

“SAY NOT THE STRUGGLE NAUGHT AVAILETH”

By Edgar Brookes

“I believe very few people today, “wrote an experienced critic who shall remain nameless, “would buy a book on liberalism in South Africa. In their attitude towards liberalism, black nationalists are derisive, English-speaking white students are scornful, and many former liberals are either disillusioned or disappointed – it is just painful for them to read of their own unavailing protests.”

The questions arising from this statement are to some extent a matter of semantics. “Liberal”, as the writer uses the word, means anyone who stands for equal rights for all human beings in political and economic life, irrespective of race or colour. Such an attitude cannot be faulted. Those who deride or despise liberalism do so only after they have made the name mean something less than this high ideal, just as the name “christian” is used to describe the attitude to life of some hypocritical chapel-going grocer who uses false weights, instead of denoting people like St. Francis of Assisi. To the South African Government “liberalism” means something akin to communism; to the critics referred to in my friend’s letter it means the ineffective attitudes of a comfortable middle-class reformer.

DEEPER

The real issue goes deeper than this. To many critics, black and white alike, liberalism is scorned because it has not yielded results. Since it has failed, recourse must be had to movements which believe in the use of force. This is a widespread attitude: can it be justified? Those who advocate it have used force only in a minuscule way, and they do not seem to have tried to answer, even for themselves, the questions, who is to use force, how is it to be used, whether it will be successful, and, if it should be, what sort of South Africa it will produce. The admirable emotion behind it is best expressed by Mr. Weller’s immortal words: “Ain’t nobody going to be walloped for this ‘ere?” But as a reasoned programme it is intellectually almost contemptible, at any rate in its normal manifestations.

Liberalism must indeed face the fact that innumerable protests have been made against bad laws over a quarter of a century and that nearly all the bad laws have been enacted in defiance of the protests. All this is sadly true. Where then do we go from here, unless we are prepared to advocate the use of *real* force – the galvanising of millions of the oppressed into civil war? Anyone who talks about force and shrinks from its only possible effective form merely confuses the issue. We who do not advocate such a use of force are at least intellectually coherent.

Have we failed so utterly? Suppose that we have, then let us ask since when unpopularity or lack of success have proved a doctrine to be wrong. Wilberforce’s first efforts at slave emancipation were received by the House of Commons with derisive laughter. As he lay dying four decades later the House of Commons was passing the Act emancipating slaves. Nearly every great reform which has challenged vested interests or entrenched prejudices has had the same history. Credit is due not to the big battalions who passed it in the end, but to the faithful souls who through a long night defended the beleaguered citadel of righteousness and *without whose “ineffective” fidelity the final triumph would have been impossible.*

NO CREDIT

Neither they nor we deserve credit for our firm stand in defence of justice under the silent stars. We take that stand because we can do no other. As we can do no other. As Everest is climbed because it is there, so apartheid under all its names is defied because it is there. We fight because we must. Success is not within our grasp: courage is.

But has liberalism been such a failure? Arthur Hugh Clough in his famous poem says:

While the tired waves, vainly breaking,
Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in the main.

What liberalism has done is to awaken the consciences of tens of thousands to the injustices of our situation. Fifty years ago, thirty years ago, student bodies and many church leaders were passive or apathetic: now they are alive, awake and wonderfully courageous. That they are not successful is not so memorable as the fact that defenders of the established order are so frightened of them that they must attack them with bludgeons and persecute them with bannings. There is reason for their fear, for nothing is more powerful than a new and true idea, however persecuted.

PACIFY CONSCIENCE

Even the "homelands", utterly inadequate though they are to the real needs of the situation, are an attempt to pacify the national conscience aroused by liberal thinkers. The disappearance of the word "baasskap" from the political vocabulary may be hypocrisy, but hypocrisy is the homage which vice pays to virtue.

The writer remembers, some twenty-five years ago, Nationalist speakers in the Senate protesting vigorously against the purchase of pedigree poultry and cattle for African agricultural colleges. We hear no more of these cock and bull stories today. Bad in principle as our "ethnic" universities are, they have been erected by the sons of men who opposed even secondary education for Africans. Many more battles remain to be won, most notably the battle for fair wage levels and for better education, but

the work of liberalism has not been fruitless, and its present discouragements are no cause for craven-hearted despair. Be it noted that economic and educational reform do not have to wait for the realisation of complete political equality, though they may well pave the way for it. That so many thinkers in Churches and the Universities have in this and other fields moved from friendly interest on to passionate conviction is also part of the triumph of liberal thinkers, who have influenced their friends as well as their enemies.

The writer recently had the task of going through documents of the years 1830 to 1910 referring to the Africans and their areas. The best of them are quaint and some are even repellent in the light of the beliefs of 1972. The distance between Sir George Grey and the student programmes now before us is the measure of what liberalism has achieved during its long night of effort. □

TERRORISM

by Marie Dyer

White South Africans think they are experts on terrorism. They have been told so often that they are threatened by it every hour of every day that they are convinced, even though most of them have never seen a trace of it. (Cape Town people may have seen the blackened ruins of St. Thomas Hall, but that is something else again). Consequently when the world was convulsed by the Black September murders, there was a note of smugness in the South African reaction. 'This will show the world how right we have been about terrorists all along' was somehow the feeling. And the outraged bewilderment in the country at the increased grants distributed by the W.C.C. has been correspondingly greater.

The truth is in fact that White South Africans are about as confused as they can be about terrorism and its implications. Their attitude to terrorism is the same as the medieval attitude to witchcraft — it is enough to be accused of it to stand condemned of it; and to be held responsible for any deed committed by anyone else similarly accused. The terrorism which shocks most of the world is the kind that deals in violent acts of blackmail practised on civilians, for motives of politics or greed: the hijackings, kidnappings, murders, letter- and parcel-bombs which threaten and poison ordinary people's activities, ordinary daily life. With this kind of activity the guerrilla raiders and infiltrators on our borders have not had anything to do.

IDENTIFY

It is easy to see why White South Africans are so eager to identify any kind of revolutionary guerrilla activity with the horrors of terrorism. Irregular warfare is largely the method of the weak against the strong, the poor against the rich. South Africans who find ethical merit in their wealth and strength are morally comforted by the thought

that there is some inherent evil in a home-made landmine which is not shared by a tank. But in reality, although all war and violence are hateful, there is no justification for condemning the guerrilla sniper or grenade-thrower while tactfully withholding judgement on the pilot of the helicopter who sprays him with machine-gun bullets or napalm. There is no supreme moral virtue, either, in any given status quo- (although the equation; revolution *equals* guerrillas *equals* terrorists *equals* evil would seem to accord it). South Africans would understand this well if say, a band of hard-pressed democratic rebels took revolutionary arms against a Communist dictatorship; but it is not likely that this would clear up any of their verbal confusions. Dictatorships who do not want their subjects to think or criticise are adept at the manipulation of 'push-button' words — words whose very mention is enough to induce vague but passionate feelings of patriotic hatred in almost everyone. The Communists are usually the most skilful at this — one thinks of words like 'capitalist', 'bourgeois', 'Trotskyite', 'revisionist', etc. But 'terrorist' in this country is surely one of the most successful of all. □