p12

legislation and a tendency to sanction repressive and exploitative behaviour towards blacks by local authorities under its control.

As the 1958 general election drew closer, the debate over the Sash's relationship with the UP intensified. Liberals in the organisation objected to the Party's failure to oppose apartheid and, as the Sash had gained little by trying to woo Afrikaners, they had little sympathy for UP attempts at "Afrikanisation". Conservatives who wanted the Sash to confine itself to the old battle for the interests of non-Nationalist whites, saw the organisation as a subsidiary of the Party and were concerned that Sash liberalisation in matters of race would jeopardise electoral support for the UP.

These two groups within the Sash came into direct conflict at the 1957 National Conference. Sash National Chairman Jean Sinclair, who had by that time herself resigned from the UP, warned of the gathering storm in her opening address. Noting mounting criticism that the Sash was becoming "too liberal" she insisted that the "Christian principles" upon which the Sash was built could not be selectively applied and that, as the Sash was essentially a movement of independent thought, "it could not be bound, nor could it modify its policy to conform with the tactics of any Party or other group."<sup>28</sup>

Despite Sinclair's assertion of the organisation's independence, there was a strong feeling among conservative delegates that the Sash should go into recess until after the elections, with Cape

<sup>28</sup>Natal Mercury 24/5/1957

Midlands Region presenting a very strong case. Fear that Sash independence might harm the UP had been intensified by recent statements by Party members such as de Villiers Graaff who, in a private meeting with Ruth Foley and others, had intimated that he would like the Sash to disband before the election.<sup>29</sup> Liberal members argued that the Sash would find it almost impossible to regroup once it went into recess and resented pressure on them to stifle criticism of the UP in the run-up to the election. Ultimately, the Conference decided to allow members to decide how best to act as individuals "in order to achieve the most satisfactory result in the next elections."<sup>30</sup> The Sash also decided to withdraw from debate on racial questions until after the elections, but allowed regions significant autonomy in deciding the degree to which they would assist the UP in its campaign.

Hoping for a Nationalist defeat, the Sash papered over the divisions within its membership in the run-up to the general election. But this was only a temporary solution. Widespread sympathy for the UP within the Sash indicated that many members would eventually follow the Party into the laager of white supremacy in the 1960s and that the Sash would have to decisively break with both the UP and the doctrine of white domination if it was not to do the same.

#### THE PRE-ELECTION STAND-OFF:

The period between the 1957 Conference and the General Election was a slow one for the Sash, with many of its members occupied

<sup>29</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council Meeting, 22/7/1957, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>30</sup>A862/D3 Minutes, National Conference 1957, Sash Archives.



with electoral work. With organisational coherence weak after disputes over the role of the movement, the Sash set modest objectives for itself. It collaborated with other mainline liberal groups in opposing the introduction of apartheid into universities and the abolition of parallel-medium education in the Transvaal. Neither of these campaigns challenged the more traditional view of the Sash's function, as they were issues of importance primarily to non-Nationalist whites and were concerned primarily with issues of freedom of thought and expression.

The period before the general election was characterised by a focus on education, both of Sash members and the public. This allowed liberals, shaken after the debates at the National Conference, to elaborate and strengthen their theoretical base and political strategy. At the same time, conservative members used the education brief as part of their party-political work. For example, in January 1958, the Southern Transvaal Region sent out 20,000 pamphlets on freedom in education and another 20,000 on apartheid to voters in marginal seats.<sup>31</sup>

Liberals in the Southern Transvaal Region collaborated in the organisation of a Multi-Racial Conference, held at the University of the Witwatersrand from 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> December 1957. Jean Sinclair was a member of the Planning Committee and Ruth Foley was one of the major sponsors of the event. Invitations were extended to all members of the Central Executive as well to one representative from each region.<sup>32</sup> The Conference was inspired by a growing

<sup>31</sup>"Regional Reports" *The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers* Vol.3 no.5 April, 1958 p11

<sup>32</sup>A862/D4 Chairman's Report, National Conference 1958, Sash Archives.

call among liberal whites for a National Convention of representatives of all races to discuss a just and democratic alternative to apartheid.

The Conference delegates, who represented a wide spectrum of liberal thought, decided not to pass resolutions but to try to establish a "common endeavour amongst the widest possible section of South Africans in evolving methods of ensuring peaceful existence for all races in South Africa."<sup>33</sup> The Conference was called amid an acute awareness that the government was systematically closing all avenues of contact between black and white, and delegates were motivated by the belief that to avoid an immanent struggle between ethnic nationalisms, a move should be made towards a non-racial, democratic order.<sup>34</sup> The Conference was particularly encouraging for liberals within the Sash, as it helped them to secure their non-racial stance.

The Multi-Racial Conference provided partial inspiration for a subsequent series of "Brains Trusts" organised by the Sash in which prominent figures were invited to take part in public panel discussions on contemporary political issues. The first "Brains Trust" was held immediately before the organisation's 1958 National Conference. The subject under discussion was "constitutional reform" and the meeting was attended by 500 people and given extensive coverage in the press. The "Trust" was

<sup>33</sup>The Planning Committee, South Africa's Multi-Racial Conference Johannesburg: The Planning Committee, 1957 p10

<sup>34</sup>Cooper, L. "The Multi-Racial Conference" Africa South Vol.2 no.3 April-June, 1958 pp39-41

a first step towards the Sash's goal of a new constitution for South Africa, and turned out to be the first of many held nationwide. These attempts by the Sash to provide forums for debate and discussion proved very successful at a time when most liberals felt under siege from growing white reaction and black radicalism.

### THE TRIUMPH OF THE LIBERAL PROGRAMME:

#### THE "NEW DEAL":

In the months immediately prior to the election, the Sash had suspended all vigils and continued with its extremely cautious approach to racial issues. However, with the decisive defeat of the UP at the polls in April 1958, Sash resentment towards the Party, held in check for the sake of a Nationalist defeat, boiled over. The editorial of the May edition of The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp argued that the UP had betrayed the principles of the Sash by campaigning almost entirely on bread and butter issues and refusing to attack apartheid head-on. Sash leaders also argued that the organisation could have forced more pertinent election issues to the fore if it had not voluntarily withdrawn from debates. Resentment was also strong over the considerable sacrifice of the Sash's organisational resources to the UP, with The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp noting:

The time is fast approaching when women will no longer agree to be the catspaws and "slaveys" of political groups, and mindless powers in party political battles.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>D.R. "Our Three Most Cherished Spheres" The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp Vol.3 no.6 May, 1958 p5

In the second week of June, the Sash held a Special National Conference in Johannesburg to review the role of the organisation in the light of the election results. This meeting marked a critical turning point for the Sash. First and foremost, the organisation abandoned its former political programme by repudiating the South African Constitution, which it had initially regarded as its political ideal.<sup>36</sup> Cape Western Region argued strongly in favour of this, noting that an "awakened political consciousness" within the organisation had led to the recognition that the "Compact of Union" had "proved in practice to be a charter of tyranny."<sup>37</sup> The Conference recognised that the Constitution failed to entrench universal rights and liberties and was structured in such a way that political power rested with only 10 per cent of the population. While the Sash was not prepared to advocate a redistribution of political power, it was ready to argue that the Constitution should safeguard the "fundamental rights of all sections of the community."

Cape Western Region used the Conference to try to liberalise the Sash's political activities. It had already begun to establish contacts with extra-parliamentary organisations in Cape Town like the ANC Women's League (ANCWL), and urged other regions to begin working with anti-apartheid groups. The region also shocked delegates by proposing that the Sash open its membership to all women over the age of 21 years, irrespective of franchise qualifications. This "revolutionary resolution", which would have opened Sash membership to black women at a time when they were

<sup>36</sup>Rand Daily Mail 13/6/1958

<sup>37</sup>A862/D5 Minutes, Special National Conference, June 1958, Sash Archives.

becoming a vocal group in resistance politics, was decisively defeated, but served to publicise Cape Western's liberal agenda.

Having rejected both the Constitution and the Parliamentary process in South Africa, the Conference agreed on a "New Deal" of political action. This involved sending active members into all spheres of South Africa's community life to find out where and how unjust laws were implemented, to see if some of the hardships implicit in the carrying out of the laws could be avoided, and to help those affected by unjust legislation. The Central Executive recognised that while the spirit behind the original aims of the Sash would continue, "much of our work must be centered on the colour issue."<sup>38</sup> The Sash decided to increase pressure on all levels of authority, the public, bureaucracy and the UP as well as to cooperate with other organisations.

The liberal faction of the Sash, which was made up of the core of the urban membership, greeted the outcome of the Special Conference with elation. However, the more conservative members felt that the New Deal only properly applied to activities in the urban areas and were wary of casting aside the political security of the Union Constitution in favour of an ill-defined political strategy that threatened to take the Sash far to the left of Parliament. The New Deal signalled the emergence of the Sash as a liberal organisation but rung the death knell of the country regions, and with them the organisation's claim to represent any dimension of mainstream white opinion.

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<sup>38</sup>A862/D5 "Memo on the Future Organisation of the Black Sash", Special National Conference 1953, Sash Archives.

### THE DECLINE OF THE CONSERVATIVES:

Regional reports delivered on the first day of the Sash's 1958 National Conference, indicated that organisation's membership nationwide had dropped dramatically in the previous twelve months. Cape Midlands Region had collapsed entirely and Cape Northern reported that it had been "impossible to elect a working committee due to apathy and other commitments."<sup>39</sup> Lowveld, which had boasted 500 members in 1957, had decided to go into recess eight months before the general election and had found it almost impossible to reactivate. Its delegates to the National Conference reported that only 137 members remained and that at least two of its branches had closed down completely.<sup>40</sup> All other regions reported a significant drop in membership, with Border down from 724 in early 1957 to 360 in 1958. Both Natal Coastal and Natal Midlands had lost many members who felt their loyalties to the Sash clashed with their loyalties to the UP.

Southern Transvaal, with only 1,105 members in 1958 as opposed to 2,294 in 1957, had little of comfort to report to the Conference except that Jean Sinclair had become Regional Chair. Sinclair had required little persuasion to resign from her increasingly frustrating position on the Central Executive to take over the Chair of Southern Transvaal. She had immediately set about rationalising the faltering region, consolidating weak branches into groups and strengthening organisational coherence.<sup>41</sup> Cape

<sup>39</sup>A862/D4 Minutes, National Conference 1958, Sash Archives.

<sup>40</sup>A862/D4 Lowveld Regional Report, National Conference 1958, Sash Archives.

<sup>41</sup>A862/D4 S.Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1958, Sash Archives.

Western Region was the least affected by falling membership and by 1958 it had taken over from Southern Transvaal as the largest region. Cape Western was optimistic about the consolidation of its political identity, despite the fact that it had lost many of its members to the UP. As its Regional report noted:

The mere fact that we had to think so hard about the value of the Sash in relation to political parties, has clarified for us our conception of the Sash.<sup>42</sup>

Cape Western's enthusiasm for guiding the Sash in the direction of extra-parliamentary opposition was encouraged by the region being elected as the National Headquarters. Cape Western's Chair, Molly Petersen took over from Ruth Foley as National President. The National Conference also decided to allow the National Council to fall away, with the sub-committee established to examine the Sash Constitution noting in its report:

With National Conferences discussing "ways and means" as well as policy, and Regions having a great deal of freedom of action, the need for a National Council seems to have ceased.<sup>43</sup>

By 1958 the Sash had begun to base its organisational functioning on a system of high regional autonomy. This structure was consolidated in 1960 with a decision by that year's National Conference to abolish the Central Executive and replace it with a Headquarters Region to ease the administrative burden on the Sash. Thus, after 1960, regions corresponded directly with one another and the Headquarters Region concerned itself with drawing up

<sup>42</sup>A862/D4 Cape Western Regional Report, National Conference 1958, Sash Archives.

<sup>43</sup>A862/D4 Minutes, National Conference 1958, Sash Archives.

statements, coordinating projects and demonstrations, arranging arbitration between regions and calling special national conferences. Cape Western was elected the first Headquarters Region in 1960, with Eulalie Stott replacing Molly Petersen as National President

At the 1958 National Conference, a Programme of Action based on the original New Deal formulation was ratified by delegates. However conservatives refused to adopt this strategy. Both the Orange Free State and Northern Transvaal Regions announced that they could no longer function, with the OFS attributing its collapse to the "liberal tendency" in the Sash. Lowveld Region noted that the Sash had already dangerously prejudiced its potential for influencing the electorate and, as this was considered by many to be the organisation's main function, membership dropped dramatically following the Conference.

The Sash's decision to release itself from the apron-strings of the UP was somewhat vindicated in August 1959 when, at the Party's Annual Congress in Bloemfontein, almost a quarter of its members of parliament resigned. These rebels consolidated to form the Progressive Party, and for the first time a white parliamentary party emerged specifically to propagate a more liberal policy in race relations. The Sash was keenly interested in this development, and many members who travelled to Johannesburg for the 1959 Sash National Conference stayed on to attend the first Progressive Conference as observers.<sup>44</sup> Jean Sinclair joined the Progressive Party in 1960. She and other Sash leaders argued that

<sup>44</sup>Interview with Noel Robb, Cape Town, 20/1/1989



both the Liberal Party and the Black Sash had played a major part in creating the climate of opinion in which it had been possible for the Progressive movement to develop.<sup>45</sup>

By 1959 the Sash was no longer riven by the painful divisions of 1957 and 1958. As a report on a meeting of the National Council late in that year observed:

It was interesting to note that personal friction...which has occasionally been apparent but generally successfully hidden at our previous national gatherings, seems to have been lost in something far bigger than ourselves.<sup>46</sup>

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF WHITE CONSENSUS:

The extent to which the Sash had managed to extract itself from its 'old concerns with the issues of white politics' was illustrated by its response to what were the last two serious debates within white politics in the late 1950s, namely the questions of a national education system for whites and the creation of a republic in South Africa. Sash responses to these issues were indicative of the organisation's growing disillusionment with white politics as a forum for debate or as a source of political liberalisation.

#### CHRISTIAN NATIONAL EDUCATION:

The Sash had begun its criticism of NP education policies as early as 1956 when, at the National Conference of that year, it discussed whether the abolition of parallel-medium schools for whites

<sup>45</sup>AD1457/A4.1.2/8 Sinclair, J. "Why I am a Member of the Progressive Party". Jean Sinclair Papers. Sunday Times 12/11/1961.

<sup>46</sup>"National Council Highlights" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sem Vol.3 no.20 August 1959 p14

should be opposed on the basis of the fact that this would intensify division within the white population. Throughout 1956 and 1957 the Sash deployed its ideal of white unity against Nationalist education policies, which at that time were virulently exclusivist.

By 1958 the issue had become more complex. The government, confident that it had halted trends towards anglicisation, turned its attention to restructuring all school syllabuses according to Christian-national principles. These had been outlined as early as 1948 in a pamphlet entitled: "Christian National Education Policy" issued by the Institute for Christian National Education, a body established by the Broederbond-controlled FAK.<sup>47</sup> The document argued that CNE should be dictated by the creeds of the three Afrikaner churches, that students should be imbued with a love of their own (especially language, history and culture) and that history "of the Fatherland" was, "next to the mother-tongue...the best channel for cultivating the love of one's own which is nationalism."<sup>48</sup> By the late 1950s white education had become a means of nurturing consensus on the issue of white supremacy in a Christian-national republic.

The Sash resisted the encroachments of CNE throughout 1957 and 1958, by critically examining school textbooks and trying to pressure school councils to resist regimentation of syllabuses and prescribed books. However it was not until 1959, when the

<sup>47</sup>See: van Heyningen, C. "Christian National Education" Africa South Vol.4 no.3 April-June, 1960 pp50-56. Education League Blackout: A commentary on the education policy of the Instituut vir Christelike-Nasionale Onderwys Johannesburg: The Education League, 1959 pp14-22

<sup>48</sup>Marquard, N. "Christian National Education" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.3 no.21 September, 1959 p5

Education Advisory Bill was tabled, that it began a dedicated campaign against NP education policies. The Sash lost no time in organising opposition to the Bill, which heralded the beginnings of a highly centralised and regularised system of education. Sash members were instrumental in starting the Educational Vigilance Committee in Johannesburg in 1959, which soon developed branches throughout the country.<sup>49</sup> In the Western Cape, the Sash played a decisive role in the formation of the Cape Council on Education, which worked actively with the Johannesburg Vigilance Committee in organising meetings and petitions. Sash members also played a leading role in the Natal Education Vigilance Association, which harnessed widespread resistance in Natal to the new education policy.<sup>50</sup>

The Sash developed its critique of CNE along two main themes, the arrogation of parents' rights over the quality and form of their children's education, and the attempt to condition children's minds "into acceptance of a narrow fundamentalist religious creed and an arrogant Nationalist outlook."<sup>51</sup> To counter CNE ideology, the Sash called for respect for:

the great Western tradition of free thought and enquiry...respect for the opinions of others...racial tolerance...and the acknowledgment of the rights of man.<sup>52</sup>

Late in 1960, the organisation devoted a double edition of its

<sup>49</sup>A862/D7 S.Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1960, Sash Archives.

<sup>50</sup>A862/D6 Natal Coastal Regional Report, National Conference 1959, Sash Archives.

<sup>51</sup>Editorial The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.3 no.21 September, 1959 p1.

<sup>52</sup>ibid. pp2-3

magazine to the education issue. Entitled "Education for Isolation" it contained articles written by prominent liberals, intellectuals and educationalists, and received adulation in the mainstream English press. It drew some criticism from the left however, with the liberal journal Contact in particular criticising the Sash and the education campaign in general, for failing to also commit itself to an alternative to Bantu Education.<sup>53</sup>

By early 1961, Sash leaders were becoming aware that the education campaign was supported by many English South Africans, not because they were rallying to the defence of what the organisation saw as the ideals of "Western civilisation" incorporating "the Judaeo-Christian and humanitarian belief in the brotherhood of man", but rather in the defence of a cultural and social hegemony. Hence there had never been any serious attempt to make opposition to Verwoerdian "Bantu Education" part of the campaign.

By 1961, the Sash had begun to discern some of the flaws in the education campaign, notably that it was partly sustained by a form of racism. In May of that year, a member of the Transvaal Region noted in a confidential "Memorandum on Education and Western Civilisation in South Africa in the 1960s" that, in the case of English South Africans:

The strongest element in this pre-disposition to race prejudice is the element of hostility towards Non-Europeans....But race prejudice seldom operates in isolation....There is also an English prejudice, deriving from the class structure of English society, against Afrikaner customs and social life.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Contact Vol.3 no.18, 10/9/1960 p5

The memo argued that the same prejudice that had prompted opposition to CNE, and was also leading to an acceptance of apartheid and the racist dimensions of the educational programme. It concluded gloomily that the Sash's education campaign needed to do more than attack CNE:

It is also necessary to reverse the processes which have made English speaking South Africans already half-Nationalist in their anti-Nor. European prejudices, and thus have already predisposed them to accept CNE propaganda.

However, the memo remained in limited circulation, and the Sash continued to collaborate in the flawed campaign to protect white education from Christian-nationalism until it eventually ran dry in the sands of white consensus in the early 1960s.

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A REPUBLIC:

The involvement of the Sash in the republic debate between 1955 and 1960 illustrated its movement away from a narrow concern with the effect of Christian-nationalism on white interests, towards a more broadly-based struggle against apartheid. The Sash ultimately chose to abdicate from this last truly divisive debate in white politics before the political paralysis of the 1960s.

The republican question had become an important issue within white politics in the build-up to the 1943 elections when, with the Second World War in its most bitter years, the NP called for a republic in South Africa. It based its platform on the 1942 "Draft Constitution for the Republic of South Africa" which was as much

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<sup>54</sup> MIC A862/1 Reel 1 "Memorandum on Education....", Rhodes House Collection.

concerned with shaking off the remaining shackles of British imperialism as with the exclusion of blacks from almost all spheres of South African life.

After Verwoerd became Prime Minister, the republican question developed a new character. Not only was the achievement of a republic seen as the historical triumph of the Afrikaner, but it was also presented as a means whereby English and Afrikaans speakers could resolve their differences and forge a powerful white political identity. Verwoerd managed to present these two goals as substantially non-contradictory, noting in 1958:

Now a new era is being entered. Many people now support the republican struggle because they realise it is not aimed against Britain or against other people in South Africa. It is a positive struggle. The republic is now desired because it will bring loyalty to one land only, just as there is already one flag and one anthem.<sup>55</sup>

Knowing that the NP had lagged behind the UP in the 1958 elections by some 70,000 votes, Verwoerd also realised the necessity of offering concessions to English-speakers if the republic was to become a reality. He thus took care to repudiate the 1942 Constitution, stating in Parliament:

It is a document which has never been accepted by the Nationalist Party, and if I have anything to do with the matter it will not form the basis of any republican constitution drawn up in the future.<sup>56</sup>

The Black Sash had opposed Nationalist republicanism since 1955. In keeping with its early attitude towards Christian-nationalism,

<sup>55</sup>Die Transvaler 6/10/1958

<sup>56</sup>Hepple, A. Verwoerd Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 p172

it conjured up the spectre of the 1942 Draft Constitution, with its President: "responsible to God alone" and its "voters' roll excluding everyone who did not agree with the ruling caste", as the political apogee of Afrikaner authoritarianism.<sup>57</sup> Despite an excess of high-flown rhetoric during this period, the Sash had recognised by 1956 that it would be untrue to its own ideals to reject the republican form per se. Thus, at its 1956 National Conference, the Sash opposed a republic, not because of its institutional form, but because the organisation believed that the NP was unable to be true to the ideal.

By 1958 it was becoming clear that many Sash members were unwilling to expend a great deal of energy and resources on the republican issue. Growing white support for a race oligarchy had begun to be of more concern to many members, who tended to dismiss the republican debate as the last flicker of the old "Boer versus Brit" antagonisms. However, other Sash members were not prepared to relinquish their old field of conflict so readily. This was particularly true of the Natal Coastal Region, whose members resided in a predominantly English and staunchly monarchist area. Natal was also the home of the Anti-Republican League, which boasted over 33,000 members in 1958. The League believed that "the traditions, language and citizenship of English-speaking South Africans would be reduced to a condition of servile subservience in this republic, which would have no friends, no security and no prosperity."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>"Fact and Fiction" *The Black Sash/Die Swart Sash* Vol.1 no.3 March, 1956 p15

<sup>58</sup>*Contact* Vol.1 no.9, 31/5/1958 p7

Sentiments like these were shared by many members of the Natal Coastal Region which, with its tendency towards conservatism on race issues, had found it very difficult to extend its focus beyond the parameters of the 1956 Senate Act debate. Thus its 1958 Regional Report to Conference noted:

It is difficult to counter the complaints of members that there is so little for them to do plus a feeling of too great a liberal slant in the direction of the Sash

With the region in serious danger of disintegration, the report affirmed that:

the one thing on which the Region is solid is the question of the republic....branches return to it again and again.<sup>59</sup>

As a result, Natal Coastal demanded an unequivocal statement opposing the republic from the National Conference, despite objections from the Central Executive that it had no NP republican blueprint to criticise. Conference settled on a carefully-worded compromise:

While acknowledging some members are not opposed, in theory, to Republicanism, the Black Sash, recognising the realities of the situation at the moment, emphatically rejects the demand for a Nationalist Republic.

The republic again became an issue for the Sash after Verwoerd's announcement that a referendum would be held to decide the matter on 5th October 1960. The Sash immediately objected that the simple majority required in the referendum was undemocratic, but kept itself peripheral to the debate.<sup>60</sup> For many members of the Sash, Verwoerd's call for unity between the English and the

<sup>59</sup>A862/D5 Natal Coastal Regional Report, National Conference 1958, Sash Archives.

<sup>60</sup>A862/Fbb/3 HQ Circular no.33, 11/2/1960, Sash Archives.



Afrikaners was little more than unpleasantly evocative of the Sash's own outdated platform of "South Africanism" and many saw a new racist tyranny looming in this white consensus. This mood was illustrated by the editorial in the February 1960 edition of The Black Sash/Die Swart Sen which stated:

The Sash sees no objection in principle to a republican form of government for South Africa; it would accept a democratic republic provided that a clear majority of the people - all the people - desired it.<sup>61</sup>

Before the magazine reached Natal Coastal, the essence of the opening paragraph was carried in a leader in the Natal Mercury<sup>62</sup> suggesting that the Sash approved of a republic. Natal Coastal responded with an angry letter to the Central Executive noting that "many members of the Black Sash are engaged in active anti-Republican work" and that resignations from foundation members had been received as a result of the article. The letter concluded:

our Region is in grave danger of being disbanded. We have received a "death blow" from which we may not survive.<sup>63</sup>

The Central Executive hurriedly smoothed over ruffled feathers by printing disclaimers and apologies but, despite this furore, still refused to be part of the monarchical-republican battle so dear to its Natal members. At the National Conference in November, Southern Transvaal presented a resolution on the upcoming Republican Bill which stated simply:

That the Black Sash should not protest against the Bill

<sup>61</sup>"The Republic" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sen Vol.4 no.2 February, 1960 p1

<sup>62</sup>Natal Mercury 11/2/1960

<sup>63</sup>A862/Fbb/3 Letter: Chair of Natal Coastal to the Central Executive 16/2/1960, Sash Archives.

if a mere change from a monarch to a president were envisaged.<sup>64</sup>

The Sash's retreat from the republican battle was indicative of its dissatisfaction with the limited extent of white political discourse by the end of the 1950s.

### THE BEGINNINGS OF OPPOSITION TO APARTHEID:

#### GROUP AREAS:

The central dimension of the Black Sash's extension of its political concerns and its orientation towards extra-parliamentary protest, was its growing opposition to the developing system of apartheid. The organisation became very involved after 1958 in resisting the Group Areas Act, which was one of the aspects of apartheid most visible to whites. This battle helped the Sash to develop many new strategies and theoretical tools to counter the government's drive towards complete racial separation.

The 1950 Group Areas Act allowed for the proclamation of certain areas for the occupation and/or ownership of a particular racial group. Those who did not qualify for membership of that group had to move out of the affected areas. The Sash opposed the Act for two main reasons. Firstly, the legislation was a relatively clear-cut example of simple racism, which the Sash argued was not only unjust, but also contrary to the natural socio-economic development of South Africa and would thus lead to instability, poverty and repression. These factors made the Act an ideal target for the Sash in the light of its new Programme of Action. The second, and more apparent reason for opposition, was that Sash

<sup>64</sup>A862/D7 Minutes, National Conference 1950, Sash Archives.

members responded to the human suffering that they saw was being caused by the this legislation. As one of the Sash's earliest commentaries on the Act noted:

Nobody lost his job, went hungry or lay awake sobbing all night over the Coloured Vote. But that is what is going to happen over the Group Areas Act.<sup>65</sup>

Probably the most acute example of Nationalist attempts to unscramble the racial egg was the application of the Group Areas Act in Cape Town, where 300 years of racial mixing had resulted in a significant degree of residential integration. In Cape Town, the Sash found it relatively easy to mobilise whites against the Act and campaigned against removals and proclamations at Windermere, Sea Point, Kalk Bay and Simonstown among others. The last was the most intensive battle, and the strategies developed as a result provided a blueprint for similar campaigns nationwide.

In February 1959, the Group Areas Board advertised drastic proposals for the zoning of Simonstown which, if implemented, would have uprooted all the Indian and most of the Coloured residents of the town and set them down in a desolate area many miles away. In a town where there had never been racial friction and where the trading area was fully integrated, these proposals were met with universal dismay. A multi-racial Simonstown Group Areas Liaison Committee was soon formed under the Chairmanship of Mrs. B. Willis, who was National Secretary of the Sash and a Liberal Party member. The Sash helped raise money for the

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<sup>65</sup>"A Cruel Act" The Black Sash/Din Swart Sem Vol.2 no.5 June, 1957 p1

employment of attorneys and counsel to represent the Committee at the Public Enquiry and launched two petitions signed by residents and every shopkeeper in the town.<sup>66</sup> The Sash succeeded in disrupting the flow of the proclamation and in extracting certain concessions, but the government eventually prevailed over the Town Council and by 1961 Simonstown was established as a white Group Area.

Shortly after the battle began to prevent Simonstown from being declared white, The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp magazine carried an article entitled "Group Areas - What You Can Do" which detailed techniques and strategies for opposing the proclamation of Group Areas.<sup>67</sup> The Sash made a particular point of exploiting the fact that in areas like Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, it still had some significant influence over Municipal Councils, most of which were UP dominated. The Sash pressured these Councils not to make zoning recommendations to the Group Areas Board and marshalled opposition among the local electorate, which had a significant effect on many Councillors.

In Durban the Sash joined in a protest against the conviction of Indian residents of Cato Manor, which was proclaimed white in June 1958. In September 1958, the Southern Transvaal Region became involved in investigating conditions in Sophiatown outside Johannesburg, which had been declared a white Group Area. It lobbied the City Council incessantly for six months before the Council established a

<sup>66</sup>"Simonstown Black Sash Leads the Struggle Against Group Areas" The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp Vol.3 no.21 September, 1959 p.9

<sup>67</sup>Thorne, M. "Group Areas: What You Can Do" The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp Vol.3 no.16 March, 1959 pp13-14

"transit emergency camp" to house those people left homeless by Group Areas Board demolitions.<sup>68</sup> The Sash also initiated zoning protests in areas such as Port Elizabeth, East London, Rustenberg, Pretoria and Walmer, and in cooperation with the Anti-Group Areas League produced a film on the plight of Coloured families "urged to leave their homes called "Notice to Quit".<sup>69</sup>

#### THE FARM LABOUR SCHEME:

The brutality with which the Pass Laws of 1952 were applied towards the end of the decade did not succeed in reversing basic urbanisation trends among blacks, but rather created severe social dislocation, impoverishment and an inflated prison population. Growing competition for labour from secondary industry in the urban areas, intensified the longstanding problem of a shortage of farm labour. However, the almost total abrogation of black civil rights by the NP government and the extended powers of the NAD, provided fertile ground for the state bureaucracy to cultivate a scheme in the late 1950s which would be effective where the pass laws were not.

A 1954 Circular<sup>70</sup> from the secretary of Native Affairs, noted that Africans arrested for certain "technical" contraventions of the pass laws, could be induced to take part in a volunteer scheme

<sup>68</sup>A862/D7 S. Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1960, Sash Archives.

<sup>69</sup>A862/D7 Minutes, National Conference 1960, Sash Archives.

<sup>70</sup>Circular no.23 of 1954

which involved a six month labour contract on a white farm.<sup>71</sup> This Circular updated and streamlined a system which had existed since the days of UP rules and which was intended "to induce unemployed Natives now roaming the streets in the various urban areas to accept employment outside such urban areas."<sup>72</sup> Africans arrested for certain pass and tax offences were not charged immediately but removed by police to a district labour bureau where they were offered, as an alternative to prosecution, employment on farms,<sup>73</sup> thereby circumventing the entire judicial process.

Conditions on farms were usually very hard and workers were often subject to assaults from farmers and "bossboys". After 1957, the farm labour scheme was brought to the public's attention through a series of court cases brought by families and friends of men who had been arrested and sent to work on farms without being charged or tried. The trials exposed gross human rights violations on every level and made public the appalling working conditions on farms.<sup>74</sup>

On the basis of these judicial exposes the Sash, inspired by its Programme of Action, decided to launch its own investigation into the scheme. The Southern Transvaal Region studied the workings

<sup>71</sup>International Commission of Jurists South Africa and the Rule of Law Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1960 Appendix: C

<sup>72</sup>Quoted by First, R. "Bethal Case-Book" Africa South Vol.2 no.3 April-June, 1958 p23

<sup>73</sup>SAIRR Survey African Farm Labour Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1959 pp87-8

<sup>74</sup>International Commission of Jurists South Africa and the Rule of Law op. cit. Appendices C, D and E.

of the system by monitoring three Johannesburg Labour Bureaux and presented a full report at the 1959 National Conference. The region showed that the police often served as recruiting agents for farmers for personal financial gain and to this end often made arrests in plain clothes in the homes and streets of the townships.<sup>75</sup> The region also discovered that there was only one inspector of labour in the Transvaal and that the state had streamlined what had previously been an informal and low-key system to create a "rootless, rightless and self-perpetuating rural population." The Sash also claimed that it had evidence to show that men were threatened to induce them to sign labour contracts.<sup>76</sup>

The Sash issued a memo to the NAD arguing that the scheme was illegal and should be abolished, and joined the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), the Liberal Party and others in calling on the government to appoint a judicial Commission of Enquiry to investigate the farm labour scheme. The Southern Transvaal Region also began transporting people to farms to identify lost relatives and conveying labourers to and from lawyers' offices for the submission of affidavits. It also involved itself in the "rehabilitation" of workers, which mainly involved welfare work, including the provision of medical and legal aid, help in tracing family and friends, and assistance in finding employment.

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<sup>75</sup>A862/D6, S. Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1959, Sash Archives.

<sup>76</sup>AD 1457/A3.3.1b/1 "Report on investigations into farm labour 'induced to volunteer' as laid down in NAD Circular no.23 of 1954", Jean Sinclair Papers.

Primarily as a result of pressure from the Sash and other organisations, the farm labour scheme was suspended in June 1959. The Minister of Justice also appointed a Departmental Commission of Enquiry consisting entirely of NAD officials, as well as a Committee of Enquiry into Farm Labour under the Chairmanship of Mr. S.D.F. Papenfus, to which the Sash made representations.<sup>77</sup>

The campaign against the farm labour scheme was important in allowing the Southern Transvaal Region to reorientate itself towards a more broadly-based attack on political injustice after 1958. Unlike Cape Western, the region remained peripheral to mass-based protests against the pass laws during this period, and the farm labour campaign helped it establish contacts with African communities and to gain first-hand experience of difficulties faced by blacks under apartheid.

#### PASS LAWS AND RESISTANCE:

Prior to 1959, influx control legislation had allowed for the existence of a "detribalised" or "urbanised" African population, permanently resident in the urban areas. Thus the 1952 Native Laws Amendment Act, under Section 10(1)(a)(b) and (c), provided certain loopholes which allowed Africans who had not been born in the city to achieve the status of permanent urban residents. For example, if an African was employed by one employer for a minimum of 10 years or by more than one employer for not less than 15 years, he could qualify for permanent residence, and the same rights could be conferred on his wife, and children under 18

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<sup>77</sup>A862/Ja/3 "Memorandum by S. Transvaal Region to Commission of Enquiry into Farm Labour" Sash Archives.



years of age.

These loopholes in the influx control regulations allowed the African urban population to grow rapidly throughout the 1950s. Furthermore, many women, free from the restrictions of reference books and Labour Bureaux, fled dire poverty in the "reserves" in large numbers.<sup>78</sup> However, the existing pass laws became increasingly crude tools in the hands of NAD which, by the mid-1950s, was attempting to halt African urbanisation altogether. In 1959, with Verwoerd as Premier, a new phase of apartheid began. In an attempt to shift the locus of African politics to the rural areas and to streamline the control of labour, every African was to be linked to a "homeland" and regarded only as a "temporary sojourner" in the urban areas.

After 1956, NAD began to tighten influx control with a drive to issue reference books to African women.<sup>79</sup> It initially employed "mobile units" in the rural areas, where it encountered some pockets of fierce resistance. This resistance became widespread in 1958 when the "mobile units" moved to the urban areas.

Opposition to passes hinged mainly on three issues; passes would prevent the movement of African women and fetter their right to sell their labour freely, arrests on "technicalities" related to the laws would have a devastating effect on families, particularly dependent children, and the enforcement of these laws contained the spectre of gross invasion of privacy by police and officials.

<sup>78</sup>Posel, D. Influx Control op. cit. p176

<sup>79</sup>Hindson, D. Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987 p64

As early as March 1957 the Sash had begun to develop a critique of the pass laws and influx control, to which few of its members had objected during the period of UP rule. That month, an article in The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp magazine noted the development of extreme social dislocation in the urban areas including a soaring crime rate, and argued of influx control:

the laws we approved of and which we believed were solving our problems and encouraging industry, were in fact responsible for the growth of idleness, vagrancy and serious crime!<sup>80</sup>

In Johannesburg however, the Sash never joined the popular campaign against passes, preferring to conduct its own protest. This meant that the region did not forge strong links with either the ANC or FSAW, who led popular resistance to passes for African women. As early as 1955, FSAW had made overtures to the Sash to join in its campaign against passes in Johannesburg. In August of that year at a Congress of Mothers, veteran ANC Women's League member Margaret Gazo recalled the first Black Sash march to the Union Buildings three months earlier and argued:

the white women did not invite us to join their protest, but we must go to the Union Buildings ourselves to protest against the laws which oppress us and we shall invite the white women to join us.<sup>81</sup>

The Sash declined the invitation to join the march, with its Central Executive claiming that the Sash constitution prevented it from associating with other organisations.<sup>82</sup> At that time the

<sup>80</sup>Rankin, D. "Our Traditional Way of Life in South Africa" The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp Vol.2 no.2 March, 1957 p6

<sup>81</sup>Quoted in Joseph, H. Side by Side London: Zed Press, 1986 p10

<sup>82</sup>Joseph, H. Tomorrow's Sun: A Smuggled Journal From South Africa London: Hutchinson, 1966 p66

organisation was still concerned exclusively with white politics and was suspicious of the extra-parliamentary activities of the ANC and FSAW and their possible communist links.<sup>83</sup>

Despite its early hesitancy, the Sash became increasingly aware of protests against the pass laws throughout 1956 and 1957.

However, it found mobilisation difficult. This was partly because conflict was at that time centered in relatively isolated rural areas and partly because of the organisation's insecurity regarding its own political identity. At this time there were many members who were still sympathetic to the principle of influx control as a means of preventing slum conditions in the urban areas and of regulating African labour.<sup>84</sup> Natal Coastal announced as late as the 1959 National Conference that it had a pamphlet defending the pass laws that had been drawn up by the husband of one of its branch Chairs.

The Southern Transvaal Region chose to exploit its own strengths in its opposition to passes rather than collaborate in mass protest late in the decade. In particular, it put pressure on the Johannesburg City Council to resist cooperating with NAD in extending reference books to women, emphasising that the laws constituted a grave attack on civil liberties and that they destroyed African family life. In lobbying the Council, the Sash also emphasised the costs of the pass laws to the economy, noting that:

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<sup>83</sup>Interview with Helen Joseph, Johannesburg, 22/4/1989

<sup>84</sup>For example: Letters to The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.2 no.6 July, 1957 pp11-12

It is impractical to talk about raising productivity and increasing efficiency without considering the living conditions of the employees concerned. Added disabilities which lead to anxiety, frustration, malnourishment and fatigue, and to an uncooperative attitude of mind, will inevitably lower standards of work efficiency.<sup>85</sup>

The region also targeted whites in its campaign. In a booklet entitled: "The Black Sash is Opposed to Reference Books for African Women" it informed employers of domestic servants that, contrary to the impression created by NAD, reference books were not compulsory. It also tried to counter the popular belief among whites that reference books were identical to the white identity books in form and function. Sash tried to sensitise whites to the suffering created by pass laws by emphasising the dangers of a possible deterioration in race relations and an increase in social dislocation. Among the negative effects of the laws for whites, the Sash noted increased juvenile delinquency and the possible sudden absence from work of "nannies" arrested on "technicalities".<sup>86</sup>

In contrast to the isolation of the Southern Transvaal's campaign, Cape Western had by late 1957 begun to evolve a complex working relationship with the ANCWL, FSAW and COD. The multi-racial and collaborative nature of its anti-pass campaign was enhanced when the shift of Headquarters from Johannesburg to Cape Town in 1958

<sup>85</sup>MIC A862/1 Reel 1 "Memorandum Submitted to the Non-European Affairs Committee of the Johannesburg City Council by the Black Sash, Southern Transvaal Region." Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>86</sup>A862/Kc/d "The Black Sash is Opposed to Reference Books for African Women." Sash Archives.

freed the region to act on an increasingly ad hoc basis in this matter.

The question of reference books for African women in the Western Cape had become an issue long before the Sash was aroused to the conflict in the other urban areas. This was primarily because, since 1954, the Cape had been targeted as an area in which uniquely rigid influx control regulations were enforced. In 1955 W.W.M. Eiselen, Secretary for Native Affairs, announced the inauguration of the Coloured Labour Preference Policy (CLPP). Its prime objective was the "ultimate elimination of the Natives from the Western Cape" which was declared the "natural home of the Coloured people". In effect the so-called "Eiselen Scheme" proposed to remove all Africans from the area of the Cape south of the Orange River, beyond a line that ran from the Magisterial district of Gordonia (Upington) to that of Knysna.<sup>87</sup> This meant that from at least as early as 1955, African women in the Western Province were subject, through a permit system, to controls over their movement.

The Cape Western Region of the Sash had by late 1957, become aware of the plight of African women partly through their early experiences of multi-racial protest against the Group Areas Act. Furthermore, the ANCWL had made overtures to the region in 1957, such as inviting members to attend a local conference on the Native Laws Amendment Bill in May. That same month, FSAW sent a circular to the Cape Western Region on the anti-pass campaign and the Cape Western Regional Council decided that members could

<sup>87</sup>Snitcher, F. "The Eiselen Scheme" *Africa South* Vol.1 no.3 April-June, 1957 p40

participate in their private capacities while the situation was under review.<sup>88</sup> In June, Cape Western attended a local ANC conference and members privately began to help FSAW with a petition against the pass laws, as well as educating African women about the implications of accepting passes. Having investigated FSAW, the Regional Council concluded that although members of COD:

are in control and running the SA Federation, the impression gained was that they are completely sincere and felt deeply the plight of the African woman. Black Sash should try to convince other organisations to join and so swamp the Congress of Democrats.<sup>89</sup>

The Sash did succeed in mobilising more moderate groups, and at a large multi-racial gathering of women in the Gardens in Cape Town in August 1957 the "Cape Association to Abolish Passes for African Women" (CATAPAW) was established jointly by the National Council of Women, the Black Sash, the Anglican Mothers' Union, FSAW, ANCWL and the Society of Friends (Quakers). All Cape Western branches were informed, and the Sash began to organise various protest activities under the CATAPAW umbrella. These included attendance at Magistrates Courts where pass offenders were tried, and where many Sash members first experienced the human suffering involved in the application of these laws.

In March 1958, following the arrest and imprisonment of a number

<sup>88</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 20/5/1957, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>89</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 24/6/1957, Cape Western Archives.

of women on permit charges, Cape Western presented a series of recommendations for the direction of CATAP.W. These included the proposal that a bail fund be started to assist women arrested for pass law violations. In addition, it suggested "that it is desirable to have responsible white people present at the Court at Langa daily" to monitor the conduct of trials, and that a "panel of young barristers" be formed to defend cases.<sup>90</sup>

Prominent Sash and Liberal Party member, Eulalie Stott, soon became personally involved with the plight of African women arrested on permit charges. She was particularly concerned about those women who, as a result of arrests, had been forced to abandon their children or care for them in prison.<sup>91</sup> Stott was highly influential in persuading the Cape Western Region to take the lead and start a bail fund for African women in its own name. In an early "Memorandum on the Bail Fund" the region emphasised that this was strictly a loan fund rather than a welfare programme and was designed to prevent the imprisonment of women prior to trial. Cape Western also tried to ensure that women who pleaded "not guilty" would have legal representation. The region informed the Magistrate and Chief Native Commissioner of the fund, noting that their intention was "to keep good women out of gaol...."<sup>92</sup>

The Bail Fund was increasingly in demand, and within six months a

<sup>90</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 24/3/1958, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>91</sup>MacRobert, J. The Emergence of the Black Sash Advice Office in Cape Town: A Regional Study of the Black Sash 1956-1963 Unpublished BA Hons. Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1988 p59

<sup>92</sup>BC 668 B "Memorandum on the Bail Fund", Cape Western Archives.

permanent office was urgently needed. Both men and women were by this time also coming to the Sash for legal aid, and the organisation had begun to monitor bribery in the pass offices and the treatment of offenders. An office was found on the Klipfontein road in Athlone, on the bus route to Nyanga and near Langa. It was staffed by Sash members and opened on weekday mornings. Mrs. Letitia Boniswa Malindi - a member of the ANCWL and herself a victim of pass arrests - was engaged as a paid interpreter. Working for the Bail Fund and with Lettie Malindi was a highly educative experience for Sash members, with a report in October 1959 noting:

Those of us who work in the office have learnt much, especially in working with the ANC Women's League. We have learnt of their efforts to help their own women and of their efforts to educate them politically.<sup>93</sup>

As early as 1957, Cape Western had begun to experience difficulties with FSAW and the ANCWL. These mainly concerned the organisation and control of mass protests and the legality of these activities. Sash suspicions of COD developed into active opposition, and in December it publicly dissociated itself from a meeting where COD initiated unplanned and illegal speeches. On a general level the Sash was disturbed by the fact that neither COD nor FSAW, nor the ANCWL seemed able or even willing to control the growing militancy among Africans in the Cape. In a letter to Jean Sinclair in late 1958 the National President of the Sash, Molly Petersen, noted that if the Transvaal Region wanted to start an ad hoc committee along the lines of CATAPAW, they should be warned

<sup>93</sup>A8:2/D6 "Report on the Bail Fund", National Conference 1959, Sash Archives.



that the ANC and FSAW would have to be included and this would involve COD. She went on to note that COD used methods "very different from ours" and that they had:

tried to show us in a wrong light with the African women....Presumably this was done (if it was intentional, as most of us believe it was) in order to keep the African women in their pocket and to make them doubt our sincerity.<sup>94</sup>

In December 1959, when political tension was running high in the Cape, the ANCWL announced a boycott of CATAPAW primarily because the Sash was, through the Bail Office, assisting women who had taken out passes. The Sash refused to confine its assistance to women who had refused passes and eventually established "some measure of agreement" with the ANC. By this time the Sash was being sharply criticised by the left, notably COD, who referred to the organisation's pass campaign as "band-aid". As Noel Robb, a veteran member of Cape Western remembers, tensions during this time were not really with the ANC:

It was much more amongst white ultra-liberals...because they said; "you're patching it up, you're trying to stop an explosion."<sup>95</sup>

By early 1960, an "explosion" was indeed immanent in Cape Town. On 18th March, a leading member of the Cape Regional Executive of the PAC, Phillip Kgosana, announced simultaneously with Robert Sobukwe, that an anti-pass campaign would begin on 21st March. What followed were two weeks of violent confrontation between protesters and police in Cape Town. Rioting was widespread, and by the second week of the protest about 95 per cent of the African

<sup>94</sup>A862/Fbh/2 Letter: M.Petersen to J.Sinclair, 21/11/1958, Sash Archives.

<sup>95</sup>Interview with Noel Robb, Cape Town, 20/1/1989

labour force in the city was on strike.<sup>93</sup> On Wednesday the government declared a State of Emergency and police began a series of brutal raids on Langa. The fury of police assault provoked a march of 30,000 Africans on Cape Town on 30th March, led by Kgosana. Following this, Langa was sealed off and residents subjected to four days of continuous brutality by police and army, which finally broke the strike.

During this period the Sash adopted an emergency welfare role. The Athlone office was used as a base from which to distribute supplies and money, and all branches gave donations to a food fund for Langa and Nyanga. The Sash was emphatic that this was a temporary measure only and tried to get the churches and Red Cross to take over welfare activities as soon as possible. At the same time the Regional Council gloomily declared that "this was a good moment for CATAPAW to die."<sup>97</sup>

For the next few months, the Sash continued unsteadily and in isolation with its bail fund and there were suggestions that the Athlone office should close "on account of the hopeless task it was to try and help the Africans who come to the office."<sup>98</sup> Finally in July 1960, the Sash withdrew from CATAPAW. The Association collapsed soon after, but the Sash continued to expand its bail fund, which was destined to develop into a nationwide network of legal advice offices, which became the mainstay of Sash activity

<sup>96</sup>Lodge, T. Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945 London: Longman, 1983 p220

<sup>97</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 14/4/1960, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>98</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 13/9/1960, Cape Western Archives.

in the 1960s.

#### MASS PROTEST AND THE STATE OF EMERGENCY:

The March disturbances in Cape Town were part of nationwide unrest which catapulted the Sash more rapidly than it had ever planned into its new political role. Sash activities during this period helped realise the terms of the 1953 Programme of Action and prepared the organisation for the political isolation it was to endure in the 1960s.

in December 1959, both the ANC and PAC had announced plans for large-scale protest against the pass laws. The ANC proposed to begin nationwide protest on 31st March, while the PAC announced that supporters would voluntarily offer themselves for arrest under the pass laws on the 21st of that month. On this date, in the township of Sharpeville near Vereeniging in the Southern Transvaal, a crowd of about 5,000 converged on the local police station. Tension rose until a surge in a section of the crowd precipitated a barrage of police fire. The final death toll was 69, with 180 people wounded.<sup>99</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Sharpeville shootings, a fund was started by the Southern Transvaal Region to assist the dependants of those killed and injured. The Sash office in Johannesburg became a receiving depot for donations of food, money and clothing. After subsequent mass arrests following the declaration of a State of Emergency by the government, donations

<sup>99</sup>Lodge, T. Black Politics, op. cit p210

were also received for the dependants of detainees. Because the Black Sash constitution did not authorise welfare work, the organisation constituted a committee of 12 women who applied for an emergency permit to enable them to collect and handle donations. A 90-day permit was obtained and the Sharpeville and Emergency Relief Fund (S.E.R.F.) was formed.

The S.E.R.F. committee controlled the distribution of donations to those requiring relief "as a result of extraordinary circumstances or disturbances" with the intention of preventing "indigency and/or social maladjustment."<sup>100</sup> By July 1960, the S.E.R.F. emergency permit was due to expire and the Sash arranged for its functions to be taken over by the Red Cross.<sup>101</sup> The Sash also played a major role in starting the Defence and Aid Fund to provide assistance to those in need of help as a result of the Emergency, including legal defence. The Defence and Aid Management Committee had three Sash members heading important sub-committees.<sup>102</sup>

In the Cape, the welfare structures set up by the Sash to help victims of the Langa disturbances were expanded to assist the hundreds of Emergency detainees and their dependants. This work also involved the country branches such as Hermanus, Somerset West, Worcester, Wellington and Paarl.<sup>103</sup> Cape Western started

<sup>100</sup>A862/Jce/1 Constitution of S.E.R.F., Sash Archives.

<sup>101</sup>A862/Jce/1 Letter: S.E.R.F. to the Transvaal Red Cross 9/5/1960, Sash Archives. M/C A862/1 Reel 1 Minutes of S.E.R.F. Meeting 5/7/1960, Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>102</sup>A862/D7 S. Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1960, Sash Archives.

