

THE BLACK SASH.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE - CAPE TOWN MARCH 10TH 1975.

OPENING ADDRESS.

BY

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TWENTY YEARS OF OUR LIVES.

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Looking back on the life of the Black Sash I have been amazed by the fact that the organisation has changed so radically in the last 20 years. Considering the character of the Women's Defence of the Constitution League, as the Black Sash was named when it was formed, the most surprising achievement of all is that it is still alive and active.

The Black Sash was formed in 1955 when the Senate Bill was introduced in Parliament. Its formation was precipitated by the public anger aroused by yet another attempt to deprive the Coloured voters of the Cape of their franchise rights. After a march to a public meeting called by the Mayor of Johannesburg, a group of women met the following week and the Women's Defence of the Constitution League was formed. A constitution for the organisation was drawn up and the aims and objects defined. They were to uphold the principles of political morality and Parliamentary democracy in South Africa ; to strive to secure human rights and liberties for all, and to educate ourselves and others politically.

At this time we were, on the whole, a conservative group of women, very naive and politically uninformed, but our lack of political knowledge was certainly compensated for in enthusiasm.

Mrs. Foley, the first National President, flew all round the country organising Regions and forming branches. The membership grew rapidly and within a few months we had 10,000 members.

During the first year we concentrated our protests on the Senate Act. Two petitions were organised - marches were held, a sit-in in Pretoria for 48 hours was organised. Demonstrations against the dissolution of the old Senate and on the election of the new Senate were mounted. Women wearing black sashes "haunted Cabinet Ministers where ever they went on official business. This long campaign against the Senate Act culminated in a convoy

to Cape Town with/---

to Cape Town with cars coming from every Province converging outside the Houses of Parliament during the debate on the South Africa Act Amendment Bill, when the packed Senate and the House of Assembly in joint session, destroyed the South African Constitution and the Coloured franchise rights. From July to December, 1957, four women went daily to Pretoria during the Parliamentary recess and stood vigil at the Union Buildings during working hours. When Parliament was in session members of the Cape Western Region took over the task and stood outside Parliament. This was a constant reminder to the Government and the public that the Coloured franchise was destroyed by a political trick.

Throughout this period it was righteous indignation which was the driving force. We took our stand on moral principle. Our main concern and our main protest was directed against the rape of the South African Constitution and the erosion of Parliamentary democracy. Many members were less concerned about Coloured voting rights than they were about the violation of the Constitution.

As was pointed out elsewhere, in 1936, after the merging of the South African Party with the Nationalist Party to form the United Party, the new government had a two thirds majority of both Houses of Parliament sitting in joint session. It was therefore perfectly constitutional to amend the entrenched clause of the South Africa Act which protected the franchise rights of the African people of the Cape. This was done and the African voters lost their voting rights on the common roll of voters. They were given four Native Representatives instead. Did this lawful amendment make the African deprivation any more moral or just? I think not. In the same way had the Coloured people lost the vote by constitutional means, would that have justified the erosion of Coloured rights? I think not. The fact that this point was not recognised by us in 1955 was an indication of the thoughtless disregard and ignorance of the needs and feelings of the majority of South Africa's people.

When the United Party tested the legality of the Senate Act in the Appeal Court and when the judgment found the Senate Act to be legal, the Black Sash called a meeting to decide whether there was still a need for a pressure group or whether we should disband.

The meeting agreed unanimously to carry on and decided that :

"There was one standard and one standard only of morality.

A thing is either morally right or it is morally wrong.

It matters not what section of our population is threatened with discrimination, injustice or lack of liberty, we shall protest on moral grounds".

This was the first tentative step to becoming a more liberal organisation. This resolution was too radical to be accepted by the bulk of our membership and by the white public in general. The membership melted away from about 10,000 to approximately 2,000 women. The official

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opposition did its best to force the organisation to disband - even the English-language press deserted us for a time. We were alone and in the wilderness.

Despite the fact that we had become decidedly "non-U" we never considered giving up, we soldiered on regardless. We started off as an organisation of women voters which meant that we were all white. Perhaps this was an excuse for not having the courage to open our membership to all South African women. Whatever the reason it was hardly logical taking into account the decision to oppose discrimination where ever it was to be found. For three years the Border Region campaigned relentlessly to persuade the annual national conference to open the membership to all South African women over the age of 18 and normally resident in South Africa. The decision was finally taken to do this in 1963 and the Black Sash grew up.

