

# Those in between

*Extracts from a discussion, led by Dr Manas Buthelezi, at a meeting held in Pietermaritzburg on October 22, 1975, under the auspices of the Natal Midlands Region of the Black Sash. The meeting was a follow-up to a previous Black Sash meeting at which June Chabaku spoke of growing polarisation between Black and White and asked what those of us "in between" (as it were) could do.*

**DR MANAS BUTHELEZI:** I hope you're not going to be disappointed, because I'm not going to give you recipes as to how you should "cook the pot" of your life. Instead I'll say a few words and then leave it to you to solve your own problems.

The way I'll try to work out this introduction to the topic without giving the answer to the question will be to look at the topic "the role of us in between". I've arranged my presentation in the form of three theses.

The first thesis is that those who find themselves in the middle of two groups polarised on moral issues must get out of the middle and take sides. In other words I'm saying to those in the middle "You are in the wrong place". Sometimes being in the middle is the same as being neutral. It's a safe place to be in.

The second point under this thesis is that "in between" may be a position of fear of taking sides where issues are so sharply defined as to leave no room for third parties.

There are only two parties: those this side and those that side. There is no middle.

The third point is that the majority of contentious issues do not have grey areas. Things are black or white. There is no place in the middle.

I will illustrate this. One of the contentious issues is the sharing of power. You either share basic or essential power, or hold it exclusively in your hands and only allow others marginal power or merely the trappings of power. So it's a matter of either or.

The second illustration of this concerns the sharing of wealth. You either share wealth or keep it to yourself, only allowing others crumbs of wealth in the form of charity or survival wages — you pay them enough to keep going but not to improve their standard of living.

Another issue where there is no grey area is the question of the sharing of civil liberties. You either share freedom with others or see the freedom of others as a continual threat to your own freedom . . . and this necessitates the so-called security measures for containing the freedom of others.

My second thesis is that in South African racial politics the word "polarisation" is a misnomer if

it is intended to suggest that Blacks and Whites have bilaterally retreated in order to take up a striking pose of confrontation at each of the political poles. I'm denying that there is polarisation in the dictionary sense of the word.

The thesis is easily explained. Blacks have been pushed by the systematic policy of apartheid to where they are at the moment. One realises that this is so when one thinks of Black consciousness or the apparently more threatening Black power — that is, a political stance of establishing a power base from the initial consciousness of powerlessness.

You become aware of the fact that you've no power, no vote, and so on, and from this consciousness you try to create something out of nothing; and that is what people mean by Black Power. There is really no power.

Instead of speaking of polarisation, one should rather speak of those who have pushed others out, and those who have been pushed out.

There is no position of in-between. In the homelands they have been pushed out; separate development was simply conferred on us. People in Newcastle never chose to reside at Madadeni: they were simply pushed out.

Students never chose to go to ethnic universities where they would see no White students, but see only Black people around them: they were pushed out. You may call this polarisation, but basically it is *not* polarisation. It's a question of one group pushing others.

My third thesis is that the role of those who believe that a viable society can be built only on the foundations of justice for all is that of striving to give power to the powerless, until reasonable sharing is realised.

So I'm not talking of those in between, but of those who believe that a viable society can be formed and structured only on the foundation of justice. They may belong to the group that has been pushed out, or to the group that has pushed others out — if there has been a conversion. Therefore those who have this feeling should support constructive Black initiative, regardless of whether or not one believes in the presuppositions on which it is based.

I know that many White people feel disturbed about the phenomenon of Black consciousness, of

Black students speaking out. They feel it has nothing to do with them.

Those who are concerned should see this as an instance of Black initiative. Here is a group of Black people trying to create something out of nothing. They deserve your support. The kind of language and vocabulary they use when they try to articulate this, is not important. What is important is that they are refusing to die. They are trying to create life in the bosom of the political tomb in which they have been placed — and they deserve your support.

My final thesis, if I may call it that, is that as long as there are people who are victims of poverty, of political oppression, there will always be room for what I'll call a Red Cross ministry. By this I mean that as long as there are casualties of all these oppressive forces, there will be a role for those who will try to provide crutches for these people to keep going.

I will, in this introduction, go only as far as this. Thank you.

MR PETER RUTSCH:

To what extent do SASO and BPC find support among the people in general? A survey done by Professor Laurie Schlemmer in Durban showed that three or four out of every ten Africans supported the ideals of SASO and BPC.

DR BUTHELEZI:

In any community, past or present, it has never happened that philosophers have been among the grass-root section of the population. You have a few people who articulate certain ideas designed to mobilise the community, but if you went to the community they would profess ignorance even though they were in fact caught up in it all themselves.

For example, look at what is happening in Newcastle, and what happened in the Durban strikes. Is that not an instance of Black awareness — that Black people have become aware of their potential? But I'm sure if you went to any of those strikers and asked them about Black consciousness, there would be no conscious support.

Even the so-called homeland leaders are using similar language to that which these students have been using. They have been influenced somehow.

MR RUTSCH:

To what extent can I as a White go out and help with the Black trade unions? Basically it's their own responsibility. What is a White man's role in the White community? To try to get people to change?

DR BUTHELEZI:

There are ways Whites can use the facilities they have. For example, Black people have no control of the Press. The White Press can play a very creative role. Another example is maybe with financial support. Activate your own creative forces.

PROFESSOR JOHN MACQUARRIE:

You said that we shouldn't be in the middle. Well, I'm in the middle, and I'm proud of it. I can't be anything else. I'm a liberal. I dislike White nationalism; I understand how it has grown up; I sympathise with the feelings that have created it. But I hate it. I dislike it.