<sup>103</sup>"The Black Sash and the Emergency" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sash Vol.4 no.4 August, 1960 pp4-5

the "Dependants of Political Detainees Fund" which was supported mainly by members and friends. Cape Western members also helped transport relatives of detainees to visits at jails. When detainees were moved out of Cape Town to Worcester and Simondium, the Black Sash collaborated with other organisations including the Liberal Party and the Quakers to provide transport for families, hiring a 50-seater bus on three occasions. As in the Transvaal, the Red Cross eventually took over these activities from the Sash.

The unprecedented active intervention by the Sash in conflict between the government and extra-parliamentary organisations was initially made more politically acceptable and palatable to members because of its welfare dimension. However, experience gained during this period helped the Sash explore the theoretical and strategic basis of its opposition to apartheid. The coordination of relief helped break down many of the barriers between Sash members and urban Africans, and many Sash members were made aware, through first-hand experience, of conditions in the townships. This led them to construct political paradigms that differed from those of most whites. Thus Wellington Branch in the Cape, commenting on white intolerance for the fact that township schools, churches and clinics had been burnt in the disturbances, noted:

Those people should have seen, as we did, a police van going off from the location with loads of husbands and fathers....They should have heard the mother of eight small children telling how her husband with many others had been removed from Worcester gaol...to some unknown destination....Perhaps then they would have understood how even the African's natural good

humour and patience have a breaking point.<sup>104</sup>

### REGROUPING IN THE WAKE OF THE EMERGENCY:

#### THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL ALLIANCES:

When regional delegates met for the Black Sash's National Conference late in 1960, the organisation was in a state of flux. The political unrest of 1960 and the violent government response had extended the scope of Sash activity almost overnight to bring about "contacts never dreamed of".<sup>105</sup> However, rather than helping the Sash cement a political identity, these experiences initially increased the organisation's political confusion. At its 1960 National Conference, the Sash struggled to clarify its political rôle and objectives. The organisation was particularly concerned that it might be caught up in the relatively radical political protest of the time. It showed reluctance to endorse multi-racial alliances although, under pressure from Cape Western Region, the 1960 Conference allowed regions to decide whether or not to cooperate with other organisations in support of "democratic principles".

At the National Conference, the Sash tried to clarify the scope of its work, endorsing activities such as "building bridges" between sections of political thinking, making contacts with blacks and publicising their situation, and educating its own members and the public. The organisation retained its overriding concern with the values defining political behavior, with the Conference affirming that:

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<sup>104</sup>ibid. p5

<sup>105</sup>A862/D7 Minutes, National Conference 1960, Sash Archives.

it was absolutely vital in a country where politics were divorced from ethics - someone had to uphold and maintain the duality between politics and ethics.<sup>106</sup>

Jean Sinclair encouraged the Sash to elaborate upon these principles by suggesting that the term "political morality" should be redefined as "freedom". The use of this word prompted unease among more conservative Sash members, with some suggesting that "there might be misconceptions about the meaning of fighting for freedom". Despite this, Sinclair's suggestion was carried as a resolution.

Despite the radicalising effects of the Sash's political activities in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the organisation was not willing to simply throw in its lot with a broad spectrum of opposition groups. It resisted the idea of forming a broad front against the government because it felt that this could compromise its liberal ideals. Thus an influential memorandum from Southern Transvaal Region to the 1961 Black Sash National Conference asked delegates:

Would we be behaving responsibly if we, a small group, concentrated, in alliance with anyone we could find, on getting rid of the present government without concerning ourselves with the type of government which might replace the present government?<sup>107</sup>

#### CALLS FOR A NATIONAL CONVENTION:

The Sash became involved in calls for a national convention in 1961, illustrating its growing disillusionment with existing

<sup>106</sup>ibid.

<sup>107</sup>A862/D8 "The Attitude of the Transvaal Region to Nationalism, White Privilege and Non-White Political Groups", National Conference 1961, Sash Archives.

political forums. The two Natal regions cooperated with the Liberal Party in organising a Multi-Racial National Convention in Pietermaritzburg in April, to which the Sash sent a number of delegates. Cape Western Region devoted most of its energies in 1961 towards planning a multi-racial conference in the area. In this they worked together with Coloured organisations, notably the Coloured Convention Movement whose leader, Dr. R.E. van der Ross, had for many years addressed Sash meetings and supported its activities. When the planned 1961 Coloured Convention was banned, Sash members helped organise a protest meeting in Cape Town. To avoid the ban, the Convention was relocated to a farm in the Malmsbury District, 30 miles from Cape Town, and was attended by Sash members, including the National President.

Despite these organisational efforts, the Sash shied away from association with calls by the Congress Alliance for a convention, and was not involved in the Pietermaritzburg Conference of March 1961, where Mandela called for a nationwide stayaway. The Sash further distanced itself from the Congress Alliance by explicitly rejecting stayaways as a protest strategy during a Special National Conference called in mid-1961. This position was ratified at the 1961 National Conference, where the organisation also affirmed that it believed that a lot of "spadework" would have to be done before a fully representative national convention could take place.

Jean Sinclair played a significant role in establishing the Sash's attitude towards a national convention and democracy generally



during this time. She was influential in drawing up a memorandum for the 1961 National Conference entitled: "Why the Black Sash Should Work for a National Convention Which Could Draft a New Constitution". The memorandum argued that the democratic process was the only fair and peaceful means of ensuring that social configurations of power were reflected in government. However, there was no suggestion that democracy should function as a means of redistributing political power. The memo argued, in line with the gradualism of Cape liberalism, that the South African Constitution should be flexible enough to absorb new political voices into the machinery of government. While acknowledging that the Union Constitution did not provide for one person one vote, the memo implied that this had not been unsuited to a period characterised by the socioeconomics of colonialism and noted that "if the voters had wanted to, there was ample opportunity for South Africa to have developed into a real democracy."<sup>108</sup>

The memo argued that that a rigid constitution meant that unconstitutional and probably violent means would be the only way of changing the government to better reflect the prevailing political voice. It thus demanded that a new constitution be drawn up which would "allow for peaceful change through the ballot-box while safeguarding individual rights". The memo illustrated the influence of a variety of liberal concepts on the Sash. In it, the principles of representative democracy combined with the liberal concern for individual rights, while both were tempered by the paternalism and gradualism of Cape liberalism. The Sash was to

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<sup>108</sup>A862/D8 "Why the Black Sash Should Work for a National Convention....", National Conference 1961, Sash Archives.

beginning to discover that the articulation of its liberal conceptual heritage in the context of modern South Africa, was to be a difficult and ongoing process.

### CONCLUSION:

By late 1961, the Black Sash found itself on an isolated middle ground between the closing ranks of the white electorate and the growing radicalisation of extra-parliamentary opposition. The Sash's struggle to retain the integrity of its liberal values in the political climate of the late 1950s, had lost it most of its political power. The organisation was abandoned by most of its membership, who no longer saw it as a vehicle for their political interests. Furthermore, the Sash's rejection of apartheid distanced it from parliamentary politics, where growing consensus was emerging on the question of white supremacy.

The Sash's breakaway from conservatism and its commitment to the Liberal Programme of Action, was given impetus by the organisation's involvement in the political conflict of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Sash's political perspectives were broadened as a result of its exposure to the turmoil of this period. This consolidated the organisation's commitment to liberal activism, but further distanced it from its traditional constituency. Despite its relative radicalisation between 1956 and 1960, the Sash's commitment to liberal values ensured that it resisted finding a political home with the Congress Alliance, which became steadily more radical in matters of both theory and practice.

By 1962, the Sash was increasingly both politically isolated and impotent. These were to be the defining characteristics of the organisation in the coming decade. Despite the fact that liberal values became less and less of a feature of political discourse in South Africa after 1956, they continued to form the foundation of the Sash's identity. The organisation entered the 1960s with its commitment to articulating these values in the South African context intact. Thus one of the central resolutions of the 1961 Black Sash National Conference affirmed:

That the Black Sash, in its efforts to work for justice for all South Africans, categorically rejects discrimination on the grounds of race, colour or creed. It will work to change the attitudes of mind which are governed by prejudice.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>A862/D8 Minutes, National Conference 1961, Sash Archives.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PERIOD OF ISOLATION: 1962-1969

#### INTRODUCTION:

The 1960s in South Africa were characterised primarily by the elimination of all significant opposition to NP policies, the manipulation of the institutions of the South African state in order to sustain the authority of the NP government, and the elaboration of the policy of apartheid. A combination of government repression and scare-mongering, the radicalisation and subsequent elimination of black opposition, and growing white support for the NP, contributed to the political isolation of the Black Sash during this period. The organisation struggled to articulate its political identity in a strategic and ideological vacuum which was to last until the early 1970s.

The Black Sash endured the 1960s partly due to the uncompromising liberal principles of its leaders, and the fact that these principles were consistently outraged by government action throughout the decade. Determination to preserve liberal values meant that the Black Sash remained one of the few voices of internal protest against apartheid and authoritarianism throughout the 1960s. Recalling this particular period, Sash member Joyce Harris noted:

nobody who hasn't lived through that whole era, when one actually saw the lights of freedom going out one after another, could begin to imagine what it felt like, the feeling of total despair and absolute anger that one had that the government was doing these

things.<sup>1</sup>

The Black Sash was also sustained through an extension of its legal advice work, particularly in Cape Town and Johannesburg. The organisation developed a network of advice offices which were initially a means whereby its members could fulfill an essentially welfare function by offering free legal advice and interceding in legal matters between the NP government and black South Africans. However, advice office work had important political ramifications for the Sash because the offices provided a crucial link between the organisation and victims of apartheid legislation. Through its advice office work the Sash became an authority on the evolving apartheid system and developed a privileged understanding of the economic and political ramifications of the policies of racial separation. As a result, the organisation developed a relatively sophisticated critique of apartheid, which became the theoretical base for much of its political protest.

#### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

Following the 1960 State of Emergency and the failure of the 1961 calls for a national convention, many opposition groups in South Africa began to consider strategies involving violence. Both the PAC and Congress Alliance formed insurrectionist offshoots which aimed to use force to challenge the South African power structure. The PAC formed Poqo (meaning "pure" or "alone"), which developed an explicit strategy of violence against whites in the early 1960s, and which achieved a significant degree of popular mobilisation,

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<sup>1</sup>Interview with Joyce Harris, Johannesburg, 10/12/1990

notably in the Transkei. The Congress Alliance evolved a separate military arm in 1961 called **uMkhonto we Sizwe** (MK) meaning "Spear of the Nation".

The first MK bombings occurred in December 1961 in Durban, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth. These received wide press coverage, with MK openly declaring itself responsible.<sup>2</sup> However the MK campaign not only failed to stimulate mass politicisation and mobilisation but served to cement the otherwise divided elements of white society behind the NP government.<sup>3</sup>

Infiltration and sweeping police powers crippled both the ANC, SACP, and MK, and in June 1963 police rounded up almost the entire leadership of the ANC and the SACP in a raid on the headquarters of the sabotage campaign in Rivonia, north of Johannesburg. This raid and subsequent arrests of leading communists, virtually destroyed the resistance movement by 1965. After the Rivonia raid the ANC entered a new phase, characterised by a withdrawal from internal political activities and the establishment of external missions in places like Dar-es-Salaam, London, Cairo and Algiers, which assumed responsibility for diplomatic efforts, fundraising and military strategy.<sup>4</sup>

The insurrectionist arm of the PAC, although achieving a higher degree of grassroots mobilisation than MK, had a weak theoretical

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<sup>2</sup>"Manifesto of uMkhonto we Sizwe". South African Communists Speak: Documents from the History of the SACP 1915-1980 London: Inkululeko Publications, 1981 pp274-6

<sup>3</sup>Inter alia Stultz,N.M. "The Politics of Security: South Africa Under Verwoerd" Journal of Modern African Studies Vol.7 no.1 April, 1969 pp3-20

<sup>4</sup>Hellman,E. and Lever,H. (eds) Conflict and Progress: Fifty Years of Race Relations in South Africa Johannesburg: Macmillan,1979 p41

base, relying rather on localised strategic objectives. The PAC planned a general uprising in which Poqo groups would engage in acts of random violence against whites, hoping to topple the power structure. However this was leaked to the press two weeks before the revolt was due, and police forestalled the plans and arrested over 3,000 Poqo suspects. Despite this, on the night of 22nd November 1962, 250 men marched on the Western Cape town of Paarl and attacked homes.<sup>5</sup> This uprising left eight dead and intensified white fears of mass rebellion. As a Paarl resident noted:

If a hundred could do this amount of damage, think what a thousand or ten thousand could do.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to MK and Poqo, a mainly white insurrectionist group called the Armed Resistance Movement (ARM) emerged in the early 1960s. Its membership numbered about fifty including some Liberal Party members and university students.<sup>7</sup> ARM managed to strike at a few ambitious targets, including railway signal cables and pylons, before being destroyed through infiltration and exposures during police interrogation.<sup>8</sup> However one of its members, John Harris, planted a bomb on the concourse of Johannesburg station in July 1964, which killed one person and injured several others.<sup>9</sup> Although the Liberal Party had

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<sup>5</sup>Contact 5/4/1963. Quoted in Lodge, T. Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945 London: Longman, 1963 p247

<sup>6</sup>Cape Times 23/11/1962

<sup>7</sup>Lodge, T. Black Politics op. cit. p240

<sup>8</sup>Paton, A. Journey Continued: An Autobiography Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 p227

<sup>9</sup>ibid. p236

consistently denounced violence and sabotage,<sup>10</sup> the government used Harris's trial and the exposure of ARM to intensify its attack on liberals, and the station bomb sealed the political fate of the Liberal Party.

The Progressive Party was severely crippled by losses in the 1961 General Election, in which the NP government gained a majority of votes for the first time and the Progressives won just one seat, Houghton. The Party limped through the 1960s with its one MP, Helen Suzman, a lonely liberal voice in the House of Assembly. The UP, unwilling to surrender its policy of racial paternalism, supported most of the government's most restrictive security legislation in the 1960s and offered only token resistance to the barrage of apartheid laws enacted up to 1970.

The NP government responded in three ways to the mass resistance of the early 1960s. Firstly and most immediately, it elaborated and strengthened its security apparatus. Resources were poured into this sector with the result that, while the defence budget for 1960 was \$63 million, it had reached \$375 million by 1964.<sup>11</sup> Atrocities and political crises in the Congo as well as fresh images of the civil war in Algeria and smouldering guerilla wars in Mozambique, Angola and Rhodesia, pushed many whites towards the relative security of the emerging garrison state. Internally, sabotage and Poqo activity stirred up disproportionate fears and many whites who had little enthusiasm for either Afrikaner

<sup>10</sup>inter alia "Sabotage" Liberal Opinion Vol.1 no.3 March 1962 pp2-3

<sup>11</sup>Johnson, R.W. How Long Will South Africa Survive? London: Macmillan, 1977 p29



nationalism or apartheid rallied in support of the government.

The second response of the NP government to political instability in the early 1960s, was increasingly to bypass the judicial arm of the state, appropriating, through successive pieces of legislation, virtually unfettered powers over civilian activities. B.J. Vorster, who had been a "commandant" in the pro-fascist **Ossawabrandwag** in the 1940s, was appointed Minister of Justice in October 1961. He soon established a hardline reputation for himself with the 1962 General Laws Amendment Act. The far-reaching powers that this Act gave to the Minister and his police force, were elaborated and extended in the 1963 General Laws Amendment Act. These two Acts were passed in the midst of a barrage of lesser legislation designed to allow the government to eliminate political opposition. Human rights abuses soared as a result. Allegations emerged of torture in South African garrets and in September 1963, Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle became the first of many prisoners to die in police detention.

The 90-day clause of the 1963 General Laws Amendment Act was renewed for a further twelve months in May 1964. During this period, many prominent opponents of apartheid in the white community were subject to harassment, searches and questioning. Others were detained or served with banning orders. By early 1965 1,095 people had been detained under the 90-day clause.<sup>12</sup> The clause was suspended shortly afterwards, only to be replaced by provisions for 180-day detention in the Criminal Procedure Act of 1965. Further police powers and provisions for detention without

<sup>12</sup>Contact Vol.8 no.2 February, 1965 p3

trial were introduced with the General Laws Amendment Act of 1966 and the Terrorism Act of 1967. The latter allowed for indefinite detention and made "terrorism" a capital offence.<sup>13</sup>

The third dimension of the NP response to the unrest of the early 1960s, was an elaboration of apartheid policies. H.F. Verwoerd developed the idea of several separate, ethnically defined "nations" within South Africa and racial separation became associated with potentially self-governing African "homelands" allocated according to tribal identification. The first of these, Transkei, was groomed for independence in the early 1960s and was granted partial self-government through the Transkei Constitution Act of 1963.

Having established the principle of homelands, the government went on to extend the system of influx control with the declared intention of removing all blacks, except those directly involved in labour, from "white" areas. Thus it intended a system of labour control which would feed the growing economy while not threatening the white oligarchy. The entry of Africans into the white labour market would be via a complex bureaucratic system which would ensure that labour would be controlled, exclusively migrant, and subject to limited contract. "Unproductive" Africans (this included most women) would reside exclusively in the homelands. This meant not only the expulsion of "unproductive" Africans from the cities, but the progressive withdrawal of Africans' rights to urban residence (so-called Section 10 rights).

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<sup>13</sup>Contact Vol.10 no.1 January, 1967 pp1-2

The Bantu Laws Amendment Bill of 1963 contained provisions for the whittling away of any permanent residence rights won by Africans and their families under Section 10(1)(a)(b) and (c) of the Urban Areas Act of 1945. In addition, no person could employ an African in a white area save through a Labour Bureau, and all Africans seeking employment had to register with a Bureau.<sup>14</sup> After 1963, there followed a plethora of regulations which attacked the established African population and arrests for pass offences skyrocketed, reaching a peak of 700,000 prosecutions in 1968.<sup>15</sup>

In September 1966, P.I.F. Verwoerd was assassinated by a Parliamentary messenger, Dimitri Tsafendas, and B.J. Vorster was unanimously elected the country's seventh Prime Minister by the NP caucus. Vorster initially tried to tone down his strongman image and initiated a more pragmatic regime which included the beginnings of an "outward movement" to establish diplomatic and trade links with other African states. Unity between English and Afrikaans speakers was encouraged and there was a significant increase in white immigration.

From 1958-1962 the South African economy had experienced instability and recession. Investor confidence was shattered by the events of 1960, and the shootings at Sharpeville provoked a flight of foreign capital. Despite this slump, the economy had entered a boom period by 1964 which was to persist until the end

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<sup>14</sup>Kentridge, F. "Controls Which Force Labour to be Migratory" in The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.8 nos.1/2 June/July, 1964 p16

<sup>15</sup>Lipton, M. Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa 1910-1986 Aldershot: Gower, 1985 p35

of the decade, and which contriouted substantially to white political quiescence during this time. This economic recovery was aided by the virtual elimination of political and labour unrest by 1962, and by the late 1960s South Africa was the 15th largest trading nation in the world.<sup>16</sup>

### THE EMERGING ORGANISATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE BLACK SASH:

#### THE CONTRIBUTION OF JEAN SINCLAIR:

Throughout the 1960s, the Sash's theoretical position was determined by a small leadership core, located mainly in Cape Town and Johannesburg, who were inheritors of a political tradition that drew its inspiration from Western democratic liberalism, but which was influenced by the gradualism and paternalism characteristic of the Cape liberal tradition. This leadership core was dominated by Jean Sinclair who, through her energy, forceful personality, commanding public presence and prolific political commentaries, was responsible for creating much of the Sash's political identity during this time. Sinclair was elected National President of the Sash every year from 1961, when she succeeded Eulalie Stott of Cape Western, until 1975, when she stepped down to be succeeded by her daughter, Sheena Duncan.

Jean Sinclair's election as President of the Sash gave her the authority to assert her particular brand of liberalism, which filled a growing ideological vacuum in the organisation, and remained largely uncontested until the early 1970s. Sinclair used the occasions of her annual Presidential Addresses to elaborate her

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<sup>16</sup>Johnson, R.W. How Long Will South Africa Survive? op. cit. p28

liberal beliefs throughout the 1960s and particularly in 1962 and 1963, when the Sash was struggling to find political direction. Sinclair based her political platform on the argument that the Sash, because it was freed from obligation to a constituency, was able to uphold political principles rather than succumb to expediency. She understood these principles to embody the fundamentals of liberal democracy with due allowances for the "colonial" context. They included a commitment to the rule of law, protection of basic individual rights, and limits to the power of the state.

On more than one occasion, Sinclair addressed the question of the capitalist economy in South Africa. In line with the basic principles of neo-classical economics, she believed that the economic order should be largely unfettered by state intervention, and that patterns of power in economic interaction were properly reflected in the structure of the state rather than vice versa. She thus used evidence of the racial interdependence of South Africans on an economic level to argue that multiracialism of a corresponding kind should be a feature of government. Sinclair never equated capitalism and apartheid in South Africa, seeing the class basis of the one as fundamentally different from, and potentially contradictory to, the racial basis of the other.

Jean Sinclair was central in establishing respect for the "Anglo-Saxon" tradition of the rule of law as a foundation-stone of the Sash's political beliefs. She also refused to be cowed by the NP government's persistent equation of liberalism with communism

and revolutionary subversion throughout the 1960s, insisting repeatedly, as she did in 1962:

We value truth, honesty, justice, freedom of speech, of association, of worship, of movement, freedom from want and freedom from fear. These are the values which civilised people believe to constitute liberalism.<sup>17</sup>

Jean Sinclair's political beliefs were sophisticated relative to the thinking of most Sash members. Her liberalism provided them with a welcome and uncontested theoretical base, but was not the prime driving force behind their political activities.

#### THE OPEN MEMBERSHIP DEBATE:

The Sash functioned at a very low level between 1962 and 1970. It operated virtually alone and was plagued by falling membership which dropped from 2,384 in 1961<sup>18</sup> to little more than 1,000 by 1969. The growth of regional autonomy within the Sash continued throughout this period, partly because the organisation lacked the political power to initiate national campaigns or perpetuate a national identity for itself.

Perhaps the best indication of the insecurity within the Black Sash over its organisational character during the early 1960s, was the debate over multi-racial membership, which lasted from 1960 until late 1963. Border Region, plagued by falling membership and situated in an area where white conservatism was coupled with the extremes of both urban and rural exploitation, proposed at the 1960 National Conference that membership of the Sash be multi-racial. This resolution had been initiated by Liberal Party member

<sup>17</sup>A862/D9 Presidential Address, National Conference 1962, Sash Archives.

<sup>18</sup>A862/D8 Minutes, National Conference 1961, Sash Archives.

Wendy Jackson, who was strongly supported by Border's Regional Chair, Daphne Curry. Debates with Liberal Party members in East London had convinced Jackson that the Sash could not maintain its integrity as a liberal organisation while it imposed racial restrictions on its own membership.<sup>19</sup>

The open membership resolution was rejected as being too late for inclusion into the 1960 National Conference agenda. However, this technicality concealed serious disagreements over the issue. One of the resolution's earliest opponents was Border's neighbour, Cape Eastern Region. Members of this region were strongly influenced in this by political developments in the city of Port Elizabeth, which had been an epicenter of black resistance in the 1950s. Many Sash members in Port Elizabeth feared that open membership would allow vocal black activists in the region to infiltrate the Sash and exercise a radical and alien political influence on the organisation.<sup>20</sup>

When Border resubmitted the resolution in 1961 it prompted a great deal of debate. Leading figures in the Cape Western and Transvaal Regions spearheaded opposition to the motion, arguing that the Sash was liable to command more influence if its members had no direct vested interest in its central demands, notably the more equitable distribution of political rights.<sup>21</sup>

Advocates of open membership were quick to point out that this

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Wendy Jackson, Durban, 30/1/1991

<sup>20</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>AD1457/31.2.6 Confidential Memorandum: "Points Against Opening the Black Sash to all Women", Jean Sinclair Papers.

argument was spurious, noting:

“Liberty is indivisible.. therefore, to plead or fight for somebody else is to plead or fight for oneself.”<sup>22</sup>

In opposing open membership, many members argued that the Sash's homogeneity was its strength and it had proved itself to be most efficient when working with black groups while remaining separate from them. In essence, the Sash's political identity was intimately related to its character as a white, English-speaking, middle class organisation. If it was to open its membership it faced the possibility of becoming a popular and more proletarian organisation, which would have resulted in what was to most of its members, an unacceptable radicalisation of its own political ideals and strategy. However, those arguing for open membership feared that the Sash, already alienated from white politics, was risking isolation from black political aspirations as well.

Despite intense debate, the resolution calling for open membership was lost. Border, undaunted, brought the same demand before the 1962 National Conference. Here the issue was complicated by an appeal by a white woman, Sonia Bunting, against a refusal by the Cape Western Region to grant her membership. Bunting was the wife of leading communist and one-time Natives' Representative, Brian Bunting, and the Sash was wary of her association with organisations like FSAW and COD and government restrictions on her political activities.<sup>23</sup> Bunting took her case on appeal to the

<sup>22</sup>AD1457/B1.2.6 Confidential Memorandum: "Points in Favour of Opening the Black Sash to all Women", Jean Sinclair Papers.

<sup>23</sup>MIC A862/1 Reel 1 Minutes, Transvaal Committee, 31/1/1962. Rhodes House Collection.



National Conference noting:

...I gather that my application was refused because of my political beliefs.....If this Conference endorses the decision taken in regard to my membership, it will not only delight the Minister of Justice but will, in fact, be doing his work for him.<sup>24</sup>

Although the National Conference rejected Bunting's appeal, the incident caused a great deal of unease in the Sash. The organisation had begun to fear that its resources and structures were becoming the target of activists whose own organisations were being destroyed by the state. This, like the prospect of open membership, posed a threat to the Sash's relatively fragile liberal identity. As a result, the 1962 National Conference passed a rash of resolutions designed to entrench the Sash's political character. For example, aspirant members had to be proposed and seconded by standing members and accepted by the executive committees of the relevant branch and region. In addition, they would be required to sign a membership form accepting the principles, aims and objects of the organisation. The Conference also resolved:

That any alteration in the categories of persons admitted to membership of the Black Sash shall require a two-thirds majority of the total voting strength of a National Conference.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of this decision, Border's resolution on open membership, although on this occasion gaining a simple majority of votes, was not passed.

In 1963, the resolution again failed to gain a two-thirds majority.

<sup>24</sup>A862/Fob/3 Letter: Sonia Bunting to the Chair of the National Conference of the Black Sash 19/9/1962, Sash Archives.

<sup>25</sup>A862/D9 Minutes, National Conference 1962, Sash Archives.

But by this stage the Sash was more politically isolated than ever before and it was decided to call a Special Conference to debate the issue, with regions being urged "to stress to their members the importance of accepting change when it became necessary."<sup>26</sup> However, a virtual technicality late in the Conference precipitated a re-vote at which open membership was accepted. The Sash had protected its identity while maintaining its liberal principles by constitutionally restricting its membership, not to white women as such, but to women with the vote. However in 1963, as a result of Verwoerd's policies of separate development, all women in the Transkei were enfranchised. The Sash realised that to admit these new "voters" to whom a form of franchise had been given and no other black women, would be to condone and even encourage apartheid and the policy of independent homelands. This realisation had a decisive effect and the Border resolution was, on reconsideration, at last passed with a two-thirds majority.

As many Sash activists had suspected, the opening of membership had a negligible effect on the organisation. Politically active black South Africans inevitably regarded the Sash as hopelessly conservative and ineffectual as a political force for the transformation of the power structure in South Africa. The Sash never had more than a handful of black members, most of these being Coloured or Indian.

#### THE CONSOLIDATION OF WHITE CONSENSUS:

#### PROTESTS AGAINST THE "SABOTAGE BILL":

As the 1960s wore on, the Black Sash not only became distanced

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<sup>26</sup>A862/D10 Minutes, National Conference 1963, Sash Archives.

from parliamentary politics, but also found that its erstwhile white constituency was becoming absorbed into the Nationalist-nurtured consensus that was to dominate the political climate of the decade. The Sash was relatively unprepared for the mercenary tactics used by the government, and for its success in drawing white South Africans into the confines of a racial oligarchy.

It was during its campaign against the General Laws Amendment Bill of 1962, that the Sash was made forcibly aware, not only of growing white reaction, but also the extent to which this was nurtured by the NP government. The Bill, which was published on 12th May 1962, created the offence of "sabotage", which was defined as any one of a number of acts including trespass or minor damage to property. Incitement to any of these acts also constituted sabotage, which was made a capital offence. The Bill also restricted anti-government newspapers, made it easier to ban meetings and introduced house arrest, a method of prosecution which completely circumvented the courts.

The Sash joined in widespread protest against the Bill, with Cape Western Region being instrumental in forming an alliance of groups called the Civil Rights Defence Committee, which was representative of organisations including the Liberal Party, Black Sash, National Council of Women, FSAW, Civil Rights League, the Progressive Party, Congress Movement, African General Workers' Union and the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). The Committee managed to organise a number of successful protests against the Bill in Cape Town, despite intimidation and

bannings.

The Sash also organised its own nationwide protests against the Bill, which it considered gave excessive powers to the Minister of Justice under the pretext of preventing acts of sabotage by MK.

The organisation stated:

...in our opinion this Bill constitutes a threat to fundamental democratic freedoms and principles, including one of the basic principles of parliamentary democracy: that all citizens have the right to oppose and criticize government policy and to work for a change of government.<sup>27</sup>

The highpoint of the Sash campaign was a vigil around a symbolic "flame of freedom" on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall from 16th May until the Bill passed its second reading. However the vigil had to be abandoned after a week due to public violence precipitated by the protest. Sash women at the vigil endured hours of verbal abuse and were pelted with eggs, vegetables, meat and lighted cigarettes by white youths who gathered at the City Hall steps each evening. Despite repeated requests, the police did little to prevent the abuse, which included physical attacks on the flame and the protesters themselves. It was subsequently revealed that an off-duty policeman was a ringleader in these attacks. The vigil was finally abandoned, after a near riot and violent assaults on blacks in a crowd of many hundreds on its seventh evening.<sup>28</sup>

The violence at the Johannesburg protest received wide publicity

<sup>27</sup>"Why We Have Protested" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.6 no.2 June 1962 p11

<sup>28</sup>A862/D9 Transvaal Regional Report and Headquarters Report, National Conference 1962, Sash Archives.

locally and overseas. The Sash was shocked, both by the level of white antagonism and by the fact that the police force was apparently a political tool of the NP. The Transvaal Region commented:

For the first time we realised that the police, with notable exceptions, were not prepared to be impartial or to protect all persons against assault and obscene language as is the duty of a police force.<sup>29</sup>

The English press regarded the incidents of violence as abhorrent, but not altogether unexpected, with the Rand Daily Mail noting:

The cowardly attack on the Black Sash women...is typical of the kind of thing which is bound to occur when the Government takes the lead in creating a hysterical state of mind among its supporters.<sup>30</sup>

In the subsequent months the Sash endured increased antagonism from the public and attacks from the government, as it came to be seen by many as an enemy of the state and as a quasi-communist organisation. South Africa's Foreign Minister Eric Louw, ridiculed the behavior of the "overweight Sash aunties" protesting on the City Hall steps and accused the organisation of encouraging the violent activities of the ANC and PAC through its demonstrations against the Sabotage Bill.<sup>31</sup> The Nationalist newspaper Die Burger commented that the Sash protest was:

nothing but a surrender to the dark and disrupting forces from our past which are bent on destroying our growth into nationhood.<sup>32</sup>

The Sash was forced onto the defensive, and persistently denied the accusations of its association with communism, insisting:

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Rand Daily Mail 21/5/1962

<sup>31</sup>Sunday Times 27/5/1962

<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Contact Vol.5 no.12 14/6/1962 p4

The Black Sash deplores Communism even more than it deplores the totalitarian attitude and methods of the Nationalist Government and for the same reasons....<sup>33</sup>

#### THE 1963 GENERAL LAWS AMENDMENT BILL:

In late 1962 and early 1963, Poqo initiated several violent attacks on whites in the Cape and Transkei, and the organisation's plans for a general uprising were exposed. Negative white reaction to these events paved the way for the passage of the 1963 General Laws Amendment Bill through Parliament. Introducing the second reading of the Bill, the Minister of Justice claimed that it was designed to "exterminate the cancer [of Poqo] in our national life."<sup>34</sup>

The General Laws Amendment Act widened the sections of the Suppression of Communism Act under which individuals could be banned or placed under house arrest. The Act also empowered any commissioned police officer to arrest without warrant and detain incommunicado for up to 90 days, any person suspected of contravening the Suppression of Communism Act, the Unlawful Organisations Act or of being involved in sabotage. In addition, people suspected of having any information regarding these offences could also be held.<sup>35</sup> This complete disregard for the rule of law outraged the Sash which asked:

Are a handful of men like Robert Sobukwe and the braggart Potlako Leballo indeed so dangerous that nothing will suffice to restrain them but the

<sup>33</sup>Cape Argus 22/6/1962

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Strangways-Booth, J. Cricket in the Thorn Tree: Helen Suzman and the Progressive Party of South Africa London: Hutchinson, 1976 p213

<sup>35</sup>Bindman, G. (ed) South Africa: Human Rights and the Rule of Law London: Pinter, 1988 p66

suspension of normal processes of the law, of trial and due conviction in open court?<sup>36</sup>

Despite rushed protests by the Sash, including pressure on the UP to reconsider its support for the measure, the Bill was passed. However, as the 90-day clause was due for Parliamentary review in twelve months, the Sash began a vigorous campaign for its withdrawal. The National President, Jean Sinclair, began moves to establish a broadly representative ad hoc committee to call for the repeal of clause 17, which allowed for detention without trial. As plans progressed, activity focused on the Cape, where UP MP Hamilton Russell had based his own campaign against the 90-day detention clause. The Sash was represented on the 90-day Protest Committee which he chaired. Together with the National Council of Women, the Sash drew up a memorandum outlining its objections to the clause, including growing evidence of the use of torture on 90-day detainees.

By early July 1963, over 100 people were being held under the 90-day clause<sup>37</sup> which, despite the efforts of the Sash and others, was renewed in May 1964 for a further twelve months. The Sash continued to oppose the concentration of arbitrary power in the state at the expense of individual freedoms through its traditional means including stands, vigils and letters to the press. However, the organisation recognised that white South Africans had been lulled into an acceptance of these measures by a growing seige

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<sup>36</sup>"Self-Inflicted Wounds" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.7 no.2 July, 1963 p2

<sup>37</sup>Contact Vol.5 no.13 28/6/1963 p5

mentality combined with an apathy bred by one of the highest standards of living in the world.

Sash members themselves were occasionally the victims of punitive action as the government consolidated its political authority in the 1960s. In September 1965 Jean Hill, a Sash member in the Natal Coastal Region, was placed under a banning order in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act, mainly for her Liberal Party activities.<sup>38</sup> The Sash was shocked and saddened, and claimed that Hill's deeply held Christian principles prevented her from ever having been a communist.<sup>39</sup> The Sash's legal advisor in the Transvaal, Ruth Hayman, left South Africa on an exit permit after she was served with a five-year banning order under the Suppression of Communism Act and confined to 12-hour house arrest in 1966.<sup>40</sup> Other Sash members suspended their membership after receiving Magisterial "warnings" that action would be taken against them if they continued their political activities. "Warnings" led to the resignations of both the Natal Midlands and Cape Eastern Chairs in 1966. A further blow was the banning of Defence and Aid, for which many Sash members worked, in April 1966.

The Sash registered its opposition to both the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1967, which further restricted the members of banned organisations, and the Terrorism Act. In the case of the latter it noted that habeas corpus had been destroyed

<sup>38</sup>Natal Mercury 9/10/1965

<sup>39</sup>MIC A865/4 Reel 4 Letter: Jean Sinclair to the Minister of Justice, 2/12/1965, Rhodes House Collection. Cape Times 26/10/1965

<sup>40</sup>Sunday Times 15/1/1967



by putting the onus on the accused to prove their innocence and also noted that:

...its definition of terrorist activity is so wide that the most innocent action can fall within its scope and any person can be subjected to indefinite detention on mere suspicion of having committed such an act.<sup>41</sup>

#### THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST BIASED BROADCASTING:

The Sash was confronted from the early 1960s onwards with increasingly vociferous and pervasive Nationalist propaganda, designed to nurture white support for the government. This was evident both in attempts to muzzle independent criticism of the regime, notably from the English press, and in the growing use of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) as a government mouthpiece. During the 1960 state of emergency the government had shown its willingness to stifle the press, and the Undesirable Publications Bill of 1962 firmly fixed the sword of Damocles above the independent media in the country.

The SABC was a public utility, which had a legally entrenched monopoly over broadcasting. Its value to the state as a propaganda tool was unquestionable and its organisational hierarchy had been steadily infiltrated by members of the Broederbond since 1948. In 1959, Chairman of the Broederbond, Dr. P.J. Meyer, became Chairman of the SABC, and by 1961 he had acquired de facto control of the organisation, ousting the Director-General, Gideon Roos. The Sunday Times commented on this coup:

The Government and the Broederbond have won their four-year struggle to get rid of Mr. Gideon Roos. With

<sup>41</sup> A262/Jb/8 "Fact Paper Produced by the Black Sash for the Demonstration Against the Terrorism Bill on June 9, 1967", Sash Archives.

his departure, the last obstacle has been removed for the control of broadcasting in South Africa to fall completely into political hands.<sup>42</sup>

The Sash had become progressively enraged at the cynical use of radio to disseminate NP propaganda, and at the dangers inherent in the associated stifling of the expression of independent opinion. This anger was given an unexpected avenue for expression at the Black Sash National Conference in Cape Town in late 1961. There, a SABC representative asked the National President Eulalie Stott if he could broadcast commentary on the proceedings. She replied that she was "flattered", but some delegates mistook her sarcasm and heated remarks were made from the floor. Finally, the reporter was asked to leave with Stott commenting: "When there is a free Radio South Africa you will be welcome".<sup>43</sup> A press statement issued later by the Conference noted:

The Black Sash condemns the change in policy which has converted Radio South Africa into an instrument for Government propaganda. This gradual and insidious change is now so blatant that the time has come for the public forcefully to express its disapproval....<sup>44</sup>

However the ejection of the SABC representative drew criticism not only from the Afrikaans press but from the English press and from some Sash members themselves. The Cape Times rebuked the Sash for breaching press freedom and noted in an editorial: "That

<sup>42</sup>Sunday Times 16/4/1961. Quoted in Wilkins, J. and Strydom, H. The Broederbond London: Paddington, 1979 p128

<sup>43</sup>"Highlights of Conference" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.5 no.5 December, 1961 p7

<sup>44</sup>"Press Statement from the Sash Conference" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.5 no.5 December, 1961 p10

kind of banning and barring can safely be left to the Nationalists."<sup>45</sup> In addition, two journalists who were Sash members immediately tendered their resignations. One, a member of the P.E.N. Club Committee, voiced a liberal objection to the Sash's action by noting that:

its moral basis seems to be that one is entitled to censor anyone whom one sincerely believes to be wrong. This is precisely the standpoint of those Nationalists who want to censor the English Press....<sup>46</sup>

The Sash's leadership realised that the attack on the SABC had violated the organisation's own liberal principles and more importantly, had touched a raw nerve in the English press, which was already extremely sensitive to issues of censorship. The incident had the makings of a strategic disaster because it had alienated one of the Sash's most powerful liberal allies. Sustained criticism of the organisation in the English press or even simple non-cooperation could have rung the death knell for the Sash, which had dedicated considerable energies towards cultivating the favour of editors and journalists.

The Sash immediately set about soothing ruffled liberal sensibilities. An explanation of the incident and statement appeared in the Cape Times of 14th November insisting that the Black Sash:

does not consider the SABC is in the same category as the Press. The SABC is a service towards which all

<sup>45</sup>Cape Times 13/11/1961

<sup>46</sup>MIC A862/4 Reel 4 Letter of resignation: M. Challans to the Black Sash, 12/11/1961. Quoted in a Circular of 4/12/1961, Cape Western to all Regions, Rhodes House Collection.

listeners, whatever their political sympathies, contribute to financially.

In the opinion of the Black Sash, therefore, the SABC should not be used to represent only the Government point of view....<sup>47</sup>

Rumblings of discontent continued, especially in the Cape, and prompted a letter of explanation from Cape Western to the South African Society of Journalists, as well as urgent appeals to regions to do all they could to repair the damage and establish good relations with the press.<sup>48</sup>

Partly in an attempt to placate the press and to justify its own position, the Sash decided to launch a public petition demanding that the SABC should cease to be an instrument for propagating government policy. Jean Sinclair was the driving force behind this campaign, which was hurriedly organised and launched over the Christmas period.

The campaign was a disaster. Despite devoting all its energies to the petition from late 1961 through to February 1962, the Sash only collected 25,000 of the anticipated 250,000 signatures. The public, in part slow to react to early signs of state manipulation of the media, in part concerned about the political instability and growing violence of the time, did not respond well to the petition, which was somewhat aggressively worded and confrontational. Reports from the regions were unanimous in blaming "fear and apathy" for the poor public response. Natal Coastal noted that many sympathetic businessmen had refused to sign because

<sup>47</sup>Cape Times 14/11/1961

<sup>48</sup>MIC A862/4 Reel 4 Circular of 4/12/1961, Cape Western to all Regions, Rhodes House Collection.

"already their principles had cost them tens of thousands of rand in loss of import permits etc...."<sup>49</sup> In the Transvaal the situation was even more acute with the region commenting:

In Johannesburg, women collecting signatures in the street have been shocked at the fear among the public of signing anything. Some admit that they agree with the petition but are afraid to sign....The similarity between South Africa and pre-war Germany is striking.<sup>50</sup>

The Sash also had to cope with apathy and resistance from its own members. Many women wanted to spend the Christmas holidays with their families and resented putting extra time and energy into what was clearly an unpopular and unsuccessful campaign. The regions had not been consulted by Headquarters over the timing of the petition and many, who were already battling depleted ranks and public antipathy, were deeply angered. The position was exacerbated by a lukewarm press response, as the Chair of Cape Eastern noted:

It has only been through my personal good relations with the Press that I have been able to keep them from printing the utter fiasco of the whole thing. We have not been as fortunate in Grahamstown where a leading article in their local paper had some quite nasty things to say.<sup>51</sup>

By March 1962, the Sash was considering abandoning the campaign. However Headquarters decided to present the petition to Dr.

<sup>49</sup>A862/Fbb/8 Letter: Natal Coastal to Headquarters, 13/3/1962, Sash Archives.

<sup>50</sup>A862/Ja/4 Letter: Headquarters to Sir de Villiers Graaff, 12/12/1961, Sash Archives.

<sup>51</sup>A862/Fbb/8 Letter: Chair of Cape Eastern Region to Jean Sinclair, 7/2/1962, Sash Archives.

Verwoerd regardless, and was rewarded with the following reply from his Private Secretary:

I am instructed to acknowledge receipt of your letter of 16 July, 1962, and petition, and to state that The(sic) Government, as you should readily understand, has no confidence in your organisation. It cannot therefore be impressed by any petition sponsored or instigated by it.<sup>52</sup>

The Sash turned this letter over to the English press, which gave it extensive publicity and attacked Dr. Verwoerd for his dismissive response, with the Star noting that "The implication is that the Government will only take cognizance of the views of those with whom it agrees."<sup>53</sup>

The campaign was transformed from failure to success as the Sash was rehabilitated almost by default in the eyes of the English press. However, the campaign had revealed trends in public opinion which the organisation found deeply disturbing. At a meeting of Headquarters to discuss the petition, it was agreed that "fear and apathy" were the twin features of the electorate's new political character.<sup>54</sup> The Sash tried to counter these attitudes, but was to discover that white consensus and its attendant seige mentality would only harden as the decade progressed, further alienating the organisation from its traditional constituency.

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<sup>52</sup>A862/Ja/5 Letter: Private Secretary to the Prime Minister to Jean Sinclair, 17/7/1962, Sash Archives.

<sup>53</sup>Quoted in "The Black Sash and the S.A.B.C." The Black Sash/Die Swart Sash Vol.6 no.3 October, 1962 p25

<sup>54</sup>MIC A262/1 Reel 1 Minutes, Transvaal Committee, 28/2/1962, Rhodes House Collection.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ANTI-APARTHEID FOCUS:

In the wake of the political unrest the early 1960s, Black Sash membership dropped steadily as most regions struggled to keep going on an uninspiring diet of analysis of new legislation, court monitoring, educational programmes and multi-racial social events. As time wore on it became clear that the Sash's members were finding that their work of a quasi-welfare nature was most fulfilling. This usually involved dispensing help to individual victims of government repression and apartheid legislation.

Two of the Sash's most rewarding political activities during this period were opposing local Group Area proclamations, and helping individuals who had been "banished" without trial to remote and impoverished rural areas for various political "offences". In the course of both these campaigns, the Sash investigated and exposed the issues primarily at a regional level, with Sash members utilising their privileged access to lawyers, MPs, publicity and other resources to oppose government policy. They worked closely with various communities threatened by the Group Areas Act, such as those in Noordhoek, Soetwater, Kommetjie and District Six in the Cape Peninsula, and sought out and provided welfare for individuals "banished" to remote rural areas in Natal and the Cape Province.

Both the Group Areas and "banishment" campaigns lent themselves to a local focus, and most regions found that they could do their most meaningful political work through this kind of first-hand interaction with individuals or groups affected by discriminatory

or repressive government legislation. As the decade wore on, the most successful vehicles for this type of political activity became the Black Sash's legal advice offices, which flourished after 1962. These offices in turn helped the Sash give shape to its political identity, which had been so nebulous in the early 1960s.

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BLACK SASH ADVICE OFFICES:

Early in 1962, the Cape Western Region of the Black Sash was approached by the SAIRR in Cape Town, who asked if its Bail Fund Office would take over the Institute's legal advice work in exchange for a contribution to expenses and the provision of an extra interpreter. Cape Western, whose office had already begun to help clients with legal difficulties on an ad hoc basis, accepted the offer and the Athlone Advice Office was born.<sup>55</sup>

As influx control regulations were applied with increasing rigidity in the Cape Peninsula, the demand for the advice office grew, and during March and April of 1962, over 500 "cases" were interviewed. Most of these were migrant labourers who had lost their jobs and been "endorsed out" to the homelands, and women who had come to Cape Town from the Transkei to try to live with their husbands. The Sash soon realised that little could be done for over half of these cases but that the office could provide some small resource for the urban African against the government's draconian labour and population controls. As a Sash volunteer noted in mid-1962:

...however much a morning at the Advice Office might sear the heart and destroy peace of the mind, there is always consolation in the actual presence of the

<sup>55</sup>"News from Regions and Branches" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sash Vol.6 no.1 March/April, 1962 pp18-19



patient Africans waiting there every morning. They need the office - no more can be said.<sup>56</sup>

By mid-1962 the women of Cape Western who worked in the office had begun to develop a reputation as authorities on influx control legislation. Advice office workers began to address church groups on dimensions of influx control legislation and an article by Advice Office Director Noel Robb entitled "Endorsed Out" made a wide impact when it was published in the journal Forum. At its eighth National Conference in Durban late that year, the Sash recognised the importance of the Athlone Advice Office and there was a strong sense that it was in that direction that the immediate path of the organisation lay. Avenues for political protest and mobilisation were closing and the Sash was losing many members who felt that the organisation had little power and no real purpose. Advice office work provided members with direct opportunities both to critically investigate apartheid and to ameliorate some of its effects. The 1962 Conference voted to try to establish other advice offices "to help the victims of Influx Control and tabulate the facts concerning this."<sup>57</sup>

Sash members in the Cape had for some time been urging Headquarters Region, Transvaal, to follow their lead and open an advice office similar to the one at Athlone. Noel Robb eventually persuaded Jean Sinclair to take the initiative in establishing a Transvaal office.<sup>58</sup> In August 1962, a sub-committee was formed

<sup>56</sup>Wilks, B. "Thy Land My Land: The Work of the Athlone Advice Office" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.6 no.2 June, 1962 p28

<sup>57</sup>A862/D9 Minutes, National Conference 1962, Sash Archives.

<sup>58</sup>Interview with Noel Robb, Cape Town, 20/1/1989

to plan an advice office in Johannesburg.<sup>59</sup> The region raised R800 towards the running of an office and prospective volunteer workers were briefed by a Johannesburg Municipal official and a member of the SAIRR on contemporary racial legislation. On 11th February 1963 the Johannesburg Advice Office opened.<sup>60</sup>

The Sash in the Transvaal still had close links to the UP-controlled Johannesburg City Council and various public officials, particularly through Jean Sinclair. The region took care not to jeopardize these valuable relationships by meeting with representatives of the City Council's Non-European Affairs Committee and the Bantu Administration Office, to explain the purpose of the advice office and to ask for cooperation. This was initially successful, and early dealings between the advice office and officialdom were characterised by mutual respect. However, as the decade wore on and the legislative noose around the urban African tightened, this atmosphere of mutual cooperation soured, and the Sash was forced to adopt a more confrontational approach which included challenging legislation in the courts.

The Sash's smaller regions responded enthusiastically to the 1962 National Conference resolution which committed the organisation to try to establish advice offices nationwide. By the 1964 National Conference, advice offices had been opened in East London by Border, in Port Elizabeth by Cape Eastern, and in Durban by Natal Coastal. Natal Coastal had gone about setting up its office in much

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<sup>59</sup>MIC A862/1 Reel 1 Minutes, Transvaal Committee 26/9/1962, Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>60</sup>AD1457/A4.1.1/25 Sinclair, J. "Speech to the Liberal Party on the Work of the Black Sash Advice Offices" 23/5/1965, Jean Sinclair Papers.

the same way as Transvaal, trying to obtain the sanction and cooperation of government officials. Partly because Natal was not an area where influx control was strictly enforced, partly because of a strong UP presence in the Provincial administration, and partly because many Sash members in the region retained their high standing in the community, very cordial relations were established with local administrators. An official was even detailed specifically to look after cases that the Sash brought to the office.<sup>61</sup>

Like Natal Coastal, Border Region found that its advice office, which opened on 8th April 1964, provided an essential focus. The region reported to the 1964 National Conference:

The opening of the office was the high-light of the year on the Border and has given us something concrete to do, but we very badly need more helpers.<sup>62</sup>

Border's office adopted a more confrontational stance towards the authorities, vigorously defending many Africans endorsed out to the homeland of Transkei, just north of East London. This led almost immediately to its unpopularity with government officials. The experience of working at the advice offices hardened the personal resolve of many Sash members to oppose the system of apartheid that was causing such social dislocation and human suffering. The 1964 National Conference recognised the impact of the offices on the Sash when it endorsed the recommendation:

That in order that all members of the Black Sash should be better equipped to make the South African

<sup>61</sup>A862/D12 Natal Coastal Regional Report, National Conference 1964, Sash Archives.