#### SELF-EDUCATION.

One of the main prongs of our activity has always been the political education of our members. Throughout the years we have informed ourselves on much of the discriminatory legislation and on the effects of its implementation by means of lectures from experts on particular subjects, the organisation of symposia, summer schools, multi-racial forums, brains trusts and by our own investigation and research. From time to time we have produced publications, sometimes through special issues of our magazine "Sash". In 1959 we published the first of the special issues on the Pass Laws as newly applied to women. Then came "Education for Isolation" in 1960 "Let No Man Put Asunder" in 1964 - a report on a two-day Forum on the adverse effects of migratory labour on family life. In May 1967 though not a special issue, the magazine devoted its pages to Justice and the erosion of the Rule of Law in South Africa. The Memorandum on the Pass Laws was first published in 1966, revised in 1971 and again in February 1974 and came out as a special issue of "Sash"... The May issue of 1974 was a special issue on Migrant Labour. A booklet "Who Cares?" was published in 1970 with articles illustrating the deprivation of African women. "Who Cares?" is the theme of our campaign on the disabilities of African women and a pamphlet giving facts was published in 1970 and republished last year together with a new "Who Cares about Migrant Labour?" pamphlet .

In 1960 Hildegard Spottiswoode compiled a book of essays by prominent political thinkers called "South Africa - The Road Ahead". It was published by Howard Timmins and was part of the work of the Black Sash. The book was received with acclaim in most quarters. Cape Western was instrumental in the production of a documentary film "Notice to Quit", showing the effects of the Group Areas Act. In 1968 Mrs. Barbara Wilks of Cape Western prepared a booklet : "Preliminary Information for Those Affected by Group Areas Proclamations". In the same year the Border Region came out with a booklet "This is our City - East London" which was updated in 1973.

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It comprised all the facilities East London provides for all its citizens of all races. It is a study in contrasts.

On our behalf Dr. Helen Suzman handed in a Petition to the House of Assembly in 1971. The Petition incorporated a Charter for Women. This was an activity in our campaign to relieve the plight of African women.

There have been innumerable pamphlets and press handouts used to publicise demonstrations and other activities of the Black Sash.

The English-speaking Press for the first year of our existence and again after we had been able to establish our sincerity and integrity have given us most valuable support. They publish our protests, our articles, publicise our campaigns and are always sympathetic and helpful to our cause. We extend to them our heartfelt gratitude. The press in South Africa is threatened with further controls. We have always done and always will do all in our power to fight for the freedom of newspapers to report and comment on public affairs.

#### ACTION.

We now turn to our activities which I think are an indication of how successful our programme of self-education has been. It is a source of great pride to me to realise that the Black Sash was in the vanguard for a National Convention in co-operation with The Covenant Movement in 1955, and again in 1961. As early as 1957 the Black Sash agreed to assist in the organisation of a multi-racial Conference, and at our National Conference that year we decided to protest against the curtailment of the individual's right to freedom of speech, whether the written or the spoken word, to protest against the separation of English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking children in the schools, against the insistence of mother tongue education and the removal of parental choice. The conference objected to the indoctrination of children in the schools ; to the Bantu Education Act (designed to keep a Bantu child a Bantu child) and to the manner in which the Bantu Education Act withholds full educational opportunities from both adult and young Africans.

It is true to say that we have protested against all the discriminatory and unjust apartheid legislation and all the legislation which abrogates the rule of law ; against bannings, banishments, house arrest and detention without trial. We protest and demonstrate against all these issues year after year and we will continue to do so. We have always tried to persuade the government to return to the rule of law, to restore habeas corpus and to stop legislating to exclude the judiciary. June 1965 was the seven hundredth and fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta. The Black Sash demonstrated on this occasion to remind the public what the Magna Carta was all about. Articles XXXIX and XLV are appropriate and I quote them :

"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 set forth against him, nor send against him, unless by the lawful judgement of his peers and by the law of the land".

Then Article XLV reads

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Then Article XLV reads :

"To no one will we sell, to no one will we refuse or delay right or justice".

How far the South African Government falls short of these injunctions 760 years later.

The Black Sash has organised a number of campaigns in an attempt to rouse the white electorate to bring pressure on the government to change its policy. Our continuous campaign is to expose the evils of the Pass Laws. These laws are the cornerstone of apartheid. They are the most bitterly resented and feared laws and they cause more misery to more people than any other legislation.

In 1957 the Black Sash in Cape Town started the Cape Association to Abolish Passes for African Women. It was an ad hoc committee composed of African and White Women's Organisations and its purpose was to work for the abolition of passes for women, on the grounds that these laws would destroy the family life of Africans. This is exactly what has occurred.

