

CIVIL RIGHTS

AC 16/2/1/4/11



AT THE CROSSROADS - S. O. S. !

November, 1957

While successive governments have whittled away the rights of the individual to an ever-increasing extent, the movement to preserve and expand such rights has become more dispersed and inefficient. Of the Civil Rights Leagues that sprang up in several cities of the Union nine years ago, there now only remains the League in Cape Town - and even the Cape Town office finds its regular expenditure greater than its regular income.

This has not been due to any inherent fault in the League itself, or to lack of enthusiasm and determination on the part of its Committee, but rather to the nature of recent events. As onslaught after onslaught on this or that civil right has been made, so ad hoc and new defences have sprung up to deal with each. This has led to a dispersion of the energies of those interested in preserving human rights - a dispersion which is welcomed by the Government because more dividing means easier ruling.

The League Committee has felt for some time that the time has come to build the League into a powerful national body covering the Union, and dealing with all aspects of civil rights. To bring this about, a vigorous campaign is planned to increase membership and activities.

It was a pity that the attendance at the General Meeting on October 3 was so very small, because the Committee would have welcomed discussion and suggestions on these future plans. It was also a pity because so few people heard Mr Delius's interesting and valuable address on "Race Relations in the U.S.A.". We do not think that the small attendance was due to apathy, but rather to the inclement weather and to the fact that a number of our members (including the secretary!) were out of town.

Activities

The League's Committee feels strongly that the time has come when the attention of South Africa must be drawn forcibly to what has happened and is happening in the whole field of civil liberties. To this end it contemplates a National Conference

soon after the elections, when authoritative speakers will survey the whole subject of civil rights as they were before and at Union and what has happened to them since. It is proposed to cover every field of civil liberty and to focus the attention of South Africa sharply on what has happened.

The League would also like to embark upon activities similar to those of its counterparts in Britain and America by publishing literature, stimulating free legal aid and making people conscious generally of what civil liberties are, what they mean and how they can be preserved.

Membership

The League has always operated "on a shoestring". Since its inception its subscription has remained at a minimum of 5/- per annum. Because it does not wish to exclude interested persons who cannot afford more, it does not propose to increase this subscription. But on its present basis it cannot do more than the small things it is doing at present. The answer to this is more members, and here the League calls upon YOU. The Committee throws upon EACH INDIVIDUAL MEMBER the duty of enrolling MORE MEMBERS. To make it easy for you we enclose a Membership Slip with this news letter (more obtainable on request). If you are not a member, sign it yourself; if you are, rope in the rest of your family, your friends and your business contacts. Civil liberties are not "politics". Civil liberties concern members of any Party or of no Party. They concern every one of us.

The League has a good record. From the start the League has embraced the whole field of civil rights for all South Africans, and it was wholly or partly responsible for organising very successful protests on the Citizenship Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, the Public Safety and Criminal Laws Amendment Acts. It has submitted memoranda to Government Commissions; it organised (together with others) a nation-wide petition to Parliament against the Separate Representation of Voters Act, obtaining over 100,000 signatures. It has issued many pamphlets and press statements, and in 1956 it co-sponsored, with the Institute of Citizenship, lectures on "The Citizen and His Rights". It has also joined with other bodies in a protest against the Native Laws Amendment Act, and for over 3½ years has distributed its monthly news letter to a

wide circle of persons both within and without the League.

In these difficult times the League should be much more active on a nation-wide basis, and should be of much more practical help to other bodies in related fields such as the Black Sash, the Institute of Race Relations, the National Council of Women - to mention only three.

During these nine years a considerable number of our members have regularly given us more than the minimum subscription - but for which generosity it is difficult to see how we could have carried on. We know, too, that we have many members who cannot afford to give us more than the annual five shillings. We are very deeply grateful for the loyal support of all these people and **WE ARE NOT ASKING ANY OF THEM TO GIVE US MORE.** But we do need more money - more support - **MORE MEMBERS!**

YOU can help the Committee to accomplish its aims -

- A. by finding us more members immediately, and
- B. in that way, giving us the increased moral and financial support that we need. Our address is Box 3807, Cape Town.

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The Citizen and His Right of Association

We are glad to announce that copies of the address by the late Archbishop G. H. Clayton are now available at 1/- each (1/2 post free). Our members will recall that Archbishop Clayton, who was one of our Patrons, gave this address for us in June, 1956 in the series on "The Citizen and His Rights". It is at least as relevant to-day as when it was given. We enclose an order form.

Censorship

One of the few gleams of light in a grim situation is provided by the reactions of the Afrikaans press to the Report of the Commission on Undesirable Literature. Thus we find "Die Burger" urging that the Courts "should have the final say" and that "secondary fields, for example, reading matter of a communistic nature or which can arouse hostility between the races", should not be included. "Die Vaderland" points out that "much difference of opinion will arise on the concept of undesirability". "Dagbreek en Sondagnuus" describes censorship as "a too dangerous road for a free country ...

however reluctantly taken.." "Die Volksblad" and "Die Transvaler" urge the positive promotion of good literature, and the latter says "the democrat - and what South African citizen is not one - is jealous of his freedom"(!). "Die Weste" says: "The least degree of freedom which must be demanded for the press ... is the absolute right to criticise the Government, political parties, subordinate legislative and administrative organs and to correct them without the slightest danger of prosecution or suppression, provided that the bounds of decency and the public interests are kept" (italics ours).

So far, so good. But the "Cape Times", pointing out that "complete secrecy of the proceedings before the board of censors and the total exclusion of the courts are main features" of the proposals, warns of the danger of "a soothing Nationalist statement which will disown most of the absurdities" of the Report and "profiting by the general feeling of relief, will insinuate another scheme which, less blatantly but nevertheless effectively, establishes an internal censorship".

One cannot help remembering the pious statements in 1931 that the safety of the entrenched clauses was "sealed with the honour of the Afrikaner people". Will the Afrikaans press carry any more weight?

It is pertinent to quote the remarks of a British M.P. in a recent case where a British newspaper was adjudged by the House of Commons guilty of a breach of privilege:

"I would remind hon. Members, with great respect, that outrageous attacks, suitably answered, are the essence of democracy... That privilege of saying outrageous things is absolutely vital, because by the exercise of that privilege the truth comes out in the end, provided that we do not abuse the privilege too far."

Facing the Facts

The President of the Railway Artisan Staff Association was recently reported by "Die Transvaler" as saying that the only way to overcome our chronic shortage of skilled labour was greater use of Native labour. This demanded rapid training and civilising - and to the extent that they advanced they should be allowed to organise themselves in the labour sphere. They were at present "atrociously" underpaid.

World Apartheid Protest

We hope to have some sort of celebration of Human Rights Day (December 10), as called for by the Declaration of Conscience signed by 123 world leaders recently. Watch the press! MOYA