<sup>62</sup>A862/D12 Border Regional Report, National Conference 1964, Sash Archives.

public aware of the devastating consequences of Influx Control and Migratory Labour systems, every member of the Black Sash should undertake to spend a morning in the Advice Offices and to bring at least one of her friends with her....<sup>63</sup>

By 1964, the Johannesburg Advice Office was well established in premises in the Harvard Buildings in Joubert Street. These offices were shared jointly by the advice office, the National Headquarters and the Transvaal Regional Headquarters, which cemented a close working relationship between the advice office and the Sash. Between October 1963 and September 1964, the Johannesburg Advice Office conducted 958 interviews with the help of 25 voluntary workers and a paid interpreter.<sup>64</sup> However, the Athlone Advice Office remained the flagship of the Sash's legal advice work, conducting 4,769 interviews between October 1963 and September 1964. The office operated five days a week with the help of 30 volunteer workers, one paid organiser, two paid interpreters and an interpreter provided by the SAIRR.<sup>65</sup>

By 1964, Sash Headquarters realised that additional funds would be required to run the advice offices, particularly to pay office rentals and interpreters' salaries. Headquarters and Transvaal Region began an appeal for funding which resulted in pledges of over R2,000 from private sources and R500 from the Bantu Welfare Trust which was administered by the SAIRR. From 1964 the Bantu

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<sup>63</sup>A862/D12 Minutes, National Conference 1964, Sash Archives.

<sup>64</sup>A862/D12 Johannesburg Advice Office Report, National Conference 1964, Sash Archives.

<sup>65</sup>A862/D12 Athlone Advice Office Annual Report, National Conference 1964, Sash Archives.

Welfare Trust provided an annual grant towards the running of Sash advice offices, putting them on a relatively secure financial footing.

After 1963, the direction of the Black Sash's political activity became strongly influenced by its advice office work. Its offices were located in urban centers, which meant that the bulk of their cases involved difficulties with both residence and employment rights. These were exacerbated by the fact that the 1960s was a period of stringent and ruthless application of influx control by the NP government. As a result, opposition to influx control became a central feature of the Sash's political programme.

#### CAMPAIGNS AGAINST THE BANTU LAWS AMENDMENT BILLS:

The Sash's first major campaign against influx control was launched against the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill of 1963, which was published in draft form in February of that year and which gave the government far-reaching powers to control African labour. Headquarters Region of the Sash responded to the tabling of the Bill with a memorandum stating that:

the Black Sash is of the opinion that the proposed legislation will have disastrous effects on the spiritual, mental and economic well-being of the African people.<sup>66</sup>

The Sash argued that the Act would cause pass convictions to soar, families to be split up and would put urban Africans in a perpetual state of uncertainty regarding their residence rights. The Sash also claimed that the Bill was economically unsound in that it obstructed the labour contract between worker and employer,

<sup>66</sup>The Draft Bantu Laws Amendment Bill The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.7 no.1 March/April, 1963 p13

forced industry to operate in areas prescribed by the Minister, and necessitated a massive expansion of the bureaucratic machinery of labour control. The organisation already had considerable evidence from its Athlone Advice Office that the rural areas could not sustain the populations being endorsed out, and that many urban residents endorsed out had no other homes and so were in effect stateless.<sup>67</sup> In line with its understanding of the role of the "free market", the Sash was convinced that the Act contradicted the most basic patterns of economic and political development, noting that:

The Bill again denies the right, basic in every democracy, that a man should be permitted to sell his labour freely and to his advantage. This denial makes the worker servile to the state, a condition found in totalitarian and Communist states.<sup>68</sup>

The Sash presented its case against the Bill to the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development in the form of two memoranda and an interview, but achieved little.<sup>69</sup> The Bill was passed in a relatively benign abridged form in the 1963 session, only to be resurrected in full for passage in the 1964 session. By this time the Sash was aware that it could no longer assume that a significant proportion of the electorate empathised with its liberal beliefs or even shared its opposition to apartheid. As a result, the organisation had some difficulty devising a basis for its campaign against the 1964 Bantu Laws Amendment Bill.

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid. pp14-15

<sup>68</sup>A862/Ja/6 "Memorandum on the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill of 1963" 27/5/1963, Sash Archives.

<sup>69</sup>A862/Fb/1 HQ Circular no.6/1964, 9/3/1964, Sash Archives.

The Sash eventually decided at its 1964 National Conference to launch a nationwide campaign against the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill focusing on its destructive effect on African family life. In part, the organisation intended to exploit the NP government's own idealisation of the family as integral to the social coherence of "Christian South Africa", which had, among other things, led it to declare the 11th July a national holiday as Family Day. In addition, by far the greatest proportion of the Sash's experience of influx control was through handling individual cases in its advice offices. Advice office files held hundreds of examples of families torn apart and forced into destitution by the Act. This meant that at the time the organisation was best qualified to develop a critique of the human dimensions of the situation rather than the broader economic and political implications.

The Sash hoped to persuade the Christian churches to support its campaign on the basis of the fact that the Christian concept of marriage was threatened by the Act. The Sash also hoped that sympathetic clergy might influence their white parishioners who, although seemingly paralysed politically, might still be able to respond as Christians. Jean Sinclair had always had a strong Christian dimension to her political beliefs and had useful contacts with many churches, which facilitated the Sash's campaign. Numerous letters were sent to churches asking for their cooperation in the campaign on the basis of the fact that they should not condone an Act which destroyed the essence of Christian marriage.

The responses from most churches were supportive, but although church leaders agreed to try to make their parishioners aware of the situation, few were optimistic about the possibilities of changing the government's intentions. Most were painfully aware that as long as the Dutch Reformed churches refused to speak out against apartheid, the other Christian denominations held little sway with the government.<sup>70</sup> Indeed Sash appeals to the **Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk** drew little beyond antagonistic responses and accusations of "destructive criticism"<sup>71</sup>

Despite launching its most intensive campaign since the Senate Act protests, the Sash was unable to prevent the 1964 Bantu Laws Amendment Act from differing much from the 1963 Bill. In addition, the new version of the Act contained a clause which threatened the advice offices. The Sash's flourishing offices had raised government ire and had been attacked in Parliament by the Deputy Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, who accused the organisation of secrecy and of "creating more trouble than doing good."<sup>72</sup> The attacks proved to be more than parliamentary bluster when clause 73 of the 1964 Act, which was designed primarily to eliminate professional pass consultants, placed restrictions on giving legal advice to Africans. This, together with visits by police to some of the smaller advice offices with accusations that they were contravening the law, led to concern and some tensions within the Sash.<sup>73</sup> However, after

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<sup>70</sup>inter alia A862/Jcb/1, Letter from the Vicar General of Cape Town to Jean Sinclair, 23/8/1963, Sash Archives.

<sup>71</sup>A862/Jcb/2 Undated letter: Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk Scribe to Jean Sinclair 1967, Sash Archives. Die Transvaler 9/9/1967.

<sup>72</sup>Rand Daily Mail 20/3/1964 and 23/3/1964



obtaining legal advice, the Sash established that its own activities did not fall within the ambit of the Act because they were conducted without charge.<sup>74</sup>

As part of the campaign against the break-up of African family life, the Sash organised a two-day Forum on Migrant Labour in Johannesburg in June 1964. Prominent academics and other leading public figures contributed to the Forum which found that:

African family life is adversely affected not so much by migrant labour in itself, as by the laws which reduce Africans in general, and migrant labourers in particular, to mere labour units, and deprive them of personal freedom.<sup>75</sup>

The Sash became particularly concerned that NP influx control policies were contributing to the artificial depression of black wages, arguing that these wages were not appropriate to a country at South Africa's stage of economic development. The theoretical basis of the Sash's economic analysis of influx control was that NP intervention in the economy, and not the economic system itself, was fundamentally unjust. The organisation still adhered to the basic conviction that an unfettered economy had the greatest potential to become both balanced and fair.

#### THE ADVICE OFFICES AND THE CRITIQUE OF MIGRANT LABOUR:

The advice offices flourished up to the mid-1960s, dealing with over 5,000 cases in 1964 alone and keeping the Sash in constant

<sup>73</sup>A862/Lad/2 Letter: Transvaal Region to M. Henderson, 13/3/1964, Sash Archives.

<sup>74</sup>A862/Lab/3 HQ Circular no.8/1964, 20/3/1964, Sash Archives.

<sup>75</sup>"The Forum on the Adverse Effects of Migratory Labour on African Family Life" The Black Sash/Die Swart Saak Vol.8 nos.1/2 June/July, 1964 p3

touch with developments in influx control legislation.<sup>76</sup> As an appraisal of the 1964 National Conference noted:

It was obvious that the women who give voluntary service in these offices are becoming more and more aware of the complexities of the mass of legislation hedging round the lives and prospects of non-Whites.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the early successes of the advice offices in Durban, East London, and Port Elizabeth, 1965 saw their rapid demise. Harassment by the police intensified after 1964, with Sash workers in East London having to endure frequent Security Police "visits" to the advice office.<sup>78</sup> For Border Region, already crippled by falling membership, this harassment proved too much and it closed its advice office. The Eastern Cape advice office in Port Elizabeth also closed temporarily following police warnings in early 1965, and subsequently found it almost impossible to summon up the resources to re-open. This was compounded by the resignation of the Regional Chair in early 1966 following a Magisterial "warning"<sup>79</sup> and the April banning of Defence and Aid with which the advice office had had a close working relationship. By late 1966, the Cape Eastern advice office was no longer functioning.

Natal Coastal also closed its advice office in early 1965, but

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<sup>76</sup>"Tenth Annual Conference of the Black Sash" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.8 no.3 October/November, 1964 p6

<sup>77</sup>Davidoff, J. "Appraisal of Conference" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.8 no.3 October/November, 1964 p7

<sup>78</sup>Interview with Wendy Jackson, Durban, 30/1/1991

<sup>79</sup>MIC A862/4 Reel 4 Letter: M.G.Roberts to P.Levy, 13/4/1966, Rhodes House Collection.

through lack of work rather than intimidation. Almost full employment in the Durban area, the fact that women were not being endorsed out of the city, and the relatively sympathetic attitude of many officials, meant that very few people came to the office for help. Although the office managed to open again in May 1966, this situation persisted and by 1968 the region reported that fewer than five people had come to the office between December 1967 and October 1968.<sup>80</sup> The Athlone and Johannesburg advice offices also suffered their share of Security Police harassment, including a much-publicised raid on the Athlone office in July 1965 during which files were seized.<sup>81</sup> However, both Cape Western and Transvaal regions were strong enough to resist intimidation and their advice offices continued to flourish.

The Athlone Advice Office continued to be the flagship of Sash activity throughout the decade. Its battles against influx control were most intense due to the fact that the Western Cape was targeted as a region in which no Africans would have the right to either live or work. The Eiselen Line, beyond which it was intended to remove all Africans, had been redrawn in 1962, redefining the zone of Coloured Labour Preference to include a much larger area, which exacerbated conditions for Africans seeking employment in the Cape. The difficulties encountered by the Athlone Advice Office as a result of the Eiselen line policy led it to collect a vast corpus of information on the workings of influx control and to elaborate a strong critique of the system.

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<sup>80</sup>A862/D17 Natal Coastal Regional Report, National Conference 1968, Sash Archives.

<sup>81</sup>Rand Daily Mail 9/7/1965

The Athlone Advice Office's Annual Report at the 1964 National Conference was particularly scathing of the economic effects of the contract labour system in the Western Cape. Among other things, the Report revealed that because neither employer nor employee were free to negotiate a contract, which under the new system had to be conducted through a Labour Bureau, they often found each other unsuitable. In the case of the employee there was no chance to bargain for a living wage, and if he disliked the terms of his employment he only had the options of either completing the contract, or breaking it and being jailed for desertion prior to repatriation.<sup>82</sup>

After 1964, the Sash regularly discussed at its National Conferences whether by disentangling the law in its advice offices it was merely helping the system to work more smoothly. The Sash steadfastly maintained that the offices were justified because they provided a valuable service to Africans trying to establish their right to live in the urban areas. It took comfort from the fact that in 1964 of the 4,870 endorsements out of Cape Town, 1,250 of these had come to the Athlone Advice Office for help.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, most members felt that their work was a necessary token stand against the state's attack on the status of Africans as individuals and citizens.

By 1965 the Black Sash had become a recognised expert on influx

<sup>82</sup>A862/D12 Athlone Advice Office Report, National Conference 1964, Sash Archives.

<sup>83</sup>"News From Regions and Branches" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.9 no.1 March/April, 1965 p32

control legislation, with Headquarters producing a pamphlet entitled "Everybody's Guide to the Pass Laws". This contained advice to Africans on how to keep within the law (for example, the amount of time that could be spent with family in the homelands before forfeiting urban residence rights) and also information for employers. The Sash was particularly disturbed at employer apathy and ignorance regarding the welfare of workers. From experience, it knew that few employers registered workers or bothered to sign valid labour contracts and it had seen many cases, particularly in Cape Town, of employers relocating their businesses and staff, thereby annulling the worker's hard-won Section 10 rights. The booklet was translated into Zulu and Xhosa and proved to be extremely popular.

In 1965 the Sash also began an intensive campaign to trace those Africans who were owed workmen's compensation for injuries or disabilities. Money had often been left unclaimed because employers had no adequate record of their employees' names and because many injured workmen had been dismissed, consequently endorsed out to homelands because they were unemployed, and thus been unavailable to collect their money. Each region searched for recipients of this money in their own areas in what was to become an ongoing project for all advice offices.

After 1965, influx control was very strictly enforced, and both the Johannesburg and Cape Town advice offices noted that the shortage of urban housing was being used as an excuse by officials to endorse people out. This was particularly the case in Cape Town where, after 1st September 1966, no more contract labour was

recruited because of severe overcrowding in Langa and Nyanga townships. Cape Western Region revealed that many women were refused permission to live with their qualified husbands because of lack of accommodation, and if the qualified owner of a brick house died, his widow and children often lost not only the house but their rights to urban residence as well.

As early as January 1966, the government announced that the African labour force in the Western Cape was to be frozen and then reduced by 5 per cent annually.<sup>84</sup> A BAD official stated that "our eventual aim remains the eventual exclusion of all Bantu in the area."<sup>85</sup> By 1967, Cape Town was being strangled by an artificial shortage of labour, with building projects having to be abandoned and industries having to cut down production. The Black Sash took this as evidence of the dislocating effects of government policies on the economic development of South Africa. As Jean Sinclair had warned in 1965:

Baasskap apartheid and sound economic growth are incompatible. Dictatorial controls and restrictions, particularly in the labour market, hamper normal expansion, put a premium on skills, increase costs and set the economy on an inflationary course.<sup>86</sup>

In 1969, a Bantu Laws Amendment Bill was tabled, which took a giant step towards making the advice offices redundant by

<sup>84</sup>Goldin, I. Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa London: Longman, 1987 p140

<sup>85</sup>Robb, N. "Where do they go?" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.11 no.3 November, 1967 p15

<sup>86</sup>Sinclair, J. "Apartheid at the Cost of Freedom" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.9 no.3 August/October, 1965 p2

extending the powers of the Minister to remove exemptions under Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act. In short, this meant that in future no African could qualify to remain in an urban area except on a year's contract as a migrant labourer. Sash regarded this as "undoubtedly the death blow to the urban African."<sup>87</sup> and wearily prepared to confront what was soon dubbed the "Slave Labour Bill".

#### RESETTLEMENT CAMPS AND "BLACK SPOT" REMOVALS:

By 1968, the Sash had become concerned with the plight of hundreds of people who had been expelled from the cities into barren rural areas as a result of influx control legislation. In many ways this was a logical extension of the organisation's advice office work, but because the problem manifested primarily in the rural areas, it involved many of the Sash's smaller regions whose advice offices had wound down. In early 1967, BAD had issued General Circular No. 25/1967, which noted:

The Honourable Minister has given instructions that the resettlement in the Homelands of thousands of superfluous Bantu families at present residing in the European areas of the Republic must enjoy the highest priority....<sup>88</sup>

These "unproductive" Africans included the aged, the unfit, widows, and women with dependent children. The Sash had long been aware that many of these people endorsed out of the urban areas had in fact no "home" in the "homelands". Furthermore, Africans born on white-owned farms who were dismissed or who left the farms to work in the cities had, in effect, no right to live anywhere. This

<sup>87</sup>Robb,N. "The Bantu Laws Amendment Bill" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.13 no.1 May, 1969 p27

<sup>88</sup>Argus 6/7/1968

latter category potentially comprised three million people.<sup>89</sup> These "homeless" people were often sent to hastily established camps within the borders of the homelands.

The Sash began to investigate these camps, which numbered about 24, from 1967. Members of the small Border Region, adjacent to the homeland of the Transkei, were partly responsible for one of the earliest exposures of a resettlement camp. The camp was called Sada, and had been established in 1963 in a barren area of the Eastern Cape about 27 miles from Kingwilliamstown. Sash investigations revealed that at Sada there was little or no opportunity for employment, transportation to the nearest town was inadequate and prohibitively expensive, government emergency rations were poor, and there were inadequate services.<sup>90</sup>

Prompted by the destitution witnessed at Sada, the Sash compiled and publicised a fact paper on resettlement villages, and went on to investigate and expose conditions in other camps, especially in the Eastern Cape.

Throughout the late 1960s the Sash extended its investigations of forms of population resettlement. One of these was "black spot" removal, which had come to the Sash's attention in 1963 through an article written by Peter Brown in the liberal newspaper

Contact.<sup>91</sup> Black spots were African communities living on

<sup>89</sup>Roberts, M. "The Evils of Migratory Labour" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sem Vol.8 no.3 October/November, 1964 p25

<sup>90</sup>MIC A862 2nd Series Reel 2 Hall, P. "Report on Conditions at Sada", Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>91</sup>Brown, P. "Blackspots' Removals: What Apartheid is Doing to 400,000 People in Natal." Contact Vol.6 no.9, 3/5/1963 pp4-5



freehold land in "white" rural areas, and the government's plans for them were clinically described in 1968 by the Deputy Chairman of the Bantu Affairs Commission:

the policy of the present Government is to consolidate as far as possible all Bantu land into consolidated blocks i.e. by excising smaller, scattered areas out of scheduled or released areas and giving compensatory land of equal value contiguous to the larger Bantu blocks....When all these "Black spots" and isolated scheduled and released areas are once removed, the chess board pattern of Bantu Areas and White Areas in South Africa will also to a great extent be eliminated.<sup>92</sup>

By far the greatest number of black spots were in Natal, where Africans lived on land often purchased by tribes or individuals shortly after the turn of the century. It was at the end of 1967 that the Sash became deeply involved in the investigation and exposure of these removals, which up to that point had been conducted largely out of the public eye at the expense of powerless and isolated rural communities.

In November 1967, a friend of a member of Natal Coastal Region spoke to her about his concerns over the proposed removal of over 12,000 people from twelve African-owned farms and five mission stations in the Klip River-Dundee area of Natal to the Msinga Reserve. He reported that no preparations had been made to resettle the communities although the move was scheduled for the new year.<sup>93</sup> Members of the region subsequently visited the Catholic Mission of Maria Ratchitz, which had been targeted for removal, and helped organise a meeting in early December which

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<sup>92</sup>Quoted in Desmond, C. The Discarded People Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971 p21

<sup>93</sup>Biggs, B. "Removal and Resettlement" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.12 no.1 May, 1968 pp23-4

was chaired by the Catholic Archbishop Dennis Hurley and attended by Bishops and other prominent citizens and churchmen. This meeting decided to form an interdenominational Committee of Church Representatives on Bantu Resettlement to oppose the removals.<sup>94</sup> The Committee appealed to the Minister of Bantu Affairs and Development not to go through with the removals due to the inadequacy of the water supply and sanitation and the shortage of building materials in the Reserve. This only achieved a temporary reprieve for the people of Maria Ratschitz mission, with BAD deciding to move 2,000 Africans from the freehold farm of Meran nearby instead.<sup>95</sup>

Sash members, accompanied by Archbishop Hurley, went to witness these removals. They were joined by the Franciscan fathers from the Mission and press representatives. The residents of Meran were moved to a desolate area called Limehill without their goats and cattle, where they were given bare plots of about one quarter of an acre. There were no facilities, an inadequate water supply and the only housing was a pile of tents. The English press carried extensive reports on the move and conditions at Limehill. These tragic images captured the public's attention and there was an outcry over conditions in the camp and over black spot removals in general.

In the wake of the Limehill controversy, came the case of Weenen "emergency camp" 35 miles south east of Ladismith in Natal. Cape

<sup>94</sup>A862/D17 Patrick, D. "Black Spot Removals in Northern Natal" National Conference 1968, Sash Archives.

<sup>95</sup>Duncan, S. "Black Spots are People" The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp Vol.11 no.4 February, 1963 p9

Western Region had noticed in the Government Gazette of 19th January 1968, the tabulation of regulations for the administration of an "Emergency camp at Weenen" and had asked Natal Coastal to investigate. The region did so and discovered that when the area around Weenen was declared a "white" area, the prospect of the complete removal of Africans from the region to Trust Farms in Zululand had upset local whites, who feared a loss of easily available labour. However, they also opposed the idea of establishing an African township in the area. Thus, although removals began in July 1967, people whose labour was needed were dumped in a barren camp three miles from Weenen. They were given no compensation for the loss of their huts and had to bear the cost of moving and building new homes.<sup>96</sup>

Sash members visited the Weenen camp in April 1968 and were appalled at the destitution they witnessed. They immediately launched a campaign to publicise conditions and helped organise a pressure group to oppose removals called the Natal Citizens' Association.<sup>97</sup> Two Sash members were voted onto the interim Executive Committee of this organisation, which absorbed the Church Committee and began a strong campaign against specific removals in Natal. This group exploited government unease at the public outcry over the removals and was able to bargain and extract compromises from local BAD officials, which did a little towards ameliorating the conditions at some of the camps.

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<sup>96</sup>A862/Hd/1 Patrick, D. "Natal Citizens' Association Report on the Emergency Camp at Weenen", Sash Archives.

<sup>97</sup>A862/D17 Patrick, D. "Black Spot Removals in Northern Natal" National Conference 1968, Sash Archives.

At about the same time, Transvaal Region decided that public opinion was such that a broadly-based campaign against removals stood some chance of success. The region gathered together many prominent Johannesburg liberals and representatives from concerned organisations, who founded the Citizens' Action Committee under the Chairmanship of Jean Sinclair. A parallel organisation was also formed in Cape Town, called the Cape Citizens' Action Committee. Late in 1968 these groups started a petition and drafted a memorandum to the State President asking him, as the Supreme Chief of the African People, to use his influence to stop the suffering caused by removals.<sup>98</sup>

Despite the fact that black spot removals had led to the first signs of significant white opposition to an apartheid policy for many years, the petition was less than a success, with many people expressing fear or anger when asked to sign. The petition campaign was also handicapped by the fact that the Natal Citizens' Association decided to withdraw from the nationwide initiative in August 1968, despite protests from its Sash members. It argued that a public campaign would prejudice the behind-the-scenes progress that was being made with local BAD officials and that white Natalians were not ready for mobilisation on the issue of removals.<sup>99</sup>

The campaigns against black spot removals did much to revitalise

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<sup>98</sup> A862/Hd/3 "Memorandum to the State President and the Supreme Chief of the African Peoples from the Citizens' Action Committee", Sash Archives.

<sup>99</sup> A862/Hd/1 Letter: Jean Sinclair to Mary Grice 3/9/1968, Sash Archives.

the two Natal regions, who had found the potential for advice office activity limited and white Natalians unsympathetic towards the Sash. The relative success of the campaigns was partly the result of a reawakening of political consciousness among white and black South Africans in the closing years of the decade. Christian churches and universities were at the forefront of this movement, which was to be a defining feature of politics in South Africa in the 1970s.

### THE RE-EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION:

#### OPPOSITION FROM THE UNIVERSITIES AND THE CHURCHES:

As the 1960s drew to a close, there were signs of an end to the paralysis of political opposition of the preceding years. There was an upsurge in student unrest, both on the segregated African campuses and in many of the English-medium universities. NUSAS had been throughout the decade one of the few remaining vehicles for multi-racial political activities. However, it remained concentrated on the English campuses despite continued, though secret, affiliation by students from Fort Hare between 1960 and 1967. A political outlet for black students was provided in part by the University Christian Movement (UCM) which was launched in Grahamstown in 1967. Essentially a white initiative, it had the support of several Christian academics and university chaplains. It developed an increasingly radical interpretation of social justice and by late 1968, despite police harassment and official threats, had a majority of black members. In 1969, black students from NUSAS and the UCM formed the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), which soon developed a critique of the white "liberalism" of NUSAS.

From mid-1960, the Sash began to view the English campuses as potential allies. At this time, Cape Eastern Region experienced the almost overnight rejuvenation of its previously defunct Grahamstown Branch, mainly as a result of tapping support from liberals associated with Rhodes University. This encouraged other regions to look towards the universities, not only for support but as the source of new, younger members. The Sash began to cooperate with NUSAS on various committees and campaigns, particularly a nationwide protest against the banning of NUSAS President Ian Robertson in 1965.

By late 1967 Cape Western, Natal Coastal, Transvaal and Grahamstown, were reporting an increase in their younger membership, and had all embarked on various forms of recruitment on campuses. Grahamstown Branch in particular had an increasingly close relationship with the UCM on the Rhodes campus. At its 1968 National Conference the Sash decided that special reduced membership fees would be available to students, and in 1969 it was decided to hold future National Conferences in February to allow university members to attend both as delegates and speakers without interfering with end-of-year examinations.<sup>100</sup>

The Christian churches had also emerged as potential liberal allies by late in the decade. The Sash had a long history of cooperation with individual outspoken church leaders but, as its attempts to

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<sup>100</sup>A862/D17 Minutes, National Conference 1968, and A862/D18 Minutes, National Conference 1969, Sash Archives.

co-opt the churches into its Family Life campaign showed, the bulk of the church hierarchy was relatively paternalistic and white congregations accepted de facto segregation as a way of life. Despite this, the South African Council of Churches, which had been grappling with the problem of reconciling Christian responsibilities and the South African "way of life", initiated a "National Consultation on Church and Society" in February 1968 to develop a comprehensive Christian ethic for South Africa. The outcome was "A Message to the People of South Africa" which denounced apartheid and any attempts to reconcile this with Christianity.<sup>101</sup>

The "Message" represented a significant break with the general passivity of the churches and was described by the Sunday Times as "Probably the strongest challenge to apartheid ever issued by churches in South Africa."<sup>102</sup> The Sash greeted the "Message" optimistically, with Jean Sinclair (who at the time sat on the Family Life Sub-Committee of the SACC) describing it as "the most encouraging thing which has happened for years".<sup>103</sup> The "Message" was issued in the midst of increased intervention by churches in political affairs, particularly resettlement camps and black spot removals. The Sash was particularly encouraged by this development, with the Natal Midlands Region noting in 1968:

...one extremely hopeful sign for Maritzburg during the year has been the unprecedented willingness of churchmen to participate in political protests. Our

<sup>101</sup>Walsh, P. Church versus State in South Africa: The Case of the Christian Institute London: C.Hurst, 1983 pp61-2

<sup>102</sup>Quoted in Collins, J. "A Challenge to the Churches" Sechaba Vol.3 no.1 January, 1969 p14

<sup>103</sup>A862/D17 Presidential Address, National Conference 1968, Sash Archives.

two big projects - the public meeting and the petition - owed a great deal to the co-operation of the clergy.<sup>104</sup>

At the 1969 National Conference, a resolution by Cape Eastern that the Black Sash involve itself fully in "the awakening of the Churches to their political and social responsibilities" was enthusiastically received.

#### THE ONGOING DILEMMA OF LEGITIMACY:

Despite its optimism regarding the reawakening of political opposition in the late 1960s, the Sash was still plagued by the loss of its white constituency. Projects aimed at cultivating white support such as discussion groups, publicity campaigns, publications and public meetings had been suggested at successive National Conferences throughout the 1960s, but had seldom come to fruition. Many Sash members argued that the organisation had lost white sympathies because it had failed to provide an acceptable alternative to apartheid. These women called on the Sash to adopt a more "positive" approach rather than simply launching attacks on apartheid legislation.

In 1964, the Sash had decided to establish a Planning Sub-Committee, attached to Headquarters and linked to Planning Sub-Committees in each region to try to clarify and strengthen the Sash's political role. It was hoped that these Committees would develop political campaigns aimed at influencing white opinion in favour of liberalism. Despite enthusiasm, little had been done by 1966, with regions finding that they had neither the resources nor

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<sup>104</sup>"Regional Reports" The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.12 no.3 November, 1968 p46



the public support to embark on most projects. As the decade drew to a close, the Sash despaired of ever having a political voice in the white community, with Jean Sinclair noting in her 1968 Presidential Address:

The once individualist, kindly and humane South African has become a blind, insensitive and intolerant person, steeped in racial prejudice, content to live in splendid isolation.<sup>105</sup>

In an attempt to make inroads into white attitudes on the question of influx control and to address the criticism that it was too "negative", the Sash decided at its 1967 Conference to try to draw up a blueprint for a more equitable social and economic system, in order to show that freedom of movement for all South Africans would not necessarily lead to chaos. This led to a Symposium entitled "Manpower - Apartheid versus Productivity", which was held immediately before the National Conference in Durban in 1968. The Symposium featured experts from numerous fields, as well as complex analyses of migratory labour and of other forms of economic dislocation associated with apartheid. The Sash decided to continue with this strategic approach by holding another Symposium the following year at its National Conference in Pietermaritzburg.

Over the next few months, Headquarters canvassed regions as to the type of Symposium to hold. However, Natal Midlands became increasingly unsure of its ability to host such an event at the Pietermaritzburg Conference. In common with other smaller

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<sup>105</sup>A862/D17 Sinclair, J. Presidential Address, National Conference 1968, Sash Archives.

regions, it had battled through the decade against an apathetic or antagonistic public, an uncooperative press and a seriously declining membership. As the Natal Midlands Regional Report noted in 1969:

We feel that we can maintain a kind of holding action in Maritzburg, not - alas - expanding or increasing much, but probably capable again next year of a similar rather unambitious series of activities. It is difficult to envisage any circumstance which could render us really dynamic.<sup>106</sup>

Like regions such as Border and Cape Eastern, Natal Midlands had found its most satisfying and relevant work to be of a quasi-welfare nature, such as collecting funds for the "banished" or tracking down the recipients of workmen's compensation. These smaller regions had also surrendered much of their idealism to a form of pragmatism in their political affairs, partly because they subsisted on the very peripheries of liberalism in South Africa. Natal Midlands began to voice serious doubts as to its capacity to host a Symposium, and argued that the Pietermaritzburg public was unlikely to support such an exercise.

In the midst of mounting difficulties over the Symposium, Headquarters received a letter submitted by Border Region.<sup>107</sup> It had been written by one of their members, Wendy Jackson, immediately after the 1968 Conference which she had attended. Jackson argued that she had found the Conference impressive, but boring. While she acknowledged that the standard of debate was high and that the papers presented showed impressive scholarship,

<sup>106</sup>"Regional Reports" *Sash* Vol.13 no.3 November, 1969 p34

<sup>107</sup>A862/Lbb/2 Letter: D. Streek to Jean Sinclair 11/5/1969, Sash Archives.

the event had taken on "an intellectual and almost unrealistic tone."<sup>108</sup> This concerned her not only because she found it difficult to relate to the level of discourse but because she assumed that the average white voter would relate to it even less. She concluded that, as one of the functions of the Sash was to influence the white electorate, "there seems to be a great need for ordinary down to earth plain talking".

What came to be called the "Wendy Jackson letter", struck a chord in the Sash and was circulated to all regions for their consideration. It was decided to discuss its implications fully at the 1969 National Conference instead of holding the planned Symposium. At the Conference, many of the Sash's concerns regarding its alienation from the white electorate were aired, but the organisation was unable to initiate a programme which would restore its political legitimacy and effectiveness among whites, while still retaining its liberal values.

### CONCLUSION:

The "Wendy Jackson letter" was symptomatic of the general political impotence felt by the Black Sash by the end of the 1960s, and a confirmation of its political isolation. By 1969, the organisation had few resources and had not managed to hold a national demonstration for three years. The Sash's smaller regions such as Border, which had six active members in 1969, were finding that their political autonomy was becoming an almost unbearable burden.

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<sup>108</sup>A862/Fbc/1 Quoted in HQ Circular no.16/1969, 12/6/1969, Sash Archives.

By 1969, it was clear that the Black Sash had no place within mainstream political discourse in South Africa. Throughout the decade, both its liberal concepts and the morality which underlaid them, had been abandoned by the vast majority of the white electorate. The Sash itself was sustained during this period by its dogged defence of the rights of black South Africans, and by the urgency lent to this effort by contacts with victims of apartheid through the advice offices and other activities that had a welfare dimension.

Although the surge of political opposition among white groups in the late 1960s helped to strengthen the Sash's political identity and provided new outlets for the expression of its liberalism, it was the organisation's opposition to apartheid, primarily through the medium of its advice offices, which had by 1969 been confirmed as the driving force behind its political activities.

## CHAPTER IV:

### THE RESURGENCE OF RESISTANCE : 1970 - 1977

#### INTRODUCTION:

The concerns with political marginalisation and irrelevance which had emerged within the Black Sash in the 1960s and culminated in the "Wendy Jackson letter" in 1969, continued to absorb the organisation in the 1970s. Political and economic instability after 1970 intensified the Black Sash's concern that its traditional liberal concepts failed to address adequately issues in South Africa which were threatening to erupt into overt political conflict.

Political and economic upheavals in South Africa in the 1970s encouraged the Sash to elaborate and extend its understanding of political and economic justice and to reorientate its activities in an effort to narrow the gulf between its liberal concepts and political conditions in South Africa. Despite subjecting its liberal concepts to criticism and revision in the light of its practical experience during the 1970s, the Black Sash remained faithful to its basic liberal values. It always understood its ongoing political marginalisation and impotence as essentially a problem of "method". The basic dilemma regarding the Sash's liberal identity during this period was captured by the Transvaal Regional Report of 1976 which noted:

The problem does not lie with our cause, but with our means of implementing it. The methods at our disposal are severely limited, but those we have must be exploited. While we must continue to

protect against injustice and ever-increasing inroads on civil liberties, we must also explore avenues of constructive effort which could contribute towards the establishment of a just society.<sup>1</sup>

The Sash focused, throughout the 1970s, on searching for strategic approaches that it hoped would popularise its ideals and render it politically effective. This enhanced the Black Sash's receptivity to many of the attempts to reassess liberal concepts during this time. Despite relatively vigorous theoretical debates within the Sash during this time, the organisation continued to find that it was best able to narrow the disjuncture between its liberal concepts and political realities through the work of its advice offices, which continued to play a definitive role in the formation of the organisation's political identity during this time.

#### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

In the 1970s, South Africa was affected by both internal and external economic instability at the same time as it began to experience domestic political upheavals. A growing conviction developed among capitalist interests that the policy of separate development was becoming detrimental to economic growth. The rapid expansion of the manufacturing and commercial sectors in the 1960s, had led to a serious shortage of skilled labour, while an excess of unskilled workers were trapped in the migrant labour system. Those industries which relied on expanding markets were handicapped by the excessively low wage levels of the black labour

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<sup>1</sup>A862/D25 Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1976, Sash Archives.

force, while apartheid policies had closed the rest of Africa to entrepreneurial activities, and international trade restrictions hindered exports.

The system of contract labour exacerbated South Africa's growing skills shortage by crippling industrial training initiatives, which were already battling to overcome the inadequacies of Bantu Education. influx control criminalised vast sections of the urban working class and wrenched apart the fabric of black society, contributing to very low productivity. In 1973 a wave of strikes swept the industrial centers, beginning in Durban where the cost of living index had risen fastest.<sup>2</sup> The strikes subsided following modest wage settlements, but triggered the growth of black worker militancy and trade union activity.

By the 1970s it was clear that the continued existence of a large black urban population was inevitable. Throughout the 1960s the government had attempted to reinforce its migrant labour policies by failing to provide housing for the growing black urban populations. By the early 1970s this had resulted in massive overcrowding and deteriorating living conditions in the sprawling black townships. Township conditions declined even further with the introduction of self-financing Bantu Administration Boards in the early 1970s. These non-representative structures perennially operated in debt and were incapable of adequately administering the townships.

On 16th June 1976, black students demonstrating in the

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<sup>2</sup>Hemson, D. "Usuthu!" *Reality* Vol.5 no.1 March, 1973 p7

Johannesburg township of Soweto against the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools, clashed with South African police, triggering violence which left over 400 dead. Within 48 hours of the first deaths in Soweto, South African share prices fell more sharply than the comparable two days after Sharpeville and a distinct trend towards disinvestment began.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1970s, black political opposition emerged in a new form called Black Consciousness (BC). Partly influenced by the emergence of Black Power and Black Theology in the United States, BC emphasised black identity and group empowerment. This period also saw the ongoing politicisation of sectors of the Christian church and the development of church-sponsored programmes to analyse and encourage a sense of Christian justice in South African society. In addition, students from English-speaking Universities intensified their opposition to government legislation behind the NUSAS banner.

The government struck at the heart of the white political initiatives of the late 1960s and early 1970s by instituting the Schibusch Commission in 1972. This was a Parliamentary Commission to investigate the objects, activities and financing of the UCM, NUSAS, the CI and the SAIRR. This politicised and partial inquest was designed to discredit the organisations involved and cripple their activities. The UCM, which was already in an advanced state of decay, soon disbanded completely<sup>4</sup> and the

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<sup>3</sup>Johnson, R.W. How Long Will South Africa Survive? London: Longman, 1977 p201

<sup>4</sup>Race Relations News Vol.34 no.7 July, 1972 p5



SAIRR, which had little to hide, was nevertheless rent apart internally over the issue of giving evidence.<sup>5</sup>

The Schlebusch Commission led to the declaration of both NUSAS and the CI as "affected organisations" - effectively cutting off vital foreign funds - and the banning of eight NUSAS members. The CI was severely crippled and was ultimately banned outright along with most BC organisations in October 1977. The leadership of both the CI and the BC movement were progressively either banned or detained in the course of the decade and in September 1977 the figurehead of BC, Steve Biko, died in detention.

In the sphere of white electoral politics, the NP gained strong mandates in the 1971 and 1974 general elections, smothering effective parliamentary opposition. In 1977 the UP split into conservative, moderate and progressive factions. The progressives, led by Transvaal Provincial Council member Harry Schwartz, formed an alliance with the Progressive Party, which subsequently became known as the Progressive Reform Party (PRP). This conservative faction formed the South African Party, which soon merged with the NP. The majority of UP MPs merged with the small Democratic Party to form the New Republic Party (NRP), which from then on consistently lost support to both the PRP and the NP.

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<sup>5</sup>Brooks, E. "The Crisis in the Institute of Race Relations" *Reality* Vol.5 no.3 July, 1973 pp7-8

## THE RECONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION:

### THE RENEWAL OF LIBERAL POLITICAL CULTURE:

The Black Sash was significantly influenced by the emergence of new challenges to the South African power structure in the 1970s, particularly critiques that attempted to revise traditional liberal perceptions of justice. The organisation viewed what turned out to be a short-lived resurgence of liberal thought early in the decade as a source of possible solutions to its own enduring sense of strategic and theoretical impotence.

At the Black Sash's first National Conference of the decade, which was held in Cape Town in early 1971, it became clear that the organisation was still plagued by the doubts and confusions that had prompted discussion of the "Wendy Jackson Letter" in 1969. The organisation had at this stage little more than a thousand members, most of whom were inactive. Cape Western, with 433 members, and Transvaal with about 300, had managed to stabilise their membership totals following their steady decline throughout the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> However the other regions; Natal Coastal, Natal Midlands, Cape Eastern and Border, were struggling to function with less than 100 members each, not more than a handful of whom were active. By the early 1970s, the few activists in these regions were finding it almost impossible to initiate protests and campaigns, and were aware that unless they could find a popular political focus they might well face dissolution. Although the two largest regions were stimulated by their ongoing advice office

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<sup>6</sup>A862/D19 Cape Western Regional Report and Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1971, Sash Archives.

work and their urban environments, and less vulnerable to a loss of membership, they appreciated many of the sentiments of the smaller regions.

At the 1971 National Conference, Wendy Jackson, who had moved from East London to Durban and become a member of Natal Coastal Region, presented a paper which had the majority backing of her new region's Executive Committee. The paper formed part of a Conference discussion on "How to Activate Members" and in it Jackson captured the mood within the smaller regions when she noted:

Its time we were all honest, and agreed that the Sash is something that gets us not quite nowhere, but not very far.<sup>7</sup>

Jackson proposed that the Sash might remedy its political impotence by allowing members to involve themselves in welfare work. She also suggested that the Sash should stop simply protesting and try to offer "positive" political alternatives for South Africa.

Jackson's suggestions were indicative of the nature of the Sash's political weakness. The organisation was strategically crippled by the growing disjunction between its traditional liberal concepts and political realities in South Africa. Welfare work, involving active redistribution of resources on a minor scale, was for many Sash members, a gesture towards creating a less divided society where conventional liberal values might have more currency. The call for a more "positive" approach, which was to be repeated by

<sup>7</sup>A862/D19 Jackson, W. "Some Views from Natal Coastal", National Conference 1971, Sash Archives.

Sash members throughout the 1970s, was indicative of a growing awareness of the need for the Black Sash's liberal ideals to be more realistically expressed in the South African context if they were to achieve any political currency.

Indicative of the inadequacy of the Sash's traditional political approach, was the failure of the organisation's "Campaign for African Women" with which it began the decade. This campaign was styled very much along the lines of Sash activities in the 1960s. It relied for its impact on liberal sentiments which were no longer current among the white population and was directed at the sphere of white parliamentary politics, which had long since ceased to appreciate liberal political values. At the same time, it demanded rights for African women without attempting to incorporate this group into the campaign.

The Sash advice offices in Cape Town and Johannesburg had, by the late 1960s, accumulated a considerable amount of disturbing evidence regarding the plight of African women. Months of casework revealed that this sector of the population was blighted by many forms of servitude. African women had their rights in the urban areas severely restricted and were expected to endure their lives separated from their husbands and battling to support children and aged dependants in an environment of rural poverty. The Sash decided to try to publicise the lack of rights of African women, and in 1970 launched its campaign with a series of six articles on their plight which appeared in the Star newspaper. These articles were then compiled in a booklet entitled Who

Cares?, which was distributed mainly to churches.

Transvaal Region extended these efforts by drawing up a "Charter of the Rights of Women". This Charter became the cornerstone of the campaign, with its nine clauses proclaiming inter alia, the rights of South African women of all races to live with their husbands, to live with their children and care for them, to have just conditions of work, to own property in their own names, and to have free education for their children.<sup>8</sup> At the 1971 National Conference, delegates ratified both the Charter and a petition to Parliament asking that the sufferings of African women be redressed. Both were presented at the Bar of the House by Progressive MP and Sash member, Helen Suzman.<sup>9</sup>

Over the next two years, the Sash tried to use the Charter to mobilise other organisations behind the Campaign, particularly women's groups. However, the focus on black rights achieved little resonance with most white groups and the Sash failed to gain support for its campaign beyond that of its confirmed allies such as the churches. The Sash's campaign also lacked political legitimacy among the black population because the organisation had taken upon itself to fight primarily on behalf of, rather than with, this group. The few responses from prominent African women in Soweto to the Charter indicated that while most appreciated the Sash's efforts, they believed that these were unlikely to have any political impact. Thus Mrs. Collins Ramutsi of Dube argued that, although the campaign was fighting for some of

<sup>8</sup>A862/Jb/12 "Charter of the Rights of Women", Sash Archives.

<sup>9</sup>A862/D19 Minutes, National Conference 1971, Sash Archives.

the legitimate needs of black women, to present these to Parliament in the form of a Charter was "meaningless".<sup>10</sup>

The Sash's inability to mobilise significant political support from either blacks or whites for its campaign, illustrated the political impotence of its particular articulation of liberal values in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the Headquarters Report to the 1973 National Conference noted:

It is all very well to decide to mount a campaign on a particular issue but, as with the campaign on African women, we found ourselves faced...with what we could actually do - what effective steps we could take....<sup>11</sup>

#### CHURCH INITIATIVES:

One of the ways in which the Sash tried to revitalise its political identity was through its close involvement with many of the political initiatives of the Christian churches during the early 1970s. There were strong personal connections between prominent Sash members and many of the individuals involved in the church's political activities. For example, Jean Sinclair not only had strong contacts within the hierarchies of the Anglican Church and the SACC, but was also active within these bodies. A significant number of leading Sash members were either personally involved in church initiatives or were married to men who were part of attempts to politicise Christian thought. Apart from these personal connections, there was an established and relatively ad hoc alliance between the Sash and the Christian churches which had its roots in a shared humanitarianism. The Sash had since the

<sup>10</sup>Band Daily Mail 19/2/1971

<sup>11</sup>"Around the Regions" Sash Vol.16 no.7 November, 1973 p29

early 1960s relied on the churches to endorse the human rights dimensions of many of its campaigns, such as the "Family Life" campaign against migrant labour.

The extension of the humanistic principles of Christian thought to the political sphere had begun in the 1960s, and had involved the formation of the CI and the UCM. This initiative continued in the 1970s and dovetailed with a more general critique of liberal thought developing during that time. While the vast majority of white Christians were politically conservative and unwilling to extend the humanistic injunctions of their religion to their political behavior, many prominent figures within and outside of the churches endorsed the emerging Christian critique of political injustice.

The most significant of the Christian initiatives during the 1970s was SPRO-CAS, the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society. SPRO-CAS, which was sponsored by the CI and SACC, was essentially an attempt to extend the terms of the 1968 SACC "Message" and to provide an outline of social, political and economic conditions in South Africa if they were determined according to Christian principles. Six Commissions were instituted on topics that included politics, economics, and the church, with over 150 mainly white, "leading South Africans" as members and consultants.

When SPRO-CAS ended in 1973, the Commissions' Reports provided a synopsis of what SPRO-CAS Director Peter Randall called "post-liberalism". The Reports tried to imbue traditional liberalism with

a political potency and relevance to prevailing conditions in South Africa. The central theme of the final SPRO-CAS Report was that the South African system was in need of radical change "in the sense of a fundamental redistribution of power and resources."

This reallocation was necessary so that:

the black majority can exercise an effective role in the decision-making process of the society and gain a more equitable share of the land's resources.<sup>12</sup>

SPRO-CAS revealed a major weakness of conventional liberalism in South Africa, namely that it was premised upon the assumption of a society that was far more egalitarian than that in South Africa. SPRO-CAS's suggestions as to how South Africa might be transformed into an appropriately egalitarian society achieved no more political currency in South Africa in the 1970s than liberalism itself. White reaction was characterised by apathy and resistance. The government, uninspired by suggestions that it divest itself of much of its power, banned the final SPRO-CAS Report.

The Black Sash greeted SPRO-CAS with enthusiasm, regarding its Reports as useful educational tools. Most regions began study groups in the early 1970s to examine the Reports and the Sash passed National Conference resolutions in 1972 and 1973 commending the work of SPRO-CAS and committing itself to the study and publicising of the findings of the Commissions. At its 1972 National Conference, the Sash used the political perspectives embodied by SPRO-CAS to facilitate debate over its political

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<sup>12</sup>Randall, P. A Taste of Power: The Final Co-ordinated SPRO-CAS Report  
Johannesburg: Ravan, 1973 p5



identity and role. Although the SPRO-CAS Reports certainly had an impact on the Sash membership, they did not have a direct impact on Sash policy as such. The Commission's Reports were seen rather as enriching the Sash's understanding of its existing political goals and, more importantly, as offering alternative means whereby they could be achieved.

It was SPRO-CAS II, which was the programme established to give practical effect to the recommendations of SPRO-CAS, that captured the Black Sash's imagination. SPRO-CAS II was initiated in January 1972 with the aim of actively influencing South African politics and society.<sup>13</sup> SPRO-CAS II was soon renamed the Special Project for Christian Action in Society and focused mainly on initiatives within the so-called Black Community Programme (BCP). The BCP assisted and supported many mainly Black Consciousness-oriented programmes within black communities. However, SPRO-CAS II also attempted to develop a White Community Programme, in which whites aimed to prepare their own communities for political change. This developed into the Program for Social Change (PSC), which was launched in January 1973 as a medium through which the political activities of a host of affiliated white organisations would be directed and coordinated.

The political intentions embodied in the PSC resonated strongly with the organisational needs of the Sash in 1973. The Program had in turn earmarked the Sash as a valuable potential ally, with

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<sup>13</sup>Walshe, P. Church versus State: The Case of the Christian Institute London: C. Hurst, 1983 p. 39

Sash President, Jean Sinclair being invited by PSC Director Peter Randall to sit on the Program's Panel of Patrons.<sup>14</sup> The PSC seemed to offer the Sash the chance to restore the organisational strength it had lost in the 1960s and to help end its political isolation by creating a network of groups dedicated to promoting political change. At its National Conference in Durban in October 1973, the Sash reviewed a SPRO-CAS II memorandum outlining the proposed Program, which would "provide a co-ordinating framework for those whites working for change."<sup>15</sup> The PSC hoped to prepare whites for the political and social change which it felt would ultimately be initiated by blacks. The memorandum explained:

we see the need for a conscious development of a program for fundamental change amongst whites, to operate parallel to initiatives that are developing in the black community.<sup>16</sup>

The Black Sash was invited to affiliate to the PSC. Although some delegates at the 1973 Conference expressed some reservations over the use of the word "affiliate", fearing that this would intrude on the Sash's jealously guarded independence, enthusiasm was such, that the Conference voted overwhelmingly in favour of affiliation. The Conference's commitment to the PSC initiative was illustrated by Jean Sinclair's unusually cavalier statement to the press shortly afterwards on the possible political repercussions of this decision:

If we are banned it will be very sad. But if we are

<sup>14</sup>A862/H/2 Letter: Peter Randall to Jean Sinclair 3/7/1973, Sash Archives.

<sup>15</sup>A862/D22 SPRO-CAS, "A Program for Social Change", National Conference 1973, Sash Archives.

<sup>16</sup>ibid.

doing something we believe is right then we must take the consequences.<sup>17</sup>

However, affiliation to the PSC began to implicate the Sash in political actions that many of its more conservative members found unacceptable and which illustrated some of the parameters of the organisation's perception of political change. In particular, the False Bay Branch of Cape Western Region soon complained that the Sash was being linked through affiliation to statements and publications by other organisations which it considered to be too radical. A fairly intense debate over affiliation ensued, which was moderated by the fact that the Sash had no National Conference in 1974.<sup>18</sup> However, heavy correspondence between regions and discussions with the PSC followed,<sup>19</sup> and at a Regional Chairmen's Conference in June 1974 it was accepted that the Sash would 'associate' rather than affiliate with the Program.<sup>20</sup> This allowed the organisation to dissociate itself from certain PSC activities of which it did not approve such as a subsequent call for the boycott of certain firms.<sup>21</sup> However, the Sash continued to maintain a low-key but fruitful working relationship with the PSC, collaborating with it in organising a successful Consultation on Migrant Labour in 1974.