Cape Western Region were the first to open an advice office. This office began as a Bail Fund when it was discovered that large numbers of African women were being arrested for being in the prescribed area of Cape Town without permission. It soon became apparent that there was need of an advice office to give practical advice in helping Africans - both men and women - to establish what rights they had. In 1963 Johannesburg opened an office and later so did Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban.

The Athlone Advice Office is run in co-operation with the Institute of Race Relations. For some years the offices in East London, Port Elizabeth and Durban closed down, mainly because of security police harassment and lack of co-operation from the authorities. I am happy to say that in East London, Grahamstown and Durban Advice Offices are again in operation.

Our experience in our Advice Offices has given us an in-depth and detailed knowledge of the pass laws and how they work. We see at first hand the devastating effects which they have on the lives of the urban African. We believe that no conciliatory statements by Cabinet Ministers, or relaxations of petty apartheid mean anything as long as the pass laws - the single most serious example of discrimination - remain on the statute book.

We have a thorough knowledge of the effects of the enforced removals from Black Spots, from white farms, from one rural area to another and from the urban areas. In 1968 the Black Sash formed the Citizens' Action Committee and it launched a national campaign to protest against the wholesale uprooting of thousands of Africans from their homes and moving them to ill prepared resettlement villages which at that time often amounted to a bare plot of land with water within walking distance.

In 1959 the Transvaal assisted in the exposure of the iniquitous Farm Labour Scheme. One of our members, Mrs. Majorie Blaine had witnessed three young African teenagers being arrested in front of their parents.

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Instead of being brought to court they were "induced" to volunteer for farm labour. The husband of another of our members, Mr. Joel Carlson, an attorney, was collecting evidence on the scheme when in his Court work he had come across lorries taking Africans who had been "induced" to volunteer to go to the farms. The "volunteers" used to refer to this term of farm labour as the 3/6 months sentence because the months were calculated in working days, - as the labourers did not work on Sundays, public holidays, rainy days or when they were ill. For this reason the sentence often dragged on for 6 months. On investigation many abuses came to light in the treatment the men received. There were several deaths as a result. These revelations caused a public outcry. A Departmental Inquiry was set up to hear evidence. The Black Sash submitted a memorandum and gave oral evidence before the Inquiry. The outcome was that the "volunteer" Farm Labour Scheme was declared ultra vires and was withdrawn.

In 1960 after the pass law disturbances and the shootings at Sharpeville, the Transvaal Region established an emergency fund to help the victims and their families with food and clothing. Cape Western said their offices were besieged with people in dire distress after the Langa and Nyanga disturbances and they too gave advice on all sorts of matters as well as giving food and money for rents.

All through the years much work has been done on Group Areas, particularly in the Cape. Protests are continually organised. Black Sash women attend meetings of the Group Areas Board to try to prevent the removal of the Coloured people from their homes.

In Simons Town the first proposal for Group Areas was first advertised in 1959. A public meeting was called and a Liason Committee was formed which consisted of representatives from the Churches, the Mosque Trustees, Rate Payers Associations the Chamber of Commerce and the Black Sash local branch. From that day this Committee worked to try and prevent the Coloured people and the Indians from being turned out of their homes and out of Simons Town. Two public enquiries were held by the Group Areas Board in 1959 and 1965. Not one person at either enquiry came forward to give evidence that he objected to his neighbours or traders. The axe finally fell in 1967 and the whole municipal area of Simons Town was declared a Group Area for Whites only. There were Black Sash demonstrations and protests against the proclamation of District 6 as an area for white occupation as there were against the removal of the Coloured Fishermen at Kalk Bay and in many other areas in the Cape. These protests are in fact endemic.

In Natal and the Transvaal the Black Sash protested about Group Areas proclamations in many places such as Johannesburg, Rustenburg, Pretoria Durban, Ladysmith. Over the years until 1971 38,180 Indian families had been disqualified to live where they were and 24,388 families had already been moved. Of the Coloured people 70,889 families were disqualified and 37,616 had been moved all over the country. All this misery is caused to

satisfy the Government's/

satisfy the government's own design of the map of South Africa.

The Government would appear to be bent on keeping black and brown South Africans on the move. In the urban areas there does not appear to be a single place where any person who is not white can have any feeling of security. There are Coloured and Indian people who have been moved not once, but twice ; for instance in Ladysmith. The vast pool of oscillating migrant workers have no settled home, and no home life. Not only is the Black Sash concerned about the general welfare of the migrant worker, but the families of these men, who suffer great deprivation.

