

The Black Sash Die Swart Serp

‘THE GOVERNMENT was anxious to use all the machinery at its disposal to enrich the urban Africans’ environment, Mr. T. N. H. Janson, the Deputy Minister of Bantu Administration said today.’ — The Star, August 2, 1973.

‘SCORES OF African men and women were arrested in Pimville Old Location last night when Johannesburg municipal and South African police raided their homes. The township was surrounded by a strong contingent of police while “blackjacks” (municipal police) entered the houses.’ — The Star, August 2, 1972.

There is a good deal of loose talk going the rounds about humanising the pass laws and removing the “pinpricks” of pass law administration.

These laws with the constituent parts — influx control, efflux enforcement, migrant labour and the housing regulations — deprive all South Africa’s African people of their right to the freedom of movement and the ownership of their own labour. You cannot take away people’s human rights and freedoms and then claim that you are doing so in a humane manner.

The pass laws are designed to control every aspect of the lives of Black people in the interests of the White group and to ensure that they can never regard themselves as citizens of the common area of the Republic.

Any relaxation of the pass laws would lead to a breakdown of the system. For example if certain Black men were to be exempted from producing their reference books on demand then all Black men would automatically be exempted because you cannot tell a person’s Section 10 qualification by looking at his face. Some form of differentiated identification would need to be introduced.

Then you would be back where you started from because the objection is not to the shape or colour of the document which must be produced but to the fact that it must be produced at all whenever and wherever it is demanded.

The same objections apply to nonsensical schemes for a centralised computerised register of all Black workers in “White” South Africa aimed at cancelling out unnecessary arrests of Blacks who are legally registered employees but who are found not carrying their reference books.

How long are people to be held while the computer checks up? It already takes a year to have a simple thing like a mistake in a birth certificate rectified in the computerised Bantu Reference Bureau in Pretoria so how

long is it going to take for *people* to feed the computer with the necessary accurate information to keep pace with the extraordinarily high labour turnover necessitated by the 1968 Labour Regulations?

Mr. Janson illustrated the impossibility of being compassionate about the pass laws when he said in Parliament that the chairmen of the Administration Boards would have to be people who had to be prepared to act in a dynamic manner “in improving conditions for the urban Bantu and *also in bringing about their resettlement in their country of origin*”.

The threat of resettlement is precisely what makes conditions for urban Africans so intolerable. It is no comfort to a man whose children are being resettled to his so-called “country of origin” that Mr. Janson’s department is doing it in a spirit of concern to establish and develop between Black and White “the happiest relations possible.”

This is not to say that more housing, better educational facilities in the cities or greater inter-area mobility are not to be welcomed. But we must not bluff ourselves that they will make one iota of difference in the long run to the basic fact that a minority group of Whites subjects a majority group of Blacks to perpetual serfdom nor must we delude ourselves that we are being humane in our administration.

It may be possible to be polite about telling a man that his wife is not permitted to live with him or to be respectful about evicting a woman from her house because her husband has died or to be courteous about ordering someone to leave the area with 72 hours but it cannot be either humane or just or, indeed, moral.

The pass law controls cannot be altered in any way which would change this fact. The very existence of such control is a denial of humanity. Only their total removal will restore to men their freedom and allow us to make a start in trying to be humane.