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<sup>17</sup>Band Daily Mail 18/10/1973

<sup>18</sup>MIC AE862 Reel 6 Letter: Jean Sinclair to Black Sash Members, 14/3/1974, Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>19</sup>MIC AE862 Reel 6 HQ Circular no. 1/1974, 10/1/1974, Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>20</sup>A862/Fba/10 Minutes, Meeting of Regional Chairmen and Members of the National Executive, June 1974, Sash Archives.

<sup>21</sup>A862/D24 Headquarters Report, National Conference 1975, Sash Archives.

The decision by the Black Sash not to affiliate to the PSC was partially justified when the Program came under the damaging investigation of the Schlebusch Commission and subsequently had its foreign funding denied. However even without the Commission's witch-hunt, it was clear by 1975 that the PSC had failed in its aim of activating the white population and had also failed to provide an effective political role for the Sash. As its coordinators noted just prior to its dissolution in mid-1975:

it is of great interest to us that while the [Schlebusch] Commission finds us to be an effective "threat to the state", we ourselves are finding that the PSC does not have any real relevance to substantial change in South African society.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the threat of the Schlebusch Commission and other punitive government action, the Sash continued its association with the Christian churches throughout the 1970s. Although the Black Sash respected the attempts by Christian thinkers to develop theories of social justice for South Africa, the organisation was far more concerned with the practical contribution church activists could make to its strategic initiatives. Of these, the most significant for the Sash were a series of protests against influx control initiated by Fr. David Russell, who was a priest in the Kingwilliamstown area of the Cape.

David Russell had begun ministering to the African resettlement area of Dimbaza near Kingwilliamstown in the late 1960s.

Dimbaza had a population in 1969 of 2,897 (of which 2,041 were children) who, as "unproductive" Africans, had been expelled from

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<sup>22</sup>A862/HI/2 Letter: L.Crawford, H.Kleinschmidt and M.McCarthy to the Black Sash Headquarters, July 1975, Sash Archives.

the urban areas.<sup>23</sup> At its 1971 National Conference, the Black Sash had discussed conditions some of its members had witnessed in Dimbaza. It was revealed by a Cape Western member that malnutrition and disease were endemic, making the settlement a particularly stark example of the inhumanity of the government's migrant labour policies. However, the Sash did not translate this information into political action at the time.

After serving the Dimbaza community for two years and burying 38 children in the first two months of 1971, Fr. David Russell began to appeal directly to the government to improve conditions in the camp. When the Minister of BANC refused to see him, Russell began a 90-hour fast and vigil on the steps of St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town. This having failed to elicit a response from the government, he returned to Dimbaza, determined to live for six months on the existing African pension of five rand a month.

The Sash, with its own concerns regarding migrant labour and resettlement camps, and its strong informal associations with the Anglican Church, was involved in supporting David Russell's protests from the outset. The Sash helped to gain publicity for Russell's campaigns, and when he decided to embark on the Dimbaza diet campaign, members of Cape Western offered support and advice, including compiling a balanced diet for him to follow.<sup>24</sup> In June 1972 some Sash members joined Russell in trying to live

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<sup>23</sup>Baldwin, A. and Hall, A. "A Place Called Dimbaza": Study Project on Mass Removals of Population in South Africa London: Africa Publications Trust, 1973 p7

<sup>24</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 17/4/1972, Cape Western Archives.

for one month on the official monthly rations (worth R2.58) given to destitute persons in Dimbaza.<sup>25</sup> Jean Sinclair joined Russell in writing open letters about her experience of the "Dimbaza Diet", which were given prominence in the press. The campaign achieved a high profile and was successful insofar as the government acted to redress the most extreme conditions in Dimbaza and private offers of assistance flooded in. However, government policy on migrant labour and forced resettlement remained unchanged.

The Sash maintained personal and organisational links with the Christian churches, despite the demise of the CI and the UCM and growing government repression. For example, the Natal Coastal Region began a fruitful and long-term association with Diakonia, an interdenominational pastoral institute initiated by Archbishop Dennis Hurley in Durban in 1974 to perpetuate the SPRO-CAS ideals,<sup>26</sup> and Sheena Duncan, became an influential figure within the SACC hierarchy.

#### STUDENT PROTEST:

Students from the English universities also radicalised their understanding of social justice in South Africa and intensified their political protests during the early 1970s. The Sash was able to play a supportive role in the political activities of these students in the 1970s and found that its own organisational resources were strengthened by support from this quarter. NUSAS in turn was willing to make use of the Sash's political experience

<sup>25</sup>MIC AE862 Reel 6 HQ Circular no. 6/1972, 19/5/1972, Rhodes House Collection.

<sup>26</sup>Walsh, P. Church versus State op. cit. p143.

to help it overcome the significant degree of political confusion it experienced following the breakaway of SASO in 1969. Thus as early as October 1969, NUSAS Acting President Clive Nettleton and President Elect Neville Curtis, wrote to Jean Sinclair asking her for advice and assistance in determining:

the long term aim(s) (ideal) for which NUSAS should be working.<sup>27</sup>

The Sash also found itself gaining new members from among the ranks of the student bodies of the English-speaking universities, especially in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Grahamstown. For example, many of the 52 new members who joined the Transvaal Region between October 1971 and November 1972 were students from the University of the Witwatersrand. A relatively ad hoc cooperation between the Black Sash and NUSAS emerged, built primarily on the traditional political affinity between these two liberal groups. Thus, major demonstrations by the Black Sash in 1970 against the detention of twenty-two prisoners without trial under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act, provided the springboard for large student demonstrations which contributed substantially to the detainees being charged. Throughout the 1970s there was close cooperation between the Sash and NUSAS in various political protests, particularly in Grahamstown.

The Sash came to the immediate defence of students who were beaten up by police outside and inside St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town on 2nd June 1972, during a demonstration in favour of academic freedom and in sympathy with students who had been

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<sup>27</sup>A.862/Ha Letter: C.Nettleton and N.Curtis to Jean Sinclair, 17/10/1969, Sash Archives.

expelled from the University of the North. The Sash was outraged at the "sickening brutality" of the police action against a peaceful demonstration expressing what the organisation considered to be legitimate demands.<sup>28</sup> The Sash also consistently deplored government attempts at "hounding and persecuting our youth", noting in a press statement in response to the attack on NUSAS by the 1972 Schlebusch Commission:

How sad it is that such a concentration of power should choose as its adversary an organisation of young people, whose crime appears to be that it is dedicated to the principles of justice and fair dealing.<sup>29</sup>

When in the wake of the Schlebusch Commission, eight students from NUSAS and eight from SASO were banned, the Sash protested strongly, not in the least because two of the NUSAS eight were members of its Cape Western Region. When the 1974 van Wyk de Vries Commission threatened to restrict the political activities of university students and staff, the Sash rallied to their defence, with the organisation's 1975 National Conference stating:

The Black Sash condemns the resort to intimidation and "terrorism of the mind" characterising(sic) by the findings of the van Wyk de Vries Commission re. so-called "out of the ordinary non-academic student activities".<sup>30</sup>

Despite its relatively close political associations with organisations like NUSAS, the CI and the PSC, the Sash avoided investigation by the Schlebusch Commission, although some of its

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<sup>28</sup>A862/Jck/9 Letter: Jean Sinclair to the Star 11/7/1972, Sash Archives.

<sup>29</sup>A862/Jck/9 Harris, J. Press Statement issued 29/8/1974, Sash Archives.

<sup>30</sup>A862/D24 Minutes, National Conference 1975, Sash Archives.



members were affected. A member of Transvaal Region, Dorothy Cleminshaw, refused when subpoenaed to give evidence about the CI and was found guilty of contempt of court.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, bitter conflict within the SAIRR over the question of giving evidence to the Commission, contributed to the Sash's decision to pass a National Conference resolution in 1978 committing it to support uncritically any member's personal decision on whether or not to give evidence to future Commissions, notably the nascent Parliamentary Internal Security Commission.<sup>32</sup>

#### BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS:

Black Consciousness was central to the political ferment of the 1970s. It emerged with the formation of SASO in 1969 and was extended through its high school counterpart, the South African Students Movement. By 1972 BC ideas were being propagated at a national level through the Black People's Convention, which was established as the political wing of the BC movement. BC was primarily a call for blacks recover their ethnic and cultural identity in order to be able to act as a group to retrieve the resources that had been drained from them. This involved a repudiation of "white liberals" who were seen as beneficiaries of the status quo and concerned, not with genuine black empowerment, but with black deradicalisation through the co-option of a black bourgeoisie into an economic power structure riddled with injustices. As Johannesburg speaker Daphne Masekele argued at a BC Symposium held in Durban in 1972, the liberal call for racial integration should be rejected:

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<sup>31</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1974 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1975 p39

<sup>32</sup>A862/D28 Minutes, National Conference 1978, Sash Archives.

because to these people integration means acceptance by blacks of the values of white society.<sup>33</sup>

A central strategy of BC became the withdrawal of blacks from established institutions and organisations as a prelude to renewed self-assertion.<sup>34</sup> This withdrawal was deeply disturbing to many liberals, particularly those who were concerned with the theoretical consistency of their political beliefs.<sup>35</sup> However, the Sash did not greet BC with the strident tones of affronted liberalism as many others had done. As a result of its own experience of political isolation and impotence, the Sash knew the value of any black political initiative, and thus its leadership welcomed BC as the first significant challenge to the government in a decade. The organisation was also sympathetic to the view, promoted by SPRO-CAS, that real change would be achieved, not by whites, but by political initiatives pioneered by blacks. Thus the 1971 Black Sash Chairmen's Conference discussed BC and noted in a press statement:

The Black Sash welcomes and supports the growing movement towards Black Consciousness as the most hopeful and creative sign for political change in our country....<sup>36</sup>

Some of the active Sash members who had strong links to Christian initiatives like SPRO-CAS developed a particular empathy for BC

<sup>33</sup>Quoted in "Black Consciousness" *Sachsa* Vol.6 no.5 May, 1972 p19

<sup>34</sup>Biko,S. "Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity" *Reality* Vol.4 no.1 March, 1972 pp4-8

<sup>35</sup>inter alia. Paton,A. "Black Consciousness" *Reality* Vol.4 no.1 March, 1972 pp3-5

<sup>36</sup>A862/Laa/2 Statement to the Press from the Black Sash Regional Chairmen's Conference, October 1971, Sash Archives.

ideals as well as personal friendships with some BC leaders. This was part of a somewhat paradoxical relationship between the BC movement and white liberals, which allowed most of the Sash's leadership to recognise BC's anti-liberal rhetoric as less of an attack than an attempt to reinforce the political identity and independence of BC initiatives.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the Sash itself was at this stage so ripe for self-criticism that even senior members were receptive to BC ideas. Thus Sash President Jean Sinclair, argued in a 1971 address on HC that liberals should be prompted by its ideas to examine their own attitudes and behaviors and to no longer confuse paternalism with liberalism.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the Sash's enthusiasm for BC as a political force, some of its members did share doubts with other liberals like Alan Paton, as to the content of BC ideology. This was exacerbated by the fact that some members experienced rejection by BC groups and gatherings because of their race. Among them was Joyce Harris of Transvaal Region, who had made significant theoretical contributions to the Sash in the 1960s and who had emerged as a strong advocate of liberal values. Her reservations about BC were based on a fear that it could evolve into Black Power, of which liberals were naturally wary because of its racial dimensions. As Harris warned in the Sash magazine:

power corrupts, and power based on feelings of racial superiority corrupts even more, as history has shown.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Interview with Sheena Duncan, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989

<sup>38</sup>AD1457/A4.1.1/48 Sinclair, J. "Black Power and Contemporary Liberalism" D.S.C. Oosthuizen Memorial Lecture; Rhodes University, 7/9/1971. Jean Sinclair Papers.

<sup>39</sup>Harris, J. "The Pipe-Dream Shattered" *Sash* Vol.16 no.4 February, 1973 p5

Any ethnically-based bid for political power challenged liberalism's most dearly-held notions of nonracialism and the primacy of the individual, and Sash members like Harris felt duty bound to warn against it.<sup>40</sup>

Although the Black Sash never formally embraced the theoretical insights of movements like SPRO-CAS and BC, its activities were influenced by these political developments. For example, the BC repudiation of liberal paternalism prompted the Sash to review the nature of its activities that had a welfare dimension. This was particularly the case with the Johannesburg and Athlone advice offices, which began to see their functions as not to merely dispense aid but to give clients the resources to cope with their own problems. As the Athlone Advice Office noted in its 1973 Annual Report:

The aim of the work is to set people on their own feet, avoiding patronising approaches in favour of discussion with a view to self-help and starting off with an understanding of the problem.<sup>41</sup>

By 1976 the Johannesburg Advice Office had also revised its methods noting:

We have made increased efforts this year to avoid creating further dependancy(sic) of black people on white goodwill which is such an unproductive and damaging thing to do. Workers are realising the importance of explaining the law to individuals, explaining the reasons why they are in difficulties, setting out the alternatives (if any) open to them and waiting on their own decision as to how they wish to

<sup>40</sup>Harris, J. "No Place at the Black Man's Side" *Sash* Vol.16 no.6 August, 1973 p21

<sup>41</sup>A862/D22 Athlone Advice Office Report, National Conference 1973, Sash Archives.

proceed.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, the Sash Headquarters began exploring through the Johannesburg Advice Office, the possibility of establishing advice offices in the homelands to educate Africans living there as to their rights. This scheme eventually developed into a long-running advice office worker training programme coordinated by Johannesburg Advice Office Director Sheena Duncan and the SACC.

At its 1976 National Conference, the Sash examined "Community Development" which the new Sash President Sheena Duncan described as "the process whereby a community which is in need is motivated to meet its needs".<sup>43</sup> The Sash's interest in this strategy was primarily inspired by BCP initiatives, notably the work of Steve Biko in the Kingwilliamstown area of the Eastern Cape. Community Development was of interest to the Sash as a means of actively participating in political change at a grassroots level of the kind envisaged by SPRO-CAS. Furthermore, Sheena Duncan in particular believed that involvement of individual Sash members in local development initiatives would help politicise them, prepare them for change, and provide an ideal outlet for their political energies. Although the Sash found it difficult to become involved in existing Community Development initiatives, an appreciation of the political ideology underlying these programmes helped enrich its own campaigns.

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<sup>42</sup>A862/D25 Johannesburg Advice Office Report, National Conference 1976, Sash Archives.

<sup>43</sup>A862/D25 Duncan, S. "Background Notes for the Discussion on Community Development" National Conference 1976, Sash Archives.

#### ATTEMPTS TO CREATE A WOMEN'S POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS:

The Sash's efforts to avoid liberal paternalism in the execution of its political campaigns in the mid-1970s were illustrated by the organisation's response to International Women's Year in 1975. Sheena Duncan had just completed a tour of the United States as a guest of the US State Department and returned to South Africa with many new insights into the feminist movement.<sup>44</sup> She saw International Women's Year as an opportunity to try to create a situation where women could use their shared gender identity as a means of political unification, to fight for the rights of all women in South Africa. Duncan envisaged Sash members becoming involved with women of all races in programmes designed to empower women, including themselves.<sup>45</sup> This strategic approach was very well-received and strongly endorsed by other members of the Sash.

This enthusiasm was short-lived however, illustrating the fact that commitment to nurturing the power of communities did not guarantee its realisation. The Sash soon discovered that the gulf between black and white women was too wide to be overcome by their shared gender identity alone, and that in trying to do so the Sash was in danger of failing to identify with either. One of the first indications of this was when various white women's organisations met in Cape Town in mid-1975 to coordinate projects for International Women's Year, and decided on a vote of 45 to 1 to exclude the Sash from participation, primarily because

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<sup>44</sup>Band Daily Mail 26/6/1975

<sup>45</sup>Star 19/2/1975 Band Daily Mail 26/6/1975

of its perceived "political" orientation.<sup>46</sup> Although the Sash tried to cooperate with other women's groups during the year, it soon became disillusioned with the lack of genuine political activity, with Duncan noting in a personal letter:

we have had endless - almost weekly - seminars, symposia, conferences etc. here about IWY and no action whatsoever.<sup>47</sup>

The impotence of the IWY initiative illustrated for the Sash the unpoliticised and conservative nature of white women in South Africa. The Sash also realised that white and black women were without a feminist consciousness that could unite them politically. As Sheena Duncan later commented: "it just wasn't the right time for us in South Africa".<sup>48</sup>

#### THE EXPLORATION OF ECONOMIC ISSUES:

In the 1970s the Black Sash extended its analysis of economic justice beyond the free market platitudes that it had accepted throughout the 1960s. The organisation's growing interest in the South African economic system was fuelled in part by attempts to revise South African liberalism in the 1970s and by the emergence of neo-Marxist interpretations of South African history. However, the Sash was primarily motivated to consider questions of economic justice by the steady accumulation of vast amounts of information by its advice offices which indicated widespread exploitation of workers by industrial and business concerns in South Africa. It was also primarily through the daily activities of

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<sup>46</sup>Rand Daily Mail 12/8/1975

<sup>47</sup>A862/Lad/6 Letter: Sheena Duncan to Gusta MacDonald, 11/9/1975, Sash Archives.

<sup>48</sup>Interview with Sheena Duncan, Johannesburg, 14/12/1990

these advice offices that the Sash began to try to actively address what it recognised as injustices within the workings of the economic system.

#### THE DEVELOPING CRITIQUE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMY:

In her Presidential Address to the Black Sash National Conference in 1969, Jean Sinclair reiterated the perspective that she had pioneered for the Sash on economic justice in the previous decade, when she noted that the NP government was guilty of destroying economic as well as individual freedoms in South Africa.<sup>49</sup> She, along with most Sash members, had come to accept that the South African economy was not the embodiment of liberal "free enterprise", but rather was shot through with excessive concentrations of power and patterns of exploitation. However prior to the 1970s, the Sash was still inclined to regard this skewed situation as detrimental to economic development, and to lay the blame for it at the door of the government's apartheid policies.

The idea that the capitalist system and apartheid were characteristically distinct and in many ways historically antithetical was more or less received wisdom in the Sash at this time. The organisation remained convinced that it could use what it saw as the growing disjunctures between economic and political imperatives in South Africa to pressure the government to abandon apartheid. Thus in March 1970, Sash Headquarters sent letters to 500 top business executives in the Transvaal, noting that the

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<sup>49</sup>Sinclair, J. "Power, Patriotism and Principle" *Sash* Vol.13 no.3 November, 1969 pp1-6



economy was under strain because of government policy and asking them to bring pressures to bear on the government to remedy this situation by giving all races an equal opportunity to participate in the economy.<sup>50</sup>

Most Sash members knew very little about the nature of the economic system in South Africa and had been content to accept Jean Sinclair's conventional wisdom on the matter throughout the 1960s. However, the political and economic tensions of the early 1970s, together with emerging revisionist theories, prompted the Sash to examine its assumptions about the South African economic order more closely. The organisation's magazine (which from 1969 was simply called Sash) began to publish articles on class-based interpretations of South African history and the Sash began to invite various academics and businessmen to its regional and national meetings to discuss alternative economic systems as well as the nature of the economic system in South Africa.

Although these forays into economic theory helped the Sash gain insights into the class dimensions of domination in South Africa, most of its members were unwilling to abandon their basic faith in the "free enterprise" system in general. It was the Sash's own experiences of economic exploitation during the 1970s that convinced it that, while the "free market" might be a suitable ideal, no such system existed in South Africa, and that economic exploitation was at least as much a result of the functioning of the capitalist system in the South African context, as it was of

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<sup>50</sup>MIC AE862 Reel 6 HQ Circular no.3/1970, 16/3/1970, Rhodes House Collection.

apartheid.

Of particular influence in sensitising Sash members to injustices within the South African economy, was a fact paper presented at the 1972 National Conference by Transvaal member Dora Hill. Entitled "A Need for Radical Change", the paper critically analysed employer-employee relationships and showed that, far from being hamstrung by racially-motivated legislation, capitalist interests inevitably used the power this gave them as employers to exploit black workers. Thus, while the paper was sharply critical of government policy for having produced a poorly-educated, unstable and unproductive labour force through measures such as job reservation, Bantu Education and migrant labour, it also argued that employers were culpable of exploiting worker vulnerabilities for profit. Thus the paper noted that industries seldom offered adequate training and job evaluation, neglected to provide sick funds or sick leave, paid starvation wages to men who had families to support in the homelands and did not provide canteen facilities to offset malnutrition. The paper also argued that employers made little effort to change patterns of arbitrary dismissal and did nothing to alleviate the dangers and strains of poor working conditions.<sup>51</sup>

Dora Hill's paper made a significant impact on the Conference delegates, prompting the resolution:

That the Black Sash do all in its power by means of protest and propaganda to focus attention on discriminatory labour conditions, low wage levels and lack of Black Trade Union rights and that each Region

<sup>51</sup>Hill, D. "The Need for Radical Change" *Sash*, Vol.16 no.4 February, 1973 pp6-10

be allocated some area of concern to investigate.<sup>52</sup> This resolution was followed up with enthusiasm. Sash members in the various regions researched the effects of education levels on training, the extent and forms of poverty among workers, and participated in the investigations of various Wage Commissions that had been set up by the students and staff of some English-speaking universities in the early 1970s.

Most important of all the projects that the 1972 resolution helped spawn was a survey of domestic workers' wages and working conditions. Concern had already been expressed by other organisations about the exploitation of this highly vulnerable category of worker, and the SAIRR had set up a Domestic Workers' and Employers' Programme (DWEPP) to improve the conditions of domestic work.<sup>53</sup> A number of Sash members helped with the running of DWEPP, which assisted housewives to attain a better understanding of their domestic workers and laid down guidelines for appropriate wage levels and working conditions.

Encouraged by these activities, Sash members in Cape Western Region decided to conduct a survey of the conditions of domestic work. They sent out questionnaires to the most readily available sample of employers - their own members.<sup>54</sup> The region received 136 replies which revealed that on average, Sash members paid their domestic workers less than the SAIRR recommended wage. When these figures were presented at the 1974 National Conference, the region partially excused them by arguing that the

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<sup>52</sup>A862/D21 Minutes, National Conference 1972, Sash Archives.

<sup>53</sup>Race Relations News Vol.35 no.8 August, 1973 p5

<sup>54</sup>Johnston,R. "Questionnaire" Sash Vol.17 no.2 August, 1974 p4

survey had also revealed strong paternalism among employers, which meant that domestic servants obtained additional benefits such as medical care, their children's school fees and subsidised food.<sup>55</sup>

Most importantly, the domestic workers survey revealed that, although they were confirmed opponents of political injustices, Sash members were not above exploiting their own employees. This helped prompt a realisation by many Sash members that social injustices in South Africa existed above and beyond the parameters of apartheid policy. This realisation was reinforced by the research findings of Mercia Wilkworth, a member of Albany Region, which showed that the average wage paid to a full-time domestic servant in Grahamstown was a pitiful ten rand per month.<sup>56</sup> Most Sash members had tended to assume that the predominantly English-speaking population of this university town echoed most of the organisation's feelings regarding political justice. However, the information about domestic servants' wages forced the Sash to recognise that this group was as culpable as any other of exploiting the politically powerless.

The survey of domestic servants' wages was extended to cover Sash members in East London and Johannesburg, and the Sash publicised its findings in early 1975. The survey revealed (to the delight of newspapers like the Transvaler) that most Sash

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<sup>55</sup>A862/D22 "Response to the Questionnaire Dealing with Members of Household Staff Issued by the Black Sash, Cape Western Region", National Conference 1973, Sash Archives.

<sup>56</sup>Transvaler 11/2/1975

members worked their servants for long hours on low wages. The average wage paid to a full time domestic worker in the Border Region was R23 per month, which fell far short of the SAIRR's recommended R56.25 per month.<sup>57</sup> These surveys vividly illustrated to the Sash inequities of the capitalist system in South Africa of which it had previously been largely unaware or simply taken for granted.

The strikes which erupted in Durban in early 1973 not only fuelled Sash fears that the excessive disparities in wealth and resources in South Africa would lead to conflict and political instability, but further emphasised the degree of exploitation prevalent in the country. The Sash was not surprised by the strikes, with the Chairman of the Natal Coastal Region acknowledging them as a "spontaneous expression of despair".<sup>58</sup> The Sash Vice-President Joyce Harris, rejected government claims that the strikes were the work of agitators arguing:

as though workers needed agitators to tell them that they were being exploited and that they were earning insufficient to feed, house, clothe and educate their families.<sup>59</sup>

Shortly after the strikes, the Mayor of Durban called a meeting of employers and businessmen to discuss the causes of the unrest. Natal Coastal Region of the Sash objected to the fact that there were no worker's or trade union representatives invited to this meeting and requested that a Sash representative be allowed to

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<sup>57</sup>Sunday Express 9/2/1975

<sup>58</sup>A862/Lda/3 Letter: Kay Ganor to members of Natal Coastal Region, 17/2/1973, Sash Archives.

<sup>59</sup>Rand Daily Mail 18/2/1973

attend.<sup>60</sup> Although this was refused, the request publicly affirmed the region's growing concern for the rights of workers.

#### ECONOMIC ISSUES AND THE RESURGENCE OF THE ADVICE OFFICES:

The economic injustices that were highlighted by the Durban strikes soon became the staple of the Sash's Durban Advice Office, which reopened on 20th February 1973. This was part of a resurgence of the Black Sash advice offices nationwide that was prompted primarily by the declining economic situation. The five new offices that opened in the 1970s were an extremely valuable source of information on the effects on Africans of the workings of the South African economy during this time. Just as its advice offices had contributed to the Sash's concern with migrant labour in the 1960s, so the offices in the 1970s sensitised the organisation to economic injustices prevalent in South Africa.

Early in 1971 Natal Coastal Region had attempted to run an advice office once a week, using SAIRR premises in Durban. However clients were irregular, even after the region publicised the office in the Zulu newspaper Ilanga lase Natal, and the office soon closed.<sup>61</sup> This was partly because the influx control and pass law problems that were the staple of the Johannesburg and Cape Town offices were not so prevalent in the area, due to the relatively close interpenetration of the KwaZulu homeland with the Durban-Pinetown industrial complex. However, the strikes of 1973 confirmed that workers' rights were a suitable target for advice

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<sup>60</sup>A862/D22 Natal Coastal Regional Report, National Conference 1973, Sash Archives.

<sup>61</sup>Meeting of the Natal Coastal Regional Committee, 28/7/1971, Unprocessed MSS, Kilfo Campbell Africana Collection.

office work in the area. The Durban Advice Office was reopened in February 1973, following a request from the Garment Workers Union for Sash assistance in dealing with legal problems associated with a Benefit Fund for African people which the Union had just begun. The Union provided the Sash with an office and facilities free of charge.<sup>62</sup> The advice office was soon open three days a week, and by November 1972 it had dealt with 727 cases, 569 of which were people seeking permits to work.<sup>63</sup>

From 1975, the Durban Advice Office shared office facilities with the Benefit Fund. The Fund had been established to help black workers with funeral expenses, but had soon begun to provide medical aid facilities and to give legal advice. In 1975 the Fund was prosecuted under the Friendly Societies Act for acting beyond its terms of reference, and was restricted to its original function of providing funeral benefits. The Fund then asked the Sash to take over its legal advice work.<sup>64</sup> As a result, the Natal Coastal Region became deeply involved in dealing not only with employment difficulties but also with unionised workers whose understanding of their situation was soon conveyed directly to the Sash members staffing the office.

The Durban Advice Office soon became expert at dealing with difficulties encountered by workers. The office focused mainly on disputes between workers and employers regarding dismissals,

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<sup>62</sup>A862/D22 Durban Advice Office Report, National Conference 1973, Sash Archives.

<sup>63</sup>"Advice Offices" *Sash* Vol.16 no.7 November, 1973 p33

<sup>64</sup>A862/D24 Durban Advice Office Report, National Conference 1975, Sash Archives.

pensions and contractual breaches. It also became expert on the terms of the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1966, and by 1977 a third of its cases related to the Unemployment Insurance Fund.<sup>65</sup> The advice office soon began to transmit its concerns to the rest of the Sash and was partially responsible for creating a greater awareness of workers' issues generally in the organisation.

The Natal Midlands advice office was established in 1974 under similar circumstances to the Durban office, when Sash members were asked by union organisers in Pietermaritzburg to help with legal difficulties associated with Workmen's Compensation and employment contracts. The Grahamstown Advice Office was set up by Sash members in May 1973 with the help of the SAIRR and law and social work students at Rhodes University. It was begun in anticipation of legal difficulties arising from the proposed removal of Grahamstown's African population from Fingo Village, to a resettlement camp called Committee's Drift on the border of the Ciskei. However, the office soon became inundated with problems relating to the declining economic conditions in the Eastern Cape. By 1977, it was dealing with about 200 cases per year, most arising from the chronic housing shortage and unemployment in the severely depressed Albany region.<sup>66</sup>

Problems were similar for the small Border Advice Office which opened in September 1973 and which by 1977 was seeing over 200 cases a year. As the economic situation worsened, Border had to

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<sup>65</sup>"Around the Advice Offices" *Sash* Vol.19 no.4 February, 1978 p23

<sup>66</sup>A862/D27 Albany Advice Office Report, National Conference 1977, Sash Archives.



deal with many cases of retrenchment and noted:

...it is with growing trepidation that we listen to this long queue of angry, frustrated voices.<sup>67</sup>

By the late 1970s the economic recession had deepened and at the Sash's advice offices were reporting a severe unemployment crisis which was having devastating effects on the black urban population.

#### THE INVESTIGATION OF ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES:

By 1975 certain prominent members of the Black Sash had begun to introduce relatively radical perspectives on economic order into the organisation. Among them was theologian Dr. Margaret Nash, who was strongly influenced by Christian principles. In late 1975 an article she had written called "To Fight or not to Fight" was printed in Sash magazine.<sup>68</sup> In it, Nash noted that all white South Africans were culpable of benefiting from and perpetuating economic injustices. Among other things, she suggested that if whites were committed to achieving justice in South Africa they could stop passively supporting the system of exploitation by adopting "non-conformist lifestyles", which would reduce their involvement with "white luxury". This was a version of a thesis in favour of leading a life of financial austerity which was prevalent among many Christian thinkers at the time. After 1975, Nash was also influential in persuading members of her region and delegates at Black Sash National Conferences to consider the validity of alternate economic systems and ways of life.

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<sup>67</sup>"Advice Offices-Their Breadth and Depth" Sash Vol.20 no.2 August, 1978 p19

<sup>68</sup>Nash,M. "To Fight or not to Fight" Sash Vol.18 no.2 August, 1975

Another relatively radical interpretation of economic justice was advanced at this time by Sheana Duncan, who succeeded Jean Sinclair as National President of the Sash in 1975. Throughout the 1960s, Duncan had established herself as the mainstay of the Johannesburg Advice Office and had also spent some years as the Editor of Sash magazine. She had strong Christian connections, particularly with the Anglican Church and the SACC. Her sense of justice, although influenced by Christian principles, was also informed by her extensive practical experience in the Johannesburg Advice Office. At the Sash's 1975 National Conference, both Nash and Duncan argued strongly for a coherent Sash critique of the economy and the existing distribution of wealth, with Duncan suggesting that a redistribution of political power was useless if the old concentrations of economic power remained entrenched.<sup>69</sup>

Duncan and Nash's suggestions received support from delegates, who committed their regions to an exploration of alternative forms of economic order. Although delegates to the 1976 National Conference enthusiastically discussed alternative economic systems such as African socialism, it was clear that there were definite limits to the Sash's willingness to revise its theoretical constructs of economic justice, and Conference drew back from endorsing any of these systems.

Although most active Sash members had accepted by 1978 that the South African economic order was in many ways exploitative and worthy of criticism, they were content to challenge this primarily

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<sup>69</sup>A862/D24 Minutes, National Conference 1975, Sash Archives. Also see: Duncan, S. "How Much Would We Sacrifice?" Sash Vol.18 no.3 November, 1975 pp9-11

through the medium of the daily activities of the Sash advice offices and were loathe to adopt any conception of economic justice other than that embodied in the idea of broadly-defined "free enterprise". This stemmed in part from a general unfamiliarity with the workings of economic systems and an instinctive mistrust of any economic order that would require significant state intervention for its application. Thus the Sash remained faithful to a vague liberal definition of economic justice, although it was under far fewer illusions as to its existence in South Africa.

#### THE ELABORATION OF OPPOSITION TO APARTHEID:

##### THE ROLE OF THE ADVICE OFFICES:

The growth of the Black Sash advice offices in the 1970s confirmed them as a vital motor of the organisation's anti-apartheid activity. Johannesburg became the epicenter of political conflict in the 1970s and the Sash advice office there began to record, for the first time, a heavier case load than the Athlone office in Cape Town. By 1974 the Johannesburg office was dealing with over 5,200 cases per year and recording a 22 per cent success rate.<sup>70</sup>

There was perhaps no clearer indication in the early 1970s of the effect of the advice offices on the political concerns of Sash members relative to other "liberal" whites, than the Alexandra Hostels scheme. Alexandra Township was located just beyond the Johannesburg Municipal boundary, to the east of the wealthy white

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<sup>70</sup>Star 29/4/1975

suburb of Sandton. In the beginning of the 1970s, Alexandra was targeted by the government as a key component of its scheme to make Johannesburg "white by night". Not content to have all "unproductive" Africans removed from the urban areas, the government also wanted to ensure that employed blacks did not sleep overnight in "white" Johannesburg. As a result, the government revealed plans in the early 1970s to demolish all family housing in Alexandra and turn it into a vast hostel complex to house more than 60,000 "single" men and women who lived and worked in the city.

In 1972, the government began bulldozing large areas of Alexandra and moving families to Tembisa or Meadowlands townships. Wives and children of workers who were found not to have the requisite Section 10 rights were forced back to the homelands, while the workers themselves were offered single hostel accommodation. By 1973, two huge hostels had been built, designed to house 2,700 inmates each in very overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.<sup>71</sup>

When the initial demolitions began in Alexandra, an Action Committee, which had originally been formed by white residents of the northern suburbs to combat the removal of domestic servants from Houghton Ridge to Diepkloof hostels in 1970, resurrected itself. The Committee called a well-attended public meeting, and the Citizens' Hostels Action Committee (CHAC) was formed, made up of representatives of churches, the Progressive Party, the Black Sash and concerned citizens. Sash representatives on the CHAC were Joyce Harris, who was Publicity Officer, and Sash President

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<sup>71</sup>Harris, J. "An Orwellian Concept" *Sash* Vol.16 no.3 November, 1972 p22

Jean Sinclair. Within two weeks the Committee had sent a memorandum of objections to the scheme along with a 40,000 signature petition to the Deputy Minister of BAD, Dr. Piet Koornhof.<sup>72</sup> The memorandum dealt with the implications of the scheme for public and private health and outlined psychological and social problems likely to result from overcrowding, lack of privacy, segregation of the sexes, and the total absence of family life in the hostels.<sup>73</sup>

The memorandum and petition did help improve conditions in the hostels and helped secure the Section 10 rights of those who were moved there. In addition, BAD promised not to serve notice on live-in domestics in white suburbs. The Action Committee had been relatively successful in mobilising public opinion behind its campaign against the hostels. This was however primarily a result of enlightened self-interest rather than spontaneous philanthropy. Very few whites in Sandton, Randburg or Johannesburg wanted their live-in domestics to move to the hostels, as this would mean regulated and limited working hours and a time consuming and expensive daily commute. Still fewer wanted a volatile concentration of 60,000 people living in degrading, unsanitary conditions in the midst of the northern suburbs. The scheme was made even less appealing when it was calculated that an estimated 250 buses per hour would have to travel through Sandton at peak periods transporting people to and from work.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>AH1132/Gb/4 Citizens' Hostel Action Committee, The Alexandra Hostels 14/9/1972 TUCSA II Files.

<sup>73</sup>A862/Ja/18 Letter and Petition from the CHAC to M.C. Botha, 25/5/1972, Sash Archives.

<sup>74</sup>Race Relations News Vol.34 no.5 May, 1972 p1

While the Action Committee wound down following the relative success of the petition, the Sash campaign against the hostels scheme intensified. Primarily through information gleaned from the Johannesburg Advice Office files, Sash members in the Transvaal had become concerned about the implications of the scheme for the existing residents of Alexandra. In particular, Johannesburg Advice Office workers were alarmed at the number of cases they saw of women and children who had been living illegally in Alexandra with husbands and fathers who were, as a result of the demolitions, being forced back to the homelands.<sup>75</sup> The Sash, knowing that the shortage of family housing in Johannesburg was reaching crisis level, objected to the demolition of the few homes that did exist in Alexandra and argued that it would be almost impossible for families to find homes in other townships.<sup>76</sup>

In January 1974, after trying to publicise the plight of Alexandra residents through numerous articles and letters to the press, the Sash sent a memorandum to the Deputy Minister of M&AD, Punt Jansen, noting that as a result of the demolitions, hundreds of wives of men qualified for permanent residence were being refused permission to live with their husbands. Jansen agreed to receive a Sash delegation, but at this meeting he proved to be intransigent and the Sash reported that the discussion had "achieved nothing".<sup>77</sup> Despite this and numerous other appeals, the Sash

<sup>75</sup>Duncan, S. "The Illegal Children" *Sash* Vol.16 no.4 February, 1973 p19

<sup>76</sup>*Sash* Special Edition: "Memorandum on the Pass Laws and Influx Control" Vol.16 no.8 February, 1974 p45

<sup>77</sup>"From the Advice Offices" *Sash* Vol.18 no.1 May, 1975 p30

could make no impact on official policy, although it continued to help people with legal problems resulting from the demolitions through its advice office in Johannesburg. In 1977, the Alexandra hostels scheme was suspended, apparently through lack of funds, but also no doubt because the 1976 uprisings had caused BAD officials to reconsider the policy of treating urban Africans as nothing more than "labour units".

#### REHABILITATION INSTITUTIONS:

Through its advice office work the Black Cash gained a privileged insight into many of the more obscure contortions of apartheid and their ramifications. The advice office workers routinely examined all new apartheid regulations and were thus well-placed to expose convoluted and deliberately low-key attempts by the NP government to streamline its increasingly unworkable influx control policies in the 1970s. One such attempt by BAD to clear the black urban population of any persons other than bona fide migrant workers, was a scheme to construct "Rehabilitation Institutions" in the homelands. These had been mooted along with the Aid Centers as early as 1971, but it was not until 1975 with Proclamation No. R133, that the scheme was revealed for public scrutiny.<sup>78</sup>

The 1975 "Proclamation for Rehabilitation Institutions in the Bantu Homelands" allowed the establishment of institutions for the "reception, treatment and training" of persons committed there under the Bantu Areas Consolidation Act or the Bantu Labour Act.

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<sup>78</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1975 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1976 p104

The Institutions were to be run along similar lines to prisons, although one of their functions appeared to involve the re-education of inmates including:

reorientating them to the traditions, culture, custom and system of government of the national unit to which they belong.<sup>79</sup>

To many observers, the Institutions represented little more than an attempt to deal with urban delinquents and petty criminals, but the Sash had its doubts.

Director of the Johannesburg Advice Office, Sheena Duncan, viewed plans for Rehabilitation Institutions with great skepticism, and pioneered a Black Sash investigation into their structure and function. The Sash advice offices had interviewed many people who had been ordered out of the urban area and yet had no contact with (and invariably were not welcome in) their "national unit". This led Duncan to suspect that the Rehabilitation Institutions might be used for the incarceration and brainwashing of the urban dispossessed who continually slipped through the net of influx control. She thus argued:

In effect any Black person can be confined to a rehabilitation center under prison conditions for three years for minor pass law offences which, after normal court proceedings, usually result in small fines or terms of imprisonment measured in weeks.<sup>80</sup>

The Sash issued a memorandum outlining objections to the Institutions in July 1975 which was published in full by the Rand Daily Mail and which received widespread press coverage. The strongly-worded memorandum suggested that the "inmates" of

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<sup>79</sup>Duncan, S. "Rehabilitation Institutions...or?" Sash Vol.18 no.2 August, 1975 p11

<sup>80</sup>ibid. p13



these Institutions would be subject to forced labour as well as the unbridled power of superintendents, noting:

Concentration camp commandants in Nazi Europe had this kind of power.<sup>81</sup>

The Sash's attack led to angry outbursts against the organisation from conservative whites. This included an article by a Nationalist sympathiser Dirk Rezelman, in the Rand Daily Mail ("When Their Charms Fail the Black Sash Turns Vicious") which called the Sash a "tawdry joke" and noted:

The Sash has, by its latest attack on the Government, shown an irresponsible viciousness which has stabbed this country in the back.<sup>82</sup>

However, the Sash had both successfully publicised the potential abuses of the scheme and touched a raw nerve in BAD. On 19th July the Deputy Minister of BAD published a press statement, followed by a radio broadcast, denying that the Institutions would be used for indoctrination and claiming that only "idlers" and "delinquents" would be sent there after a full court hearing.<sup>83</sup> A well publicised battle ensued, with Sheena Duncan responding that there was nothing in the wording of the legislation that prevented detention without trial, to which the Minister replied insisting that the Institutions would not be used for enforcing influx control.<sup>84</sup> The Sash also succeeded in blighting the scheme to the extent that various normally quiescent homeland leaders were

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<sup>81</sup>A362/Ja "Memorandum on the Proclamation for the Establishment of Rehabilitation Institutions in the Bantu Homelands" 17/7/1975 p7, Sash Archives.

<sup>82</sup>Rand Daily Mail 12/8/1975

<sup>83</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1975 Johannesburg: SAIRR 1976 p105

<sup>84</sup>Rand Daily Mail 29/7/1975; 8/8/1975; 12/8/1975

prompted to come out in opposition to it. By early 1976 it was apparent that the controversial scheme had been abandoned.

#### THE RIGHTS OF URBAN BLACKS:

Despite occasional dramatic encounters with the government like that over the Rehabilitation Institutions, the bulk of the Sash's activities against apartheid during the 1970s consisted of the frustrating task of cataloguing the increasing hardships these policies inflicted on black South Africans. The Sash saw the urban rebellion which began in June 1976, partly as the result of the burden of hardships that it had defined and opposed throughout the preceding years. The organisation had persistently warned that political conflict in one form or another was the inevitable consequence apartheid policies, notably those associated with local administration of townships and the application of influx control. The Transvaal Regional Report of 1977 noted:

All the elements of our society which the Black Sash year after year has exposed as trouble spots - the pass laws, migrant labour, job reservation, unequal education, inadequate housing, overcrowding, the denial of human and political rights - have indeed proved to be flashpoints, and will continue to aggravate an already very delicate situation unless immediate and positive steps are taken to alleviate them.<sup>85</sup>

Throughout the early 1970s the Sash warned that the local administration of African townships was imposing almost intolerable burdens on urban Africans. However the organisation found there was little it could do to alleviate these burdens,

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<sup>85</sup>A862/D27 Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1977, Sash archives.

beyond making known to the government and the white public the ominous trends it discerned in the information gathered by its advice offices. The dominant feature of the administration of Africans in the "white" urban areas in the 1970s and a prime target of the Black Sash's criticism, was the introduction of twenty-two Bantu Affairs Administration Boards (BAABs) countrywide. This scheme, which was designed to bring urban Africans under the control of the central government, was introduced to Parliament and passed in the 1971 session as the Bantu Affairs Administration Act. The various Boards were to take over all responsibility for African affairs, including labour regulation and township administration, from local authorities. The Boards had all the powers and rights of a local authority, were run by appointed white officials, and were expected to be self-financing.

The Boards responsible for the Johannesburg region, the West Rand Administration Board (WRAB) and the East Rand Administration Board (ERAB), started operation in July 1972. The Johannesburg Advice Office dealt chiefly with WRAB, which administered the Soweto area. The Sash was initially skeptical about the Boards but accepted that centralisation of various prescribed areas under a single jurisdiction might allow Africans with Section 10 rights to move more freely in the urban areas. However, by late 1974, the advice offices had concluded that the Boards had resulted in little more than the establishment of a more efficient system of endorsement cut. In addition, the Sash soon realised from its advice office case work that the bureaucratic structure of the Boards allowed for the almost endless referral of individuals

trying to establish their urban residence rights.<sup>66</sup>

It was not the administration of the pass laws by the Boards that began to concern the Sash most, but rather the growing body of evidence accumulated by the advice offices which showed that the Boards were failing to administer the townships effectively. Their greatest weakness was that they were expected to be self-financing. Before the Boards were established, some of the larger white municipal authorities were able to subsidise their Bantu Revenue Accounts to a considerable degree, thereby giving them some flexibility in the administration of the townships. Thus, to help meet the needs of Soweto in the 1971/1972 financial year, the Johannesburg City Council had subsidised its Bantu Revenue Account from the general rates fund to the tune of about R2,500,000.<sup>67</sup> Without this financial flexibility, the Boards were vulnerable to many of the external and internal economic pressures of the 1970s.

Around the time that the Boards began to operate, the Sash also began to warn that it had evidence to indicate that the shortage of housing in the townships was reaching a critical level. Because proof of adequate housing was a precondition for achieving the right to live in an urban area for many Africans, the advice offices were well informed of the housing situation in the African townships. Throughout the 1960s the government had been reluctant to provide African housing in the urban areas, fearing that this would only stabilise the black urban population it was

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<sup>66</sup>Athlone Advice Office Report, October 1973-September 1974" Sash Vol.17 no.4 February, 1975 p30

<sup>7</sup>Band Daily Mail 20/5/1971

trying to eliminate. However, it proved to be easier to neglect housing than to reverse the human tide driven by poverty from the rural areas to the cities. As a result, homelessness and overcrowding soon emerged as the urban crises of the 1970s. By 1975, there were over 15,000 families on the waiting list for housing in Soweto, whereas authorities had only built 1,137 homes in 1973.<sup>88</sup> With few financial resources to spare, the Administration Boards could do little to ameliorate this situation.

The Sash was made aware through its Johannesburg Advice Office that the shortage of housing was an important factor contributing to the anger that manifested in the Soweto uprising in 1976. In 1974, the office noted in its annual report:

There is a critical situation in Soweto and the overcrowding and hopelessness of people with no security of tenure is one of the greatest causes of the growing anger and frustration of the Black community.<sup>89</sup>

By 1975, approximately 15 per cent of the Johannesburg Advice Office clients had problems directly related to housing. In early 1976 Sheena Duncan noted that the government's failure to fulfill promises to restore 30-year leasehold titles for blacks in urban areas, had fuelled discontent and concluded:

All this adds up to a rapidly developing alienation of the black community from our society and a serious and growing hatred of whites by blacks.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Kabak,B. "Housemaking for the Masses" Sash Vol.18 no.1 May, 1975 p24

<sup>89</sup>Johannesburg Advice Office Report, October 1973-September 1974" Sash Vol.18 no.1 May, 1975 p31

<sup>90</sup>Duncan,S. "Presidential Address to National Conference" Sash Vol.18 no.5 May, 1976 p2

The West Rand Administration Board announced an estimated deficit of almost R3,500,000 for the 1974/75 financial year.<sup>91</sup> The Sash was even more alarmed when a WRAB application to raise rents drastically to offset this deficit was approved by BAD. Rents were increased overnight by R2.00 per month for houses and by R1.00 per month for hostel beds, and subsidies for welfare organisations in the townships were cut. The advice office in Johannesburg warned:

Black people are expressing increasing resentment that they must pay for the instruments of their own oppression.<sup>92</sup>

The sudden rent increase prompted the Sash to try to attend WRAB committee meetings, but its members found these closed to the public for discussion and decision-making sessions and finally gave up after having been ejected from five meetings in a row.<sup>93</sup> In mid-1975, the Sash levelled a stinging public attack at the Boards, calling them:

non-representative, dictatorial, bureaucratic mini-governments which have complete power over the lives of all African people in the common area of the Republic.<sup>94</sup>

To add to the problems brought about by the economic recession and the BAAB scheme, the Sash was acutely aware of misery caused to the urban Africans by the government's determination to push ahead with homelands independence. The government's

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<sup>91</sup>SAIRR: Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1974 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1975 p165

<sup>92</sup>"From the Advice Offices" Sash Vol.18 no.1 May, 1975 p31

<sup>93</sup>A862/Fbb/13 Letter: Sheena Duncan to Carol Lamb, 6/11/1975, Sash Archives.

<sup>94</sup>A862/Jck/9 Letter: Sheena Duncan to the Rand Daily Mail 5/6/1975, Sash Archives.

determination to ensure that no African would be a citizen of South Africa became clear with the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act, passed in early 1970. This Act confirmed that even the 60 per cent of Africans living and working in the urban areas of the Republic were destined to exercise their political rights only in distant homelands.

In 1976 the Status of the Transkei Act was passed, granting sovereign independence to the Transkei from October that year. Among other things, the Act contained a very wide definition of citizenship which meant that 3,300,000 people (1,000,000 of whom lived outside the Transkei) were deprived of their South African citizenship.<sup>95</sup> The Johannesburg and Athlone advice offices were inundated with people wanting to challenge this compulsory loss of citizenship, which meant the loss of many of their rights in the urban areas. Johannesburg Advice Office recorded widespread resistance to the scheme and noted:

It is necessary to stress that the urban people affected are furiously angry and totally reject the concept of being made to swap future full participation in a common society for citizenship of a remote homeland which many have never seen and in which they have no interest.<sup>96</sup>

The Black Sash believed that the cumulative effect of homeland policies, Administration Boards and influx control legislation on urban Africans was the underlying cause of the violence that erupted in townships in June 1976. In its memorandum to the Cillie Commission of Inquiry into the riots, the organisation

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<sup>95</sup>Editorial Sash Vol.18 no.7 November, 1976 p1

<sup>96</sup>"Johannesburg Advice Office Report" Sash Vol.19 no.2 August, 1977 p25

elaborated this theme, quoting legislation that it felt was directly responsible for creating:

anger and frustration in the African communities and the growing hatred of white people by black people.<sup>97</sup>

In the memorandum the Sash referred mainly to the cumulative evidence of its advice offices, noting that major contributing factors to the rioting included the acute housing shortage, the dictatorial and inefficient administration of the Boards, massive unemployment, the huge number of people harassed, arrested, fined or imprisoned due to pass law offences, and the threats to people's rights and security brought about by impending homeland independence. In the absence of government action to ameliorate these conditions, the Sash advice offices could do little more than continue to record a litany of black suffering, anger and frustration.