The evils of the migrant labour policy are constantly brought to the notice of the public. The adverse effects of hostel life - both mental and physical are disastrous. The plan to build hostels in Alexandra Township to house 60,000 men shocked the people of Johannesburg. A citizens' Hostels Action Committee organised a petition and presented it with authoritative dissertations on the effects of this policy to the Deputy Minister of Bantu Administration and Education. To date only one hostel for men and one hostel for women have been built in Alexandra, but all family accommodation in that township is being destroyed causing great distress to many families.

In 1974 the Black Sash and the Program for Social Change organised a Consultation on Migrant Labour to which many authorities on the subject were invited.

#### MEMORANDA.

Memoranda on a variety of matters have been prepared and submitted to the appropriate Minister or Departmental Committee of Enquiry. The legislation or policies concerned were the Farm Labour Scheme, the Publications and Entertainments Bill and the amendment to the Act in 1974 ; on the Coloured Cadets Bill ; on the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill of 1964 ; on the break up of families in Alexandra Township ; on Resettlement villages of Limehill, Sada, Illinge and Dimbaza. Natal Coastal with the assistance of Professor J.O.V. Reid and the co-operation of Dr. Anthony Barker and Professors and lecturers of the University of Natal, initiated a study among infant patients admitted to the Charles Johnston Hospital at Nqutu in Kwa Zulu to determine the relationship between poverty and ignorance, and malnutrition. The facts were revealed in all their starkness and a summary of the findings is published in the latest edition of "Sash".

This is a very brief and far from complete story of the activities of the Black Sash since 1955. One has to come to the reluctant conclusion that the more the restrictions imposed on us all, and the tighter the noose gets round our necks the more apathetic the public becomes. In the early years we may have been euphoric ; we certainly were hopeful that with constant pressure we would have been able to rouse the white public to take action of some kind. In the late fifties there was excitement, even fun at times. I well remember at a meeting of the Executive Committee discussing in all seriousness what form the demonstration we should organise when the new Senate was elected. It was suggested that we should obtain 88 black sheep and lock them up/-

sheep and lock them up in the Raadsaal the night before the election. It would be spectacular we thought when the doors were opened in the morning. When the debate on the removal of the Coloured voters from the common roll took place we thought we would put a horse on the steps of the Senate to emulate Caligula. We enjoyed the day when the Minister of Justice on his way to open a new Police Station along the Reef, jumped over a wall with his bodyguard after him rather than walk between the lines of Black Sash women who had come to "haunt" him.

I can remember the very first meeting of representatives from all over the country who came to Johannesburg to discuss our policy and to try to restrain the "irresponsible" women from the north. Two members from the Western Cape, happily still very much with us, sat knitting like Madame Défarge waiting for the guillotine to fall.

As the years passed so did the lightheartedness we once had. Life became grim and we were absorbed in helping Africans through the maze of the pass laws and trying to make white South Africans realise what it would be like to be black.

These reminiscences make one realise the extent to which all South Africans have lost their civil liberty and how far authoritarianism has encroached on our lives, but most seriously on the lives of the Blacks. The following are just a few rights which have been removed :

Until 1962 citizens did not require permission to demonstrate, but with the passing of the General Law Amendment Bill, (Sabotage Bill) of that year trespass was defined as sabotage in certain circumstances, such as being on public or private property for political reasons - attending or organising political meetings or gatherings, without permission.

From that date permission has to be sought to demonstrate and the wording of any posters has to be submitted and passed by the local authority. There is no real choice of venue. The Minister of Justice, banned the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall to all political meetings and there are a limited number of venues for which it is possible to obtain permission to hold a demonstration. The Riotous Assemblies Act amended last year provides that any official can stop any gathering or any person from attending any gathering. Permission to march first has to be sought from the local authority and then from the chief magistrate. Few, if any marches have taken place since this edict. The Affected Organisations Act prevents any organisation declared "Affected" from obtaining or receiving funds from overseas.

The Publications and Entertainments Act and its amendments determine what you may read, what you may write, and what you may see and hear. The Extension of University Education Act restricted education by closing the open universities to all races, destroyed academic freedom and now with the Van Wyk de Vries Commission's report before it, the Government is threatening legislation which will destroy utterly the National Union of South African Students and any modicum of academic freedom which still remains.

The ever hardy annual is the threat to the freedom of the press - like the poor it is always with us.

