

BRAM FISCHER'S GREAT SPEECH

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BRAM FISCHER, WHOM it is my privilege to know and to reverence, is one of the truly great political lawyers in history. He could have been, and in a country ruled on honest and humane principles he would have been, just a very good advocate, conducting cases for all sorts of people and living a comfortable intellectual life in Johannesburg. But he combined a strong sense of social duty with clear political judgment, and he was a citizen and a resident of the Union of South Africa, a country misruled by a ruthless group of racists who denied to the non-White population all elementary human rights.

In such a position, where many "good" advocates—good in that they were skilled in their profession, irrespective of social conscience—find it possible to take the easy road of not seeing the injustices around them, Bram Fischer displayed the qualities that have made him one of the most splendid of living men. His cold, unbreakable, twenty-four-hours-a-day courage, his complete integrity, and his readiness to accept and endure endless hardship and suffering in support of what he knew to be right, have led him triumphantly through one test after another, including eleven months "underground", never knowing at what moment "the law" would catch up with him, and now a sentence of life imprisonment. That is not, of course, the final stage of his life's work, for we are all confident that long before his life ends he will be free again, working for his principles in a happier world.

His last public act to date, and one of his greatest, was his speech from the dock in the Supreme Court at Pretoria on March 28th, 1966, now published in pamphlet form by Mayibue Publications. He who conducted so many cases so well for other political accused—and won so many acquittals (a rare event in political trials)—now had the opportunity to speak in his own defence. (This rarely comes the way of political defenders; Georgi Dimitrov had it at Leipzig thirty-three years ago, but he was not a lawyer. The two speeches, by Dimitrov and by Bram Fischer, should be studied by everyone who aspires to be a good political defender. I will not try to compare the one with the other, for they were delivered in very different conditions; I will just say that they were both perfect, both imperishable classics.)

Bram Fischer's speech was, of course, addressed to the world rather than to the Court; but it was addressed to the Court, too, and

for all the studious moderation of the language it must have made the judges writhe in their seats as they listened.

The speech, one can see, must have taken many hours of preparation; every word is carefully weighed, and we get many interesting glimpses of Fischer's personal and political history, problems and development. But even more valuable are the lessons it carries for all of us. Let us study what it tells us:

Why and in what circumstances those who suffer intolerable injustice and misrule can rightly—and indeed must—resort to violence;

How fully experience demonstrates the genuine equality and the equal capacity of human beings of all races and colours;

How hopeless and dangerous a future the White racists in the Union are creating for themselves;

How clearly impossible it is for the present regime to maintain its cruel and bitter colonialism when almost all the rest of the world has passed out of the colonialist period, and its actual total end is in sight;

Why Marxism is the only reliable guide for political development (this lesson being reinforced by some good Marxist analysis of history);

What Communists have done and are doing for their own countries, and how peace and justice in the future depend on the strength of the Communist Parties;

What terrible cruelties are inflicted on the victims of solitary confinement and prolonged interrogation; and how unreliable evidence is that is extracted by those cruel methods;

And why the practical immediate objective for the people of South Africa is not the immediate establishment of a Socialist state but the institution of national democratic rule.

I could write at almost any length in praise of Bram Fischer and of what he has achieved, but I will do better just to conclude with a quotation from one passage of his wonderful speech:

“It was to keep faith with all those dispossessed by apartheid that I broke my undertaking to the Court, separated myself from my family, pretended I was someone else, and accepted the life of a fugitive. I owed it to the political prisoners, to the banished, to the silenced and those under house arrest, not to remain a spectator, but to act. I knew what they expected of me and I did it. I felt responsible, not to those who are indifferent to the sufferings of others, but to those who are concerned. I know that by valuing

above all their judgment, I would be condemned by people who are content to see themselves as respectable and loyal citizens. I cannot regret any condemnation that may follow me.”

The speech referred to by Mr. Pritt is published as a pamphlet *What I did was right*. It is available from Central Books, London, or from THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST at 1s. per copy, plus postage.