#### URBAN SQUATTERS:

A new and disturbing dimension of black urban life encountered by the Black Sash during the 1970s, was the dramatic growth of illegal squatter communities in the urban areas. This was yet another symptom of the government's influx control policies and, although squatting and its associated problems affected the Black Sash in both Durban and Johannesburg, it was in Cape Town that the problem was most pronounced.

From the mid-1970s, large squatter communities grew up around

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<sup>97</sup>MIC AE862 Reel 11 Duncan, S. "Memorandum to the Committee of Enquiry into the Riots at Soweto and Other Places in the Republic During June 1976", 23/7/1976 Rhodes House Collection.



the Cape Peninsula. Although the Sash's Cape Western Region offered legal and other assistance to Coloured squatters, it was the growing number of African squatters on the Peninsula who required the most help. Unlike the Coloured people, many of the African squatters were illegally in the area and thus faced not only the potential demolition of their shacks but also prosecution and endorsement out of the Western Cape. The African squatter camps were partly a result of the government's decision in 1972 that no new family housing for Africans would be built in Cape Town, which meant that in the 1970s provision was made for only one in every 4.7 African workers to live with their families.<sup>98</sup> In addition, many of the families of men living in "single" hostels in the townships came from the reserves in the 1970s to join their husbands and fathers in Cape Town.

One of the largest squatter camps was Crossroads, which came into being shortly before the Easter weekend in 1975 when a few families (allegedly at the suggestion of Cape Divisional Council officials) moved onto a piece of ground adjacent to the official township of Nyanga. Crossroads grew rapidly, housing approximately 7,000 to 10,000 people in 1976.<sup>99</sup> Although the camp alleviated the homelessness of many legal residents, the Peninsula BAAB soon realised that it also provided shelter for growing numbers of illegals, mainly women and children. From May 1975 onwards, mass arrests began and hundreds in the camp were endorsed back to the homelands and their shacks demolished.

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<sup>98</sup>Ellis, G. et al The Squatter Problem in the Western Cape: Some Causes and Remedies Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1977 p2

<sup>99</sup>Financial Mail 20/2/1976

Almost immediately after people began to settle at Crossroads, groups from the camp began arriving at the Athlone Advice Office. These were mainly women trying to obtain permits to live with their husbands. However, as the demolition of squatter camps intensified, the advice office soon began to be used by Crossroads residents as a meeting point and a place where they could liaise with legal advisors. For the first time since the early 1960s, the advice office began cooperating with assertive and increasingly militant black groups who were determined to express their needs rather than merely try to exist on the government's terms. As workers from the Athlone Advice Office noted at the 1976 Black Sash National Conference:

This involvement has proved a major experience for workers in the office and has demonstrated another facet of community development, where people and voluntary workers have grown together and learned much from one another.<sup>100</sup>

From June 1975 the Sash assisted residents of Crossroads in fighting a series of successful legal battles to prevent the demolition of their homes. However, these victories helped precipitate government action to close any legal loopholes that would prevent the removal of the settlements. As a result, the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Amendment Bill was drafted, providing for the removal of squatters without allowing them recourse to the courts. However in November 1976, before this Act came into effect, Crossroads was declared an "Emergency Camp". This followed a typhoid scare, and was a measure designed to give officials some control over the camp to prevent it from becoming a

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<sup>100</sup>A862/D25 Minutes, National Conference 1976, Sash Archives.

health hazard. This meant that residents were offered some measure of security as well as rudimentary services such as a basic water supply and sewage removal. However, the Divisional Council also drew up a map of the area and proceeded to demolish any new shacks that were built. Although Crossroads's "Emergency Camp" status gave it some kind of reprieve, the Sash was constantly occupied with defending residents in claims against demolitions of shacks built before November 1976.

When the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Amendment Act came into effect in 1976, it heralded a period of massive uncertainty for other squatter communities on the Peninsula including those of Modderdam, Werkgenot and Unibell in the area of Bellville South, which together housed between 30,000 and 35,000 people. The Sash was involved in the defence of squatters in these camps against various charges. When these camps were finally demolished, the Sash cooperated with the SAIRR, the Cape Flats Interim Committee, churches and other concerned groups to provide emergency welfare relief.

The squatter problems on the Peninsula and Transkeian independence, together with the recession, meant that in 1977 the Athlone Advice Office dealt with more cases than for any year in a decade - 3,136 in all.<sup>101</sup> Contributing to this total were cases arising from rioting on the Peninsula following the Soweto uprisings in 1976. By 1978 the Athlone Office noted pessimistically that all indications were that the legislative roots

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<sup>101</sup>"Athlone Advice Office Report" *Sash* Vol.19 no.2 August, 1977 p21

of the Peninsula unrest remained and that the precipitating factors including unemployment, rising rent and costs in general were intensifying.

### THE SOWETO RIOTS AND THEIR AFTERMATH:

The explosion of political tensions into violence in June 1976 catapulted the Transvaal and Cape Western regions of the Sash into a role largely characterised by crisis intervention and strongly reminiscent of their activities during the State of Emergency in 1960. These regions found that it was necessary to suspend many of their more routine activities so that they were able to devote their organisational resources to assisting those who became victims of state violence and repression during this time. As violence spread from Soweto to other townships, and as massive stayaways paralysed industry, the Sash mobilised both to condemn the government for its role in precipitating the uprisings and to try to alleviate some of the suffering that resulted.

The Transvaal Region cancelled its proposed campaign to oppose Transkeian independence and began issuing statements to newspapers on the events, distributing pamphlets, and writing letters to Ministers deploring the government's role in creating such a catastrophic political situation. The region also assisted other organisations in the collection and distribution of food and other supplies. The region was particularly mindful of trying to work with the victims of the unrest, and invited black leaders including Dr. Manas Buthelezi and Mrs. Bernadette Mosala, to address its meetings on the situation in the townships. The Saturday Club, which was a long-running multi-racial social group

organised by Transvaal Region, held a special meeting at which Soweto mothers gave Sash members first hand information about conditions in the township. As a direct result of information gained at this meeting, the Sash made arrangements with the SAIRR to set up an office to assist people to find their missing children, and compiled a handout of phone numbers for people to call if searching for a missing person.

After an initial absence of clients, the Johannesburg Advice Office soon became extremely busy dealing with cases arising from the unrest, and also made itself available to people wishing to make affidavits to the Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate the riots. The advice office work during this time fell into roughly five categories: helping those injured or disabled by police while going about their lawful business to sue for compensation; tracing people who had disappeared; helping obtain financial assistance for the dependants of those killed or injured; defending those dismissed from their jobs for participating in stayaways, and providing support for dependants of those detained. ✓

Hardly had the Sash begun to recover from the various crises associated with the political violence of 1976, than news came of the death in detention on 12th September 1977 of Stephen Bantu Biko, one of the foremost BC leaders of the decade. News of his death profoundly shocked the Sash. Some prominent Sash members knew Biko personally, having met him through their association with projects linked to SPRO-CAS. Upon hearing of Biko's death, members of the Transvaal Region immediately made up 250

wreaths and placed them at key places around Johannesburg. Two members also placed a large wreath at the foot of the platform at the NP Transvaal Congress on September 14th. This audacious action received national and international attention and helped publicise the Sash's conviction that the government was culpable in Biko's death. The Sash followed up these gestures with statements and letters to the press, in particular criticising the Terrorism Act, under whose provisions of indefinite detention Biko had been held.

The long investigation into the circumstances of Steve Biko's death had hardly begun before the Transvaal Region was "stunned into inaction" by the 19th of October crackdown. That day, almost every significant BC organisation was banned, and the core of the black leadership was silenced through banning or detention. Three newspapers were also banned, as was the Ci and Donald Woods, the husband of a Sash member and Editor of the Daily Dispatch. The Sash was virtually unscathed in this crackdown, but witnessed the decimation of the political initiative which had enriched so much of its work in the 1970s. The Sash remained convinced however, that while the energy underlying the political resurgence of the decade had been repressed it had not been extinguished. The organisation did however fear that the government's uncompromising response would force political opposition to take more extreme and destructive forms.

#### CONCLUSION:

A clear indication that by the beginning of 1978 the Sash had

extended its understanding of the application of liberal concepts in South Africa, was its decision at that year's National Conference to adopt a resolution in favour of the universal franchise. The 1970s had seen many political developments which had challenged the organisation's preconceptions about what constituted a just social order, and the Sash had explored alternative political and economic systems. This had led it towards an elaboration of its liberalism in the pursuit of liberal justice in the South African context. In her three years as National President from 1975 to 1978, Sheena Duncan had encouraged the Sash in this self-criticism, and it was she who played the leading role in bringing the issue of universal franchise to the 1978 National Conference.

As National President of the Black Sash, Sheena Duncan had been asked more and more frequently about the Sash's attitude towards universal franchise and she realised that the organisation would not be able to evade taking a stand on this matter for much longer. Furthermore, it was an issue about which she had always felt strongly, believing that no real degree of social or economic justice could be achieved without first establishing political justice. The Sash's traditional excuse, that the franchise issue was "political" and therefore beyond its jurisdiction, no longer had much legitimacy within the new, broader perspective of justice that the Sash had developed in the 1970s. Furthermore, the franchise resolution was an indication that the Sash had made progress towards identifying and eliminating the more paternalistic dimensions of its liberalism. The Sash's experience of church and BC initiatives in the 1970s had also helped it develop a greater appreciation for the idea that liberal justice would be

served through a broader distribution of political power in South Africa.

Despite her personal convictions, Sheena Duncan was under no illusions about the magnitude of the question of universal franchise for the Sash. She ensured that all the regions had time to debate the issue in full before the 1978 National Conference, having sent them a persuasive working paper as early as August 1977.<sup>102</sup> She remained optimistic about the Sash response, despite suggestions from senior members that it might be too radical a step for the organisation to take, and a warning from her mother, Jean Sinclair, that the issue would "tear the Black Sash apart".<sup>103</sup>

At the Black Sash's 1978 National Conference delegates discussed the franchise question in full. The main issue of contention was (as it had always been), that many Sash members feared the implications, not of the universal franchise, but of majority rule manifesting as black racial domination. However Duncan had preempted these doubts and fears by appending a series of qualifications to her draft resolution. Thus, while endorsing the vote for all, the resolution noted that, "it has been demonstrated that a universal franchise does not guarantee political justice", and consequently insisted on guarantees of an independent judiciary, freedom from arbitrary arrest and punishment, freedom of the press, of assembly and of speech, the protection of the

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<sup>102</sup>A862/D28 "Working Paper on the Black Sash Attitude to the Franchise" 16/8/1977, National Conference 1978, Sash Archives.

<sup>103</sup>Interview with Sheena Duncan, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989. *Star* 15/3/1978



rights of minority groups and regular free elections.

The demands appended to the resolution indicated that, although the Sash was prepared to revise and develop the application of its liberal concepts, this process was still premised on a fundamental concern for liberal values. The resolution's insistence on guarantees of basic liberal rights was decisive in convincing delegates, and it was passed with 30 votes in favour, none against and 2 abstentions. The Sash had confirmed its commitment to a redistribution of political power in South Africa as a condition for the existence of justice in the country. That commitment had been hard won throughout the 1970s and by 1978 and had finally been accepted as a fundamental organisational principle. As Sheena Duncan noted:

It wasn't an ideological debate anymore...people just agreed that it had to happen.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup>Interview with Sheena Duncan, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989

## CHAPTER V

### CONFRONTING THE ERA OF "TOTAL STRATEGY" 1978-1984

#### INTRODUCTION:

The political impotence and isolation which had plagued the Black Sash throughout most of the 1960s and 1970s, was to some extent overcome after 1978. This was partly due to the fact that the Sash progressively de-emphasised its liberal ideals and focused more on intervention in concrete political conflicts involving apartheid policies. During this time the Sash became seen by many, including some of its own members, as primarily an anti-apartheid organisation. As a result of this strategic reorientation, the Sash became more politically active, with its various regions intervening directly in many local political issues that arose as a result of the implementation of apartheid legislation after 1978.

Although the Black Sash never repudiated its liberal values, its implicit orientation away from a focus on liberal principles was evidence of their strategic limitations. The Sash's alternative focus on practical intervention, aimed at directly assisting those who it felt were oppressed by the political system, flowed naturally from the organisation's political frustration throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In many ways the organisation's evolving strategic focus was a realisation of the Sash's vaguely expressed desire to do something more "positive".

The orientation towards more direct intervention aimed at

opposing apartheid policies, rather than trying to promote liberalism, served to revitalise the Sash organisationally. Many members became enthusiastic participants in campaigns which involved the direct alleviation of suffering caused by apartheid policies. Despite its evolving strategic emphasis on apartheid, the Sash continued to develop liberal critiques of other dimensions of government policy after 1978, notably the progressive militarisation of South African politics.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

The economic crises of the 1970s, together with the rebellion of 1976, challenged the authority of the NP government and the strategic value of the nationalism upon which it was based. This was apparent in a trend within the NP in the mid-1970s towards abandoning the relative isolationism of nationalist ideology in favour more co-optive methods of maintaining power. The ascendancy of this strategic approach was affirmed with the election of the "reformist" Cape NP leader and Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha as Prime Minister following B.J. Vorster's retirement in 1977.

Botha soon set about introducing a more managerial form of government, in which strategic rather than ideological considerations were foremost. He channelled power away from the legislature and his increasingly restive caucus, and concentrated it in his own office and in a collection of advisory committees made up, not only of MPs, but of representatives of the business community and the military as well. Botha's introduction of what

was essentially a military ethos into the workings of the state, was part of a process known as "total strategy".<sup>1</sup> This was ostensibly designed to combat the so-called "total onslaught" against South Africa, which was usually portrayed as voracious communist imperialism, massing armies on South Africa's borders, and corrupting the country from within by subverting the population to its cause. The progressive infiltration of the state into virtually all spheres of life after 1978 was usually justified by the supposed need to counter this omnipresent enemy.

Botha perceived that the tensions which had exploded into violence in 1976, stemmed in part from the government's failure to fully appreciate the emerging character and needs of the South African economy. As a result, he made various overtures to the business sector, including two highly publicised meetings between business leaders and the Cabinet in Johannesburg and Cape Town in 1979 and 1981. Also central to Botha's "reform" package, was the co-option of an African working class, which would be granted privileged status in the urban areas due to its indispensable role in the urban economy. The Riekert and Wiehahn Commissions, established after the 1976 rebellion, were of central importance in the development of government strategy regarding the creation of this African urban elite.

The Wiehahn Commission, which was appointed to examine the efficacy of the existing industrial relations system, called for the

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<sup>1</sup>Inter alia. Grundy, K.W. The Militarisation of South African Politics London: I.B.Taurus, 1986; Frankel, P. Pretoria's Praetorians: Civil-Military Relations in South Africa Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

registration of black trade unions, the abolition of statutory job reservation and the opening of apprenticeship to Africans. The government responded with the 1981 Labour Regulations Amendment Act, which gave African unions the right to negotiate, subject to their registration. The Riekert Commission revised influx control, recommending that Africans who qualified for Section 10 rights should be granted the status of permanent urban residents. However, unqualified workers were to be subject to tightened influx controls and increased penalties for illegal employment.

Integral to the strategy of politically isolating most of the African working class and withdrawing South African citizenship from all Africans, was the scheme for consolidating the homelands and granting them "independence". By the end of 1980, Transkei, Bophuthatswana and Venda were "sovereign" states and Ciskei, Lebowa, Gazankulu, Qwa Qwa and KwaZulu were "self-governing territories", while KaNgwane and KwaNdebele were moving towards "self-government". Many of these homelands were within commuting distance of the major industrial areas, notably around the western periphery of the PWV region in the Transvaal, near East London in the Eastern Cape, and near Durban in Natal.

To encourage settlement in homelands on the urban peripheries, township housing was drastically curtailed and influx control strictly enforced. This, together with population removals undertaken in the pursuit of consolidation, accounted in part for a leap in the homeland population in the late 1970s. The preliminary

results of the 1980 census indicated a 69 per cent growth in the population of the homelands since 1970, with the population of KaNgwane increasing by 204 per cent, KwaNdebele by 415 per cent and Qwa Qwa by 515 per cent.<sup>2</sup> This pressure on the land in the late 1970s contributed to a significant rise in rural poverty. It was estimated that the proportion of homeland households that could be considered absolutely destitute had risen from 5 per cent in 1960 to 13 per cent in 1980.<sup>3</sup> This situation was compounded by the government's policy of consolidation, which resulted in entire communities being uprooted and resettled in alien and often economically impoverished homeland areas. In 1983, it was estimated that 3,500,000 people had been moved from "white" South Africa since 1960 and that at least 2,000,000 were still threatened with removal.<sup>4</sup>

The culmination of the Botha government's reformist scheme for South Africa was the adoption of a new constitution. The constitution envisaged the co-option of Indians and Coloureds into national government, but excluded Africans from political representation beyond a local level in the Republic. In terms of this new constitution, the executive branch of government would be headed by a State President, who would preside over a tricameral Parliament. The House of Assembly with its 178 white members would be retained, and added to it would be a Coloured House of Representatives, with 83 members and an Indian House of

<sup>2</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1982 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1983 p.45

<sup>3</sup>The Economist 2/6/1984 Quoted in Murray, M. South Africa: Time of Agony Time of Destiny London: Verso, 1987 p.7

<sup>4</sup> Surplus Peoples Project Forced Removals in South Africa: SPP Report Vol I Cape Town: SPP, 1983 p. 1

Delegates, with 45 members. The jurisdictions of the Houses would be determined by the State President's interpretation of "own affairs" and "general affairs". The emphasis was on vertical differentiation along ethnic lines, and the basic 4:2:1 numerical formula ensured that the authority of the House of Assembly would prevail in any joint vote.<sup>5</sup> The government called a referendum on the new constitution on 2nd November 1983, and 66 per cent of the whites who voted expressed approval.<sup>6</sup>

Reactions to Botha's "reforms" were widespread and varied. A conservative faction within the NP was particularly resistant to Botha's new vision of "power-sharing" in the Tricameral Parliament. In 1982 the Party split when Transvaal leader Andries Treurnicht and several MPs formed the Conservative Party (CP). The CP was supported mainly by blue-collar Afrikaners and farmers, many of whom had already deserted the NP for the parties of the far right, resulting in a drop in the NP's Afrikaner support from 85 per cent in 1977 to just over 60 per cent in 1981.<sup>7</sup>

Following the Wiehahn reforms trade unions grew rapidly, and by 1984 there were 35 unions with over 400,000 members.<sup>8</sup> There was also widespread grassroots mobilisation among urban blacks in opposition to Botha's reforms, focusing initially on local issues but emerging on a national level by 1983. In rural areas there was

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<sup>5</sup>Murray, M. South Africa op. cit. p117

<sup>6</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1983 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1984 p88

<sup>7</sup> Giliomee, H. Schlemmer, L. The Parting of the Ways: South African Politics 1976-1982 Cape Town: David Philip, 1982 p.140

<sup>8</sup> Lipton, M. Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa 1910-1986 Aldershot: Gower, 1985 p.340

significant resistance to the government's consolidation scheme, and many communities threatened with removal fought high-profile battles to remain on their land.

The ANC, strengthened by hundreds of exiles who had fled the country after the Soweto uprising, reemerged as a significant political presence after 1978 and began launching sabotage attacks inside South Africa. According to the Center for Intergroup Studies at the University of Cape Town, the ANC undertook approximately 210 acts of political violence between 1977 and 1983 in which 52 people were killed.<sup>9</sup> After 1979, the South African Defence Force (SADF) began a strategy of launching cross-border raids on ANC bases in neighbouring countries, notably Lesotho, Angola and Mozambique.

The "new dispensation" which was encapsulated in the three "Koornhof Bills" and the new constitution, precipitated national resistance. The most prominent organisational vehicle for this opposition was the United Democratic Front (UDF), which was launched at a meeting in August 1983 in Cape Town. There, over 1,000 delegates, representing some 600 organisations, agreed on the formation of a loose-knit coalition to oppose the new constitution and the Koornhof Bills. The UDF was the inheritor of the Charterist tradition of the Congress Alliance movement of the 1950s, and subscribed to a multi-class, multi-racial coalition of democratic organisations.

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<sup>9</sup> SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1983 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1984 p.45



## THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE BLACK SASH:

The Black Sash began the 1978-1984 period with a seemingly momentous change to its organisational structure. In July 1976, at a Special National Conference convened in Johannesburg, Sash delegates voted unanimously to open the organisation's membership to men for the first time.<sup>10</sup> However, the Sash's motives were entirely strategic and its objectives purely financial. Late in the 1978 Parliamentary session, the Fund-Raising Act had been passed. Section 2 of the Act laid down that no-one (except for sporting bodies, church services, educational institutions and political parties) could collect contributions from the public, including donations from overseas, without the permission of the Director of Fundraising.<sup>11</sup> The Director had wide discretionary powers and the right to withdraw or refuse permission without explanation.<sup>12</sup> This Act led to an outcry from opposition bodies, particularly the SACC, which at its 1978 Conference condemned it as a threat to all church activities unacceptable to the government.<sup>13</sup>

The Sash also felt extremely vulnerable to the Fundraising Act, particularly as a great deal of its revenue came from male friends and members' husbands who, because they were not members themselves, fell into the category of "public" donors. To avoid being subject to the investigations and whims of the Director of Fundraising, the Sash altered its constitution to allow men to

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<sup>10</sup>A862/D28(1) Minutes of Special National Conference 1976, Sash Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Race Relations News Vol.40 no.9 September, 1976 p.3

<sup>12</sup> Editorial Sash Vol.20 no.2 August, 1976 p1

<sup>13</sup> SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1976 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1976 p.39

become "associate" members. This meant that they could participate in activities, attend meetings and contribute to funds, but not vote or hold national office. Joyce Harris, who succeeded Sheena Duncan as Sash President in 1978, described the manoeuvre as:

very female-chauvinistic...we made them associate members, we gave them taxation without any representation.<sup>14</sup>

As very few of the men to whom this new status was awarded wanted a closer relationship with the Sash, this apparently radical change in organisational profile remained little more than a legal manoeuvre.

The decision to make men associate and not full members of the Black Sash stemmed from the reluctance of many members, for both sentimental and strategic reasons, to surrender the Sash's established "political persona" as an organisation of women. Many felt that, as an organisation of women, the Sash had always (rightly or wrongly) been less vulnerable to being accused of furthering vested interests through its political activities. Many Sash members ascribed this to the fact that, as women, they were somewhat removed from arenas of political competition such as the market or party politics.<sup>15</sup>

By the late 1970s much of the operational character of the Sash had become attuned to a membership made up mainly of white middle-class women. Its heavy reliance on voluntary work, particularly in the advice offices, presupposed that members would

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Joyce Harris, Johannesburg, 21/4/1989

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Noel Robb, Cape Town, 20/1/1989

have a reasonable amount of spare time. Many did, being married women with adult children who did not have to work full-time. This meant, for example, that until the mid-1980s most regions could afford to hold their Regional Council meetings on a weekday morning. The Sash was also wary of changes that might lead it into mainstream politics, where the purpose of most organisational activity seemed to be the pursuit of political power. Few if any Black Sash members aspired to this goal. Linked to this, some members felt that if a male membership drew the Sash into mainstream politics it might disrupt the tradition of ideological tolerance characteristic of the organisation and its ideals.

Many Sash members also approved of the way the organisation's internal politics were characterised by a relatively overt expression of interpersonal empathy and affection that was not as prevalent in male-dominated political organisations. This meant that the Sash was also able to fulfill a social support function for many of its members in a relatively hostile social and political environment.<sup>16</sup> The compassionate organisational persona of the Sash was epitomised by successive National Presidents throughout the 1970s and 1980s routinely signing official national circulars: "With love to you all". However, the Sash tended not to analyse its identity as a women's organisation, and it was not until the late 1980s that feminist issues began to appear on its agenda. Most members who were happy with a female membership would simply have agreed with Sheena Duncan's observation that they "just like

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<sup>16</sup>Interview with Beverley Runciman, Cape Town, 9/5/1989. Interview with Marj Brown, Johannesburg, 12/12/1990. Interview with Gill de Vlieg, Johannesburg, 12/12/1990.

working with women."<sup>17</sup>

The introduction of associate membership allowed the Sash to continue receiving "substantial" financial support from husbands and male friends. This was essential to the functioning of the organisation as, for example, the Transvaal region operated on a minimum budget of R3,000 a month in 1979, which its membership fees could not hope to cover. Neither did the Sash's own fundraising efforts provide sufficient funds, with Transvaal's region's annual "morning market" bringing in R10,500 in 1979 which was supplemented only by about R1,000 from assorted cake, book and jumble sales.<sup>18</sup> The Donaldson Trust (previously the Bantu Welfare Trust), which was administered by the SAIRR, continued to provide an annual grant towards the workings of the advice offices. Some advice offices, such as that in Grahamstown, benefited financially from the fact that they were officially run jointly by the Sash and the SAIRR.

Advice office costs rose steadily after 1978, particularly as a result of an increased case load, which often meant that regions had to engage additional paid office staff and interpreters. However, most of the Sash's financial difficulties were resolved in 1982 when the organisation entered into a contract with the New York based Ford Foundation. Technically, the Foundation began paying the Sash an annual sum to further the work of the advice offices and to publish information related to its work, thereby circumventing the Fundraising Act.<sup>19</sup> This contract put the Sash

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<sup>17</sup>Interview with Sheena Duncan, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989

<sup>18</sup>"Regional Reports" *Sash* Vol.22 no.1 May, 1980 p.18

<sup>19</sup>A862/Lab/5 HQ Circular no.6/1982, 29/6/1982, Sash Archives.

on such a secure financial footing that at the 1982 National Conference the National Treasurer announced that Headquarters would render only three instead of four accounts to regions for levies and magazines in the coming financial year.<sup>20</sup>

The Sash began 1978 with six regions and seven advice offices. Only three regions, namely Transvaal, Natal Coastal and Cape Western, still had branches by 1978. Transvaal's Pretoria Branch had no more than 35 members, but benefited from a strong leadership core and the popularity of its advice office. Natal Coastal's Highway Branch had less than 25 members, but was very cohesive, being made up of a group of women who lived in the affluent white suburbs in the hills to the north-west of Durban. In 1978 Cape Western Region had eight branches scattered around the Cape Peninsula among which its membership of about 380 was distributed.

After battling through most of the 1970s with less than six active members, Cape Eastern Region was formally dissolved at the 1978 National Conference. After 1978, Border Region struggled to keep going, and held no meetings in 1980 or 1981 because it lacked office-bearers. Like the defunct Cape Eastern, the region was plagued by a conservative white public and constant security police harassment. Although Border had about 30 members, only about six or seven were active and this total was whittled away by work, family commitments and emigration. Border limped along by focusing on its advice office, but by 1980 had only three

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<sup>20</sup>A862/D32 Minutes, National Conference 1982, Sash Archives.

committee members.

In the early 1980s however, both Border and Cape Eastern regions experienced a revival. This was primarily due to their direct political involvement in local issues linked to apartheid policies, which galvanised their membership. Border was revitalised through its involvement in a campaign to oppose the destruction of Duncan Village in East London and the relocation of its residents to the Ciskei township of Mdantsane.<sup>21</sup> This hard fought political campaign helped give the region both direction and impetus.

In the case of Cape Eastern, government attempts to destroy the long-established township of Walmer and move its residents across the city to the township of Zwide provided a vital focus for regional mobilisation. In addition, Molly Blackburn, who became MPC for Walmer in 1981 and who was involved in the campaign to save the township, joined the Sash.<sup>22</sup> Blackburn brought to Cape Eastern her considerable political competence and leadership and by 1981 Cape Eastern had 33 members and was reconstituted as a fully-fledged region of the Sash.

The Black Sash advice offices, which conducted over 21,000 interviews in 1981 alone, were an important impetus behind the Sash's orientation towards more localised strategic objectives after 1978. This reorientation was also strengthened by the emergence of Sheena Duncan as a powerful political figure in the Sash throughout the early 1970s and 1980s. Duncan was re-

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<sup>21</sup>"Regional Reports to Conference" *Sash* Vol.25 no.1 May, 1982 p24

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*

elected President of the Sash in 1982, succeeding Joyce Harris, who had served as President since 1978. She helped move the Sash away from a central concern with liberalism that had characterised its political expression during the long period of Jean Sinclair's Presidency. Duncan was strongly influenced by the concerns of the Johannesburg Advice Office and more oriented towards direct intervention to oppose specific dimensions of apartheid legislation. Although she pioneered many confrontations with the government over its apartheid policies at a national level, she also encouraged Sash members to become involved in local and small-scale battles against apartheid, many of which emerged through regional advice office work.

Building on a pattern established in the 1970s, the Black Sash continued to develop contacts with other organisations that shared its political concerns. This was facilitated by the Sash's emerging focus on opposing apartheid as such, which provided a strong basis for alliances between different groups. After 1978 in particular, the Sash established fruitful working relationships with organisations like the SAIRR, NUSAS, SACU, National Council of Women, Diakonia, the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, the Association for Rural Advancement (AFRA), and a host of local organisations. These groups supplemented each other's research and often embarked on joint campaigns.

### CHALLENGING THE TERMS OF THE "TOTAL ONSLAUGHT":

The Black Sash consistently opposed both the militarisation of the South African state after 1978, and the impact on South African

society of the pervasive logic of "total onslaught" and "total strategy". In many respects, this was a continuation of the Sash's traditional defence of liberal principles and ideals. As a result, opposition often took the form of token protest which received little public support. This was particularly the case with ongoing campaigns for press freedom, which had been an issue for the Sash since the since the early 1960s. However, the resurgence of opposition to the government in the early 1980s lent a surprising political potency to some of the Sash's campaigns against the construction of the "garrison state", notably its stand against conscription.

#### DETENTION WITHOUT TRIAL:

The degree to which South African whites had been influenced by the images and rationality of the "total onslaught" was evident in the increasingly lively stand that the Sash took against detention without trial. The Sash refused to be swayed by the logic of the "total strategy" and maintained its traditional liberal opposition to legislation which allowed for bannings, detentions and banishment without trial, condemning it at successive National Conferences between 1978 and 1984. Throughout this period, the issue was brought progressively closer to the Sash as friends, children of members, advice office workers (such as Rhodes University lecturer Guy Berger),<sup>23</sup> and even the organisation's National Secretary, were subject to this arbitrary form of punishment.

There was also growing evidence in the late 1970s that torture was widely used by the security police. The Sash condemned this

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<sup>23</sup>"Regional Reports to Conference" Sash Vol.25 no.2 May, 1982 p23



on humanitarian grounds and because it indicated a callous disregard for the most basic of human rights, and demanded that the government agents involved in such practices be prosecuted. The exoneration, by a Committee set up by the Medical Association of South Africa, of the doctors who treated Steve Biko shortly before his death, outraged the Sash. The organisation issued a widely published statement decrying the belief that what was done by officials, especially the police, was:

outside the scope of ordinary rules and must first be judged in the light of State interests and State security.<sup>24</sup>

In late October 1981 Keith Coleman, a journalist on the student newspaper SASPU National and son of the Chairman of the Transvaal Region, Audrey Coleman, was detained.<sup>25</sup> This event galvanised Audrey Coleman and her husband Max into action and they became leading figures in forming the 'Detainees Parents' Support Committee (DPSC). The DPSC soon rose to national prominence as a strident opponent of detention without trial. It not only provided support for detainees and their families, but also developed into a valuable source of information about detainees and the conditions in which they were held. The Sash welcomed the formation of the DPSC. Not only did the two organisations have strong personal links, but the DPSC was able to complement Sash work by devoting the time and energy that the Sash lacked to the increasingly important issue of detentions.

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<sup>24</sup>"Headquarters National Report" Sash Vol.24 no.1 May, 1981 p.22

<sup>25</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1981 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1982 p88

### THE STATUS OF "TERRORISTS" AND OF THE SADE:

After 1978, the Sash perceived a growing tendency among whites to develop a more militarised political ethos. This was particularly obvious when uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) fighters of the ANC began to infiltrate South Africa in relatively large numbers the early 1980s and the rate of sabotage attacks increased. The Sash fought a losing battle to counter the tendency among whites to regard this as a foreign invasion in line with the government's tendency to conflate the ANC with communism and Russian imperialism.

The Sash consistently refused to acknowledge MK as an invasion force, preferring to understand its activities as a form of civil war. Especially in the Transvaal, the Sash began to develop the theme of "institutional violence" in an attempt to provide a more accurate context within which to understand the confrontational and often violent strategies used by the ANC after 1978. This stopped short of developing into a "just war" theory because the Sash maintained its abhorrence of political violence of any kind. The organisation responded to MK attacks by arguing that the NP government should take responsibility for driving a section of the South African population to violence. Members were thus sympathetic towards the case of Solomon Mahlangu, a MK fighter who was sentenced to death for terrorist activities. As the Transvaal Regional Report noted in early 1980:

Moved by a Post leader which pointed out that Solomon Mahlangu would not have taken up arms if society had not forced him to do so, we decided to attend an all-night vigil in St. Alban's Cathedral, Pretoria on the

night before he was hanged.<sup>26</sup>

When the SADF began cross-border raids directed at ANC bases in 1980, the Sash strongly resisted the argument that the ANC was a legitimate military target. The 1981 National Conference adopted a statement which warned:

South Africans must remember that their fellow South Africans have been driven to armed struggle by the institutionalised violence of apartheid. The only way to end violence is to establish justice and the rule of law.<sup>27</sup>

Following up on the Conference resolution, the Sash appealed to the government to recognise SWAPO and the ANC and to allow them to operate as legitimate political organisations.

The Sash's attitude towards the SADF underwent rapid revision between 1978 and 1983, due in part to the phenomenon of cross-border raids and South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia. While many Sash members were still prepared in 1978 to give the SADF recognition as the legitimate defender of South Africa against external aggression, by 1983 most saw it as little more than an agent of the NP government. By this time many Sash members were involved with groups working for a system of alternate military service for conscientious objectors. Some also felt deeply about the issue of South Africa's growing military aggression against neighbouring states because they had sons who were eligible for military service, at least one of whom was killed in action with the SADF during this period.

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<sup>26</sup>"Regional Reports" *Sash* Vol.22 no.1 May, 1980 p.17-18

<sup>27</sup>A862/D31 Minutes, National Conference 1981, Sash Archives.

At the Sash's 1983 National Conference, delegates considered the upcoming Defence Amendment Bill, which severely limited the opportunities for conscientious objection. Sheena Duncan had recently visited Namibia with the Anglican Justice and Reconciliation Committee and she brought to the general debate vivid accounts of the disruption and suffering caused by South Africa's illegal occupation of Ovamboland. Delegates decided that the legitimacy of the SADF as a defender of the South African people was seriously in question and concluded that conscription was a means whereby a partial and instrumental Defence Force was maintained by the NP government. Delegates thus agreed:

If a conscripted army is necessary it will be because of the political failure to respond to the desires of the citizens, and that army will be engaged in a civil war which is good cause for many to refuse military service.<sup>28</sup>

The statement went on to call for the complete abolition of conscription. It denied the existence of a "total onslaught" and opposed the thesis of "total strategy", which it argued amounted to "the military defence of a minority government."

This resolution seemed to the Sash an appropriate response, not only to the harsh terms of the Defence Force Amendment Act, but to the increasing mobilisation of the SADF in the interests of a government that was not recognised by the vast majority of South Africans. Its call to end conscription inspired many people both within and outside of the Sash. What became known as the "Black Sash call" was raised at the National Conference of Conscientious Objectors Support Groups in Durban in July 1983, where it was

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<sup>28</sup>AB62/D33 Minutes, National Conference 1983, Sash Archives.

accepted as the basis for a broad campaign. This led to the formation of the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), which first emerged in the Western Cape in late 1983.<sup>29</sup>

By early 1984 the ECC was well on its way to achieving national prominence, its main objective being to create a coherent voice of opposition to the military within the white community. The "Black Sash call" proved to be a powerful mobilizing agent because it provided, at the right time, a viable focus for growing resistance to the militarisation of South African society, and the basis for a campaign whose strategies were particularly congruent with its aims. Furthermore, there was no legal impediment to opposing conscription, and this issue was relevant to a far larger section of the population than that of conscientious objection.

By the time Sash delegates gathered for the 1984 National Conference, the organisation stood firmly in opposition to all aspects of the militarisation of South African society. Delegates approved an uncompromising statement which affirmed:

We object to the loss of civil liberty occasioned by the lie of the "Total Onslaught", which is of the Government's own making. This is propaganda of the most dishonest, insidious and dangerous kind. It is deliberately creating a war psychosis throughout the region and is leading to a disastrous civil war.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>A862/D34 Runciman, B. "The Development and Formation of the End Conscription Campaign (Western Cape)", National Conference 1984, Sash Archives.

<sup>30</sup>A862/D34 Minutes, National Conference 1984, Sash Archives

## THE RIGHTS OF URBAN AFRICANS:

### THE RIEKERT COMMISSION:

The most important aspect of the Black Sash's anti-apartheid activities after 1978 was its exposure of the repressive dimensions of the Botha government's "reform" strategies. In particular, the Sash took the lead in developing a critique of the legislation on urban Africans that emerged after 1978. This was in many respects a result of experience and expertise gained by the organisation through its years of advice office work.

When the Reports of both the Wiehahn and Riekert Commissions were tabled in the 1979 Parliamentary session, they were welcomed by liberal commentators and the English press as the harbingers of much-needed change and the liberalisation of apartheid. Many Sash members also responded positively to the Reports, feeling that they went some way towards granting rights that the organisation had always demanded for urban Africans. However, the official Sash response was dictated by its Headquarters, which in turn was strongly influenced by the Johannesburg Advice Office and its Director, Sheena Duncan.

Throughout the 1970s the regional advice offices, particularly in Cape Town and Johannesburg, had become very influential in determining the Sash's response to successive versions of influx control legislation. By 1978 the Sash was firmly convinced that influx control was a means of excluding African workers from the fruits of their labours, and that the homelands had been constructed as no more than dumping-grounds for the unemployed

and unemployable. It was from this standpoint that the Sash confronted the Riekert Report and the revised influx control legislation that emerged after 1979. Sheena Duncan, by virtue of her proven expertise in the field, her Directorship of the Johannesburg Advice Office, and her political prominence in the Sash, took the lead in responding to government "reforms" of influx control. Duncan had greeted talk of "reform" in 1978 with extreme skepticism, noting on a number of occasions in public addresses and in print that she expected no deviation from pre-1976 policy on the part of the government.<sup>31</sup> This well-developed cynicism influenced the tenor of the Sash's initial response to Botha's legislative "reforms", which might otherwise have been more optimistic and receptive.<sup>32</sup>

Soon after the release of the Riekert Report, Duncan published a critique in Sash magazine which elicited widespread comment and discussion in opposition circles at the time. She argued that the apparently positive changes in the laws governing urban Africans, which allowed for greater mobility and freedom to seek employment, actually benefited at most only one and a half million people out of an existing African urban population of four and a half million, and that even these privileged few would be subject to controls on the basis of available work and accommodation.<sup>33</sup> Those not affected by these reforms (the unemployed or those who

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<sup>31</sup> Inter alia. Speech to the N. Transvaal Region of the SAIRR, Race Relations News Vol.40 no.7 July, 1978 pp.2-3 and "A Depressing Picture: An account of the Freiberg Conference" Reality Vol.10 no.5 September, 1978 pp.8-10

<sup>32</sup>HQ Circular no.9/1979, 22/5/1979 Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

<sup>33</sup>Duncan,S. "Riekert Commission Report" Sash Vol.21 no.2 August, 1979 p.6

did not hold Section 10 rights) would be subject to more stringent pass laws and would find existing opportunities for illegal employment closed. Commenting that the new legislation would result in the marginalisation of the bulk of the African working class, Duncan warned:

No country can jettison three quarters of its population and survive.<sup>34</sup>

The first vindication of this pessimistic attitude came in June 1979 when Parliament amended Section 10 of the Black (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act, to increase the fine payable by an employer who employed an African illegally by 500 percent to a maximum of R500. This drastic measure caused widespread panic among employers and hundreds of summary dismissals. The ensuing chaos prompted the government to announce on 13th July 1979 that it was granting a "moratorium" on illegally employed Africans, thereby giving employers until the 31st October to register them. The Sash's Cape-Town and Johannesburg advice offices were flooded with workers desperate to regularise their position or wanting to fight dismissal. This resulted in the number of cases at the Johannesburg office doubling between June and October 1979 as compared to the same period the previous year.<sup>35</sup>

Concern over the implications of this fine prompted the Johannesburg Advice Office to issue an "Emergency Report" in November 1979, which attempted to give an indication of the scale of human suffering that the Sash believed would be a consequence

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p.7

<sup>35</sup> "The Inside Story: The Advice Offices Report" *Sash* Vol.22 no.2 August, 1980 p.10



of the new strategies of influx control.<sup>36</sup> The Sash believed that the fine signalled the beginning of attempts to freeze African urbanisation. It claimed that the government's intention was not to control influx, but rather to eliminate it. The details of the cases dealt with in the advice offices left the Sash in no doubt as to the scale of the human disaster which would follow such a policy. Thus the Emergency Report noted:

Over and over again during the last few weeks men and women have said to us: "But my children have no food" "My children are hungry" "What will my children eat?"<sup>37</sup>

The Sash's Emergency Report attracted considerable attention and was widely published in newspapers and magazines, including the exiled ANC journal Sachaba.

#### CRITIQUE OF THE "KOORNHOF BILLS"

The Sash's critique of the report of the Riekert Commission prepared it to oppose government legislation that emerged from the report's recommendations. On 31st October 1980, Dr. Koornhof introduced three draft influx control Bills which he claimed were the beginning of the promised liberalisation of apartheid. Sheena Duncan, by then an established analyst of influx control legislation, was commissioned by the Rand Daily Mail to write a critique of the Bills. The subsequent article rejected the Bills outright and elaborated on the Sash's position on the Riekert Commission by arguing that, far from having a liberalising effect, they would

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<sup>36</sup>"The Fuse Burns Shorter: Emergency Report-Johannesburg Advice Office" Sash Vol.21 no.4 February, 1980 pp5-7

<sup>37</sup>Race Relations News Vol.42 no.1 January, 1980 p.3

increase the controls on most urban Africans. The article was printed in full and elicited editorial comment and requests from other newspapers for similar analyses.<sup>38</sup> Commenting on the Bills in the Sunday Tribune, Sheena Duncan claimed:

The Bills create walls around the cities trapping people in the homelands. The situation that faces them in these homelands amounts to genocide.<sup>39</sup>

Duncan's critique helped ferment a negative reaction to the Bills which became so widespread that they were withdrawn for redrafting. In 1982, the most benign of the three was reintroduced and passed without significant resistance as the Black Local Authorities Act.

In the closing days of the 1982 session, a revised version of another of the Bills was introduced and referred to a Select Committee. Called the Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill, it contained a new system of influx control which completely repealed the Black (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act. According to the Bill, those Africans with Section 10 qualifications or holding 99-year leasehold, and their descendants, would be granted Permanent Urban Residence (PUR) status. Those not eligible for PUR status would be subject to draconian restrictions, such as not being allowed in an urban area between 10pm and 5am without a permit.<sup>40</sup> The Sash responded to the Orderly Movement Bill with dismay and anger. Sheena Duncan, in a brief to regions shortly after the Bill made its appearance noted:

It is an horrific bit of legislation which re-inforces the exclusion of the majority of Black people from

<sup>38</sup> BC 668 D HQ Circular no.12/1980, 25/11/1980, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Sunday Tribune 25/7/1982

<sup>40</sup> Black Sash, You and the Rikhotso Case Johannesburg: Black Sash, 1983.

participation in our common society.<sup>41</sup>

Duncan immediately set about orchestrating a campaign against the Bill. This had three dimensions; the submission of a memorandum to the Select Committee on the Constitution which was reviewing the legislation, informing the public and particularly employers as to the implications of the Bill, and the education of Africans as to their situation under the new legislation. Numerous articles were written for the press and other organisations as well as for translation into African languages and for circulation to employers. Duncan not only interpreted the Bill for the Sash, but on behalf of other organisations as well. The Sash estimated that in time the Bill would diminish the black urban population by up to 50 percent<sup>42</sup> and in its memorandum to the Select Committee the organisation stated:

The Bill fails entirely to address itself to the needs of our society and will therefore inevitably lead to an escalation of conflict. It should be withdrawn.<sup>43</sup>

The Sash's early pessimism regarding the so-called "reform" of influx control had been more than vindicated by 1984. Its conviction that the South African government had no right to exclude almost two-thirds of the country's population from access to the opportunities and rewards of the nation's economy, provided the Sash with the basis from which to develop an ongoing critique of these policies.

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<sup>41</sup>BC 668 D HQ Circular no.6/1982, 29/6/1982, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>42</sup>Editorial *Sash* Vol.25 no.3 November, 1982 p.1

<sup>43</sup>"National Headquarters Report" *Sash* Vol.26 no.1 May, 1983 p.24

### THE KOMANI AND RIKHOTO CASES:

After 1978, the Sash began to use the courts to challenge evolving influx control legislation. This was primarily a consequence of the legal focus of the advice offices and the Sash's willingness to make use of the courts to challenge the implementation of government policy. In some cases precedents were set which had a significant effect on the status of hundreds of urban Africans. However, the Sash soon found that Administration Board officials were very resistant to applying changes in legislation that had been secured through the courts and that the government had little compunction in overriding court decisions.

In 1980, Cape Western Region decided to lodge an Appellate Division appeal on behalf of an advice office client, Mrs. Noncoba Komani. The appellant contested an Administration Board ruling that she did not have the right under Section 10(1)(c) of the Black (Bantu Areas) Consolidation Act to live with her qualified husband in Cape Town, because neither held a lodger's or residential permit.<sup>44</sup> This was an expensive project for Cape Western because, despite securing pro amico defence for Mrs. Komani, the region had to deposit R2,500 with the Appellate Board in order to lodge the appeal. Nevertheless the Regional Council, knowing that the housing shortage was being used as a means of influx control, decided that "it was too important a case to let fall at the last hurdle".<sup>45</sup> The Cape Division of the Appeal Court ruled that Mrs. Komani was entitled to live with her husband by virtue of the

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<sup>44</sup>Duncan, S. "Johannesburg Advice Office Report" *Sash* Vol.24 no.3 November, 1981 p19

<sup>45</sup>"Regional Roundup" *Sash* Vol.21 no.1 May, 1979 p.28

provisions of Section 10(1)(c) of the Black (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act.<sup>46</sup>

This was a great victory for the Sash. It meant that the wives and dependants of men who had won rights to urban residence, could not be denied their Section 10(1)(c) rights to live with these men because of the shortage of housing. The Komani ruling automatically gave hundreds of families the right to permanent urban residence. The Minister of Cooperation and Development, Dr. Piet Koornhof, responded by warning that it "would be completely wrong" to draw a generalised conclusion from the case, but his Department eventually accepted the ruling as binding.<sup>47</sup> Despite this, the advice offices continually found that the ruling was ignored by officials and that people had to fight their cases one by one through torturous bureaucratic channels, and were usually only granted their rights when attorneys threatened Supreme Court action. This behavior prompted Mr. Justice Goldstone to issue a directive to Dr. Koornhof and WRAB in July 1981, conveying the Supreme Court's "extreme displeasure" at official disregard for the Komani ruling.<sup>48</sup>

On 26th August 1983, an amendment to Section 10 was promulgated which removed the rights of women and children of qualified men established by the Komani judgment. It prevented migrant workers from establishing their families in urban areas

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<sup>46</sup>Komani v Bantu Administration Board, Peninsula Area The South African Law Reports 1980(4) Cape Town: Juta, 1980 pp448-473

<sup>47</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1980 Johannesburg: SAIRR 1981 p.305

<sup>48</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1981 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1982 p.237

after they had earned Section 10(1)(b) rights, unless they held 33-year leasehold or were registered tenants of a house. The serious housing shortage made these rights very difficult to win. The Sash fought against this amendment, asking MP Helen Suzman to intervene at the Committee stage of the Bill to appeal for lodgers' permits to be included in the accommodation limitations.<sup>49</sup> However, these efforts were to no avail.

A more significant court victory by the Sash against influx control was the 1983 Rikhotso judgment. According to the 1968 Labour Bureau Regulations, migrant labourers were only allowed to take out one-year contracts. This meant that employers were obliged to discharge a recruited worker at the end of each year, whereupon he had to travel to his homeland and attest to a new contract if he wanted to return to his job. The Sash had consistently opposed this ruling because the obligatory break in contract was cited by Board officials as the reason why workers could never earn Section 10 rights, even if they were employed by the same firm for ten years or more. The iniquity of this ruling was felt particularly strongly by the Johannesburg Advice Office in 1980 when over 10,000 municipal workers (mainly migrants) in the city went on strike. Most were summarily dismissed and endorsed back to their homelands irrespective of the length of their employment. Many came to the Sash for help and the advice office became more and more convinced that:

This matter needs to be tested in the Courts and  
literally hundreds of people on our files are waiting

<sup>49</sup>BC 668 D HQ Circular no.10/1983(incorrectly numbered as: 11/1983) 8/8/1983, Cape Western Archives.

for it to be so tested.<sup>50</sup>

Shortly after the municipal worker's strike, Mr. Mehloio Tom Rikhoto, who came from Gazankulu and had worked for the same East Rand company for over ten years, came to the Johannesburg Advice Office. He claimed that, despite his ten years of unbroken employment, the East Rand Administration Board had refused to give him a Section 10(1)(b) endorsement entitling him to urban residence rights. The Sash obtained legal representation for Mr. Rikhoto, whose case was taken to the Supreme Court, which judged in his favour. The ruling did not come into effect immediately because ERAB took the case to the Appeal Court, which finally confirmed the Supreme Court's decision on 30th May 1983.<sup>51</sup> As a result of this judgment, about 143,000 migrant workers immediately qualified to live permanently in the urban areas and were entitled to bring their families to live with them in terms of Section 10(1)(c) of the Act. Because Section 10(1)(b) rights under the new "reformed" legislation also allowed workers to apply for family accommodation, to work without registration, and to move from one town to another, Rikhoto breached the rural-urban divide and challenged the government's attempts to isolate a privileged group of African urban residents.

On 21st June 1983, Dr. Koornhof announced that the government would not legislate to annul the Rikhoto judgment but would interpret it very narrowly, meaning that only about 5,000 out of

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<sup>50</sup>Duncan, S. "Johannesburg Advice Office Report" Sash Vol.24 no.3 November, 1981 p.19

<sup>51</sup>East Rand Administration Board v Rikhoto The South African Law Reports 1983(3) Cape Town: Juta, 1983 pp595-610

the 143,000 eligible workers would benefit.<sup>52</sup> Shortly after this, the Sash advice offices began receiving reports that those submitting for Section 10 rights in terms of the judgment were being subject to a bureaucratic process which lasted months. In addition, workers who had taken unpaid leave from their jobs at any time were being refused Section 10, as were those from independent homelands unless they had completed their ten years of employment before independence.