Then we have/---

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Then we have legislation which flouts the Rule of Law and usurps the function of an independent judiciary. There is the Suppression of Communism Act which excludes the Courts from hearing actions from people banned and house arrested without trial. The 180 day detention law and the Terrorism Act, the latter law provides for indefinite detention without trial and the detainee has no access to anyone other than a magistrate. The most recent example of this, being the incarceration of an undisclosed number of people in September 1974, some of whom are still not charged or released.

Courts have been excluded from hearing appeals against the decisions of the Censorship Board.

The Prohibition of Interdicts Act denies an African the right of recourse to the Court to appeal against his enforced removal from an urban area until he has been removed and is existing, possibly stateless, and in limbo.

The Improper Political Interference Act put an end to non racial political parties. The Liberal Party chose to go out of existence and the Progressive Party, at the request of its black members, chose to carry on as an emasculated party with its whites only membership.

The Coloured and Indian people are now saddled with toothless Representative Councils, which neither group wants.

The laws and regulations which control the lives of the African people are the most restrictive of all. Their whole lives are fenced around with permits. The Urban Areas Act, the Labour Act and the Regulations provide for permits to reside in an urban area, to lodge, to rent a house, to work, to seek work, to go to school, to live as a family. When the Urban Areas Act was amended in 1964, it provided inter alia, that African wives and children of men qualified in terms of Section 10(1)(a) or (b) could only live with their husbands if they could prove that they entered the area lawfully. Immediately after this amendment a total embargo on the entry of women into the metropolitan areas for purposes of residence or employment was imposed.

In 1968 new Regulations for Labour Bureaux at Bantu Authorities were gazetted. These Regulations make all workers coming to the common areas permanent migrants. They can never acquire rights to remain in the urban areas and for the whole of their working lives they are employed on yearly contracts and must return to their rural homes at the end of each contract.

Job reservation is still with us though it has been relaxed in certain fields of employment.

Time does not permit of a complete list of restrictive laws ; but the above are an indication of an ever increasing totalitarianism.

For almost 27 years there has been a steady erosion of our civil liberties and our basic human rights. For all these years South Africa has become more and more isolated. For years the black people have steadily become more frustrated and more bitter and for all these years the Government has felt itself becoming more and more secure in the seat of power. Then the day after the Nationalist Party successes in the General Election of April 1974, the entire situation changed overnight. No longer is the Nationalist

Government as secure as/---

Government as secure as it was. Suddenly the white electorate is becoming more tolerant ; suddenly the status quo is at risk ; suddenly South Africa is on the threshold of change. Suddenly Mr. Vorster has shown his skill as a statesman in his response to the new situation in Mozambique and Angola. We must acknowledge his achievement for bringing about detente between Rhodesia and her neighbours and we sincerely hope his efforts will be successful. However, all that he has done so far will count for nothing unless he and his Government will bring about meaningful and radical change in South Africa.

Mr. P. Botha made two astonishing statements in his famous United Nations speech. Firstly he said "My Government does not condone discrimination purely on the grounds of race or colour" and secondly he said : "Let me put it very clearly. The Whites of South Africa as well as the Government of South Africa, are as much concerned about the implementation of human rights, human freedoms, human dignities and justice as any other nation or Government in the world". This is saying something for a nation which refused to sign the Declaration of Human Rights.

We would like to know if the Government means to move away from discrimination or whether it will once again adopt the sophistry of changing nothing but the word. Is discrimination to become differentiation? The moving away from discrimination in the field of what is euphemistically known as petty apartheid, such as opening the parks, libraries and the Nico Malan Theatre to people of all races ; allowing blacks to eat and stay in 5 Star Hotels, by permit - is a step in the right direction. It was also necessary to order officials to extend the same courtesy to black people as they would to white people - not that this directive has been universally carried out. But, in the final analysis, it does not matter to an African woman who is told to leave her husband and home within 72 hours whether she is told politely or otherwise. While one is entitled to expect courtesy from everyone and in particular from servants of the public, courtesy is no substitute for a change of policy. It is the law which has to be changed. The Government cannot go on denying the African freedom of movement by imposing influx control; denying a man the right, freely to choose his category of employment and his employer ; the right to bargain for his wages and working conditions ; denying him the right to found a family and set up a home in the place where he works ; denying him the right to freehold tenure and most important, denying him his dignity and political control over his own destiny.

The time has come for whites to admit that if the black man's labour and skill are essential to the white economy, then by the same token he is entitled to his freedom of movement and to his civil and political rights. South Africa does not belong to any one group to the exclusion of all others. Its citizens are black, brown and white and none of us has any moral claim to privilege or prosperity at the expense of others. We are called upon to share political and economic power and with no further procrastination, if we do not our future will be too ghastly to contemplate.