



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS LEAGUE, CAPE TOWN FOR THE YEAR 1956-57
(presented at the Annual General Meeting, October 3, 1957)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Although it is not possible to say that the position of civil rights in this country has improved during the past year - and indeed there have been new and alarming attacks upon them in several fields - there are not lacking signs that can encourage us to hope. Perhaps the very seriousness of the situation is itself responsible for the growing awareness of the need for opposition to repressive legislation; and this awareness is the brightest feature of the year under review.

I would like to ask you to pay tribute to the late Archbishop Clayton. The Archbishop honoured the League by being one of its patrons for almost his entire period of office, and the League, in common with the rest of South Africa, has suffered a very heavy loss by his death. You will remember that he kindly gave a lecture for us last year in the series on "The Citizen and His Rights" which we sponsored together with the Institute of Citizenship. This is now being printed, and at the time of writing this report it is hoped to have it available for sale at our annual meeting.

Legislation

The measures before Parliament during last session which most concerned the League were the Native Laws Amendment Bill, the Separate University Education Bill and the Police Amendment Bill. We are happy to report that - owing in no small measure to the vigour of public protest, in which we took part - the first of these measures was considerably modified before the second reading, though it is still objectionable in many respects. The second was held over, which means that if it is not passed in the 1958 session, it will have to be introduced afresh in the new Parliament after the election.

The clause in the Police Amendment Bill which proposed to allow the Police to withhold documents in court cases was the subject of representations by the League to both the Bar Council and the Law Society of the Cape. Both these organisations thanked us for our approach to them. As a result of representations made (we understand) by the Bar Council to the Government, this clause was dropped by the Minister of Justice.

These gains, small though they are, show that it pays to protest, and we feel encouraged by the public response to the lead given by ourselves and other organisations.

Censorship

Members of your Committee have addressed meetings on this subject during the year. The Committee also approached the Minister of the Interior with the request that invitations to his proposed exhibition of pornography be issued to some of its members, and urged that, as censorship was a matter of public interest, such an exhibition should be open to the public. No reply has been received to these points.

There have been hints from members of the Government during the year of possible press censorship, and your Committee awaits with interest the report of the Press Commission, as it regards the freedom of the press as of the utmost importance.

News Letter

Your Committee is pleased to report that as a result of the free circulation of the News Letter to interested persons, twenty new members have joined the League during the past few months. We feel that this free mailing list is a public service, and are glad to add to it any names our members suggest.

Your Committee has found of real value in this connection the bulletins issued by the Institute of Race Relations and by NUSAS, and would like to express its appreciation to both these bodies.

Co-operation with other Organisations

Your Committee has been glad during the year of the opportunity to co-operate with the Institute of Race Relations, the National Council of Women and the Black Sash in protests against the legislation already referred to. Together with these bodies it sponsored a protest meeting against the Native Laws Amendment Bill in the Cathedral Hall, a conference of twenty-two organisations affected by that Bill, and a procession of protest through the streets of Cape Town on the "church clause" and the freedom of association generally.

The League is also represented on the continuation committee which was set up by the "twenty-two organisations" conference.

In addition to this, representatives of the League attended two confe-

rences on the Native Laws Amendment Bill and allied legislation sponsored by the African National Congress.

Several of our members have repeated lectures of "The Citizen and His Rights" to meetings of the Sons of England Lunch Club.

Group Areas

Your Committee has continued to keep in touch with the Group Areas Co-ordinating Committee, and expects to be one of the sponsors of a conference to be called on the working and implications of the Group Areas Act in the Peninsula.

Constitutional Policy

Your Committee has noted with keen interest the developments in the field of the franchise in the Rhodesian Federation, and also the constitutional policies recently issued by the United and Liberal Parties, all of which indicate a growing awareness of the need for realising the aims which the League has put forward during the nine years of its existence.

Inter-racial Conference

Members of your Committee have agreed to act as individual sponsors of an inter-racial conference which is to be held in Johannesburg in November as a follow-up to the Bloemfontein Conference held in 1956 under the auspices of the Interdenominational African Ministers' Federation.

Interest in other centres

During the year there have been indications of increasing interest in civil rights in other centres in the Union - notably in Johannesburg, where a Civil Rights Defence Committee has been formed under the chairmanship of Bishop Reeves. An ad hoc committee was set up in Durban to protest against legislation, and similar action was taken in Port Elizabeth. We have also had a request for information from the latter city with a view to possibly establishing a branch of the League there.

National Conference on Civil Rights

In order to consolidate this growing interest and to awaken further public awareness of the situation, your Committee is planning a national conference on civil rights to be held some time after the elections in 1958. Such a conference would be planned to cover the whole field of civil liberties before and since Union, and would show clearly, not only where they have been encroached on by recent legislation, but where they fall short of the standards laid down by the Declaration of Human Rights made by the United Nations Assembly in 1948, and would, we hope, suggest what we should aim at. It is hoped that from such a conference a permanent national organisation for the defence and extension of civil rights would emerge.

Hopeful Signs

The growing awareness of the danger to our liberties has shown itself in the decided stand taken by the English-speaking Churches on the "church clause", and it is heartening that, for the first time, the Churches have seen the need to ally themselves with other organisations affected in protesting against such legislation. There are signs too that there is a growing uneasiness amongst Afrikaans-speaking people about the actions of the Government. The Hoernlé lecture of Professor Keet on "The Ethics of Apartheid" was a clarion call to the conscience of South Africa.

Another sign of real progress is the willingness of White organisations to co-operate with Coloured and African bodies in trying to find a solution to our problems which will be acceptable to all South Africans. This in itself is beginning to build an atmosphere of confidence between the different groups which is one of our greatest needs at this time.

And it is encouraging to see that more and more people are willing to take the stand, not only that the present policy of apartheid and its manifestations "won't work", but that they are wrong and unchristian. The appeal to conscience is beginning - though all too slowly - to awaken a response.

But time may be against us. It is your job to speed up the process by awakening your friends before it is too late.

"Our liberties can easily be lost if there is no effective body of people organised to preserve and extend them. If the fight to preserve a liberty has to be fought only by those directly concerned, then that fight is lost."

MOYA

B. RETNART, Chairman