I equally strongly dislike Black nationalism. I know how it has arisen and I sympathise, but I am still very disappointed that there are not more people like Mr Knowledge Guzana, who is a liberal, and takes the line that nationalism in itself is an evil thing.

You talk about Black Power: it's Black people who created Black power. You seem to think most of us White people have more power than we actually have. What power have I got, or any of the Whites present, over the control of money? I do think that leaders like yourself could help the Black people to see the need for conciliation, for working together.

Black nationalism in the rest of Africa has had some very unfortunate effects, for example in Uganda. I don't hear any of you people complaining about it. I stand for liberalism, not for nationalism of any kind, and I'd like to see more Blacks support liberalism.

DR BUTHELEZI:

It's a matter of words. If you stifle something that has not even properly existed, you are bringing more destruction.

I don't see this threat of Black nationalism. All I see round me is the threat of White nationalism which has made it impossible for me to associate with White people on a meaningful level. That is what I regard as a threat — something that has created havoc, much more than this so-called Black power.

I don't see the havoc created by that. But I do see what White nationalism has created — banings, detentions, etc. What is happening in the Black community is that people are trying to survive in a position of rejection. They have been pushed out.

How should students at Ngoya or Turfloop (who have been segregated) establish their identity as students — by dreaming that we are one, that we belong to one community? Shouldn't they rather say, "We don't like the position we are in, but we will not allow the situation to kill us?"

Black consciousness is creative. It is an attempt to exist. Therefore do not stifle or crush this, saying it is just another version of Afrikaner nationalism. It's not. It's a survival technique.

PROF. MACQUARRIE (following a comment from the floor):

The last speaker talked of "sitting on the fence". A fence is something erected between two different pieces of ground. I refuse to believe that I'm sitting on the fence between White nationalism and Black nationalism.

A liberal of whatever colour stands for something quite different: therefore the picture of fences just doesn't make sense. The whole metaphor seems to me to be unsound.

**DR BUTHELEZI:**

I consider myself a liberal too. But the problem has been created that you White liberals have not been successful in reaching White people in general and turning them into liberals.

I never meet White people who need to be converted. I meet only those who are also against apartheid: so there is no dialogue.

What has happened since the beginning of the 50s is that the Black community has tried to mobilise itself to achieve exactly what you (White liberals) for many years tried to achieve. I see Black consciousness as a complement to what you are trying to do.

We are all against apartheid — but we do not use the same language.

**MRS MARY PARK ROSS:**

I think everybody would welcome an open society in which everyone has the same civil rights. But on the way to that I think we've got to face the fact that the large majority of Black people are still trying to find their own identity.

It seems to me we'll have to go through a period in which Black people will say to White people, "No, thank you, we'll do it on our own," until they find themselves, their own identity, their own dignity. Only then can we meet together on equal terms.

**DR BUTHELEZI:**

I think you have summed it up very well. That's the crux of the matter. It's not as if the so-called Black nationalism is out to devour anyone.

I don't like the word nationalism myself, but it is an attempt on the part of Black people to discover their identity because many Black people cannot relate to a White person on a human level: we have been brainwashed into thinking that ours is only to receive, in any form of relationship that is established.

And what is happening now is that Black people are trying to rediscover themselves, as well as their own resources. White people may think that Black people are turning their backs on them. But it is a time to look into my pockets.

What do I have? What assets do I have to enrich any form of relationship? I pretended in my introduction that I did not understand what you meant when you referred to yourselves as people in the middle. I do appreciate the dilemma you find yourselves in.

I'm thinking of the so-called liberals. For many years you have tried to speak on behalf of Black people. We are very grateful for this role you have played. But you should not take it as something that undermines the contribution you have made if Black people stand up and say, "Just wait a moment. We are now going to define our own problems in our own words."

That is complementary to your contribution. Don't feel threatened by it. Because if you feel threatened I begin to wonder if your contribution is of the right type.

**PROF. MACQUARRIE:**

I've been very interested in what Mrs Park Ross has said, but as far as I'm concerned my feeling is this: "Here I stand. I can do no other."

I think a person who is a liberal has certain standards of life, and I think most of us are against nationalism in any form. We can't solve the problems of the country. All we can do is to stand firm on the convictions on which we feel deeply, and leave the rest to the future.

**DR BUTHELEZI:**

But the problem is how to influence others.

**PROF. MACQUARRIE:**

I want to influence you to abhor Black nationalism as much as I abhor White nationalism.

**DR BUTHELEZI:**

It seems to me as if the greatest problem is in the White community. You don't need to struggle to convince a Black person that injustice is unjust. He knows that because he experiences it.

But I sometimes wonder how many White people really appreciate the impact of apartheid in a Black man's society. Very few of them are aware of this. And that is the challenge — how the liberals or the Black Sash create an impact in the White community.

We are trying to do that in the Black community, because the mistake we have made in the past has been that of seeing ourselves as being merely victims praying that a change of heart might occur among White people. Now we realise that we can do something. We don't need only to listen to the Whites — we should speak to them. And this is happening. So it's not enough to say, "Here I stand. I can do no other." We should do something to change people.

**PROF. MACQUARRIE:**

What more can anyone in this world do than stand on his convictions? What more can he do? I dislike hearing the speaker talk about the White group or the Black group as a whole because all groups are made up of individual people.

I also feel that the White people have made a tremendous contribution to life in South Africa. I think there must be about ten times as many Black people living on this sub-continent as there were when the White people came.

We have made great contributions. We needn't be shamefaced about many things. And we have brought ethical standards to this country which did not prevail in African society.

**DR BUTHELEZI:**

I don't see them. Where are those standards? I don't feel the impact of those ethical standards. Instead I see the contradiction of the morality which the Christian faith claims.