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In this issue the traditional editorial has been discarded in favour of an article expressing the editor's concern for the principles the Black Sash has always stood for and the pressures to which these beliefs are presently being subjected. We hope the article will encourage responses from members.

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# Onslaught on human rights

*Jill Wentzel*

**I**F THERE is any total onslaught in Southern Africa it is on human rights and liberties. Less obvious, but possibly more serious in the long term, is a reactive process that has built up over the years resulting in an overall disrespect for human rights even from Government opponents, who, living in the atmosphere created by the Government, have begun to be affected in subtle ways of which they are seldom aware.

## **Totalitarian habits**

While the Black Sash has tried to maintain respect for human rights and human dignity, and for individual, creative thinking, we have to acknowledge that the Government has been more successful in establishing the habits of totalitarianism.

It is a disturbing human predicament that brutality seems to teach brutality more effectively than it teaches opposition to brutality; that intolerance towards opposition creates corresponding intolerance among the opposition; and that censorship and banning encourage conflicting ideologies to anathematise each other rather than mutate creatively as a result of criticism and debate. Another undemocratic habit that develops in a totalitarian climate is apathy in the face of both fear and the failure of protest. Also, the long failure of liberal protest causes a loss of faith in its values.

Ironically, as abuses of power increase numerically, the result is less, not more protest, as people become accustomed to what has become commonplace. This phenomenon so disturbed our national committee that we called a special members' meeting in Johannesburg in June to discuss what we could do to counter it. No new strategies emerged and perhaps none exist. We decided that all we could do was carry on protesting and guard against our own apathy.

The public has come to accept the philosophy that the orderly management of society is something apart from and more important than civil rights and liberties.

The more arbitrarily and ruthlessly the Government punishes dissidents, the more rampant police power becomes, the more ubiquitously there takes root an acceptance of the idea that any government, or any power group, is entitled, indeed must, take undemocratic action in the face of special circumstances. Most whites clearly believe this: but we have also heard opponents of the Government, and champions of civil liberties here, excuse detention without trial in Zimbabwe on the grounds that Mr Mugabe is facing serious problems.

There is an atmosphere of authoritarianism among dissident organisations which increasingly demand of their followers the same unquestioning obedience to their ideology and their strategies that Afrikaner nationalism demanded of its followers in order to establish itself. What is unhappy for us is that we have to acknowledge that this counter rigidity seems to be the only weapon in the face of Government intransigence and power and the votelessness of three-quarters of the Government's opponents.

## **Economics first**

The Prime Minister's conferences with businessmen have reinforced the philosophy of economic matters first and civil rights and liberties a luxury in second place. In the last issue of this magazine you will have read in the national report for 1981 that at the end of last year Joyce Harris, who was National President of the Black Sash, wrote a letter to 100 of the 600 businessmen invited to the Prime Minister's Good Hope Conference to draw their attention to official lawlessness and asking them to use their influence to press for the restoration of the rule of law, without which, she said, 'no reform can be beneficial and no society can progress.' Apart from a minority who

agreed with us, most of those who replied stressed the prior importance of economic stability.

Black and white radicals echo this economics first philosophy, believing that structural economic change is the priority and that without economic justice no civil rights can have any real value. An increasingly strong radical lobby argues that the present bitter battle for human rights, in the context of the apartheid regime, is nothing but irritating 'reformism,' and warn that any small victories that might be achieved would negatively give credence to a rotten system.

But economic justice is not easy to achieve, whether attempts to reach it are channelled through free enterprise or through socialism. We are concerned that all respect for human rights might be lost during the long battle to solve economic problems, which could span decades under whatever regimes.

The downgrading of the vote is another serious aspect of the total onslaught on civil rights. The Government has so successfully discredited the idea of universal suffrage that it has become the conventional wisdom to think in terms of solutions that do not include the vote: and radicals are just as sceptical of its efficacy. Everyone has lost sight of the negative strength of democracy, which is more importantly there to get rid of bad government without bullets than to create good government.

### **The other onslaught**

Some of the Black Sash members who have attended protest gatherings during the last two years have had first-hand experience of the build-up of onslaught on human rights and liberties from all sides. Outside these lawful gatherings, often waiting to break them up, were the police. Inside, where emotions have run justifiably high and indignant, we have been inspired by the courage and enthusiasm, the uplifting feeling of community spirit and solidarity: but we have also felt the chill of the other onslaught as we have listened to slogans and cliches and angry attacks on fellow dissidents who commit the crime of working within the system and who are accused of retarding the liberatory struggle. Painfully we see unfolding before us an awful logic, as the weight of Government oppression necessitates opposition solidarity at the expense of other important values.

Black Sash members are not immune from the rigidity and also the romanticism of the atmosphere around us. Members have become reluctant to withstand the moral opprobrium and the intellectual contempt that follows any questioning of fashionable liberatory language. Last year the Transvaal region held a seminar to try and resolve this dilemma. The results are summarised in the Transvaal report on page 26. Basically we reaffirmed that we are no major force for change but a catalyst for human rights and liberties and a witness of the suffering caused when these are disregarded.

### **Onslaught on the media**

Despite the unpromising climate in which we have to operate, there is still a substantial hard core of people in all dissident organisations who will continue to hold faith *with basic human freedoms*.

If this hard core of middle-ground people are to stop the rot they must be led and supported by the media. But the onslaught on the media is also total. We know how the fury of Government attacks on the Press have set up an onslaught from within the ranks of the media, who tend to censor themselves, vainly hoping to forestall more oppressive legislation.

An example of the leadership potential of the Press is the opening up of taboo areas of dialogue by Frontline.

But there are hardly any signs that powerful businessmen will effectively back an independent, free Press in the way they are prepared to back the universities and other training institutions: and without the Press the middle-ground will probably not survive.

### **President's Council**

The snowballing of authoritarianism and the growing strength of the white right wing seem to us a more relevant indication of the future in which we must live than the proposals of the President's Council. We cannot help being more perturbed by our debasement of civilised standards than we are hopeful of the outcome of constitutional negotiations. Perhaps the proposals, as Treurnicht clearly believes, will start unstoppable process of change, but this has **yet** to happen, and if it happens in a climate of disrespect for human rights it might not be much use anyway.