In an attempt to counter this bureaucratic stonewalling of the Rikhotso judgment, the Sash brought out a pocket-sized handbook late in 1983 called You and the Rikhotso Case. This was directed primarily at urban Africans and explained the exact nature of the rights won by the judgment. It also outlined various techniques of bureaucratic obstructionism used by the Administration Boards and explained that these were illegal.<sup>53</sup> The booklet proved extremely popular and over 50,000 copies were distributed nationwide. The government's cynical disregard for the judgments of the courts frustrated the Sash's efforts to fight against influx control and led Sheena Duncan to conclude in her Presidential Address to the 1983 National Conference:

We have now been forced to realise that in this whole area of our work it is impossible for people to enforce their legal rights and that Court judgments will simply be ignored if they are not in line with Government policy.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Duncan, S. "The Rikhotso Scandal" Sash Vol.26 no.3 November, 1983 p.22

<sup>53</sup>Black Sash, You and the Rikhotso Case op. cit.

<sup>54</sup>Duncan, S. "Presidential Address" Sash Vol.26 no.1 May, 1983 p.5



### LABOUR, CAPITAL AND REFORM:

The concern that the Sash had developed for worker's rights in the 1970s continued after 1978. The organisation welcomed the relaxation of restrictions on African trade union activity which followed the Wiehahn Report and developed a supportive relationship with most of the emerging new trade union federations. Despite the fact that Sash advice offices began encouraging workers to take their legal difficulties to the various legal aid centers run by the unions themselves, the Sash still dealt with a significant number of labour-related problems. It was this experience which dictated the nature of the organisation's campaigns on behalf of workers' rights after 1978.

The Sash's labour-related campaigns during this period focused on three main issues which, because of their legalistic nature, had come to light through advice office activity. These were workmen's compensation, unemployment insurance benefit and the contractual conditions of migrant workers. The Durban Advice Office, which functioned under the partial patronage of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), took the lead in bringing instances of injustice in the labour field to the attention of the Sash as a whole.

By late 1978, the Durban Advice Office was registering a distinct change in the tenor of the labour difficulties it was encountering. Since 1976, most of its case-load had been made up of people wanting to obtain work-seekers' permits or registration as attested contract workers. However, as the economic situation

worsened and influx control was tightened, the office began to deal with more and more cases of dismissal, retrenchment and exploitation. Office workers began to recognise the extreme vulnerability of workers who were shackled by apartheid legislation in times of economic recession. Even for Africans with Section 10 qualifications, dismissal meant the possible loss of a home and, in line with the new administrative regulations, subsequent loss of urban residence rights.

The vulnerability of African workers under the migrant labour system, meant that they were liable to increasingly be exploited by employers. As the Durban Advice Office noted in its Annual Report in early 1979:

Because of the gross unemployment situation exploitation of black workers, especially by many smaller firms, is rife. Contract workers are desperate to hold on to their jobs and so will accept any conditions in order to do so.<sup>55</sup>

Similar problems were reported from advice offices in the Transvaal, Natal Midlands and the Cape, with the Pretoria office noting:

As regards the labour situation, we come across unconcern and arrogance on the part of employers.<sup>56</sup>

The Sash also discovered that collusion between state departments and business was rife, with Natal Coastal complaining that not only did management have too much power but:

The Department of Manpower Utilization, it would seem, bends over backwards to protect the employers.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> "Around the Advice Offices" *Sash* Vol.21 no.2 August, 1979 p.23

<sup>56</sup> "The Inside Story: Advice Offices Report" *Sash* Vol.22 no.2 August, 1980 p.8

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p.5

The Sash decided to try to lobby the government to try to address specific issues that related directly to advice office findings regarding labour exploitation. Thus the 1979 National Conference requested Headquarters to approach the relevant government authorities in an effort to make it legally binding on employers to issue all migrant workers with copies of their contracts.<sup>58/</sup> This would mean that at least some legal basis would exist for this highly exploited group to challenge unfair dismissals and poor working conditions. Headquarters also appealed to the government to make it legally binding for employers to keep an up to date record of their employees' names and addresses so that they could receive unemployment insurance benefits or workmen's compensation. Although the National President's dealings with officials on these matters were relatively amicable, the Sash was not able to persuade the government to modify legislation.

Evidence that employers exploited workers' vulnerabilities that were caused by apartheid legislation, made the Sash very skeptical of the motives of capitalist interests in advocating "change" after 1978. Thus when P.W. Botha made overtures to capital in 1979, culminating in the Carlton Conference of November of that year, the Sash had little faith that capital would be a liberalising force unless this served its own interests. Although hoping that the rationality of the market would prevail over the prejudices of ethnicity the Sash, particularly members like Sheena Duncan, feared that an unholy alliance was being forged.<sup>59</sup> The Emergency

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<sup>58</sup>A862/D29 Minutes, National Conference 1979, Sash Archives.

<sup>59</sup>Star 10/12/1981

Report brought out by Transvaal Region in November 1979 indicated the Sash's developing perspective when it noted:

The present visible alliance between the Government and big business in the "total strategy"....can only result in the black/white political conflict becoming irrevocably identified with the Marxist/Capitalist economic conflict....Those who believe that the benefits of capitalism and free enterprise can be spread through the whole population and can bring about justice must prove it and must do so now. Tomorrow will be too late.<sup>60</sup>

### POVERTY AND HOMELAND CONSOLIDATION:

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE:

Throughout the "reform" period, the Sash argued that the progressive consolidation of the homelands was essentially a means of reinforcing draconian influx control legislation and of robbing all Africans of their South African citizenship and the rights attendant upon that citizenship. After 1978, the modification of influx control legislation to create a barrier between urban Africans and their rurally-based counterparts, combined with a severe economic recession to lead to a serious deterioration of conditions in the homelands. The Sash was one of the first organisations to expose the fact that the creation of an urban African elite would permanently consign millions of people to the homelands, which had virtually no subsistence base.

The Sash was well aware from its long experience of dealing with the legal problems encountered by urban Africans, that flaws in the existing influx control legislation had enabled thousands to glean a

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<sup>60</sup>The Fuse Burns Shorter: Emergency Report-Johannesburg Advice Office" Sash  
Vol.21 no.4 February, 1980 p7

living illegally from the urban areas and thereby support dependants in the impoverished homelands. In its Emergency Report of November 1979, the Sash illustrated just how important this illegal employment was by referring to research conducted by Dr. Jan Lange of UNISA, which had appeared in the Financial Mail on 12th October 1979. Dr. Lange had shown that there would be a 170 per cent improvement in living standards for someone from the homeland of Lehowa, who worked six months in Johannesburg and spent six months in prison, and a 285 per cent improvement for a person from Bophuthatswana who worked for only three months in Pretoria and spent nine months in prison.<sup>61</sup>

The Sash concluded that rural poverty was likely to intensify as a direct result of the "reformed" influx control legislation. The organisation realised that it could use evidence of increased rural poverty to expose the repressive nature of the "reform" promised by government. Furthermore, if the Sash could establish a link between government policy and destitution in the homelands it would also serve the larger purpose of helping to expose the homelands scheme as primarily coercive and exploitative. The organisation also hoped to use this evidence to oppose government plans for homeland "consolidation", by showing that this was a means whereby the state from could absolve itself from responsibility for millions of South Africans.

The Sash initially set about publishing reports on conditions in the homelands in an effort to convey the scale of rural poverty. The

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<sup>61</sup>ibid. pp5-7

relationship between rural poverty, influx control and homeland consolidation was high on the agenda at the Sash's 1980 National Conference. In a hard-hitting fact paper delivered to Conference, Judith Hawarden from Transvaal Region noted that in 1980 50,000 children were expected to die of malnutrition in the rural areas, while a further 100,000 children's lives were at risk.<sup>62</sup> The Sash subsequently passed a resolution opposing removals and consolidation policies. The organisation also called for the immediate institution of a state-run poor-relief programme as the precursor to a national welfare system which would include the "independent" homelands. This was necessary, the Sash claimed, to relieve the desperate poverty caused by the implementation of apartheid policies.<sup>63</sup> This call for poor-relief and the institution of a welfare state was intentionally provocative and designed to highlight the extent to which the government was renegeing on its responsibilities towards Africans.

#### BLACK PENSIONS:

Despite the sincerity of its opposition, the Sash had difficulty orchestrating an effective campaign against poverty in the homelands. Those who were suffering were largely unpoliticised and often isolated, and white South Africans seemed virtually immune to reports of starvation and disease in the rural areas. By 1980 however, an issue was emerging through the advice offices which provided the Sash with a potential vehicle for action. It was the issue of African pensions, which had occupied the offices on a relatively modest scale for years, but which had become

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<sup>62</sup>Hawarden, J. "Rural Poverty" *Sash* Vol.24 no.1 May, 1981 p.18

<sup>63</sup>A862/D30 Minutes, National Conference 1980, Sash Archives.

significantly more problematic following the intensification of influx control and moves towards homeland consolidation and independence. As rural Labour Bureaux stopped recruitment and as homeland poverty increased, pensions became an increasingly vital source of revenue, not only for the elderly, but also for their families. However, from as early as 1979 the Sash had recognised that, not only was the state negligent in its administration of African pensions, but it was using homeland independence as a means of evading even this small responsibility.

Natal Coastal Region was largely responsible for highlighting the issue of African pensions. This was partly because the proximity of sections of KwaZulu to the Durban metropolitan area meant that more complaints reached the advice office from homeland areas. This proved to be particularly important after the late 1970s, when the Department of Cooperation and Development tried to shift the administrative control of thousands of African pensions onto the KwaZulu government at Ulundi, precipitating bureaucratic chaos. Official confusion was compounded by the fact that KwaZulu lacked the funds to maintain African pensions in the homeland.

At the 1979 Black Sash National Conference, Natal Coastal member Mary Grice had presented a fact paper which exposed the maladministration of pensions by the KwaZulu government.<sup>64</sup> Natal Coastal also revealed that even in rural areas still under the jurisdiction of Pretoria, pensions were very poorly administered

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<sup>64</sup>Grice, M. "Pensions in KwaZulu: The Environs of Hillcrest and Botha's Hill" *Sash* /ol.21 no.1 May, 1979 p14

and applicants often had to prove up to an 60 percent disability before they were paid out. Other regions, notably Johannesburg and Albany, also reported considerable official resistance on the part of the Department of Cooperation and Development to paying out pensions. Advice offices discovered inexplicable delays of up to a year in paying out, no arrears if pensions were late, and a tendency for officials to cancel disability pensions at random and demand the resubmission of a medical certificate.<sup>65</sup> This information prompted the 1980 National Conference to resolve to:

draw the attention of the Minister of Co-operation and Development to the scandalous inequities in the payment of pensions and grants to African people, and to ask him to take immediate steps to ensure that the statutory rights of the aged and disabled people is(sic) honoured, both in the common area and in the so-called "homelands".<sup>66</sup>

Although the Sash made an initial effort to challenge the right of the government to transfer the responsibility for pensions onto homeland governments in the courts, it soon discovered that its case was not legally sound. Thereafter, there seemed little that Headquarters could do and it fell to the regions to respond locally to problems with pensions as they arose in particular areas. Primarily because the regions dealt with pension problems on a far more immediate level, they often had modest successes. This contrasted with Headquarters which, in the face of white apathy and the political vulnerability of African pensioners, could do little more than make generalised and ineffectual statements condemning government actions.

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<sup>65</sup>"Around the Advice Offices" *Sash* Vol.21 no.2 August, 1979 pp19-28

<sup>66</sup>A262/D30 Minutes, National Conference 1980, Sash Archives.



Natal Coastal Region took the lead in developing a local campaign for the rights of pensioners. It responded to reports of gross inefficiency and bureaucratic bullying at government pay-out points by holding a series of workshops to train members and concerned friends to monitor pay-outs. It then tried to have representatives attend the pay-outs about which it received complaints, and in many cases was able to give advice to pensioners and to decrease the incidence of bureaucratic irregularities. The region used evidence from these monitoring exercises as well as from its advice office as the basis of frequent complaints to the Department of Cooperation and Development about lax administration and the application of extremely severe means tests.

Natal Coastal also found the courts useful in its campaign against official negligence regarding pensions. It soon discovered that pensions were usually paid when applications were brought in the Supreme Court against the Department of Cooperation and Development. However, this strategy was unable to prompt revision of policy, as the advice office noted:

It is clear that legal action succeeds where all else fails. However, it is for each individual that it succeeds and the system remains unmoved.<sup>67</sup>

The broad campaign against rural poverty in the homelands and the more specific battles on behalf of pensioners conducted by the Sash during this period, fell victim to the enormity of the policy of separate development. Despite repeated national resolutions and

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<sup>67</sup>Natal Coastal Advice Office Report *Sash* Vol.24 no.3 November, 1981 p.21

appeals to the government, the Sash knew that its national opposition to rural poverty and the homelands was destined to be no more than token. In the more specific case of pensions, local victories hardly dented the established policy.

#### HOMELAND CONSOLIDATION AND REMOVALS:

Integral to the homeland consolidation strategy that was central to Botha's "new dispensation" was the removal of hundreds of "black spots". Some of these were townships like Duncan Village in East London, which clung to the peripheries of the urban areas, but many were established and flourishing rural communities. The Sash had a long history of opposing rural removals as part of its general opposition to the coercive implementation of the homelands scheme. After a lull in the 1970s the Sash threw itself into its campaign against removals with renewed vigor. This was stimulated by the stepping up of consolidation plans and removals after 1977 in an attempt to identify every African South African with a homeland.

Sash members like Sheona Duncan, who had begun battling towards the end of the 1970s to dampen the "reform euphoria" brought about by the government's promises of a liberalisation of apartheid, seized upon the consolidation issue as evidence of the government's commitment to ensure that there would be, in Minister Connie Mulder's words, "no Black South Africans". The Sash also hoped that evidence of human suffering occasioned by removals and consolidation would serve as proof of its contention that Africans would be worse off under the government's "new

dispensation".

Sash campaigns against removals after 1978 were characterised by their local focus. This was primarily because after 1978, many communities under threat of removal mobilised to oppose the government. The Sash, aware of the futility of appealing to broad white political sentiment on the issue of removals, enthusiastically supported this grassroots resistance. Strategically, this led to a more immediate focus of activities, and marked an important transition for the Sash towards making its resources available for use by others.

By mid-1980, Transvaal Region was hearing rumours from its advice office clients, the SACC, SAIR and other organisations, of massive unseen removals taking place in "no-go" areas in the Northern Transvaal.<sup>68</sup> Then came the removal of the Makgata people from their land in the Northern Transvaal to Kromhoek in Lebowa, followed by threats that their neighbours, the Batlokwa, would be next.<sup>69</sup> The Transvaal Region decided to mobilise in defence of the Batlokwa. Members sent telegrams to the Prime Minister's Economic Sub-committee asking them to meet the chiefs of the Batlokwa tribe. Making use of an aeroplane loaned them by the Anglo-American Corporation, Sash representatives took a member of the Committee, an MP, representatives of the press and the Batlokwa's lawyer to the Northern Transvaal. The visit had the desired effect, as the Sash reported:

Everyone was shaken and moved. The contrast

<sup>68</sup>"Transvaal Regional Report" Sash Vol.22 no.1 May, 1980 p.16

<sup>69</sup>Platzky, L. and Walker, C. The Surplus People: Forced Removals in South Africa Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985 pp.238-40

between the exquisite villages of the Batiokwa and the devastation of the Makgato village was dramatic.<sup>70</sup>

The Sash also encouraged the local and foreign press to visit the area and articles subsequently appeared worldwide, ensuring that the public was not ignorant of removals.

This intervention signalled the beginning of close involvement of Transvaal Region with removals. The issue was high on the agenda for the Sash's 1980 National Conference, where delegates agreed that removals had to be seen as an integral part of the government's "new dispensation". The Conference called on the government to stop the resettlement of people and resolved to document all removals in order to expose their place in the "total strategy" and to support all people and communities resisting removal.<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, all regions began investigations of local removals and the November 1980 edition of Sash was devoted almost entirely to resettlement. By the time delegates gathered for the 1981 National Conference, the regions had collected a wealth of information about removals and resettlement schemes nationwide and Transvaal Region had also set up a Resettlement Sub-Committee.

By early 1981, Sash research into removals and its initial contacts with communities involved, had begun to translate into active opposition. The Sash soon recognised that it faced a more sophisticated government strategy than before, when families had been routinely loaded onto trucks, often at gunpoint, and dumped in

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<sup>70</sup>"Regional Reports" Sash Vol.22 no.1 May, 1980 p.16

<sup>71</sup>A862/D30 Minutes, National Conference 1980, Sash Archives.

barren resettlement areas. On a number of occasions in 1980, P.W. Botha had stated that the era of forced removals in South Africa was over and that people scheduled to be resettled would be consulted and only moved with their consent. The Sash refused to accept that this heralded an end to coercion, arguing instead that a period of more subtle and subversive strategies was beginning.

In its early analysis of removals, the Sash was helped considerably by members who had already been active in opposing removals for some time. These included Laurene Platzky, who was associated with the Rural Action Project of SALDRU at the University of Cape Town, and Cheryl Walker, who was the coordinator of the AFRA in Pietermaritzburg. In addition, the 1983 publication of the five volume Report of the Surplus Peoples Project (SPP), to which Sash members had contributed, enriched the organisation's understanding of the scale and nature of removals.

The Sash subsequently became involved in various ways with a number of rural communities threatened with removal, such as the Fingoes in the Humansdorp area of the Cape, the communities of Mothopiestad, Boons and Kliptown in the Northern Transvaal, Mgwali in the Eastern Cape, Huhudi in the Northern Cape and Daggakraal in the Eastern Transvaal. Perhaps the most significant of all the local campaigns fought were those opposing removals at Magopa in the Western Transvaal and Driefontein in the Eastern Transvaal near Piet Retief.

At Magopa, the Sash witnessed deliberate government attempts to

ferment division in the tribe by the co-option of a faction led by a corrupt and deposed headman.<sup>72</sup> The Department of Cooperation and Development then subjected those who had resisted removal to great hardship through a variety of measures, including the withdrawal of transport services. Finally, the community was issued with an order from the State President to move in terms of Section 5 of the Black Administration Act of 1927. The Sash, responding to an appeal from the community, was successful in marshalling groups to help them resist this order and in fermenting public opinion both in South Africa and abroad against the removal. However, in mid-February 1984, once the clamor of publicity had died down, the government forcibly moved the community to the settlement at Pachsdraai.<sup>73</sup>

At Driefontein, the government could not successfully divide the community, which united under the charismatic leadership of Saul Mkhize to oppose removal to settlements in KwaZulu and KaNgwane.<sup>74</sup> In 1982, the Sash became involved in helping the community resist government pressures, such as failing to pay out pensions or issue work permits. On 2nd April 1983, while trying to mediate between the police and a crowd at Driefontein, Saul Mkhize was shot dead by a young white constable.<sup>75</sup> The Sash immediately went to Driefontein to collect statements and affidavits to counter the police version of the shooting. The Sash also sent telegrams to government Ministers, alerted local and

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<sup>72</sup>TRAC The Myth of Voluntary Removals, Johannesburg: Black Sash, (undated 1984?)pp.2-3

<sup>73</sup>Ibid. p8

<sup>74</sup>Wentzel,J. "Driefontein" Sash Vol.25 no.4 February, 1983 pp7-9

<sup>75</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1983 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1984 p.305

foreign press and held protest stands.<sup>76</sup> This swift response contributed to the constable being charged with murder, although he was subsequently acquitted.

Experiences like those at Driefontein and Magopa led Transvaal Region to initiate a week-long removals protest in June 1983, which focused on the 70th anniversary of the 1913 Land Act. As the region described it, the motivation for the protest came from "the desperation of our younger members in the Transvaal", who were moved by their encounters with law-abiding communities which were threatened by the authority which should have protected them, and for which they had a strong traditional respect.<sup>77</sup> This protest was taken up by other regions, who organised stands and meetings and tried to publicise facts about removals.

By late 1983, the Sash had become so involved with removals that the Transvaal Region decided to establish a permanent removals committee with a paid staff, called the Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC). Although it operated largely independently of the Transvaal Region, TRAC worked within the framework of Black Sash aims and objectives. The Committee monitored removals and resettlement areas and kept the Sash in contact with rural communities which approached it for support. TRAC's first published report was a scathing critique of "voluntary" removals,

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<sup>76</sup>SC 668 D HQ Circular no. 3/1983, 11/4/1983, Cape Western Archives. AC62/Lcl Minutes, General Purposes Committee and Removals Sub-Committee 5/4/1983, Sash Archives.

<sup>77</sup>Editorial *Sash* Vol.26 no.2 August, 1983 p.1

which showed that the government consistently tried to divide communities, was quick to exploit tensions when they arose, and often offered bribes or cut off services to persuade communities to move.<sup>78</sup>

TRAC was to develop into a significant actor in subsequent campaigns against removals. Its broad aims confirmed new patterns in the Sash's approach to resisting oppression. While maintaining a watching brief and employing strategies involving publicity and the mobilisation of public opinion, TRAC work was premised on the belief in the overriding importance of enhancing community self-reliance and self-help. Although TRAC intervened directly in political conflicts over land, it was determined not to dictate the terms of resistance or the nature of demands to threatened communities. This effort to build a fruitful relationship with people acting in the cause of their own liberation became a characteristic of Sash activities in the 1980s.

### URBAN SQUATTER COMMUNITIES:

The squatter communities which had emerged on the urban peripheries in the early 1970s, continued to grow despite rigidly enforced influx control after 1978. By the end of the decade, half a million people were living in informal settlements in greater Inanda adjoining Durban, 300,000 in the Winterveld near Pretoria, 250,000 in the Edendale-Zwartkops area outside Pietermaritzburg, and 100,000 in the Crossroads area of Cape Town.<sup>79</sup> Usually

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<sup>78</sup>TRAC The Myth of Voluntary Removals op. cit.

<sup>79</sup>Giliomee, H. and Schlemmer, L. From Apartheid to Nation Building: Contemporary South African Debates Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1989 p.116



driven to the cities by poverty in the rural areas, the squatters lived in defiance of the government's influx control policies, particularly after 1978.

The Sash, as a result of its principled opposition to influx control and the homeland scheme, supported the squatters' claim to the right to live and work in the urban areas. However by 1980, the Sash also had to establish its position vis a vis the squatters' own political agendas. This was a more complex task and one which was to become fraught with difficulties after 1984. The Sash's activities in this area became very localised and area-specific as different regions tended to respond to the unique local patterns of repression and resistance that they encountered. As a result, the Sash never developed more than the most superficial strategic response to squatter issues at a national level.

For Cape Western Region, the period was dominated by two contradictory trends, namely the continued enforcement of the CLPP, and surprise government concessions to squatters on the Peninsula. After massive police raids on Crossroads squatter camp in September 1978, which left many badly beaten and one dead,<sup>80</sup> Minister Piet Koornhof began a series of negotiations with squatter leaders. These ended in April 1979, when he announced that residents of the Crossroads camp would be given residential and work rights in Cape Town and housed in a new township called New Crossroads.<sup>81</sup> This came as a surprise to the Cape Western Region, which by this time was accustomed to arranging for legal

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<sup>80</sup>Platzky, L. and Walker, C. *The Surplus People* op. cit. p.148

<sup>81</sup>*Race Relations News* Vol.41 no.5 May, 1979 p.1

defence for hundreds of Crossroads squatters arrested for being illegally in the area and taking affidavits following periodic demolitions and assaults by authorities.

The government's first step in the legalisation of the Crossroads community was to conduct a survey to establish the camp's bona fide residents, who would qualify for a moratorium allowing them to live legally in the area for some time. The Cape Western Region decided to advise people to cooperate fully with the Department of Cooperation and Development survey. Having gained the trust of the Crossroads community in the 1970s, the Sash found itself acting as an informal mediator between the government and the community. To allay fears of the government questionnaire, the Sash conducted its own survey, interviewing 3,000 families in two weeks and explaining the importance of the Department's questionnaire.<sup>82</sup> When the moratorium was subsequently extended, the Sash continued conducting surveys of the Crossroads residents well into 1981, in order to help them establish their rights to the coveted Section 10(1)(d) status.

However, the Koornhof moratorium soon fermented divisions within the Crossroads community. These included disagreements between those who felt that they should have asked for more from the Minister and those who were satisfied with the offer of New Crossroads. These divisions deepened within the camp to the extent that, in 1979, the Sash closed an advice office that it had been operating in Crossroads because it did not want to get

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<sup>82</sup>A962/D30 Minutes, National Conference 1980, Sash Archives.

involved in factional disputes.<sup>83</sup>

By late 1979, there had been violence between groups in Crossroads and a number of the camp's Executive Committee had been found guilty on charges of corruption.<sup>84</sup> Internecine conflict at Crossroads continued to mount, leading to another failed attempt by the Sash to establish an advice office there in early 1981. The Athlone Advice Office noted in its annual report in February of that year that the Sash "did not wish to become embroiled in the internal disagreements of the community".<sup>85</sup> However, in response to requests from residents, the Crossroads advice office reopened in April 1981.

The political factionalisation of Crossroads, which intensified as the coveted resources of homes and legal employment became available to the privileged, distressed the Sash. The organisation, in its campaign for official recognition of the camp, had gone to great lengths to convince whites and officialdom that Crossroads was a stable and flourishing community. Thus the Sash had announced following the massive September 1978 raid on the camp:

The Black Sash and other bodies have continually pointed out that Crossroads is a sane, decent, law-abiding community. It has a high reputation for orderliness and its own vigilante squad.<sup>86</sup>

To the Sash's dismay, tensions grew throughout 1983, and by May of that year veteran Advice Office Director Noel Robb reported that

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<sup>83</sup>ibid.

<sup>84</sup>A262/D30 Robb,N. "Crossroads: February 1980" National Conference 1980, Sash Archives.

<sup>85</sup>"Advice Office Reports" Sash, Vol.24 no.3 November, 1981 p.13

<sup>86</sup>Editorial Sash Vol.20 no.3 November, 1978 p.1

she felt that the factions could not be reconciled and that the Sash should not get involved at all.<sup>87</sup> An attempt to provide a neutral presence in the camp by taking down statements and affidavits from all sides was subsequently abandoned. By 1984 the region felt that there was little it could do to help the people of Crossroads and it reported in March:

Factions have split the community and violence has broken out on many occasions.<sup>88</sup>

Cape Western never regarded the government as directly responsible for creating the divisions in Crossroads and was unwilling to take sides within the camp. It was aware that the fighting had severely damaged its campaign for the recognition of the rights of squatters. The Sash's withdrawal from Crossroads indicated the limits of its influence and that it was not prepared to involve itself at that stage in internal community politics. Despite withdrawing from Crossroads, the Cape Western Region continued to be deeply involved in assisting other squatter communities on the Peninsula by arranging for legal defence, providing advice, coordinating welfare programmes and constantly keeping the public up to date on conditions in the camps and government actions against the communities.

Natal Coastal Region became involved with the burgeoning squatter camps around Durban mainly as an extension of its early work on housing. In 1979, Natal Coastal had joined forces with Women for

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<sup>87</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 9/5/83, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>88</sup>A862/D34 "Cape Western Regional Report March 1983 - February 1984". National Conference 1984, Sash Archives.

Peaceful Change Now, the National Council of Women, Diakonia and the SAIRR to form a Coordinating Committee to monitor the housing crisis in the greater Durban area.<sup>89</sup> This developed into the Durban Housing Coordinating Committee, which initially focused on problems related to housing in the poorer areas of the Durban Municipal area such as Chatsworth, Merebank, Springfield, Phoenix and Newlands East. However, the Committee soon extended its range to squatter communities beyond the urban fringes such as St. Wendolin's, Isanda and Richmond Farm.

Initially, Sash members were impressed by the internal orderliness of squatter settlements, which was belied by their chaotic external appearance. Like Cape Western, the region initially set out to rehabilitate these camps in the eyes of the white public by emphasising that external circumstances were chiefly responsible for the existing conditions of poverty, overcrowding and instability. At the 1979 National Conference it was suggested that the Sash should "create awareness that spontaneous settlements were not slums, nor were they breeding places for crime."<sup>90</sup> In an attempt to do this Natal Coastal, together with Diakonia, conducted a comprehensive survey of the Richmond Farm camp north-west of Durban.<sup>91</sup> The results were analysed with the help of Professor L. Schlemmer of the University of Natal to show that, as he said:

Richmond Farm is integrated into the economy of the greater Durban area and it has a settled and stable core.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>89</sup>"Regional Round-Up" *Sash* Vol.21 no.1 May, 1979 p.29

<sup>90</sup>A862/D29 Minutes, National Conference 1979, Sash Archives.

<sup>91</sup>Williams, J. "Black Housing in Natal" *Sash* Vol.23 no.4 February, 1981. p.21

<sup>92</sup>A862/D30 Minutes, National Conference 1980, Sash Archives.

In the Durban area, the Sash functioned mainly as an intermediary between various communities and the authorities when attempts were made to destroy or remove settlements. It organised and presented petitions to local Administration, Board officials and government Ministers when requested by communities under threat. It also publicised conditions in the camps and kept the Durban public aware of government plans for various settlements. On certain occasions, when immediate eviction was threatened, Sash members were called out by residents to stand by and create a stalemate situation, as Port Natal Administration Board officials seemed unwilling to demolish homes in the presence of Sash women.<sup>93</sup>

Although its principled stand in favour of the rights of squatters to work and live where they wished remained unchanged, the Sash was by 1984 developing a more sophisticated response to these communities. Working closely with these groups had enhanced its ability to understand and respond effectively to various forms of repression. At the same time however, it also been made aware that it could no longer assume that its understanding of liberation was universal, and that even among the oppressed communities themselves there could emerge conflicting political needs and aspirations.

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<sup>93</sup>Hemson, J. "St. Wendolin's" Sash Vol.25 no.3 November, 1982 p.24

## THE RISE OF MASS RESISTANCE:

### THE DEBATE OVER STRATEGIC ALLIANCES:

After 1978 the Sash not only had to come to terms with a new array of government strategies, but also with the politicisation of many of the sectors of the population on whose behalf it had traditionally campaigned. In some cases, these groups mobilised on the basis of ideological beliefs which many Sash members found unacceptable. In the early 1980s it became clear that many Sash members were willing to cooperate in local campaigns with certain organisations who shared common immediate goals but not necessarily strategies or long-term objectives. Serious consternation developed in the organisation when these alliances appeared to affirm strategies and objectives which many members felt were anathema to the organisation.

The difficulties associated with political alliances first became clear in the course of the Anti-Republic Festival Campaign in 1981. At that year's National Conference the Sash had called on its members and the public to boycott the celebrations planned to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Republic. In pursuit of this end, Natal Coastal joined a 61-member joint committee formed to oppose the Festival celebrations. Although the region ran a successful campaign it also, through the committee, was joint signatory to a number of controversial resolutions. One of these called on the Indian government, the UN and others to indicate their abhorrence of apartheid by blacklisting certain categories of people who "collaborated" with the South

African government. This elicited public criticism including an open letter from an Indian member of the President's Council to the Sash, asking how the organisation could reconcile this resolution with its simultaneous attempts to obtain the cooperation of the PFP, Labour Party, Inkatha and other "collaborators" in opposing the new constitution. The region had no adequate response.

Similar problems, although on a smaller scale, were experienced by Cape Western. The region had helped NUSAS organise a meeting at the University of Cape Town opposing the Republic Festival and was in danger of being associated with a widely-publicised "pennant-burning incident" at the beginning of the meeting. Transvaal encountered similar difficulties. For example, the region disapproved of the wording of a poster to be displayed at a public meeting called to oppose the Republic Festival by an ad hoc committee in Johannesburg of which it was a member. Despite protracted negotiations, no compromise could be reached which would allow the Sash to express its repudiation of the poster, with the result that Sheena Duncan withdrew as Chairman of the meeting and Joyce Harris withdrew from the platform. In a national Circular following this incident, Sash President Joyce Harris warned regions to be wary of being co-opted by other organisations whose ultimate goals the Sash might not share, and to be honest about Sash objectives even at the risk of antagonising potential allies.<sup>94</sup>

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MARXIST CHALLENGE:

In the 1980s the Sash's traditional tolerance for a variety of

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<sup>94</sup>A862/Fbc HQ Circular no. 11/1981, 7/7/1981, Sash Archives.



political perspectives, together with the decline of its liberalism in favour of a focus on apartheid, made the organisation vulnerable to ideologies which, although they often incorporated impressive analyses of social justice, advocated historical solutions which were not liberal. Of these, the most tempting and also the most threatening was Marxism. By 1982, it was clear that certain members of the Natal Coastal Region in particular had imbibed socialist doctrines and were becoming deeply involved with labour militancy in the region.

At the 1982 National Conference, which was held in Durban, leaders of the Natal Coastal Region launched a radical challenge to the Sash's traditional liberal understanding of justice. Natal Coastal, which was responsible for organising the Conference, ensured that a significant portion of the proceedings were devoted to discussions on labour and trade unions, focusing specifically on the questions of a legislated minimum wage and the use of boycott as a political strategy. Natal Coastal presented a resolution in favour of a legislated R2 minimum wage, which echoed a call made by FOSATU in October 1981. Significantly, the resolution insisted that a minimum wage would only be successful "as part of a general re-allocation of the country's resources...."<sup>95</sup> After lengthy discussion the resolution was passed unanimously, but it remained unclear whether delegates thought they were voting for just a minimum wage or general economic redistribution as well.

Later, during a closed session on strategy, it became clear that there had been disagreement within Natal Coastal throughout 1980

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<sup>95</sup>A862/D32 Minutes, National Conference 1982, Sash Archives.

over the ideological basis for the region's involvement in trade union activities. Many members were extremely uneasy about the socialist thinking which had emerged in the region. In its annual Report, Highway Branch admitted to having had serious disagreements with Natal Coastal over political direction and in particular over the Natal Coastal's emphasis on economic goals and trade union involvement.<sup>96</sup> Other members felt manipulated by those who had embraced the certainties of a Marxist historical analysis and they feared that the emphasis on socialism and class issues obscured the Sash's established concern for civil rights and liberties.<sup>97</sup> In a statement read out before the end of the Conference, Cape Western Chairman, Mary Burton tried to steer a middle ground by pleading with Sash members to accept that both class and racial oppression were at work in South Africa and that both should be a target of attack.

However, many Sash members left the Conference deeply troubled. To many of them, accepting a class-based analysis of injustice meant accepting a socialist political solution. Yet for them this implied the kind of ideological and political authoritarianism that the Sash had always opposed. Jill Wentzel, who was then Editor of Sash magazine, was outspoken in her condemnation of what she saw as a creeping socialist dogmatism in Sash thinking. In a meeting of the General Purposes Committee of the Transvaal Region shortly after the Conference, she warned that the "moral

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<sup>96</sup>"Regional Reports to Conference" Sash Vol.25 no.2 August, 1982 p.29 Also: Minutes. Highway Branch, 22/2/1982 and 22/3/1982, Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

<sup>97</sup>Inter alia Letter of resignation: Wendy Jackson to Sheena Duncan 22/3/1982, Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

opprobrium" being heaped upon liberals inside and outside the Sash who rejected class-based ideological solutions to injustice, was causing them to "melt away".<sup>98</sup> Wentzel deliberately tried to keep this debate alive in the pages of Sash, forcing members to examine the liberal response to contemporary issues such as sports and economic boycotts.

#### AFFILIATION TO THE UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT:

By 1983 the nature of the Sash's political identity was again in question when it had to decide whether or not to affiliate to the United Democratic Front. At the 1983 Sash National Conference, delegates were informed of moves to establish a broad democratic alliance to oppose the new constitution. They recognised that a potential obstacle to the Sash forming an association with this alliance, was that participating organisations might be required to endorse the Freedom Charter, drawn up at the Congress of the People in 1955. Delegates discussed the Charter, and while they had no objections to the main introductory statements of principle, many found items that advocated both the redistribution and state control of property<sup>99</sup> to be unacceptable.<sup>100</sup> A straw vote indicated 13 for and 16 against endorsing the Freedom Charter and Conference decided to refer the matter back to the regions for discussion and to call an Emergency Conference if necessary. However the question of the Charter soon became redundant as by April it was clear that the new movement would not require its

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<sup>98</sup>Minutes, Transvaal General Purposes Committee, 17/3/82, Jill Wentzel's personal papers.

<sup>99</sup>Notably clause 3: "The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth"

<sup>100</sup>A862/D33 Minutes, National Conference 1983, Sash Archives. "Discussion...on Resistance to New Constitution" Sash Vol.26 no.1 May, 1983 p.18

endorsement as a prerequisite for affiliation.

Throughout the year, various regions of the Sash established different links with the UDF. Both Natal Midlands and Natal Coast developed close working relationships with the organisation. The latter affiliated and was represented on the UDF Regional Council. Cape Western too became involved with the UDF through its work with local organisations concerned with issues like rents, transport and housing. Transvaal felt that although there was a high-powered UDF leadership in the region, it lacked a community base, which led to endless ideological disputes and little positive action.<sup>101</sup>

Sash Headquarters sent Joyce Harris to observe the official launch of the UDF on 23rd August 1983 in Cape Town. Harris, who like Wentzel was a confirmed liberal, was very disillusioned and in her report on the launch confessed to "mixed feelings". Although impressed by the level of organisation and the unity of so many diverse constituencies, she was wary of some of the ideological content of the meeting. She saw problems arising, not because of what the UDF was against but what it might be for, and noted:

...there were statements made from the floor - for instance that it was necessary for workers to take over the means of production...which made me wonder where the UDF is heading and whether there is room for us within it.<sup>102</sup>

The debate over affiliation intensified as the 1984 National

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<sup>101</sup>BC 688 D HQ Circular no.10/1983, 8/8/1983, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>102</sup>BC 688 D HQ Circular no.12/1983, 25/8/1983, Cape Western Archives.

Conference neared. Late in 1983, the issue became more fraught when UDF leadership announced that one of the non-negotiables for affiliation was a commitment not to participate in any government-created structures or processes, including Community Councils, homeland governments, Parliament and the 1983 referendum. Following this, National President Sheena Duncan suggested that the Sash not affiliate to the UDF, but rather join a second tier of organisations that wanted to cooperate with the organisation.<sup>103</sup>

At the 1984 National Conference there was long and heated discussion over affiliation. Cape Western and Transvaal delegates had mandates from their Regional Conferences to oppose affiliation, while Natal Coastal wanted the Conference to endorse the region's own earlier decision to affiliate. Eventually, a straw vote was taken, which showed 14 for and 14 against affiliation with 5 abstentions. As it was clear that the two-thirds majority required for affiliation by the Sash constitution would not be forthcoming, the resolution in favour of affiliation was withdrawn. Natal Coastal also withdrew its resolution with strong protest from regional delegate Ann Colvin, who read out a statement expressing her anger at what she saw as an "ignoble decision". Colvin had strong personal links with many UDF leaders in Natal and it was unlikely that the region as a whole shared her sense of alienation.

The Sash went on to establish a close working relationship with the UDF. However, in rejecting affiliation, the Sash affirmed its

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<sup>103</sup>BC 688 D HQ Circular no.14/1983, 19/9/1983, Cape Western Archives.

role as an organisation whose primary aim was to fight for a political environment in which organisations like the UDF had a right to be heard. For liberals within the Sash this was an important affirmation of the organisation's identity. As Joyce Harris put it:

...in siding with one section of the black community, for instance the UDF...the Sash is losing its identity as a possible mediator or a possible honest broker because it ceases to be an honest broker once it takes sides....When some of its members say it must participate in the liberation movement, my answer is, "which liberation movement? whose liberation movement?".<sup>104</sup>

### THE NEW CONSTITUTION:

The culmination of the political restructuring initiated by the Botha government, was the introduction of a new constitution for South Africa. While this constitution incorporated Coloureds and Indians into the political decision-making process at a national level, it did not represent a departure from either the principle of ethnic differentiation and separation or from the established dominance of whites in national politics. The Sash waged a seven-year campaign against the introduction of the new constitution and although this was, in Sheena Duncan's words, "a total flop" it strengthened the organisation's internal coherence and helped it to clarify its position regarding the government's constitutional "reforms".

At its 1978 National Conference, the Sash was prompted by an

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<sup>104</sup>Interview with Joyce Harris, Johannesburg, 21/4/1989

insightful analysis of the government's constitutional plans by Joyce Harris, to make opposition to the new constitution a national campaign for the following year. This was to involve an ongoing analysis of government blueprints and their implications. The Sash rejected the constitution primarily because it concentrated power in the hands of the executive, entrenched the division of the society on a racial basis and totally excluded Africans. As the outgoing National President, Joyce Harris noted in her paper to the Conference:

The very division of people into their racial components, with the implicit denial of their joint contribution to the corporate whole and their just rights within that whole, is in itself a denial of the essence of democracy.<sup>105</sup>

As the campaign against the new constitution progressed, Headquarters (strongly influenced at this time by the preoccupations of the Johannesburg Advice Office) decided to link it to a concurrent campaign on the "New Foreigners", which opposed the introduction of homeland citizenship, "as it was realised that the two issues are inseparable".<sup>106</sup> This marked the beginning of the Sash's growing conviction that the constitution, in its attempt to dispossess Africans and entrench white hegemony, marked the triumph of "total strategy".

Although the Sash was unambiguously opposed to the constitution, it did have trouble deciding what strategic form its opposition should take. By the time delegates gathered for the 1983 National Conference some felt that, because of its kingpin role in "total

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<sup>105</sup>Harris, J. "The New Constitution" *Sash* Vol.20 no.3 November, 1978 p.18

<sup>106</sup>"Regional Round-Up" *Sash* Vol.21 no.1 May, 1979 p.24

strategy", an outright rejection of the constitution was the only appropriate response. This was evident in a scathing attack on "reform" by National President Sheena Duncan, in which she argued that co-option, particularly into the new constitution, was an integral part of government attempts to entrench the status quo. Joyce Harris had anticipated that there would be a strong impulse within the Sash towards demanding an outright boycott of the new constitution. She was aware that many members had been swayed by opposition groups who argued that any involvement with the new system would legitimise it. At the same time, she felt that the Sash, as a primarily white organisation with a foothold in the establishment, should adopt a more strategic response.<sup>107</sup>

In a persuasive paper delivered to the Conference, Harris warned that opposition to the Constitution was being crippled by divisions between those who favoured participation and those who did not. She argued that to prevent this division splitting the Sash, members should recognise that this resulted from a conflation of strategy and principle. She argued that as long as the Sash was united with other opposition groups in rejecting the constitution outright, it could legitimately consider strategies of opposition besides boycott. The Sash would thus not be betraying its principles if it devised "strategies of rejection".<sup>108</sup>

In arguing this way, Harris successfully divorced the idea of principled rejection from that of strategic non-participation in

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<sup>107</sup>Star 11/3/1983

<sup>108</sup>Harris, J. "The New Constitution and Strategies of Rejection" *Sash* Vol.26 no.1 May, 1983 p.17



many delegates' minds, removing from the latter an aura of moral absolutism. Thus, although Conference approved a resolution in favour of boycotting "any election which may be called in terms of the new Constitution" it settled for merely "urging" members to follow this course.<sup>109</sup> This was emphasised in a subsequent circular from Duncan to all regions in which she noted that because strategy should reflect the aim to render the new system as inoperable as possible, it should rightly remain fluid.<sup>110</sup> This enabled the Sash to criticise the Labour Party for prematurely deciding to cooperate with the constitution, (thereby robbing Coloureds of a referendum), while it simultaneously argued that the PFP decision to sit in the Tricameral Parliament was the most viable strategy open to it as a white opposition party. It also allowed the Sash to change its own tactics. At the organisation's 1984 National Conference, held after the Constitution was firmly entrenched, the Sash agreed that the scope of its opposition to the constitution should be broadened. Thus the Conference resolved that the 1983 resolution urging boycott be replaced by:

The Black Sash urges its members and the public to oppose the new constitution in whatever way possible.<sup>111</sup>

Shortly after the Sash's 1983 National Conference, the government announced that a referendum would be held among whites to determine their response to the new constitution. The Sash soon became involved in a massive campaign to ensure a "no" vote in the referendum. This enthusiasm was partly because the government

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<sup>109</sup>A862/D33 Minutes, National Conference 1983, Sash Archives.

<sup>110</sup>A862/Fbb HQ Circular no.3/1983, 11/4/1983, Sash Archives.

<sup>111</sup>A862/D34 Minutes, National Conference 1984, Sash Archives. Star 9/3/1984.

had said that it would be bound by the results of the referendum and partly because surveys began to show by July that as many as 43.8 per cent of people would vote "no".<sup>112</sup> The Sash decided to target the "undecided" voters, who were primarily English speakers who supported the PFP. It specifically addressed its own membership, women's organisations, professional associations and university convocations as well as church congregations and businessmen.<sup>113</sup>

The Sash argued that there was no "hidden agenda" of reform in the Constitution, stressing that two cornerstones of apartheid, the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act were essential to its functioning. Despite organising many public meetings, providing speakers to address many others, distributing thousands of booklets and pamphlets, mailing thousands of letters and issuing a stream of articles and press statements, the Sash made little impression on white voters. On November 2nd, 66 per cent of those who voted gave the government a mandate to go ahead with its new constitution.

The Sash was bitterly disappointed, with Sheena Duncan writing to members; "...I feel I have misled you into weeks of very hard work to no avail."<sup>114</sup> Following this defeat, the Sash prepared itself to encounter a revitalised opponent in the state. Yet it also recognised that legitimate opposition would increasingly operate outside of formal political structures. South Africa had moved one

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<sup>112</sup>BC 688 D HQ Circular no.10/1983, 8/8/1983, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>113</sup>BC 688 D HQ Circular no.11/1983, 22/8/1983, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>114</sup>A862/Fbb HQ Circular no.17/1983, 3/11/1983, Sash Archives.

step closer to the political polarisation that posed one of the greatest threats to the realisation of the Sash's conception of justice.

#### CONCLUSION:

The Black Sash intensified its activities after 1978 and recovered some of the political influence that it had lost in the 1960s. This was primarily the result of a progressive change in political emphasis, which had begun in the mid-1970s. The Sash began to concentrate less on the objective of establishing and preserving liberal political principles in South Africa, and more on strategic and localised attacks on specific dimensions of government policy. This was indicative of a new political realism in the organisation, which included a recognition that liberalism as such no longer constituted a viable political force in South Africa. As a result, the Sash concentrated more on maximising its use of the concrete political resources it had at its disposal, and less on appealing to defunct liberal sentiments. This reorientation was partly dictated by the concerns of Sheena Duncan, who had exercised a strong influence on the Sash since her first term as National President in 1975.

The role of the Black Sash advice offices became steadily more prominent after 1978, in keeping with the Sash's reorientation towards the more pragmatic use of its organisational resources. The offices gave the Sash valuable insights into the ramifications of government policies during this time, particularly those formulated under the rubric of "total strategy". The Sash

responded by developing important critiques of legislation and by mounting persistent and directed campaigns against specific dimensions of apartheid.

By 1984, the Sash's activities had consolidated primarily around the foci of its advice offices and the organisation had developed a more specific and pragmatic style of opposition. Nevertheless, the organisation's ongoing concern with militarisation, detention, and civil rights and liberties indicated that it had not abandoned its liberal principles. Although the Sash maintained an attachment to its traditional liberal values, it did become strategically distanced from them. This became evident in a growing ideological fluidity within the Sash and in the difficulties experienced by the organisation in forming satisfactory alliances with other political groups after 1980. The degree to which the Sash continued to identify with liberal values and to see them as the foundation of its political activities, was to be sorely tested after 1984.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE FINAL YEARS OF APARTHEID 1984-1990

#### INTRODUCTION:

Since the late 1950s, the Black Sash's political focus had been on fighting for the establishment and preservation of liberal values in South Africa. In the 1970s and early 1980s, this enterprise became concentrated on opposition to the evolving apartheid policies of the NP government. However, after 1984, the political terrain in South Africa changed dramatically. Apartheid was progressively "reformed", with crude racial classification being replaced by the more subtle distinctions of class and group identity. In addition, powerful extra-parliamentary challenges to the authority and legitimacy of the NP government emerged. This new political environment posed many challenges to both the Sash's liberal beliefs and their established forms of expression.

Between 1984 and 1990, the Sash struggled both to define its liberalism and to resist the gathering momentum towards political polarisation and violent confrontation in South Africa. The challenges posed by the political flux of the period, forced the organisation to re-examine the theoretical foundations of its political behavior. Although this process was often difficult and fraught, it helped the Sash to renew many dimensions of its liberalism, thereby ensuring the organisation's political relevance beyond the apartheid era.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

Between 1984 and 1990, the South African government was weakened by serious economic decline, a growing debt crisis, international pressures, and widespread popular rebellion. The government attempted to shore up its crumbling legitimacy by discarding racist legislation and elaborating the mechanics of government on the basis of "group rights", thereby moving away from the highly stigmatised concept of racial exclusivity. At the same time however, the government acted to crush mounting challenges to its authority through the deployment of both its security apparatus and its executive powers.

A major landmark in the government's legitimisation programme (so-called "reform apartheid") after 1984 was the abolition of the pass laws. In the face of the imminent collapse of the machinery of the pass laws and mounting political pressure, the government abandoned Section 10 restrictions altogether in 1986. They were replaced by an "orderly urbanisation" policy, which sought to regulate population movement through controls over Group Areas, squatting and slums. However, the government persisted with its consolidation plans for the homelands. The residents of "independent" homelands were still considered foreigners, and their entry into South Africa was restricted by the terms of the South African Aliens Act.

Having by 1985 accepted the inevitable reality of urban Africans as South African citizens, and increasingly aware of the political challenge posed by this group, the government attempted to

incorporate African municipal structures into the local government machinery of the Republic as a whole. In 1986, the existing white Provincial Councils were phased out in favour of government-nominated Executive Committees, which included Africans, Coloureds and Indians. In addition, the various racially discrete local authorities were to nominate representatives to multi-racial Regional Services Councils (RSCs). This apparent redistribution of power was accompanied by a corresponding centralisation of political control in the hands of the Executive. This was most apparent in the formation of the State Security Council, which was chaired by the State President and made up of the inner cabinet and senior representatives of the security forces.

