

No place at the Black man's side?

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“Liberal — pertaining to a free man... free from narrow prejudice... open to the reception of new ideas or proposals of reform... favourable to changes and reforms tending in the direction of democracy.”

A liberal, that is one who subscribes to liberal ideas, is faced with a tremendous moral dilemma in South Africa today.

Man is not free in this society. The Black man is not free to be educated, to develop his potential, to do the work of his choice in the place of his choice, to sell his labour on the best market, to live with his family in the place where he chooses to live.

No man, Black or White, is free to read what he likes, to see what he likes or even to say what he likes. Far too much justifiable criticism is interpreted as lack of patriotism or even as treason.

The objectives of a concerned liberal in such a society would appear to be self-evident — to strive for a freedom for all men which would allow them to exercise their free choice in every aspect of their lives without endangering the balance which must always be maintained between the rights of the individual and the stability and prosperity of the society as a whole. This is the traditional role of the liberal.

But for the liberal in South Africa this clarity of objective has become increasingly clouded by the conditions which prevail, complicating practically every issue.

Fundamentally the problem has been, and remains, a population consisting in 1970 of the overwhelmingly unbalanced ratio of 17.5 per cent Whites to 82.5 per cent Blacks. This ratio has even greater significance because Blacks have ownership rights to only 13 per cent of the land plus a few Coloured and Indian group areas, leaving the Whites with the remainder, while all urban industrial and commercial wealth is concentrated in the hands of the Whites. As inequitable as the population distribution, is the distribution of wealth.

Despite all this disparity, the path of the liberal should still be clearly defined — towards a redistribution of wealth with all its

concomitant rights in order to ensure for all men that freedom which the liberal holds dear.

But it is not only wealth which has been withheld from the Blacks, it is practically every human right as well — in fact had the Blacks not been denied all meaningful political rights such an inequitable situation could never have arisen.

Blacks would then have had the power to press for their share of prosperity and all that goes with it, in an evolutionary manner, and White liberals could happily have supported them.

In fact this is the dream which White liberals have been nurturing through all the years — the eventual evolution of a society which would recognise the right of every man to his place in the sun; which would respect the dignity of man and which would create conditions where the Black-White divisions ceased to matter and where differences would be those of abilities, interests and achievements, not of colour, discrimination and lack of opportunity.

However this was not to be, and the liberal dream has been receding and becoming even more remote. The exploitation of the Blacks by the Whites has at last and inevitably produced a reaction from the Blacks which is now manifesting itself in the growing cult of Black Consciousness and Black Power.

In order to help himself the Black man needs the bargaining power which has so long been denied him, and in order to build up his bargaining power he needs the stimulus of Black Consciousness which is being increasingly equated with Black Power.

Where does the liberal stand in this new situation? He has lost his dewy-eyed vision of a colour-blind society. He is afraid that the growth of Black Power will do more than provide the Black man with the bargaining power

he needs to achieve his rightful place in society.

He is afraid it will eventually lead to a confrontation between White power and Black power which will make impossible a colour-blind society at least for very many years to come. So he is reluctant to lend his full support to the development of Black power, even though he may recognise the need for it in the prevailing circumstances.

In any event any overture he might make would be instantly rejected by the Black man, who now sees the White liberal as a very real threat to his own solution to his problems — the Black Power movement.

Anything the White liberal might be able to achieve to alleviate the plight of the Black man would make it that much harder for the Black Power movement to gain and maintain its impetus.

Besides the Black man now believes that the White man, even be he a liberal with concern for the Black man's problems, no longer has any place at the Black man's side, and can only undermine him.

This leaves the White liberal out on a limb, as it were. He belongs neither with White power nor with Black power. He believes in manpower, but how is this to be achieved in the growing polarisation between Black and White?

It would be good if he could believe that when Black bargaining power becomes sufficiently strong it will then sit round a table with White power — assuming that White power would then be prepared to co-operate — and that out of the bargaining a peaceful and just society would emerge.

If such an outcome were at all possible then the present task of the White liberal would be to prepare White power and cajole it into a readiness to accept change, but he may well be forgiven for wondering whether Black power will stop at bargaining power, and whether it will be "favourable to changes and reforms tending in the direction of democracy."

Might it not by that time be corrupted by power and satisfied with nothing less than the obliteration of the exploiting White man or at least with his complete subjugation? This is a possibility which cannot be excluded.

There is obviously no easy solution, either to South Africa's dilemma or to that of the White liberal within that society.

There is the White fear of being swamped which leads to ever more harsh and stringent restrictions on Blacks — restrictions which are immoral and unjust and which undermine the oppressors as well as the oppressed.

There is the White liberal caught between his hatred of injustice and inhumanity and his rejection by both Whites and Blacks.

Yet there is nothing fundamentally wrong with liberal ideas. There is nothing wrong with wanting and with working for a just and responsible society. There is nothing wrong with judging a man on his worth, irrespective of his colour, creed or race. These are the ideals for which men have striven through the ages. They remain ideals for which the White liberal is entitled to strive.

Restricted as he is by the conditions in which he finds himself in this place and day and age it seems that all that is left to him is to continue to strive for what he believes in despite a universally hostile environment.

If he has been totally rejected by Black men he must still continue to do what he can among White men to achieve his aims.

His enthusiasm might be dampened by the knowledge that the Black men, whose cause he espouses, believe that he is undermining them, but the Black men may not necessarily be correct in their belief.

No-one can foretell the course of events, nor what the repercussions may be of any given action or activity. It remains to each individual to do what he believes to be right and just, and perhaps this is the sole guiding light for the White liberal in his dilemma.

Why should he withdraw from the scene simply because at this precise moment he is not wanted by anyone? Perhaps in the long run he might be the one with the true answer.

If all mankind minus one were of one opinion and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.

— John Stuart Mill, 1859