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With Alan Paton's compliments.

(Article for FINANCIAL MAIL)

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I get up early on Saturday and compose myself for the coming day, when I am to speak at Woodmead School. This is a school after my own heart, because it is open to all the children of our country. I have my first real bath for three weeks, because I am now in Johannesburg, which has taken all the water which by rights belongs to Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

I mean to give of my best at Woodmead. I shall tell them a joke or two, including the one about the bath. I shall encourage them in the pursuit of ideals. I shall not say to them "too little and too late". I have thrown that phrase out of my vocabulary because it speaks of the futility of human endeavour and who has a right to speak to young boys and girls about that?

The speech went well. I told them - what many of them knew already - that their school had a vision of a land and a nation that did not yet exist. I told them I had come to talk about the country in which they were living, and the kind of world they were going to. This seemed the right point at which to say something about Mr. P.W. Botha's new constitution. I said I could not call it "a gigantic swindle." It was the attempt of Afrikanerdom - and the white man - to get off the tiger they had been riding. I said one more thing about the constitution. I said "you boys and girls are watching a lot of politicians trying to do a most impossible thing, and that is to make a constitution for getting off a tiger".

The rest of the talk dealt with the religious and moral motives for working for a new and better society. It was intended to be elevating.

On Monday morning I left Johannesburg at 7 am. for the Okavango Swamps and did not see the headline "Dr. Alan Paton supports P.W.'s Plan". In fact I knew nothing about this until I returned to Gaborone on the following Friday where I received a message from a close friend in Durban. He told me of the furore in the press and that three of my closest associates had "distanced" themselves from me. I am stoical, but not as stoical as all that. As the Americans say, I am sick to the stomach. I return to Durban to find that the Natal Indian Congress has condemned me. One prominent Indian member who has "venerated" me for thirty years now venerates me no longer. I am quite stoical about that. I am less stoical when I am phoned from Cape Town to be told that "Die Burger" has praised me: I say "Liewe God!" I read that Dr. Treurnicht has castigated a Government that could receive the support of a person like myself. I am extremely stoical about that. I have long regarded Dr. Treurnicht as a man of great intelligence and no sense whatever, an erudite troglodyte.

What do I think of the constitution? It offers to the black people of South Africa no participation whatsoever in the only legislative process that really matters

matters. Several leaders have already pointed out that it must inevitably increase black-white alienation. I regard the meeting of Chief Buthelezi and other black leaders as an event of the utmost importance, boding no good to the Constitution. Lastly I am astounded that Botha and Heunis still cling to the Verwoerdian concept of separate territorial development leading eventually to the creation of happy and contented "sister states" The well-known land-distribution makes this solution unattainable.

One could criticise many aspects of the constitution, which is surely one of the most complex ever devised by man. But I shall limit myself to two more. The first is the totally unreal separation of interests into "general" and "own". It just won't work: What is the Group Areas Act, "general" or "own"? It will be one of the first issues raised by the two new parliaments if they ever come into being. And what will P.W. Botha do then?

My second criticism is of the possible assumption of dictatorial powers by the State President. I believe that he could actually assume the powers of any parliamentary chamber that chose to walk out, a choice that is very possible. I do not think that P.W. Botha is a swindler, but I don't think he is a genius either.

Why then have I aroused such criticism? I shall give you one reason. I referred to the troubled Afrikaner conscience. Now this makes some people spit including some of those who have "distanced" themselves from me. I understand their reasons. They say "why the hell should we worry about the Afrikaner conscience? Look what it has done to people for thirty-five years." And they are right, that the Afrikaner conscience has sold itself to a Party for too long. But I cannot regard its troubles with contempt. If I did, I would be contemptible too. I hold that old quaint belief that man can always try to do better.

Now what should P.W. do? If he had great wisdom, he would scrap his constitution and his referendums and start again. He should consult much more widely than he has done. He must give up his idea that the National Party can save the country. This would require not only wisdom, but great courage also.

"Beeld" which is the first Afrikaans newspaper to visit me in my eighty years asked me what is the first thing I would do if I were Prime Minister. I said I would scrap the Group Areas Act. But in fact I would do something else first. I would order the immediate execution, without trial, of every headline-writer in the country. I have supported the freedom of the Press all my life, but I think that the editorial control of headline-writers is lamentable. They have caused me anger, and even pain, several times. I think a writer and speaker deserves better treatment than this, especially one who believes in the same freedoms as they do.

Oliver Nelson

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