Although the state had successfully crushed significant challenges to its authority by 1987 through the brutal deployment of its security apparatus, the co-optive strategies of 'reform apartheid' had little support from the majority of South Africans. As the decade drew to a close, the NP government responded to its ongoing legitimacy crisis in an increasingly ad hoc fashion, unwilling to discard the fundamentals of apartheid even though they were by then precipitating a profound threat to its political survival. Only with the departure from government of President P.W. Botha was this paralysis broken. Botha's successor, F.W. de Klerk, with a landmark address to Parliament on 2nd February 1990, announced the government's commitment to a non-racial order in South Africa.

The widespread popular challenge to the government from what

became known as the mass democratic movement, had two main dimensions. Firstly, it involved an attack on the legitimacy of all government institutions and processes. Secondly, it consisted of attempts to establish alternative governmental structures and processes, primarily at local level. The UDF emerged after 1984 as the most prominent organisational vehicle of this challenge. Numerous UDF affiliates pioneered the politicisation of urban blacks at local level and began to establish alternative authority structures including street and area committees and civic associations.

A one day stayaway in the Vaal Triangle, which had been called by the UDF in early September 1984 to protest rent and service charge increases, turned violent. Government buildings were attacked, as were the homes of local councillors and policemen. Within a few days, at least 31 people were reported dead including four black councillors.<sup>1</sup> The government responded to the unrest with accelerating force, culminating in the deployment of troops in the townships in October 1984. A period of sustained township unrest began, with 149 people being killed between 3rd September 1984 and the end of the year.<sup>2</sup>

Despite government repression, the mass democratic movement steadily gained momentum, and early 1985 saw the mushrooming of hundreds of youth, student and civic organisations, mostly affiliated to the UDF. Protest became characterised by school, rent and consumer boycotts, and political violence spread from the Vaal

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<sup>1</sup>SAIRR Race Relations Survey 1984 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1985 pp64-5

<sup>2</sup>*ibid.* pxvii



Triangle to the Northern Orange Free State and the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage area. 1985 was marked by ongoing violent confrontation between township residents and security forces, amid calls from the exiled ANC for residents to rid the townships of their local authorities and render them "ungovernable".<sup>3</sup> The precise link between the banned ANC and the UDF during this period remained unclear, although it was made the subject of various treason trials by the government.

The government did not hesitate to use the legislative and coercive powers at its disposal to repress the popular challenge to its authority. At midnight on 20th July 1985, P.W. Botha declared a State of Emergency in 36 magisterial districts. A wave of detentions followed affecting 7,966 people between 21st July 1985 and 7th March 1986 when the State of Emergency was lifted.<sup>4</sup> The UDF and its affiliates were specific targets of state repression, with an estimated 56 per cent of National and Regional officials either detained, charged with offences or killed by September 1985.<sup>5</sup>

The NP government's uncompromising response to political protest precipitated an intensification of international pressures after 1984. A petulant and hard-line speech by P.W. Botha to the NP Conference in Durban on 15th August, hardened attitudes among the international community and hastened the implementation of a series of punitive measures against South Africa, including

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<sup>3</sup>Davis, S.M. Apartheid's Rebels: Inside South Africa's Hidden War New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987 p89

<sup>4</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1985 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1986 pxxv

<sup>5</sup>Davis, S.M. Apartheid's Rebels op. cit. p94

boycotts and sanctions. The worsening economic situation after 1984 contributed to the growing strength of trade unions. On 30th November 1985, a new trade union federation sympathetic to the UDF was founded. This body, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), had 33 affiliates and claimed a membership of 600,000 making it the largest in South Africa.<sup>6</sup>

By late 1985, the dynamics of violent confrontation between the state and opposition movements were complicated by the emergence of vigilante forces who employed violent coercion to achieve their political objectives. These groups were primarily concerned with local power struggles and their character varied. Some were allied to homeland administrations whose state-sponsored authority was endangered by political challenges to the government. Others were linked to township councillors and their allies, who were both politically and physically threatened by the activities of local UDF-linked bodies. In most cases of vigilante activity, collusion with the South African security forces was alleged.

As township activists struggled to establish alternative sources of political authority within black communities in 1986, retributive and coercive violence intensified. SAIRR figures indicated that conflict within black communities accounted for about half of the 1,298 deaths in political violence in 1986, while security force action accounted for about a third.<sup>7</sup> The most horrific

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<sup>6</sup>Smith,R. "The Black Trade Unions: From Economics to Politics" in Blumenfeld,J.(ed) South Africa in Crisis London: Croom Helm, 1987 p97

<sup>7</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1986 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1987 pxxi

manifestations of this violence were so-called "necklace" murders, in which a petrol-soaked tyre was placed over the victim's shoulders and set alight.

Other aspirants to political legitimacy began to emerge apart from the UDF after 1984. In April 1986, the KwaZulu/Natal Indaba was convened by the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly and the Natal Provincial Council. The Indaba, which aimed to establish a non-racial administration for the Province of Natal, was rejected by groups to both the left and right, including the NP and the UDF. Relations between the UDF and the Zulu organisation Inkatha deteriorated throughout 1986, with the UDF accusing Inkatha leader and Chief Minister of KwaZulu, Chief M.G. Buthelezi, of collaboration with Pretoria. After the nationwide State of Emergency was announced on 2nd June 1986, violent confrontations between Inkatha and COSATU and the UDF intensified, particularly in Natal.

Despite considerable grassroots support, the mass democratic movement had been crippled by government repression by 1987. The 1986 State of Emergency was renewed in 1987 and again in 1988 and 1989. This corresponded with a downturn in the level of political violence, except in Natal where it intensified after 1987. On 24th February 1988, the government effectively banned 17 opposition movements including the UDF, and prohibited the trade union COSATU from engaging in political activities.

In May 1987, a white general election returned the NP to power and

strengthened the hand of the conservatives, with the right-wing CP taking over as official Opposition. There were breakaway groups from both the NP and the PFP, illustrative of the degree of uncertainty prevalent in white politics. On 26th October 1988, nationwide municipal elections were held. These were the first ever elections involving people of all races and provoked much controversy. Many opposition groups supported a boycott and the elections were plagued by low voter turnout.

In February 1989, a nationwide hunger strike was begun by hundreds of detainees. It lasted about nine weeks and resulted in the release of most of those still in detention under the Emergency regulations. In September 1989, the first white, Coloured and Indian general election was held. The run-up to the election was dominated by a mass defiance campaign in which people challenged racial segregation in residential areas, beaches, buses, social and sporting facilities and hospitals.

On 2nd February 1990, State President F.W. de Klerk, signalled the end of apartheid and the beginning of a new era in South African politics. In his speech to the opening of Parliament, he pledged his government to genuine negotiations towards a non-racial constitution for South Africa. He simultaneously lifted bans on the ANC, PAC, SACP and other organisations. A week later, the most prominent leader of the ANC, Nelson Mandela, was released from prison and shortly thereafter the government began talks with the ANC aimed at removing obstacles to negotiation.

### THE BLACK SASH AND REFORM-APARTHEID:

The Black Sash's political activities in the late 1970s and early 1980s had been characterised by a relatively legalistic approach towards opposing apartheid legislation, and by appeals for political change within the established power structure. However after 1984, the Sash's political activities began to be determined primarily by its relationship with the emerging mass democratic movement. This involved alternative strategic focuses, such as grassroots politicisation and challenges to the authority of the state as a whole. Furthermore, the intensity of political conflict after 1984 meant that many of the Sash's resources were channeled into crisis intervention activities. As a result, the Sash developed a relatively weak critique of apartheid legislation after 1984, at a time when this legislation was at its most vulnerable.

### THE PASS LAWS AND INFLUX CONTROL:

The most significant "reform" of apartheid which with the Black Sash had to grapple between 1984 and 1989, was a major revision of the administration of the black urban proletariat. This was most dramatically revealed in the formal scrapping of influx control legislation on 1st July 1986. However, the Black Sash saw this event within the context of population control legislation as a whole, and did not greet it with unqualified approval.

For some time prior to the abolition of the pass laws, the Sash had accumulated evidence of their increasing unworkability. The system was patently failing to prevent the movement of Africans into the cities and was increasingly plagued by bureaucratic

confusion. Thus Johannesburg Advice Office Director Sheena Duncan wrote in her 1985 Annual report:

It is impossible for the public to know any longer who is responsible for what. One wonders if the officials themselves know. Many just make up their own rules as they go along in flagrant defiance of the law.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time however, the Sash advice offices and TRAC began to report that the government was beginning to control influx by limiting the amount of land available for housing and by pricing accommodation out of the reach of the majority of people. This operated to the obvious advantage of the established black working class while discouraging poorer immigrants from the rural areas. Duncan warned in 1985:

Any attempt to pretend reform by introducing "orderly urbanisation" as a euphemism for a more efficient form of influx control will be a betrayal of the first magnitude and will be unenforcable.<sup>9</sup>

When the pass laws were abolished, the Sash realised that the government was abandoning a defunct control mechanism, and the organisation had good reason to suspect that it would be replaced by a new system of control over the most disadvantaged sectors of the population. The Sash consequently set out to develop a critique of the emerging policies of "orderly urbanisation".

One of the most immediate practical consequences of the abolition of influx control in July 1986 was that thousands of people began to move into the urban areas. Sash members who had established links with squatter communities in the Johannesburg area soon

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<sup>8</sup>A862/D35 Johannesburg Advice Office Report, National Conference 1985, Sash Archives.

<sup>9</sup>ibid.

reported that, in addition to restrictions on housing, squatting controls were becoming central to the government's new "orderly urbanisation" policies. Josie Adler of Transvaal Region warned in an October 1986 article in the Star newspaper that the government-created black housing shortage was also transforming hundreds of urban Africans into squatters, even those who had residence rights in the cities under the old pass laws. Using its squatting and trespass legislation, the government was then able to evict and prosecute these people without being seen to be enforcing racist controls on population movement.<sup>10</sup>

The Sash soon realised that while the issue of population movement had lost many of its racist dimensions after 1986, it was increasingly subject to manipulation by the government on the basis of socioeconomic factors. The Sash argued that a whole package of ostensibly non-racial legislation was being used to control the movement of the poorest sectors of the black population into the cities. By 1987 Transvaal Region noted in its Annual Report:

Jails are once again being filled by people whose only offence is their homelessness - the same people who were previously offenders under influx control laws.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas the advice offices had formed the backbone of the Sash's campaign against the pass laws, the organisation developed more assertive strategies to identify and address the oppression and

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<sup>10</sup>A862/D37 Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1987, Sash Archives.

<sup>11</sup>ibid.

discrimination it believed were inherent in the government's policy of "orderly urbanisation". Transvaal Region convened an "Urbanisation Working Group" to do in-depth research into land distribution policy, squatting and housing. This group absorbed the region's Court Monitoring Committee, which had previously monitored the enforcement of the pass laws in the criminal courts. These monitors now adopted a crisis response function, focusing on specific court cases involving legislation like the Group Areas Act or the Squatting Act. In Cape Western Region, the Sash began to explore practical ways in which it could help ensure that adequate and suitable housing was provided for people, particularly those living in the massive township of Khayelitsha.

By early 1988, the analysis of homelessness and campaigns for the rights of the homeless had become an important feature of the Sash's work. By this time however, the organisation had realised that homelessness could not simply be regarded as another dimension of influx control. It was in fact becoming a major socioeconomic problem that was threatening to expand well beyond official control. The Sash responded to this developing crisis on two main levels. Firstly, it maintained contact with individual squatter communities themselves in the tradition of the hands-on work of the advice offices. This work helped inform the second level of approach, which was to demand changes in the political response to homelessness.

In 1988, the Transvaal's Urbanisation Working Group expanded into the Urban Removals and Homelessness Group, and by early 1989 it



was in regular contact with over 40 groups of squatters. It held a weekly advice office in one of the larger camps and provided legal advice and support for people on trial for trespass or squatting. The Group published information on the scale and nature of homelessness in the area, helped homeless groups fight for land and housing, and networked extensively with other concerned groups especially the Witwatersrand Network for the Homeless, of which Sheena Duncan was a founder member.<sup>12</sup>

The Homelessness Group also developed a critique of the government's housing policies, arguing that they were designed only for middle class blacks. It urged that land allocated for housing should be secure, affordable and close to places of work, and campaigned for the upgrading of existing informal settlements rather than their demolition. Other regions also began to establish supportive relationships with local squatter communities and to build up the Sash's understanding of homelessness and the degree to which it could be diminished or exacerbated by government policy.

The Sash also pressured for the reform of legislation relating to the homeless, launching a scathing critique of the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act Amendment Bill and Slums Bill of 1988.<sup>13</sup> The organisation argued that the government had made homelessness a crime and demanded that it adopt a more remedial approach to the problem.<sup>14</sup> When the controversial Group Areas and Squatting Bills of 1988 were referred to the President's

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<sup>12</sup>Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1989, Personal papers.

<sup>13</sup>Star 27/7/1988

<sup>14</sup>Sowetan 29/8/1988

Council, the Sash launched a major campaign for their abandonment.

The end of traditional influx control meant that the Black Sash was no longer involved in fighting the discrimination and exploitation enshrined in these racist laws. However, the Sash had realised by the late 1980s that the economically weak in South Africa were emerging as the new oppressed. By early 1990, its concern for the homeless began to reflect this realisation and the organisation began to realign its perspectives to defend sectors of the South African population which it feared would remain vulnerable long after the abolition of racist legislation.

#### REMOVALS AND HOMELAND CONSOLIDATION:

In the context of the collapse of influx control and official recognition of the status of certain black South Africans, the ongoing development of independent homelands ceased to be driven by the confidence of a grand apartheid policy, and became vulnerable to various political pressures. As a result, the government's removals policy became increasingly erratic after 1984. The Black Sash not only had to allow for unexpected vacillations in official policy, but also found that its own campaigns against removals were contributing to this situation.

After 1984, the Sash's work in the area of removals was carried out primarily by TRAC. Although other regions were concerned with local removals, major campaigns in the other Provinces were mainly carried out by other groups such as AFRA in Natal, and the

Surplus Peoples Project (SPP), which operated mainly in the Cape. By 1984 TRAC was assisting groups throughout the Transvaal and in the northern Cape to resist removal. It was staffed by full-time fieldworkers and supported by Transvaal Region's Removals Sub-Committee.

Partly because of the mounting pressure on TRAC to respond rapidly and effectively to removals crises after 1984, and partly because it was staffed by full-time paid employees who worked from their own office in Khotso House in Johannesburg, TRAC became somewhat detached from the Black Sash itself. Although there was close informal liaison between a few members of the Transvaal Region and TRAC, the Committee inevitably developed a degree of professionalism and a level of specialisation that set it apart from the Sash as a whole. This had the effect of preventing the Sash from being as enriched politically by TRAC work as it might have been.

TRAC's activities after 1984 remained focused at the level of grassroots intervention, and inevitably became distanced from the Sash's broader removals policy and the political ideals that informed it. This prompted some unease in Transvaal Region, with some members feeling that TRAC's broader political objectives were potentially distinct from those of the Sash. By 1989, Transvaal Region was attempting to resolve this difficulty by establishing a more formal relationship with TRAC with the intention of allowing for a far greater degree of political cross-fertilisation.

Because of its involvement with a number of threatened communities in the Transvaal and Northern Cape after 1984, TRAC was extremely well-placed to monitor the erratic developments in removals policy. In 1984, the sudden abandonment of a number of scheduled removals led TRAC to suggest that this might indicate a possible softening of government policy. Official confirmation of a new attitude seemed to come with an announcement by the Minister of Cooperation and Development, Dr. Gerrit Viljoen, on 2nd February 1985, that "forced removals" from townships and black spots would be suspended while the government reviewed its policy.<sup>15</sup>

Although the Black Sash decided at its March 1985 National Conference to "reserve judgement" on the announcement until it saw concrete evidence of a reformed policy, TRAC was optimistic, noting that "the situation is more fluid than it has been for many years."<sup>16</sup> On 27th August 1985, the government's change of heart seemed to be confirmed with the reprieve of the neighbouring black spots of KwaNgema and Driefontein in the south eastern Transvaal.<sup>17</sup>

Despite their initial optimism, it was not long before TRAC workers became convinced that most government concessions in the area of removals represented last-ditch attempts to legitimate rather than abandon removals policy. The government's growing concern with legitimacy meant that its removals policy became increasingly vulnerable to political pressures exerted upon it by

<sup>15</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1985 op. cit. p328

<sup>16</sup>A862/T35 TRAC Report, National Conference 1985, Sash Archives.

<sup>17</sup>Claassens,A. "A Reprieve" Sash Vol.28 no.3 November, 1985 p20

TRAC and others. Clear evidence of the fact that the government was not impervious to opposition was given by the Deputy Minister of Cooperation and Development Mr. Sam de Beer in early 1985 when he said in Parliament:

...removals have recently become extremely politicised, both internally and abroad, entailing problems of threatening disinvestment and boycott campaigns.<sup>18</sup>

However, TRAC's close involvement with the battle of the Magopa people of the Eastern Transvaal to remain on their land, gave it ample proof that the government was not abandoning its removals policy. On 19th September 1985, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court had ruled that the forced removal of the Magopa community from their land in February 1984 was illegal.<sup>19</sup> However, the government had in the meantime expropriated the Magopa land and, despite the court verdict, refused to allow the community to return.

TRAC, together with the SACC and the Ecumenical Development Agency, attempted to buy a farm for the Magopa, only to have the government step in and expropriate this land shortly before the sale was finalised.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, in late 1988 and early 1989, against the advice of TRAC, destitute members of the Magopa community began to resettle their land. South African police had sealed off the area by February 1989 to prevent further influx, and the Magopa people were charged with trespass. In May 1989, the

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<sup>18</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1985 op. cit. p330

<sup>19</sup>"And now we have no land" TRAC Newsletter no.13 August, 1987.

<sup>20</sup>Harris,J. "Perseverance Pays" Sash Vol.30 no.3 December, 1987 p36

Transvaal Supreme Court gave a final order for the people to leave Magopa, confirming the government's commitment to enforcing the removal.

The Black Sash also found that the quest for legitimacy led to adaptations in the government's strategy regarding the removal of townships after 1984. TRAC exposed the government strategy of allowing townships to fall into disrepair, thereby inducing people to move "voluntarily" to a more suitable location. This corresponded with the trend in reform apartheid to use ostensibly economic criteria rather than race to enforce discrimination. The Sash publicised the use of this strategy in a number of areas, notably the Brits Location (Oukasië)<sup>21</sup> and the township of Lawaaikamp outside George in the Cape.

The most significant modification of removals policy after 1984 came with homeland consolidation proposals announced in September 1985, and the Borders of Particular States Extension Amendment Act of September 1986. TRAC responded to these by arguing that the government was simply redrawing boundaries to include within the administrative areas of homelands, many communities who had resisted physical removal. This meant that the residents of these communities lost their South African citizenship and became subject to the inefficient and often brutal administration of homeland governments.

TRAC argued that the consolidation proposals for the Transvaal were little more than rewards for Bophuthatswana and KwaNdebele

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<sup>21</sup>"The old Brits Location" TRAC Newsletter no.11 July, 1986.

for accepting the policy of homeland independence. The randomness of the allocation of various ethnic groupings to various homelands seemed to bear this out. Thus the two farms of Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein were earmarked for incorporation into Bophuthatswana despite the fact that most of their population was non-Tswana. TRAC was particularly scathing about KwaNdebele, only 50 per cent of whose population was actually Ndebele.<sup>22</sup> TRAC showed that the proposed incorporation of the 120,000-strong mainly Sotho population of Moutse into the small and impoverished KwaNdebele would lower its Ndebele population to about one third of the total. The Committee thus argued that incorporation was "completely illogical in terms of government strategy, as KwaNdebele cannot be justified on the grounds of separate ethnic development."<sup>23</sup> Many other communities that TRAC had helped avoid physical removal subsequently found that they had become part of homelands by the simple redrawing of boundaries.

There was relatively little that the Sash or TRAC could do to oppose this new form of removal, other than expose it and help individual communities challenge the legal validity of particular acts of incorporation. However, by 1989, the Sash noted that despite the relative success of the incorporation strategy, removals policy was becoming increasingly random and haphazard. The government seemed to be disregarding legal and political precedents in ordering some removals and yet granting other communities reprieves. Transvaal Region was prompted to ask in

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<sup>22</sup>"Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein" TRAC Newsletter no.12 February, 1987.

<sup>23</sup>"Moutse" TRAC Newsletter no.10 April, 1986.

its Regional Report for 1989, "Is there a consistent policy with regard to rural black communities? Is there a policy at all?"<sup>24</sup>

The abandonment of apartheid in 1990 indicated that the Sash had been working in opposition to a removals policy that was increasingly without long-term goals, and thus particularly vulnerable to political pressures such as those it had exerted.

### THE RISE OF POPULAR RESISTANCE:

The popular challenge to the NP government after 1994 had two main dimensions. The first was a groundswell of resistance to all forms of state authority in black townships, and the second was the development, usually under the umbrella of the UDF, of alternative political structures. The Black Sash was broadly sympathetic to the popular rebellion insofar as it represented resistance to apartheid, and was attracted to both the democratic principles and the organisational strength of the UDF.

However, there were aspects of the challenge to the state that the Sash found difficult to accept. These were primarily dimensions of political theory or strategy that confirmed liberals within the organisation: felt were in conflict with liberal principles. However many Sash activists, who had come to understand the Sash as an anti-apartheid organisation, were resistant to this liberal critique, which they felt was weakening the anti-apartheid movement. As a result, the Sash had difficulty reconciling its identity as an anti-apartheid organisation with its need to criticise some dimensions of the challenge to the state.

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<sup>24</sup>Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1989. Personal papers.



### INVOLVEMENT IN THE POPULAR CHALLENGE TO THE STATE:

The Black Sash's involvement with the surge of popular resistance to the government was strongly influenced by its links to the UDF. When the UDF emerged in late 1983, the Sash had been extremely well-disposed towards what it saw as an important ally in its battle against apartheid. Despite deciding not to affiliate with the UDF, the Sash actively sought close cooperation with the organisation, and by May 1984 had been granted observer status on its regional and national committees.<sup>25</sup> The working relationship between the two organisations was facilitated by the fact that both had their Headquarters in Khotso House in Johannesburg, and many Sash leaders soon developed close personal friendships with leading figures in the UDF. Sheena Duncan, who was Sash President until 1986, was particularly close to a number of UDF leaders, and she soon began to address UDF meetings and share platforms with UDF officials.<sup>26</sup>

At a regional level, early relationships between the Sash and the UDF varied, with the Sash most commonly cooperating with a variety of UDF affiliates on matters of mutual concern. In the Transvaal, the Sash formed an ad hoc working group in early September 1984 with the UDF and a number of its affiliates such as JODAC and the DPSC. Called the Committee Against Repression, this group soon produced a booklet opposing preventative detention, and in November 1984 published a book on the unrest in the Vaal

<sup>25</sup>A862/Lcl/4 Minutes, Transvaal General Purposes Committee, 2/5/1984, Sash Archives.

<sup>26</sup>A862/Jcg/5 Duncan, S. "Statement to the Delmas Treason Trial" p14 of transcript, Sash Archives.

Triangle called Repression in a Time of Reform.<sup>27</sup>

The leadership of Natal Coastal, which already had strong links to trade unions and local progressive organisations, was among the first to involve the Sash in a number of UDF campaigns. Thus, while other regions adopted a relatively low-key approach to the August 1984 elections for the Indian and Coloured Houses of Parliament, activists in Natal Coastal, together with organisations like the Natal Indian Congress, the United Committee of Concern and the Association of Durban Democrats, became involved in a "Don't Vote" campaign, urging a boycott of the elections. This sort of initiative by the Natal Coastal leadership, gained the region a high level of credibility among local opposition groups, on many of whose committees it was given representation.<sup>28</sup>

In the Eastern Cape the Sash became particularly involved with the struggles of various township communities to establish representative structures such as civic associations under the UDF banner. The depth of the Sash's involvement in this type of grassroots activity was primarily dictated by the activities of the Cape Eastern Regional Chair, Molly Blackburn. After she had been elected onto the Cape Provincial Council in 1981, Blackburn developed a particular concern for the welfare of township residents in the Eastern Cape. She soon involved other Sash members in investigating township conditions throughout the Province. Their work consisted primarily of responding to calls for

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<sup>27</sup>A862/D35 Headquarters Report, National Conference 1985, Sash Archives.

<sup>28</sup>A862/D35 Natal Coastal Regional Report, National Conference 1985, Sash Archives.

assistance from developing community organisations in townships including Graaff-Reinet, Colesburg, Middelburg, Port Alfred and Jansenville.<sup>29</sup>

Blackburn's most intense involvement with attempts to establish civic structures, was in the township of Lingelihle outside Cradock. In September 1983, she had been approached by a Cradock High School teacher, Matthew Goniwe and others, for advice on how to set up a civic association and on how to resist large rent and service charge increases in the township. Blackburn provided the group with information on committee structure and procedure and began negotiating with the Eastern Cape Administration Board about housing problems in Lingelihle.<sup>30</sup>

The establishment of the Cradock Residents' Association (CRADORA) by Goniwe and others in late 1983, precipitated large-scale state repression in the area. An attempted transfer and the subsequent dismissal of Goniwe by the Department of Education and Training triggered school boycotts and intensified community resistance. The government responded by banning meetings and establishing a strong police presence in the township. In March 1983, community leaders including Goniwe were detained under Section 28 of the Internal Security Act. What Blackburn was to describe as "a nightmare of detentions, assault and intimidation by the authorities" had begun.<sup>31</sup> Blackburn, assisted by Sash

<sup>29</sup>Chalmers, J. "A Sister Remembers..." *Sash* Vol.28 no.4 February, 1986 p3

<sup>30</sup>A862/D35 Blackburn, M. "Lingelihle/Cradock....1984", National Conference 1985, Sash Archives.

<sup>31</sup>Evening Post 2/1/86

members in Cape Eastern Region, responded to frequent reports of police brutality and calls for assistance in the months that followed. By mid-1984, Cradock's resistance and Blackburn's role in supporting it and other communities had spread nationwide, prompting the Minister of Law and Order Mr. Louis le Grange to warn Blackburn and the rest of the Black Sash to keep out of Cradock.<sup>32</sup>

Many of the strongest links between the Sash and other progressive organisations generally during this time, were established by individuals whose personal political involvement crossed organisational boundaries. This contributed to the exchange of information and ideas and led to many joint efforts. For example, Helen Zille, who was Editor of Sash for much of the late 1980s was also vice-chair of the EDC in Cape Town; Audrey Colemar, who sat on the Executive Committee of the Sash and the Transvaal Regional Committee for many years, was deeply involved in the work of the DPSC; and Sheena Duncan served as vice-chair of the SACC from July 1987.

When popular opposition erupted into political violence in late 1984, many regions found that all their resources were taken up with coping with immediate crises such as tracing detainees, taking statements, monitoring events and providing legal advice. Because of its established links with the UDF and its affiliates, the Sash tended to perceive the political violence of the period more from the perspective of these groups than it might otherwise

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<sup>32</sup>Blackburn, M. "In Cradock" Sash Vol.27 no.2 August, 1984 p30. A862/Lcl/4 Minutes, Transvaal General Purposes Committee 27/8/1984, Sash Archives.

have done. Furthermore, the pressure of events, the brutality of the state's reaction, the horror of township violence and the confusion surrounding political developments, made it difficult for the Sash to assess its involvement dispassionately or to debate its precise political role at the time.

When a State of Emergency was declared in 36 magisterial districts from midnight on 20th July 1985, political pressure on the Sash intensified. The organisation called an emergency national meeting on 9th August in Johannesburg to decide on priorities and strategic responses to an increasingly fraught political situation. Delegates decided that because political conflict appeared to take different forms in the various regions, the Sash could not adopt a national strategy. Headquarters agreed that each region would be responsible for responding to the crisis in its own area.<sup>33</sup> The Conference did not discuss the Sash's political response to the unrest, preferring to focus primarily on immediate strategic considerations like the formation of crisis committees, concern for children caught up in violence and a renewed commitment to court monitoring.<sup>34</sup>

The Black Sash itself was affected by coercive state action under the State of Emergency, which put further pressures on the organisation. The May 1986 edition of *Sash* magazine was banned under Section 11 of the Emergency regulations and a number of Sash members were imprisoned in the waves of detentions that

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<sup>33</sup>A862/Lcl/4 Minutes of the Transvaal General Purposes Committee 21/8/1985, Sash Archives.

<sup>34</sup>A862/Lba/1.7-1.8 Cape Western Region Newsletter, August 1985, Sash Archives.

swept the country. The Vice-Chair of Cape Eastern, Sandy Stewart, was detained, as were three key members of Albany Region, Ann Burroughs, Louise Vale and Priscilla Hall.<sup>35</sup> Pretoria Chair Annica van Gylswyk was among the handful of Sash members detained in the Transvaal. After six weeks in detention, she was given the choice of further incarceration followed by charges and a deportation order, or "voluntary" departure to her native Sweden. She elected to leave, ending 30 years of residence in South Africa.<sup>36</sup>

At the most general level, the Sash understood its main role in relation to the political conflict, as being the long-standing one of defending the vulnerable from state repression. This meant that the organisation tended to perceive the government as the perpetrator of political conflict rather than understanding the conflict as symptomatic of a powerful challenge to state authority. The Sash's strategic response to the mounting unrest was also influenced by the fact that it used its existing alliances and resources to support those who came to it for help. Thus the Sash's role in establishing crisis centers nationwide after 1984 involved cooperation with established allies like the PFP, UDF, DPSC, and the SACC. The Sash's organisational resources meant that it involved itself primarily in monitoring, providing legal advice and information on legislation, and helping refer people in need to concerned organisations like the Red Cross or Child Welfare.

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<sup>35</sup>A862/Lba/1.9 HQ Circular 5/9/1986, Sash Archives.

<sup>36</sup>"Annica Hakandotter van Gylswyk" *Sash* Vol.29 no.3 November, 1986 p27

### THE VIOLENCE DEBATE:

Behind the exhausting involvement in supporting those caught up in political unrest and state action after 1984, lurked a growing uncertainty about the Sash's role in relation to popular resistance. This became apparent when certain members began to demand that the Sash define its political position by asserting its liberal identity regardless of whether it corresponded to the political activities of the extra-parliamentary left. This liberal challenge was most intense in the Transvaal Region, where it had originated among some senior Sash members. Prominent among this group was the Editor of Sash magazine, Jill Wentzel, who had been a member of the Liberal Party in the 1950s and 1960s, and who was closely associated with the liberal SAIRR.

As early as 1981, Wentzel had used the medium of Sash magazine to criticise what she saw as the emergence of neo-Marxist thinking in the Sash. As extra-parliamentary opposition gathered momentum in the early 1980s, Wentzel repeatedly warned that liberals in South Africa, because of their long-standing desire to overcome apartheid, were in danger of being corrupted by organisations on the left who shared a common abhorrence of apartheid but not a common alternative vision of political justice. She urged liberals in the early 1980s to have the courage of their convictions even when this meant criticising anti-apartheid organisations.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Wentzel J. "The Liberal Slide-Away" in SAIRR Liberalism and the Middle Ground Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1986. Minutes, Transvaal General Purposes Committee 17/3/1982, Jill Wentzel's personal papers.

Involvement in the political activities of many progressive organisations after 1983, altered the political perspectives of many Sash members. Many began to subscribe to the relatively radical political agendas of UDF affiliates such as the DPSC or JODAC. The first real indication for the Sash that traditional liberalism no longer formed the foundation of many members' political perspectives came in 1984, when Joyce Harris submitted an editorial she had written for Sash magazine to the Sash Executive Committee for approval. The editorial criticised the behavior of some township activists for being "lawless", and was rejected because some Committee members objected to the use of this term. Harris was extremely taken aback, noting:

I was shattered to find myself so out of step with an organisation to which I have belonged for thirty years and whose principles I have always thought I was able to reflect.<sup>38</sup>

Jill Wentzel subsequently inserted her own article in place of an editorial in the August 1984 edition of Sash, focusing on a critique of the retributive and coercive violence that was emerging among black communities. In it she accused the Sash of being "more sympathetic to the reasoning behind left-wing violence than we are to the reasoning behind right-wing violence."<sup>39</sup> In the Sash editorial in November 1984, Wentzel went on to explicitly link the UDF with emerging coercive dimensions of "the struggle", and warned that the potential for dictatorship existed on the left. When challenged by Sash members, Wentzel vigorously defended her

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<sup>38</sup>Harris, J. "Discussion Paper" (undated 1985?), Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection. Interview with Joyce Harris, Johannesburg, 21/4/89.

<sup>39</sup> Wentzel, J. "Trying to Diffuse(sic) Violence" Sash Vol.27 no.2 August, 1984 p2



position, accusing the UDF and COSAS of making inflammatory speeches and of failing to condemn retributive killings.<sup>40</sup> At the same time Wentzel led an attack on the book Repression in a Time of Reform, which Transvaal Region had published in cooperation with the UDF and some of its affiliates in November. Wentzel argued that the book was one-sided, emotive and not factually correct.<sup>41</sup> She claimed that it failed to admit to violent coercion within townships and described it as a "fascist document" which endorsed retributive violence.<sup>42</sup>

Although the challenge led by Wentzel was concerned with the Sash's liberal integrity in the face of potentially authoritarian behavior on the part of the mass democratic movement, it consolidated around the issue of political violence. For many members, the Sash's attitude towards emerging township violence became the litmus test of the organisation's liberal identity. Through this debate the Sash tried to define its political role in relation to the popular challenge to the authority of the government.

As early as September 1984, criticism from certain liberals in Johannesburg that the Sash's Natal Coastal Region was taking a consistently partial view of violence between UDF and Inkatha

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<sup>40</sup>Letters: Mary Burton to Jill Wentzel 4/1/1985 and Jill Wentzel to Mary Burton, 28/1/1985, Jill Wentzel's personal papers.

<sup>41</sup>A862/Lcl/4 Minutes, Transvaal General Purposes Committee 28/11/84, Sash Archives.

<sup>42</sup>HO Circular no.1/1985, 28/1/1985, Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

groups in the area,<sup>43</sup> prompted Sash President Sheena Duncan to try to clarify the organisation's official attitude to violence. In a letter to all regions, Duncan emphasised that the Sash was an avowedly non-violent organisation.<sup>44</sup> She warned members that the Sash should not be tempted into accepting any kind of "just war" policy with regard to violent attacks on the state, although individual members were at liberty to subscribe to this belief. She went on to affirm that the only violence the Sash was not obliged to condemn was unplanned and spontaneous violence. Duncan's attempts to clarify Sash policy did little to resolve the emerging divisions over the organisation's political identity and role, which continued to coalesce around the issue of condemning opposition violence.

By the time delegates met for the 1985 National Conference, two opposing factions had emerged. The first consisted of members who felt the Sash could not condemn violence on the left in the same terms as it condemned state violence. This group was broadly representative of members who understood the Sash primarily as an organisational vehicle for anti-apartheid activities rather than as a defender of liberal values. Some were relatively young, with a political heritage of late 1970s student activism and trade unionism that drew inspiration from neo-Marxist rather than liberal theory. Many were dedicated political activists who also owed their loyalty to emerging "progressive" organisations such as the DPSC, JODAC and the UDF. They had often been directly

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<sup>43</sup>A862/Lcl/4 Minutes, Transvaal General Purposes Committee 5/9/1984, Sash Archives.

<sup>44</sup>Letter: National President to all members of the Black Sash, November 1984, Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

involved in helping the victims of state violence and been deeply moved by the suffering they witnessed at the hands of the security forces and the apartheid regime as a whole.

This group argued that although all violence was wrong, township violence was far less morally blameworthy because it took place within the "structural violence" of apartheid. Thus they refused to openly condemn violence that occurred in the course of constructing a political challenge to the state, notably the horrific necklace killings of suspected collaborators. As Natal Coastal Chair Ann Colvin wrote in a paper for the National Conference:

...for me, there is simply no equation between the retaliatory violence of the oppressed and the systematic violence of apartheid....I don't believe that I can, in all fairness, extract the violence of "lawless" acts and evaluate it in isolation from the social and historical matrix out of which these acts arose, nor from the social forces and determinants that shaped them.<sup>45</sup>

Opposing this way of thinking were Sash members whose liberalism had been nurtured in the context of the SAIRR and the Liberal Party of the 1950s and 1960s. They understood the Sash as first and foremost a liberal organisation and had never diluted their liberal beliefs for the sake of specific strategic victories, even those against apartheid. They believed that capitulation to any logic of violence by the Sash would signal the collapse of its liberal foundations. These members regarded township violence as at best random and at worst fascist and demanded that the Sash condemn it regardless of the insensitivity this might show

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<sup>45</sup>Colvin, A. "Discussion Paper on Violence" National Conference 1985, Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

towards the anti-apartheid struggle. They demanded that the Sash retain a constant standard of political morality even if this meant (as it had done so many times before) political marginalisation and strategic isolation.

The violence debate raged on throughout 1985 at Special Meetings, workshops and Regional Conferences, with intense lobbying on both sides. As it centered on conflicting understandings of the political character and role of the Black Sash, it proved to be a bitter and almost insoluble issue. A Draft Statement on violence produced by Transvaal Region for the 1986 National Conference, failed to gain unanimous approval and was subsequently handed to the new Headquarters Region, Cape Western, to try to resolve.

In December 1986, over two years after the debate began, the Sash finally issued an official statement on violence. This did little more than admit that disagreement existed within the Sash over how to respond to township violence and committed the organisation to helping to eliminate all violence.<sup>46</sup> By this time, the debate had died down. This was partly due to a reduction in political violence, a decline in optimism regarding the strength of popular opposition, and Jill Wentzel having terminated her active involvement with the Sash. This painful and divisive debate did however encourage the Sash to make significant progress after mid-1986 in securing and reaffirming its independent political identity and in developing non-violent strategies that proved politically effective.

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<sup>46</sup>"The Black Sash Statement on Violence" *Sash* Vol.29 no.4 February, 1987 p30

## THE FORM OF BLACK SASH ACTIVISM AFTER 1984:

### NON-VIOLENCE AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE:

The horrors of political violence in the 1980s and the divisiveness of the internal debate over the Sash's attitude to violence, encouraged it to explore non-violent strategies after 1984. This was symptomatic of the Sash's wish to develop valid and effective opposition to the apartheid state while still preserving respect for the ideal of the rule of law.

Cape Western Region was the first to try to develop opposition strategies that offered an alternative to violent confrontation, with its publication in October 1984 of a booklet entitled "From Anger and Anxiety to Constructive Action". The booklet was a direct response to the political violence of that year and it explored non-violent ways in which people (particularly concerned whites) could contribute to justice and democracy in South Africa. In 1985 both Cape Western and Transvaal Regions followed up this theme by holding discussions and workshops on non-violence.

In the Transvaal Region, non-violent strategies dovetailed with an exploration of civil disobedience, pioneered by Sheena Duncan. Duncan had developed sophisticated views on civil disobedience, partly as a result of her Christian beliefs, which had made her a "total committed pacifist".<sup>47</sup> Her belief in the importance of civil disobedience increased as violence grew and she noted the

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<sup>47</sup>A862/Jcg/4 Sheena Duncan's Statement to the Delmas Treason Trial, p23 of transcript, Sash Archives. Interview with Sheena Duncan, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989.

ongoing corruption of the rule of law in South Africa. Although her work in the Johannesburg Advice Office had given Duncan a thorough understanding of the abuse of the rule of law by the government, she was deeply concerned that respect for the idea of the rule of law should be preserved in South Africa. She believed that civil disobedience was a form of protest that allowed for this, and at the Sash's 1985 National Conference she urged that it be one of the most important matters on the national agenda.

In March 1986, Duncan attracted public attention by advocating civil disobedience in her Presidential address to the Black Sash National Conference. This was prompted in part by her conviction that the pass laws were on the verge of collapse and required little more than passive non-cooperation to make them unworkable. Underlying this was the belief that civil disobedience was the only means of confronting apartheid laws while retaining the true spirit of the rule of law in South Africa. She thus argued:

Civil disobedience must not be entered into where the law offer redress. It is a last resort. In South Africa the law does not offer redress for the many gross violations of civil liberties and human rights which are part of the laws for this country.<sup>48</sup>

On a strategic level various Sash members were encouraged to engage in civil disobedience, and towards the end of the decade a number were arrested for various acts of defiance. However the Sash as such never formally embarked on any campaigns of civil disobedience. This was primarily a result of Duncan's conviction that an act of civil disobedience was a matter for the individual

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<sup>48</sup>Star 16/3/1986

conscience, but also because the Sash recognised and accepted that some of its members would be unwilling or unable to take part in such activities.

#### THE CAMPAIGNS FOR CHILDREN:

One of the most effective ways in which the Black Sash addressed the issues of political violence and state repression after 1984, was through its campaigns on behalf of children. Although the specific focus of these campaigns emerged out of the practical preoccupations of the Black Sash during this period, they reflected the organisation's concern with the implications for South African society as a whole of the generalised decay of the rule of law.

By early 1986, the Sash had become deeply concerned about the health and well-being of children caught up in the political violence that was sweeping the country. Evidence gathered by the advice offices and Sash monitors pointed to the brutalisation of a whole generation of township children who were growing up in an environment where violence was endemic. In many townships, children under 18 years old had formed the vanguard of the popular rebellion and had also become a specific target of state repression. At the Black Sash's National Conference in 1986, regional reports detailed the high incidence of ill-treatment of children nationwide at the hands of the police and army.<sup>49</sup> Most regions agreed that there appeared to be widespread arbitrary detention and harassment of children, often involving verbal and physical violence.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>A862/D36 Minutes, National Conference 1986, Sash Archives.

<sup>50</sup>Inter alia. Douglas-Jones, I. and Oettle, G. "The Children's Emergency" Sash Vol.29 no.1 May, 1986 pp.13-15

Apart from the suffering of minors at the hands of the state, the Sash also feared that an entire generation of children was being tutored in a culture of violence through their exposure to conditions in many black townships. Thus Sheena Duncan asked in her 1986 Presidential Address:

How does one cure these young people who lust to kill and burn and for whom hatred is the staff of life....?<sup>51</sup>

The Sash decided at its 1986 National Conference that its organisational focus for the coming year would be "Children at Risk" and convened a national committee to coordinate the campaign. This focus took various forms in the different regions and included a 33-page "Memorandum on the Suffering of Children in South Africa".<sup>52</sup> The memorandum, which attracted much public attention, contained affidavits from children alleging police brutality and noted:

The ill-treatment ladelled out to children is a frightening symptom of a disease which may have already progressed beyond cure.<sup>53</sup>

The memorandum was well publicised by the press and drew fire from the Commissioner of Police who said it consisted of "unsubstantiated allegations".<sup>54</sup>

By late 1986 the work of both the Sash and the DF3C confirmed

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<sup>51</sup>Duncan, S. "Presidential Address" *Sash* Vol.29 no.1 May, 1986 p2

<sup>52</sup>A862/Jcn "Memorandum on the Suffering of Children in South Africa", Sash Archives.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.* and *Star* 15/10/1986

<sup>54</sup>A862/D37 Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1987, Sash Archives.



that hundreds of children had been detained under the Emergency regulations and that many were being held in harsh circumstances. At the time members of the Transvaal Region were searching for a focus upon which to build a campaign against the government's response to popular opposition, and seized upon the idea of a focus upon children in detention.<sup>55</sup> In October 1986, Transvaal Region initiated a campaign aimed at securing the release of hundreds of children believed to be in detention at the time. It was strongly supported in this by the DPSC, which not only provided valuable information and resources but was particularly responsible for focusing world attention on the campaign.

The Sash decided to try to involve a wide range of opposition organisations in the campaign, and on 13th November a "Free the Children Alliance" was launched in Johannesburg. By December, twenty-seven organisations, including the partially state-funded Child Welfare Society, were part of the alliance. The campaign gained momentum in the run-up to Christmas, with extensive coverage of its activities by the international media.

The Sash had hoped that the "Free the Children" campaign's focus on the plight of minors would encourage South Africans to put their political and racial prejudices aside and come out in support of the rule of law. However, despite providing an ideal focus for the media and mobilising strong opposition within the international community, the campaign failed to reach as many white South Africans as expected. This was partly because the official media

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<sup>55</sup>Interview with Jill de Vlieg, Johannesburg, 12/12/1990

had emphasised the role of children in instigating township violence, and emphasised the point with horrifying television footage of atrocities in the townships. This had helped harden attitudes among even liberal whites, who felt that the simple release of all those under 18 years in detention was perhaps too naive a solution. Thus Denis Beckett, the Editor of Frontline magazine, commented on addresses at the launch of the Free the Children campaign:

We heard of the special vulnerability of detained children, but only one speaker even hinted at the not wholly irrelevant factor that childish hands have also proved capable of jamming people's heads into tyres and turning them into charcoal.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the apathetic response of most whites, the Free the Children campaign prompted strong international criticism and the government, embarrassed by the publicity, had released the majority of children by the time the campaign had run its course.<sup>57</sup>

#### CAPITAL PUNISHMENT AND THE RULE OF LAW:

The Sash's attempts to wrestle with the corruption of the rule of law in South Africa manifested in a large-scale campaign against capital punishment in 1988. The Sash had had a long-standing aversion to capital punishment, based on the belief that no society should sanction premeditated killing, and reinforced by the belief that no judicial conviction could ever be absolutely secure.

However, much of the impetus for the 1988 campaign came from

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<sup>56</sup>Beckett, D. "The Liberal Role in South Africa's Collapse" Frontline Vol.6 no.8 February, 1987 p37.

<sup>57</sup>Interview with Ethel Walt, Johannesburg, 10/12/1990

the fact that by 1987, people were beginning to stand trial for their parts in murders committed in the course of the 1984-1986 unrest. In particular, public attention was focused in 1988 on the so-called "Sharpeville Six" who had been sentenced to death for their parts in the murder of the Deputy Mayor of Lekoa in September 1984. This case aroused particular interest worldwide because the accused were convicted under the principle of "common purpose", whose underlying rationale was that an accomplice or instigator might be found as guilty of the crime as the actual perpetrator.

Unease over the general criminalisation of acts of violence that took place in a political context, together with the Sash's ongoing opposition to the death sentence, prompted the organisation to launch its campaign. The mainstay of the campaign was the re-establishment of the Society for the Abolition of the Death Penalty in South Africa (SADPSA) which had been active in the late 1960s and early 1970s under the leadership of the late law Professor Barend van Niekerk. The Sash mobilised other concerned groups, and on 5th November SADPSA was relaunched in Johannesburg, with Cape Western Chair Beverly Runciman as National Secretary and Sheena Duncan as a Patron. The various regions of the Sash went on to launch regional chapters of SADPSA nationwide.

Other dimensions of the campaign against the death penalty included an in-depth investigation into the nature of capital punishment in South Africa in the hope of conveying its more brutal dimensions to the public. Transvaal Region commissioned a study of the lives of a handful of death row prisoners which was

published in book form as: Inside South Africa's Death Factory. The book explored each prisoner's background, their crimes, the circumstances of their convictions and the conditions of their lives on death row. The Black Sash also compiled, through its fieldworkers and court monitors, information which indicated that serious social deprivation, usually linked to apartheid, was a significant characteristic of the lives of many prisoners on death row. The Sash's research also cast doubts on the security of many convictions and the workings of the South African judicial process. For example, the Albany Region Court Researcher noted in a 1989 Conference paper that since September 1988, three East Cape men on death row had been set free after they were found not guilty by the Appeal Court.<sup>58</sup>

The Sash also stimulated public awareness over the issue of capital punishment through activities like a human rights film festival and Parliamentary questions. It also publicised uncomfortable information such as the fact that South Africa had one of the highest rates of capital punishment in the world, with the gallows at Pretoria Central Prison being capable of hanging seven people simultaneously. In a letter to President P.W. Botha in June 1988, Sash President Mary Burton appealed for a review of the death penalty and for clemency for prisoners on death row, including the "Sharpeville Six" and four policemen sentenced to death for murder. She received a courteous reply from Botha who said he had taken note of the contents of the letter "with interest" and had referred it to the Minister of Justice.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Orpen, B. "Death Sentence for Politically-related Crimes in the Eastern Cape" 1989 National Conference. Personal papers.

On 2nd February 1990, in his opening address to Parliament, State President F.W. de Klerk announced that the death penalty "which had been the subject of intensive discussion" would be reformed. Its use would be restricted, and an automatic right of appeal would be granted all those sentenced to death. All executions were to be suspended until Parliament decided on the new proposals.<sup>60</sup> It was likely that this decision to review the legal and political dimensions of capital punishment in South Africa resulted in no small part from the campaign initiated by the Black Sash.

#### THE RECOVERY OF A WHITE CONSTITUENCY:

The Black Sash's involvement with white South Africans after 1984 illustrated the development of a more sophisticated approach to its traditional constituency. Although the Sash had begun as a pressure group fighting for the interests of a sector of the white population, it had become progressively marginalised from white politics as support for the NP government grew throughout the 1960s and 1970s. However, by 1984, the Sash noticed political realignments within the white population and a growing disaffection with apartheid, which opened the way for possible political initiatives.

The Sash also extended its political involvement with white South Africans after 1984 by working closely with opposition groups who had their bases in the white community. This strategic

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<sup>59</sup>Letter: Mary Burton to the State President 20/6/1988, reproduced in Sash Vol.31 no.2 September, 1988 p43

<sup>60</sup>Sunday Times 4/2/1990

cooperation was facilitated by the fact that up to 1990, apartheid formed the common enemy of organisations across a fairly broad political spectrum. As a result, the Sash became involved in a number of successful campaigns with other opposition groups. These included working closely with the ECC on various campaigns against militarisation, such as the "Fast for a Just Peace" campaign in 1985, and "Working for a Just Peace" in 1986. The Sash also joined ad hoc groupings to address topical issues, such as the "Votes for All" alliance in Cape Town just prior to the 1987 general elections, and the "Coalition for the Right to Know" which was established in the Transvaal following the 1986 State of Emergency.

#### THE SASH'S ORGANISATIONAL RENEWAL:

The Sash also became more involved with white South Africans in the second half of the 1980s through experiencing an unprecedented influx of new members, coinciding roughly with successive declarations of States of Emergency. Thus Cape Western's membership grew from 400 in February 1985, to 650 in February 1987.<sup>61</sup> Transvaal Region's membership rose from 429 at the end of 1985, to 855 by late 1988.<sup>62</sup> On the simplest organisational level, this growth strengthened the smaller regions like Border and Cape Eastern and led to the formation of new regions and branches. In Cape Western, the Plumstead and Somerset West Branches, which had been dormant for many years, were resurrected in 1986, and in January 1987 a South Cape Branch

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<sup>61</sup>"Report on Cape Western Workshop on Democratic Organisation", Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

<sup>62</sup>Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1989. Personal papers.

was formally constituted.

