

# Malice in Wonderland

MICHAEL SAVAGE

**T**HERE can be few countries in the world which go about tackling a grave housing shortage by introducing legislation to knock down people's homes.

It requires an inverted type of logic — a sort of Malice in Wonderland approach — to believe that the demolition of housing addresses the problem of a housing shortage. Yet first we have seen the Group Areas Act introduced, an act which since its inception has been responsible for moving 305 739 Coloured persons; 153 230 Indian citizens (as contrasted to a mere 5 898 Whites) and also has been responsible for moving an uncounted number of Africans from their homes.<sup>1</sup>

In the Cape Province alone some 244 718 Coloured persons have been moved out of their homes under the provisions of this Act, which also moved 18 939 Coloured people out of their homes in the city of Cape Town last year.<sup>2</sup> Already a system of mass population removals is underway.

The Prevention of Illegal Squatting Amendment Bill proposes to continue this process and move still more people out of their homes, and this at a time when the housing shortage has become even more critical because thousands of houses have been removed from the Black housing stock by the Group Areas Act. The mass removals of people from their homes and the demolition of squatter shacks are peculiarly South African responses to a housing shortage.

My particular concern with this Bill is the damage it could cause to sound race relations in this country, at a time when such damage can be ill-afforded. In one move this Bill, with all the delicacy of a bulldozer, proposes to do at least five things that could threaten further the possibility of establishing sound race relations.

● First, it proposes to put the onus on White owners of property to prevent illegal squatting on their premises. It will put Whites, and Whites who are not necessarily even Government officials, into the position of having to police the Black population and, for instance, it will put the White owner of land against the Black squatter. Likewise it will put the White employer of labour in the position of turning away a potential Black employee who is wanting a job, because the White employer cannot provide housing, or because the Black cannot find it. This Bill will help make many Whites policemen of Black behaviour.

● Secondly the Bill continues the trend of imposing legislation that is made solely by Whites on the Black population. None of the people who

will be most severely affected by this legislation, namely the Black squatters, have been consulted about the Bill.

As a result the Executive Committee of the Vrygrond, Lourdes Farm and Snake Park squatters camps, in a public statement said "We feel an ignored, unwanted and shunted about part of the community" and "hurt that legislation should be put through without us ever having been consulted".<sup>3</sup>

If this bill becomes law, squatters will become trapped into a legal machinery that they did not create and become unwilling victims of laws made by Whites which deeply affect them, but which they had no part in erecting.

● Thirdly, the Bill could damage race relations by creating amongst those whose homes it will ultimately be responsible for destroying, a bitter and frustrated section of the population.

It could create a group of Black people who could attribute their woes to White legislators, White owners of property or White officials, and it thus raises the ugly possibility of physical confrontation between Black and White.

Recently I interviewed a squatter who had been told by a White official to move to Lourdes Farm from another squatter camp. Having put up his shack, after one week he was told by an inspector to remove it to another part of Lourdes Farm. His reaction was predictably angry.

"We're not going to move, we're going to stick like Bostik. We'll fight the inspectors if they come to pull down my house". This Bill raises the ugly possibility of many more citizens feeling willingness to consider entering such confrontations.

● Fourthly, this Bill fails the basic test in creating sound race relations, namely the test of whether it proposes to treat people as people, each having her or his own dignity, rights and aspirations. The Bill proposes to institute a blanket solution to the vast variety of problems which have led people to becoming squatters — it proposes a solution of destroying the squatter homes of those who cannot afford housing, those who cannot find it, those who do not qualify for public housing and those who are fleeing from the anonymity and crime of some housing estates.

The Bill treats all squatters as an undifferentiated mass and thereby denies the established fact that a variety of different problems led people individually to becoming squatters. In motivating the Bill some politicians appear to

have argued that squatters are very different from the population from which they come.

Statistically, we can show in the area of greater Cape Town that Coloured squatters are similar and are not a quickly shifting mass of people. Overall they resemble the Coloured population as a whole, in terms of their residential stability, their incomes and the length of time in which they stay in one job — one third of them for instance in the CCC area have held their current job for more than four years.

In short, squatters have made and continue to make a solid economic contribution to the community. Where they differ chiefly from other people is in their lack of proper housing — yet at the same time they are *not* the globular group that this Bill suggests they are.

● Finally, this Bill could damage race relations by introducing a new principal in placing the onus on employers to provide, or find, housing before being able to bring prospective employees into an urban area. This amounts to introducing for Coloured and Indian citizens a severe restriction on their freedom of movement, and they could in fact become subject to a camouflaged form of influx control.

The Bill, if it became law, would further South Africa's already unsuccessful attempt to bottle up in the rural areas the housing and employment problems that should be being faced squarely in the towns. Ominously the Bill relies on bottling up these problems by introducing influx controls, controls which we have ample evidence to indicate are widely hated, damage race relations, split families asunder and help bring the law into disrepute.

In short, this Bill could cause the most grievous harm to relations between Black and White.

As serious, the Bill could cause untold human suffering. Already squatters are suffering. Let us remember Angeline Mangine who lives in a shack "somewhere in Cape Town" and who trekked to Cape Town "in search of food". She is reported in the Sunday Times Extra as saying:

"My husband has not got the necessary papers to live in Cape Town or to work here. We come from the Illinga Resettlement Township near Queenstown.

"There are no more jobs. The White people pay only R10 a month there. At night the children used to cry for food. We decided it was better to come and live in the bush near the city so my husband can earn better money. We hide here. If they kick us out, we will come back. We must live."

How much more will Mrs Mangine suffer under *this Bill* and can the Mangine's please be told how their problems are going to be helped by this Bill?

This Bill merely attacks the symptoms of a problem whose roots rest in a whole pattern of discriminatory political, economic and social legislation. For instance, we cannot hope to set about obtaining a solution to the housing problem without at the same time considering competing claims on the financial resources of our society between let us say, defence and education; and in particular competing claims between the interests of the Black and the White population.

To get adequate financial resources to address the housing problem requires first a dismantling of some of the discriminatory decision-making machinery and some of the discriminatory economic and social legislation which traps people into low paid jobs, into living in particular areas and into having only certain types of training available to them. This Bill not only totally fails to get to the roots of the problem it is supposed to be addressing, but by not doing this actually helps contribute to the problem, by obscuring it even further.

We should remember that while this Bill may become law, it will never be able to be morally justified.

- (1) *Minister of Community Development, Hansard, March 9, 1976. Question 417.*
- (2) *Minister of Community Development, Hansard, February 20, 1976. Question 311.*
- (3) *Sunday Times Extra, May 16, 1976.*
- (4) *Sunday Times Extra, April 4, 1976.*
- (5) *The Argus, July 1975.*