The new members who flooded into the Sash after 1984 were distinct from the established membership in many respects. They tended to be younger than the average Sash member and most joined not simply as a gesture of support but to become more politically involved. As a result, pressure developed, particularly in Transvaal and Cape Western, for the Sash to restructure itself so as to be able to respond more adequately to the needs of a larger, more active membership. The Sash's traditional hierarchical structure, which had allowed a small core of active members to operate within the context of a large passive membership, came in for increasing criticism. In addition, many Sash members' experience of the mass democratic movement led them to demand a review of the Sash's own democratic credentials.

At a special workshop on "Sash Today and Tomorrow" in Johannesburg in October 1986, Transvaal Region discussed how to reach and involve new members, promote a sense of belonging, and increase organisational coherence. It was decided that, in order to base the region on more democratic principles, the structure and functioning of its long-standing governing body, the Transvaal General Purposes Committee, would be revised. The approximately 30 members of this relatively ad hoc committee stood down, and it was replaced by a Regional Council with one year's tenure, to be formally elected at the region's Annual General Meetings.

In August 1986, Cape Western also initiated a critical review of its organisational structures. Cape Western had become

Headquarters Region in 1986, with Mary Burton taking over from Sheena Duncan as National President, and the extra work that had resulted provided an additional incentive for the region to decentralise. Cape Western encouraged more participation at branch level and insured branch representation on the Regional Council. All regions also tried to involve more members in Sash activities by establishing various interest groups which allowed members to become involved in the specific activities that best suited them. Thus, by early 1989, Transvaal Region had an Urban Removals and Homelessness Group, a Group Areas Committee, a Media Sub-committee, a Court Monitoring Committee, a Removals Committee, an Education Committee and a Demonstrations Committee.

An important change in the character of the Sash membership after 1984 was that an increasing number of Sash women were employed full-time. A 1986 survey of the Rosebank Branch of Cape Western showed that 80 per cent of the membership worked full time as opposed to 40 per cent nationally.<sup>63</sup> To accommodate members in salaried employment, most regions and branches shifted their traditional morning meetings to the evenings. However, it was doubtful whether the upper echelons of the Sash could accommodate wage-earning women because of the simple pressure of Sash work. Thus in Cape Western between 1987 and 1989, while 55 per cent of Branch Executives were wage-earning, only 27 per cent of Regional Executives were.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Sutherland, C. The Role of Whites and Fundamental Change in South Africa: A Case Study of the Black Sash Unpublished BA Hons. Thesis, University of Cape Town, February 1987



The growing popularity of the Sash as a political vehicle for white South Africans precipitated a challenge regarding its exclusively female membership. To conform with the provisions of the Fundraising Act, the Sash had made its male donors associate members in 1978. Most of these men accepted this expediency for what it was and were content with their inferior status which denied them office and voting rights at national level. However, after 1984 some men joined the organisation because they felt it was their political home, while others were employed by various regions as fieldworkers. By the end of the 1980s some began to demand equal status with women in the organisation. At the Sash's 1990 National Conference, a paper by an associate member of Pretoria Branch challenged the Sash's attitude towards male membership, particularly in the light of its professed opposition to sexism.<sup>65</sup>

The challenge to the Sash to open its membership to men arose partly out of the fact that it was developing a more prominent political role in the white community as a whole. It no longer relied for its political survival on the firmly-held convictions of a handful of white women, who had both the time and money to assert their beliefs despite the political isolation of their organisation. Not only was the socio-economic base for the Sash's exclusively female membership eroding, but more and more whites began to see the Sash as a vehicle for their own political ideals.

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<sup>64</sup>Paper to 1990 National Conference. "Black Sash Western Cape Region and Wage-Earning Women", Personal papers.

<sup>65</sup>Harris, V. "The Black Sash, Associate Membership and the Question of Gender", National Conference 1990, Personal papers.

The question of male membership was unresolved by 1990, but because it was so intimately tied to the Sash's political identity and role, it was likely to become an important issue in the new decade.

CONCERNED CITIZENS' GROUP AND THE FIVE FREEDOMS FORUM:

After 1984, the Sash, particularly in the Transvaal, began to focus specifically on attempts to mobilise white South Africans behind its political banner. In September 1985 Sheena Duncan, then the Black Sash National President, called together a number of organisations with strong roots in the white community, with a view to making political inroads among the white population. These organisations, which included the Black Sash, SACC, SACBC, DPSC, JODAC, ECC and the PFP, agreed that many whites were feeling let down by the government and were receptive to ideas for political change.

In an effort to address this white constituency, these organisations formed the 'Concerned Citizens' Group in Johannesburg in late 1985. The Group aimed to respond to the political uncertainties and fears emerging in the white community, and formed sub-groups to coordinate different approaches. This included a meetings group which held informal public meetings in the white suburbs of Johannesburg on subjects of general concern such as "What is Happening in the Townships?" and "The Economy - What Next?". The Group tried to inform whites, address their fears and above all persuade them that one person one vote was an acceptable alternative for South Africa.<sup>66</sup>

In September 1986, an open letter was sent to various organisations by SACC Secretary General Dr. Beyers Naude, New Nation Editor Zwelakhe Sisulu, and Geoff Budlender of the Legal Resources Center, suggesting they explore ways in which the white constituency could be prepared for a future democratic society.<sup>67</sup> The Black Sash was involved in following up this suggestion by helping to create a broad political initiative focused on the white population. This new political focus did not escape the attention of the government, who apparently feared it had revolutionary dimensions. In February 1987, President P.W. Botha alluded to the emerging front, claiming that he had evidence that the ANC was attempting to manipulate white organisations within it, including the Black Sash.<sup>68</sup> This was followed by a warning to the Sash from the Deputy Minister of Information, Dr. Stoffel van der Merwe, that it was in danger of being co-opted by the ANC. He reminded the Sash that:

The history of the twentieth century is littered with the bones of very well-intentioned people who were duped into co-operating with hard core revolutionaries.<sup>69</sup>

Despite these dire predictions, the coalition, called the Five Freedoms Forum (FFF) and incorporating organisations like NUSAS, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, JODAC, the National Education Union of South Africa, Wits Academic Staff

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<sup>66</sup>A962/D36 Transvaal Regional Report, National Conference 1986, Sash Archives.

<sup>67</sup>Smith, C. "The Black Sash and Other Organisations: The Five Freedoms Forum" Sash Vol.30 no.1 May, 1987 p29

<sup>68</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations: 1987/1988 Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1989 p697

<sup>69</sup>City Press 12/2/1987

Association, Jews for Social Justice and the Black Sash, was launched in Johannesburg in March 1987. At the launch, Sheena Duncan said that the FFF would try to give disillusioned whites: a vision of a peaceful future, to persuade them that there is a place for them in South Africa without apartheid, and that they have a role in achieving that society - they don't need to emigrate.<sup>70</sup>

The Sash played a major role in subsequent FFF campaigns, including a highly successful conference in Johannesburg in September 1987 entitled, "Towards Democracy: Whites in a Changing South Africa" which stimulated the growth of the Forum nationwide. By 1989, initiatives aimed at the white community had again become an important part of the Sash's work, and were being rewarded with a response that had not been as positive since the mid-1950s.

#### ALTERNATIVE CLAIMS TO POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND LEGITIMACY:

After 1984, the Sash had to come to terms with a number of political interests and initiatives that were not part of the surge in popular opposition behind the UDF. These frequently ambiguous political developments demanded that the Sash define its political identity in ways which the organisation found extremely challenging and occasionally divisive.

#### THE CONVENTION ALLIANCE:

In September 1985, PFP leader F. van Zyl Slabbert and President of Inkatha and Chief Minister of KwaZulu, M.G. Buthelezi, co-hosted a meeting to establish a "Convention Alliance" that would campaign

<sup>70</sup>Weekly Mail 13/3/87-19/3/1987

for a representative National Convention, committed to the creation of "one constitution, based on one citizenship in one country".<sup>71</sup> Joyce Harris attended the inaugural meeting as the Black Sash representative and, with the knowledge and approval of Sash President Sheena Duncan, was elected onto the steering committee to arrange for the launch of the Alliance. Other members of the Committee included businessmen, lawyers, academics, churchmen and representatives of both the PFP and the KwaZulu administration. Organisations that rejected involvement with the Alliance included the UDF, the NP and various trade unions.

Strong opposition soon emerged within the Sash to Harris's participation in the steering committee.<sup>72</sup> Harris was initially shocked that the Sash appeared to be rejecting the idea of a National Convention, which had been a mainstay of the organisation's strategy since the 1950s. Her own conviction that negotiation was the only viable solution to political conflict in South Africa had prompted Harris to gather together representatives of a broad spectrum of political groupings in her own informal "Constitution Group" in 1978. Despite numerous upsets, this Constitution Group had run until 1986. Upon hearing of the dissent, Harris wrote in a Circular to all regions:

It did not enter my mind that their might be opposition to the concept in the Black Sash.<sup>73</sup>

Some Sash members had simply rejected the Convention Alliance

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<sup>71</sup>SAIRR Survey of Race Relations 1985 op. cit. p565

<sup>72</sup>HQ Circular no.7/1985, 17/9/1985, Unprocessed MSS, Killie Campbell Africana Collection.

<sup>73</sup>A862/Lab/5 HQ Circular no.9/1985, 3/10/1985, Sash Archives.

as a gesture of solidarity with the UDF or because they rejected the idea of negotiating with KwaZulu while Inkatha pursued what they believed was a policy of violence against UDF affiliates in Natal. However, most members who opposed the Alliance did so as a result of a developing appreciation of the strategic importance of the distribution of power in South African society. Exposure to the democratic ideals of the UDF had sensitised many members to the realities of political power in South Africa.<sup>74</sup> They thus argued that while the objects of the Alliance were laudable, until there was a more equitable distribution of political power in society, the outcome of any convention might well be undermined by the same forms of inequality. This attitude indicated a willingness to reassess traditional liberal strategies in the light of a real concern for the actual distribution of power in South Africa at the time. Despite appeals from Harris for compromise, opinion against a convention remained steadfast. As a result Harris continued on the steering committee in her private capacity. As it was, the Convention Alliance was stillborn, unable to flourish in the prevailing climate of political polarisation.<sup>75</sup>

#### THE NATAL/KWAZULU INDABA:

In 1986 the Black Sash found itself internally divided over an attempt by moderates in Natal to establish a non-racial system of second-tier government in the Province. In April 1986, the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly and the Natal Provincial Council jointly convened a conference called the Natal/KwaZulu Indaba, to

<sup>74</sup>inter alia A862/Lab/5 HQ Circular no. 11/1985, 25/10/1985, Sash Archives.

<sup>75</sup>Cape Times 30/10/1985

try to establish broad political agreement on proposals for a single legislative body to govern the combined area of KwaZulu and Natal. The Indaba was dominated by moderates from the Natal Provincial Council, the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly and industry. Organisations on both the left and right refused to participate, including the NP, the CP, the HNP, the UDF, COSATU, and the NIC.<sup>76</sup>

Many Sash members, particularly in the two Natal regions, were dismayed at the Indaba initiative. Since the 1970s, animosity had developed between the Sash and the KwaZulu authorities, primarily over the alleged maladministration of Unemployment Insurance Fund benefits and social pensions in the homeland. The KwaZulu government resented the Sash's criticism of its administration, with the Minister of Health and Welfare, Dr. Frank Mdlalose, complaining in 1985 that "some of the white elite women pile scorn and venomous remarks on us."<sup>77</sup> Subsequent political alliances with the UDF and its affiliates hardened Natal Coastal Region's attitude towards the KwaZulu administration. Many Sash members in the region criticised Buthelezi for being a powerful ally of capitalist interests, and resented the fact that Inkatha's often violent suppression of progressive organisations had earned it a reputation for political moderation among whites in Natal.

In 1986 the Sash invited the KwaZulu Minister of Education and Culture Dr. Oscar Dhlomo, to address its National Conference on "the KwaNatal Option".<sup>78</sup> At the Conference many delegates were

<sup>76</sup>Cape Times 4/4/1986

<sup>77</sup>Star 14/4/1984

<sup>78</sup>Dhlomo, O. "The KwaZulu/Natal Option" Sash Vol.29 no.1 May, 1986 pp8-10

attracted by the Indaba's attempts to abandon the "homeland" status of KwaZulu as well as enforced ethnicity and racial segregation in the region. However, other delegates responded to Dr. Dhlomo's address by calling a special conference session to voice their misgivings about the Indaba. They feared that the sectional interests of Zulu nationalism were being promoted by the Indaba and that the effort was distracting attention from a national political solution for South Africa.<sup>79</sup>

By mid-1986, many leading members of Natal Coastal Region had begun to campaign against the Indaba. In an article in the May edition of Sash, a member argued that the Indaba promoted a federalist political solution, which both the UDF and ANC had rejected because it perpetuated the idea of ethnically-based political divisions. The article also endorsed the UDF claim that negotiations were impossible without the release of all political prisoners and detainees, the ending of the State of Emergency the dismantling of apartheid and the return of all exiles. It rejected the political interests convening the Indaba, concluding:

In order to be credible and democratic...the Indaba needs to begin without the designs of the defunct Provincial Council or a discredited bantustan government.<sup>80</sup>

An even more hardline position was taken by Natal Midlands Region, which produced a pamphlet in November 1987, designed to temper white enthusiasm for the Indaba. The pamphlet argued that "the Indaba proposals will simply perpetuate political instability and

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<sup>79</sup>A862/D36 Minutes, National Conference 1986, Sash Archives.

<sup>80</sup>Stevens,G "Some Other Obstacles to the Option" Sash Vol.29 no.1 May, 1986 p11



economic inequalities" and accused the process of pandering to the 'aggressive Zulu ethnic nationalism' of Inkatha, as well as to the sectionalist interests of the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly, the Natal Provincial Council and "powerful business and industrial interests (particularly the sugar industry)...."<sup>81</sup>

Many Sash members, particularly in Natal, did not share this perspective. Some were personal friends of Buthelezi or moved in social and business circles where political support for Inkatha was high. Many of these women were not sympathetic to the UDF's refusal to negotiate with any political groupings linked to the government and also felt marginalised as whites by the progressive movement's political agenda. While they objected to the racial basis of apartheid they did not agree with a revolutionary solution. These Sash members saw the Indaba as a means of overcoming racial discrimination in government with the minimum of bloodshed and socioeconomic upheaval.

These opposing attitudes towards the Indaba revealed that the Sash harboured divergent views on the precise nature of political justice. Thus while some members felt that eliminating racial discrimination was integral to establishing justice in South Africa, others believed that limits on the activities of capitalist interests were necessary as well. The Sash's traditional liberal concepts had always left it poorly equipped to respond to the alleged injustices of the economic system in South Africa. Thus there were strongly opposing views on the participation of

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<sup>81</sup>A862/D38, "Factsheet on the KwaNatal Indaba" National Conference 1988, Sash Archives.

capitalist interests in the Indaba.

On the question of ethnicity in politics, the Sash was equally at sea. While the organisation unequivocally opposed racism, it had few insights into an appropriate political response to the actual ethnic divisions within South African society. In many ways the Indaba provided a uniquely South African challenge to the liberal understanding of both economic and political justice. The deep divisions within the Sash over the issue indicated some of the limitations of its conventional liberal political solutions in a society deeply divided along the lines of class and race. The Sash avoided debating the Indaba at national level and was largely content to let the issue remain one of local interest in Natal. Thus the issues at the heart of the Indaba debate remained unresolved and promised to haunt the Sash, particularly after the demise of apartheid.

#### LOCAL CONFLICTS AND VIGILANTE FORCES:

The emergence of local political struggles, mainly characterised by the activities of vigilante forces, added a new dimension of complexity to the political configuration of South African society after 1984. The Sash evolved a variety of political opinions on the various local struggles it encountered, but in all cases it found itself with very few avenues for strategic response to the violence that infused most of these conflicts. As a non-violent and liberal organisation, the Black Sash had always found itself relatively impotent in political situations characterised by violence. The Sash encountered localised violent political conflict both in urban townships and in rural homeland areas after 1984.

The Sash was involved with violent racial conflict in the case of the Crossroads squatter camp in Cape Town. In the early 1980s, disputes within the Crossroads community, together with the massive influx of people into metropolitan Cape Town, led to a mushrooming of satellite camps around the original settlement, which became known as Old Crossroads. After 1983, political tensions within the settlement were exacerbated by selective government patronage, ongoing security force harassment, the activities of UDF-linked youth organisations, the establishment of private militia by various community leaders, and disputes over whether or not to move to the government settlement of Khayelitsha. All these factors contributed to intense power struggles within the greater Crossroads complex, which erupted into widespread violence in 1986.

By the mid-1980s the government regarded the Crossroads satellite camps as hotbeds of UDF-inspired sedition, from where groups of "comrades" proselytised against moving to Khayelitsha. In Old Crossroads, a powerful faction led by Johnson Ngxobongwana, regarded the "comrades" as a threat to its political authority. It also felt that by radicalising the satellite camps, the "comrades" were jeopardising the chances of Old Crossroads residents to extract concessions from the state. In May 1986, vigilantes from Old Crossroads, known as "witdoeke" launched a vicious attack on "comrades" in the satellite camps. South African security forces were widely alleged to have cooperated with the vigilantes in this assault. The ensuing violence destroyed many of

the satellite camps and left an estimated 100 dead and 70,000 homeless.<sup>82</sup>

Cape Western Region's involvement with Crossroads since the time of its formation had, by 1984, given it a healthy respect for the realpolitik that characterised the internal affairs of the settlement. The Sash unreservedly supported the squatters in their battles for residence and housing rights in Cape Town, but soon realised that there was little agreement within the camp on how these objectives were to be achieved. Cape Western Region became extremely wary of being co-opted into political conflict within Crossroads. Thus, when the region was asked by members of Johnson Ngxobongwana's "Old Crossroads" Committee to assist them in holding an election in 1985, it was reticent. Knowing Ngxobongwana's reputation for power-play and aware that it did not have the resources to adequately monitor an election, the region refused to help.<sup>83</sup> This decision was proved correct by subsequent reports of extortion in the course of the election and false claims by the Committee that it had the Sash's endorsement.<sup>84</sup>

Cape Western reacted to friction within Crossroads by trying to strengthen the unity of Crossroads residents against government policies. It tried to reconcile various factions, to coordinate the

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<sup>82</sup>Cole, J. Crossroads: The Politics of Reform and Repression 1976-1986  
Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987 p146.

<sup>83</sup>A862/D35 Cape Western Regional Report, National Conference 1985, Sash Archives.

<sup>84</sup>BC 668 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 28/10/85, Cape Western Archives.

political efforts of various groups, and to encourage consensus on political objectives. It played a significant role in the Crossroads Coordinating Committee, set up by the Red Cross to coordinate various welfare initiatives in the camp. Cape Western also began to resuscitate the Crossroads Support Group in April 1985.<sup>85</sup> Through this group the region tried to clear channels of communication between squatter groups and between various groups working in the camp, partly in an attempt to prevent welfare groups from being drawn into internal factional alliances. However the situation remained confused and the Sash realised that that irreconcilable differences existed between those who believed people should be encouraged to go to Khayelitsha and those who were completely against the move. The Sash noted in early 1985 that "the possibility of violence" existed.<sup>86</sup>

As violent incidents became more frequent in early 1986, the Sash complained that confusion was rife among welfare bodies and various squatter leaders. The organisation confined itself mainly to a monitoring role, and was particularly frustrated by the failure of the government to use its own means of coercion to act against the instigators of local violence. While wanting to respond to Crossroads "from our concern for justice and democracy" Cape Western was handicapped by fear of becoming involved in a political conflict it did not fully understand, and by its impotence in any context mediated by violence.

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<sup>85</sup>BC 688 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 25/3/1985 and 22/4/1985, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>86</sup>BC 688 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 29/4/1985, Cape Western Archives.

When violence exploded in Crossroads in May 1986, the Sash could do little beyond crisis intervention. It took affidavits and formed an ad hoc Squatter Support Group to try to coordinate the relief effort.<sup>87</sup> The region soon joined the chorus of voices alleging security force support for the "witdoeke" and pledged to support "the moral and legal right of those forcibly and violently removed from their homes to have access to that land without further delay...."<sup>88</sup> This was not achieved, as the land was sealed off and rebuilt for the use of Old Crossroads residents and thousands of refugees were forced to settle in Khayelitsha.

The Sash ultimately blamed the state for the violence and, along with many other concerned groups, accused it of acting to achieve "the fastest, cheapest, bloodiest 'forced removal' ever".<sup>89</sup> However, Cape Western Region in particular had recognised that there was a genuine conflict of interests in Crossroads, which it had found extremely difficult to adjudicate, particularly when those conflicts culminated in violence.

#### VIGILANTE FORCES LINKED TO HOMELAND ADMINISTRATIONS:

The Sash also encountered localised factional conflict between homeland administrations and other groups in Natal, the Cape and the Transvaal. In the Transvaal, TRAC encountered the use of vigilantes by both the homelands of Bophuthatswana and KwaNdebele to break the resistance of black communities to

<sup>87</sup>BC 688 A Minutes, Cape Western Regional Council, 26/5/1986, Cape Western Archives.

<sup>88</sup>ibid.

<sup>89</sup>A862/D37 Cape Western Regional Report, National Conference 1987, Sash Archives.

removals and incorporation.<sup>90</sup> In both cases, the homeland administrations used violence and intimidation to suppress resistance to their authority.<sup>91</sup>

The Sash, and TRAC in particular, found that there was little that could be done in the face of violent coercion by homeland authorities. This was illustrated in the organisation's work with the people of Braklaagte, who were subject to a reign of terror by vigilantes linked to the Bophuthatswana government, when they resisted incorporation into the homeland. When TRAC workers attempted to help the people of Braklaagte to defend themselves against these waves of violent repression, both it and the Black Sash were declared unlawful in terms of Bophuthatswana's Internal Security Act on 13th July 1989.<sup>92</sup> The Sash was increasingly helpless in the battle against homeland administrations who exhibited a flagrant disregard for democracy and the rule of law and willingness to use coercive violence to achieve their objectives.

In Natal, the political interests of the Inkatha organisation clashed with those of the UDF to create a highly complex local political scenario, infused with violence, to which the Sash found it difficult to respond. The most devastating violence in Natal between Inkatha supporters and "comrades" loosely allied to the

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<sup>90</sup>Yawitch, J. "Kwandebele - A Rural Trojan Horse" *Sash* Vol.29 no.2 August, 1986 pp24-5

<sup>91</sup>"Moutse" TRAC Newsletter no.10 April 1986. Haysom, N. *Mabangalala: The Rise of Right-Wing Vigilantes in South Africa* Johannesburg: Center for Applied Legal Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986.

<sup>92</sup>SAIRR *Survey of Race Relations 1989/1990* Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1991 p473

UDF, occurred after 1986 in the townships surrounding Pietermaritzburg in the Natal Midlands.<sup>93</sup>

The roots of the Midlands violence lay in Inkatha's resistance to the emergence of youth groups linked to the UDF in the area in 1983. These groups represented a challenge to Inkatha's authority and legitimacy among a population that was already disaffected by growing unemployment and widespread poverty. Many of the traditional Chiefs in the area established "impis" to root out UDF sympathisers, becoming known as "warlords". A spiral of violence began, fuelled by criminality, a vicious cycle of revenge killings and the ambiguous role played by the South African security forces. By early 1989, the Pietermaritzburg violence had claimed over 1,300 lives,<sup>94</sup> over 3,000 homes had been destroyed and more than 30,000 people had been made into refugees.<sup>95</sup>

The small Natal Midlands Region of the Black Sash initially found it difficult to respond to the conflict, in part due to widespread confusion over its exact nature and the relative detachment of the region from local townships and rural communities.<sup>96</sup> However, when hundreds of refugees began to stream into Pietermaritzburg, the region established a Refugees Sub-Committee to try to help them. Working closely with a coalition of organisations in the Pietermaritzburg Crisis Committee and with the Pietermaritzburg Association for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA), the

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<sup>93</sup>Aitchison, J. Numbering the Dead: Patterns in the Midlands Violence Pietermaritzburg: Center for Adult Education, 1988.

<sup>94</sup>Weekly Mail 21/4/1989-27/4/1989

<sup>95</sup>"Daily Life, Daily Death in Natal" Sash Vol.32 no.1 May, 1989 p5

<sup>96</sup>Interview with Marie Dyer, Pietermaritzburg, 30/5/1989



Committee tried to find short-term shelter for the so-called "displacees".<sup>97</sup> However, this welfare work soon took on a political dimension. Many of the displacees turned out not to be simple refugees, but politicised youth actively engaged in the political challenge to Inkatha, while others were exploiting the breakdown in law and order for their own ends. Confusion soon emerged in the Natal Midlands Region over the exact nature of its role in the conflict.

Because political conflict in the Pietermaritzburg area was infused with violence, there was no real political framework through which a liberal, non-violent organisation like the Sash could operate. The Sash thus became almost completely marginalised and found that most of its attempts at intervention were both dangerous and largely ineffectual. By early 1989, the small Natal Midlands Region was both despairing and emotionally drained by the scale of destruction, the levels of brutality it had encountered, and its inability to address these.

By the end of the 1980s, the Sash was urging its members and others to try to find long-term solutions to factional violence in Natal, which it feared might "be a precursor of future eruptions elsewhere in the country."<sup>98</sup> By mid-1990, this prediction had been born out, as violence between Inkatha loyalists and ANC supporters, together with the ambiguous role of the state, had begun to pose a significant threat to the formation of a democratic order in South Africa.

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<sup>97</sup>Interview with Peter Kerchoff, Pietermaritzburg, 19/5/1989

<sup>98</sup>"Daily Life, Daily Death in Natal" *Sash* Vol.32 no.1 May, 1989 p5

### IN THE WAKE OF APARTHEID:

The abandonment of apartheid by the NP government in early 1990, marked the end of the principal defining feature of the Sash's political protest. For some members of the organisation, it also marked the end of the Sash's political usefulness. This was particularly true of some members who had joined the Sash in the 1980s intending to use the organisation as a means of opposing apartheid. Many of these subsequently went on to find their political home with other political organisations such as the ANC. However, the Sash retained many members whose opposition to apartheid had rested on basic liberal beliefs, and who understood apartheid as only one example of the kind of political injustice they would continue to oppose.

It was clear that the Sash faced a difficult period of realignment and reconstruction after 1990. This chiefly involved determining whether the organisation could sustain its political momentum following the demise of apartheid. The Sash itself seemed convinced that it would continue with its activities. As early as March 1990, at its National Conference, the organisation specifically addressed political activities whose continuity had not been broken by President F.W. de Klerk's dramatic announcements of February of that year. This involved a focus on aspects of the Sash's activity that extended beyond its involvement with the struggle against apartheid itself, such as projects relating to homelessness and workers' rights.

The Sash was quick to recognise that the demise of apartheid would not necessarily put an end to problems like factional violence, and neither would it ease many of the deprivations of the economically vulnerable in South Africa. The organisation seemed determined to continue to address issues like these well into the 1990s. The Sash also recognised that it had the political experience and expertise to play an important role in any reconstruction of South Africa in the wake of apartheid. For example, many Sash members who had been involved in fighting removals had begun by 1990 to plan how lost land might be reclaimed for various communities.<sup>99</sup>

The February 1990 watershed also prompted the Sash to reassess the role of its advice offices. Despite their diminished role in dictating the nature of the Sash's political activities after 1984, the organisation's advice offices continued to function as a channel of communication between the Sash and many of the most powerless sectors of South African society. They remained an important source of information on political, social and economic developments in South Africa, and on the implications of legislation. Thus legal difficulties associated with issues like housing, unemployment, social pensions and citizenship had brought over 35,000 clients to the nine Sash advice offices nationwide in 1988.<sup>100</sup>

After 1990, the Sash began to explore ways in which its advice office work could be restored to a more prominent role in the

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<sup>99</sup>Interview with Ethel Walt, Johannesburg, 10/12/1990

<sup>100</sup>Pretorius, D. "Re-charging the Advice Offices" *Sash* Vol.32 no.1 May, 1989 p26

development of the organisation's larger political programme. In particular, the Sash visualised its advice offices as a valuable source of information and expertise for future policymakers hoping to unravel the social and economic dislocation caused by over 40 years of apartheid.<sup>101</sup> This involved re-establishing the advice offices at the foundation of the Black Sash's political identity, primarily through a commitment to a more overt and systematised relating of advice office cases to political issues.

Paradoxically, the Sash's liberalism had been revitalised by the surge in opposition to the NP government in the 1980s. The conditions of political flux after 1984 had encouraged the Sash to contextualise itself in relation to many forms of political activity, rather than simply to maintain its generalised anti-apartheid stand. It was apparent that the Sash continued to be engaged in the ongoing process of articulating its liberal political identity after 1990. The liberal concepts that had informed the founders of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League in 1955 had long ceased to provide a secure theoretical base for the organisation. When the abandonment of apartheid robbed the Sash of the rationality for much of its day-to-day functioning, it again faced a major reassessment of its political objectives in the light of its liberal values.

The Sash's central response to the abandonment of apartheid in early 1990, was to move towards a definition of itself as a "human rights" organisation. It seemed that this was at least the organisation's short-term direction, with Sash members beginning

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<sup>101</sup>Interview with Marj Brown, Johannesburg, 12/12/1990

to talk of the need for fighting for "second generation" human rights in South Africa, such as the right to housing and schooling. Although the organisation's talk of human rights studiously avoided the label "liberal", this particular emphasis affirmed the fact that the basis of the Black Sash's conception of justice continued to be a belief in the preservation of individual rights which lay at the foundation of liberal thought.

## CONCLUSION:

The history of the Black Sash illustrates that liberalism informed political activity in South Africa during a period in which it is commonly assumed to have declined almost completely. It also shows that the liberalism espoused by the Black Sash cannot be regarded simply as an extension of the Cape liberal tradition, although this tradition did form an important part of its political heritage. The Black Sash affirms the existence of an indigenous political liberalism, confronting and responding to the historical conditions in South Africa in the period 1955-1990. In the light of the history of the Black Sash it is also possible to look more generally, and from a more theoretical perspective, at the structure of its liberalism.

Most conventional perceptions of liberalism in South Africa fail to appreciate the dynamic character of liberalism within organisations like the Liberal Party<sup>1</sup> and the Black Sash. As the history of the Sash shows, the organisation's liberal concepts were constantly being challenged and revised in the light of changing historical circumstances and experiences. This element of political dynamism has been crucially missing from the general understanding of South African liberalism in the post-war period, and particularly after 1960. This has of course been in no small measure due to the scarcity of studies of active political liberalism during this time. However, it does mean that the conventional perceptions of South African liberalism require some

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<sup>1</sup>A notable exception is Everatt, D. The Politics of Nonracialism: White Opposition to Apartheid 1945-1960 Unpublished DPhil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1990

degree of revision. This conclusion will try to distil the central characteristics of the Black Sash's liberalism in order to cast some light on liberalism in modern South Africa.

Having said that the most distinctive characteristic of the Black Sash's liberalism is its dynamic nature, some suggestions may be offered as to the origins of this dynamism. There seem to be two broad components to the Sash's liberalism, namely an underlying morality, and a set of associated concepts such as "freedom of speech" and "democracy". These latter seem to be primarily historical and political expressions of the former. These two components appear to operate in a particular dialectical relationship, giving the Sash's liberalism a significant degree of conceptual flexibility and political dynamism.

The Black Sash's initial conceptual framework seems to have been derived primarily from the Western tradition of liberal individualism, modified by the more specific Cape liberal tradition, and infused with the humanitarianism of mission Christianity. Thus the Sash initially drew on a liberal heritage that had its roots in Hobbes, Locke and Mill, to portray the South African constitution as a form of social contract, designed to regulate the way in which political behavior was conducted. However, the limits placed on the meaning of the concept of "democracy" by the Sash in 1955, illustrated its adherence to the Cape liberal belief that this political form was properly the heritage of the "Europeans" and "Europeanised".

The Sash consistently made a political virtue out of its adherence to political ideas broadly associated with the Western liberal tradition. Thus for example, Jean Sinclair noted in her 1962 Presidential Address to the Sash:

The values, which are our standard, date back to A.D. 1215, to the Magna Carta - Chapter XXXIX states "No freeman shall be arrested, or detained in prison, or deprived of his freehold, or outlawed or banished or in any way molested; and we will not send forth against him, nor send against him, unless by the lawful judgement of his peers and by the law of the land." This is what we understand by the rule of law, this is our traditional way of life.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that the Sash's intellectual heritage meant that it initially drew on the concepts traditionally associated with both Western and Cape liberalism, the organisation's political experience soon led it to challenge and develop these ideas.

The Sash's articulation of liberal concepts was mediated by a liberal morality, rooted in a belief in the value of individual freedoms and rights. This strong and largely instinctive moral attitude informed the Sash's activities throughout its history. The organisation's own belief in the moral value of its actions was most apparent in the months immediately following its formation, when it lacked political experience and sophistication. During this time the Sash frequently alluded to its "morality" when trying to describe its political identity. The precise nature of this morality was poorly articulated, but the Sash believed that it lay at the very foundations of political discourse.

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<sup>2</sup>A862/D9 Sinclair, J. Presidential Address, National Conference 1962, Sash Archives.



While the political identity of the League was firmly embedded in the historical peculiarities of the time, it was clear that most of its members believed that the organisation drew its authority and legitimacy from a transcendent morality. Thus the first of the League's early principles, drawn up shortly after its formation, stated:

The League is a pressure group, to be used for the restoration and encouragement of political morality and the preservation of Constitutional Government.<sup>3</sup>

The first President of the Black Sash, Ruth Foley, commented on the organisation's identity in 1956 by noting:

We have learned that nothing is politically right which is morally wrong and the end of all political struggles is to establish morality as the basis for all legislation".<sup>4</sup>

The League never fully articulated the precise nature of its "morality", but tended to construct it in terms of Western liberal values. Thus a Sash member writing in the organisation's magazine in 1956 on "Political Morality and the Abuse of Power" noted:

Any short re-statement of the phrase "political morality" would probably be "short, simple and wrong". At the same time many people who are rooted in Western societies and who have the necessary facts at their disposal, acquire what might almost be called a knack, more or less developed, of recognizing the immoral features of political acts.<sup>5</sup>

The League believed that its concern for "morality" distinguished it from other political organisations, allowing it to claim that it stood for a set of universal political values, not sectional

<sup>3</sup>The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp Vol.1 no.1 January, 1956 p1

<sup>4</sup>Rogers,M. The Black Sash Johannesburg: Rotonews, 1956 p viii

<sup>5</sup>Welsh,A. "Political Morality and the Abuse of Power" in The Black Sash/Die Swart Serp Vol.1 no.4 April, 1956 p3

interests. Sash member Noel Robb has recalled of the Sash in the 1950s that:

we were free to oppose anything we thought was morally wrong or a diminution of anybody's rights, and political parties never are, they've always got an axe to grind, they've got to get votes.<sup>6</sup>

The Black Sash's growing political sophistication after 1955 meant that the expression of its identity became couched in progressively more analytical rather than "moral" terms. Thus the moral dimension of the Sash's liberalism tended to become obscured as the organisation became more deeply involved in the specific discourse of South African politics and as it began to enrich the conceptual content of its own liberalism. Despite this, the moral dimension of the Sash's liberalism was clear in the tone of many of its political campaigns where it fought, not for specific policies, but for what it understood to be a level of political decency.

Throughout its history, the Sash consistently opposed apartheid by appealing to the moral conscience of white South Africans and the NP government.<sup>4</sup> This was particularly evident in the organisation's campaigns against various dimensions of influx control and in its opposition to forced removals and resettlement. This emphasis on political morality has prompted political scientist Raphael de Kadt to describe the Sash as "a white South African Jimmin; Cricket".<sup>7</sup> It also earned the Sash many critics, including those who believed that it was ignorant or afraid of the realities of power, and those who accused it of being woolly-minded. The

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<sup>6</sup>Interview with Noel Robb, Cape Town, 20/1/1989

<sup>7</sup>Interview with Raphael de Kadt, Durban, 7/6/1989

Sash's moral point of view continued to have a strong influence on its political identity and behavior through to the end of the 1980s, with Cape Western member Helen Zille retiring of the organisation in 1989:

People know what's right in their hearts, and that's what constitutes a really large section of the Black Sash membership, and they hate what's wrong and they hate oppression and they will stand up and fight for that....<sup>8</sup>

The moral dimension of the Black Sash's liberalism appears to have enjoyed particular prominence in the organisation's political history for a number of reasons. Among them was the gender identity of the organisation itself. As women, most Sash members were relatively marginal to the mechanics and processes of political power in South Africa. This marginalisation not only meant that most of these women knew little about the dimensions of political power, but also that they were disinclined and ill-equipped to compete for power within the prevailing political discourse in South Africa. This contributed to the Sash's development as a pressure group, rather than an organisation primarily involved in trying to achieve power in conventional terms. Thus the Sash was inclined to interpret its political identity more in terms of abstract moral values than immediate, concrete political objectives. As the editorial of the March 1956 edition of the Black Sash/Swart Sers noted:

A few thousand women who can see an issue straight and know nothing about politics can do more than politicians can ever do.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Interview with Helen Zille, Cape Town, 12/5/1989

<sup>9</sup>Editorial The Black Sash/Die Swart Sers Vol.1 no.3 March, 1956 p2

The particular political environment within which the Sash worked after the 1950s also helped enhance the moral dimension within the organisation's liberalism. This was partly because so much NP legislation so obviously violated the Sash's basic liberal values, prompting the organisation to focus, not simply on specific interpretations of liberal political concepts, but on the legitimacy of liberal morality. For example, the organisation found itself fighting less for specific interpretations of the concept of freedom of speech, but for respect for the value of freedom of speech.

The Sash's tendency to emphasise liberal values also resulted from the fact that the organisation dealt so closely with the victims of authoritarian, repressive and discriminatory legislation. When the Sash committed itself to extending the scope of its "political morality" in 1958, its members were urged to do this by actively involving themselves at the political interface between unjust laws and the people they affected. Thus the organisation's 1958 Programme of Action noted:

investigations of individual cases will give members of the Black Sash an insight into the practical effects of unjust laws which they can obtain in no other way....This is a form of down-to-earth education in politics which means much more than theorizing about abstract principles.<sup>10</sup>

This commitment to working with the victims of "unjust laws" came to characterise much of the Black Sash's work, particularly through its advice offices. This sort of political focus subjected Sash members to the immediacy of individual human suffering, and this experience gave deeper content to their moral values. Thus

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<sup>10</sup>The Black Sash/Die Swart Sash Vol.3 no.10 September, 1958 pp2-3

much of the Sash's political momentum came, not from adherence to specific political concepts, but from a belief in the need for certain moral standards to guide political behavior.

It seems that an underlying moral commitment to individual liberty within any social order allows, and even demands, that liberal concepts be flexible in their interpretation and application. It is commonly argued that liberals value a situation in which as many individuals as possible can realise as many of their ends as possible, without judgement of the value of those ends, save insofar as they confound the ends of others. Thus at the heart of liberal morality lies a disinclination to prescribe or dictate human ends, which encapsulates the belief in human development as an ongoing and open-ended process.<sup>11</sup> It may be argued that if liberalism itself is to be true to this value, it must be open-ended. Thus the application of liberal concepts in any context will always be a matter for dispute and judgement, and continuing revision in the light of experiences.

Liberal concepts are not in and of themselves immutable political blueprints. They are, at best, the products of an accumulated tradition of liberal practice, offering an approach to politics, but no absolute political solutions. A belief in the value of the indeterminacy of the human condition, endorses liberty of expression and rejects political solutions which aim to create

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<sup>11</sup>A number of writers have interpreted J.S. Mill's seminal essay On Liberty in this way, notably; Berlin, I. "John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life" in Berlin, I. Four Essays on Liberty Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969 and recently Gray, J. "Mill's Conception of Happiness and the Theory of Individuality" in Gray, J and Smith, G.W.(eds) J.S. Mill on Liberty in Focus London: Routledge, 1991

conditions that are historically conclusive and static. In order to remain true to the perception of humanity at the heart of liberal morality, liberal political concepts must be both dynamic and flexible.

The history of the Black Sash offers an insight into a specific relationship between liberal concepts and their shared moral dimension in South Africa in the post-war period. Although the reasons why the Sash valued liberty or liberalism were never made entirely clear, its morality seemed to provide a framework within which the Sash conducted its political activities. In short, the Sash's liberal morality meant that it could criticise and revise its liberal concepts without destroying its liberalism.

There is no doubt that the tradition of internal debate within the Black Sash substantially contributed to the development of the organisation's liberalism. The Sash always exhibited a significant tolerance for a diversity of political perspectives, in part because it was not bound by the imperatives of achieving political power. A clear indication of the dynamism of the Sash's liberalism was given in 1990 when a member reported that she was considering resigning from the organisation because she objected to the fact that homeless people had settled on her land. She was persuaded not to leave the Sash, with the Transvaal Region commenting, "her case will allow all of us to explore the complexities and difficulties of our own situation."<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the most persuasive evidence in favour of the assertion

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<sup>12</sup>Transvaal Region Newsletter, November 1990. Personal papers.

that consensus over liberal morality within the Black Sash formed an anchor which allowed its liberal concepts flexibility, comes from an exploration of the limits of the organisation's liberalism. Despite its flexibility, the Sash's political identity was apparently bound by a liberal framework which seemed to be defined by moral characteristics. This was particularly clear at points at which the organisation refused to adopt certain political ideas or behaviors which seemed to violate its liberal values. This was particularly so in the cases of economic justice and political violence.

Initially, the dominant economic philosophy among Sash members was the "business liberalism" that marked the outlook of their class, and which assumed that apartheid hindered and contradicted economic development. Thus in the 1950s and 1960s the organisation criticised the government's apartheid policies because they interfered with the "free market" economy, with Jean Sinclair noting in her 1965 Presidential address:

In the economic field apartheid interferes with the fundamental rights of employers and employees. It hampers efficiency by preventing the free flow of labour, by adherence to job reservation and the maintenance of the industrial colour bar, and by the restrictions on the training of skilled and semi-skilled workers and by the rigid enforcement of influx control and the Group Areas Act.<sup>13</sup>

However, as the Black Sash gained a more sophisticated understanding of the South African economic system through its own political activities, it moved away from its simple "laissez-

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<sup>13</sup>Sinclair, J. "Apartheid at the Cost of Freedom" The Black Sash/Die Swart Semp Vol.9 no 3 August/October, 1965 pp1-2

faire' position towards, among other things, demanding greater state intervention to prevent what it saw as excessive economic exploitation. Thus by the early 1980s, the Sash had begun to demand that the government intervene to ensure that migrant workers were given contracts by their employers as a defence against poor working conditions and exploitative employment practices. The organisation also became progressively more critical of capitalist interests in South Africa, with prominent members like Sheena Duncan accusing business interests of entering into an unholy alliance with the NP government in the late 1970s in order to secure greater control over the black labour force. Particularly through its advice office work, the Sash came to appreciate that certain dimensions of apartheid legislation facilitated the economic exploitation of black South Africans.

Although the Sash clearly radicalised its critique of the South African economy over the years, its repudiation of certain notions of economic justice indicated the primacy of its liberal values. For example, in 1978 Cape Western member Margaret Nash, who was influenced by Christian teaching on poverty, suggested that individual Sash members should contribute to social justice by adopting more modest lifestyles and by redistributing a proportion of their personal wealth. This was given a frosty reception by Sash members, but not only because they did not wish to give up their relatively good standard of living. Nash's suggestion rested in a belief that political justice derived from equality rather than liberty. While Sash members might have increased material equality by divesting themselves of some of their personal wealth, it was unlikely that they would have increased their own or anyone



else's liberty by doing so. Nash's suggestion failed to inspire Sash members at least partly because it was not rooted in a basic concern for liberty, and because it could be seen to violate liberty rather than affirm or increase it.

In the early 1980s, Marxist thinkers in the Natal Coastal region attempted to involve the Sash in worker militancy and trade union activities. This precipitated much unease in the organisation, primarily because many Sash members felt that certain conceptions of economic justice were being put before individual freedoms and civil rights.<sup>14</sup> Natal Coastal member Wendy Jackson noted that the region was "becoming a tool of the trade union movement", and argued that the role of the Sash was to fight for the right of the trade unions to exist and express themselves, but not to be a strategic "response group" at the beck and call of the unions.<sup>15</sup>

By the late 1980s the Sash had become more or less sympathetic to what it referred to as a "social democratic" economic position, with Sheena Duncan noting in late 1990:

I think the Black Sash accepts that there has to be state intervention in the future, particularly on issues like land, and that there ought to be a much greater degree of slowness and caution about the privatisation programmes....<sup>16</sup>

Although the Sash accepted that there could be a necessity for state intervention in the economy, it still shied away from

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<sup>14</sup>Wentzel, J. "The Liberal Slide-Away" in SAIRR Liberalism and the Middle Ground Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1986

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Wendy Jackson, Durban, 30/1/1991

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Sheena Duncan, Johannesburg, 14/12/1990

endorsing a strictly prescriptive role for the government, with Sheena Duncan noting in late 1989, "we don't think economic systems should be built into constitutions anyway...."<sup>17</sup> The maintenance of a relatively "open-ended" position on economic ideals, particularly in the late 1980s when the Sash was under great pressure to adopt more dogmatic blueprints, seemed to be the result of the Black Sash's adherence to basic liberal values.

Further evidence of the effect of liberal values on the Sash's political identity can be found in an examination of the organisation's debate over violence. The refusal by some Sash members to condemn retributive or coercive violence on the political left in the mid-1980s was perceived by many in the organisation as a challenge to the Black Sash's liberal values. Despite their abhorrence of apartheid and their rejection of the NP government, liberals within the Sash refused to condone authoritarianism and violent coercion on the political left. As Sash member Ethel Walt commented:

When the Black Sash refused to make a public statement condemning "necklacing" it was a tremendous conflict for me personally, because I felt we ought to be even-handed in our condemnation of violence and of human rights abuses from whichever quarter.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, despite their desire to rid South Africa of the apartheid system, liberals within the Sash refused to employ strategies of opposition that were themselves authoritarian or violent. When the violence debate confronted them with a choice between

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<sup>17</sup>Interview with Sheena Duncan, Johannesburg, 17/4/1989

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Ethel Walt, Johannesburg, 10/12/1990

preserving their liberal values and defeating apartheid, they indicated that they would choose the former. Sash member Joyce Harris captured the essence of the liberal position in the Sash when she noted:

there's no guarantee inat whatever replaces the present regime is going to be a free and democratic one. It would be very easy to replace one kind of tyranny with another, and there's always going to be the necessity for an organisation that has established the right to stand for liberal tenets, for freedom and for human rights, for dignity, and for the recognition and respect for the individual, and for moral governments, and for the rule of law.<sup>19</sup>

In keeping with the open-ended nature of its liberalism, the Black Sash has tended to see its future as indeterminate, and has been unwilling to predict a time when its political role becomes redundant, despite the demise of apartheid. Thus Sash President Mary Burton commented in mid-1989:

I think perhaps our major role is, and should be, what I refer to as laying down foundations for the future, keeping enough of those values alive in ourselves as much as in anything else, and feeling that they are worthwhile, and not letting them be pushed aside in the rush towards a transformed society.<sup>20</sup>

The Sash's emerging emphasis on "human rights" after February 1990 indicated the persistence of the organisation's liberalism. This new focus was characterised by ongoing debate as to the appropriate definition of "human rights" and the ways in which they could be established and protected, indicating that the process of developing liberal concepts was continuing within the Black Sash.

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<sup>19</sup>Interview with Joyce Harris, Johannesburg, 21/4/1989

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Mary Burton, Cape Town, 11/5/1989

It appears from this study of the Black Sash, that its liberalism has contained both a powerful moral dimension and a rich heritage of liberal concepts. The Sash's liberalism did not endow it with a ready-made repository of political solutions. The organisation's ongoing struggle to establish and express its political identity in the South African context bore testimony to that. The history of the Sash illustrates that to value freedom is not necessarily to be able to articulate it unambiguously, and that those who espouse liberal concepts in politics do not necessarily endorse liberal morality.

The few detailed studies of the Liberal Party in the post-war period seem to indicate that the Sash does not represent an isolated or unique case. In his recent study of the early years of the Liberal Party, David Everatt has shown that, far from being the tail end of the Cape liberal tradition, "The formation of the Party set in motion an intellectual critique of liberalism which continued throughout the Party's existence."<sup>21</sup> He goes on to suggest that "...through its existence, the Liberal Party maintained an internal critique of the methods and application of liberalism in South Africa."<sup>22</sup> Douglas Irvine has noted a similar dynamism in the character of the Liberal Party.<sup>23</sup> Comments on the Liberal Party from its members indicate that there was also a strong component of liberal morality. Thus, foundation member Alan Paton, has

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<sup>21</sup>Everatt,D. The Politics of Nonracialism op. cit. p219

<sup>22</sup>ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Irvine,D. "The Liberal Party, 1953-1968" in Butler,J. Elphick,R. and Welsh,D.(eds) Democratic Liberalism in South Africa Cape Town: David Philip, 1987.

noted, "Most of those who joined the party in its early days, or in its later days for that matter, did so for moral reasons..."<sup>24</sup> Paton has gone on to endorse the "openness" of liberalism, stating:

"By liberalism I don't mean the creed of any party or country. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom."<sup>25</sup>

If, as this study of the Black Sash suggests, liberalism can be understood as ongoing attempts to realise the value of freedom through the use and revision of a set of complex, associated concepts, it must be seen as a process rather than a blueprint. Thus the radicals who complain of liberalism's neglect of economic justice and the conservatives who complain of liberalism's failure to appreciate the political implications of ethnic identification, could in fact be liberals, voicing their objections from well within the liberal camp. Liberalism is capable of addressing a far wider range of political problems in South Africa than its post-war reputation has suggested, and the history of the Black Sash shows that the specific challenges of South African politics can enrich liberalism rather than consign it to political irrelevancy.

If liberalism is ever accepted into the dominant political discourse in the "new" South Africa, it will signal the beginning not the end of the liberal process. In societies where liberal values form the basis of the political order, contests over their expression are ongoing. For example in the United States and the United Kingdom,

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<sup>24</sup>Paton, A. Journey Continued: An Autobiography Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 p116

<sup>25</sup>ibid. p294

debate over judicial and electoral processes continues, disputes rage over the meaning of freedom in the case of issues like abortion, euthanasia and obscenity, and there are ongoing debates over religious and ethnic rights and freedoms.

This history of the Black Sash shows that the greatest strength of South African Liberalism lies, not in the political "solutions" it has to offer, but in its underlying morality, and in the tradition of conceptual debate and dispute that this morality informs.

Liberalism embodies a powerful conceptual tradition, but it is the flexibility of these concepts in the light of their moral foundation that will make liberalism relevant and important in South Africa.

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