

beloved memories

zilla m. herries baird

In Durban it all started at The Victoria Club, when the late Miss Killie Campbell, of beloved memory, co-opted her bowling, horticultural and intellectual friends into a branch of the 'Women's Defence of the Constitution League', Jean Hill being its first chairwoman.

That evening, our organisation, by then known as the Black Sash, mounted an all night vigil on the steps of Durban's historic post office.

Until midnight our stand numbered some 70 Black Sash members. In the small hours of the morning, when our line of protest had been reduced by half, an unfriendly passer-by saw fit to set my sash on fire. Of poor quality material the wretched thing just smouldered ... but it did smell horrid! And I was, anyway, happier with its successor made from the pure silk mourning skirt of an aged aunt.

When the Indian Myna birds in full voice heralded the dawn, we were all back on the steps, offering a stubborn silence to the little man, still drunk at that hour, who paced the line asking 'Wotchu Waiting For?' When the last woman in the line replied in ringing tones 'JUSTICE,' the little man, most sensibly, left us to our Lost Cause.

In the course of the years, legislation has progressively limited the number and choice of venues for Black Sash stands. In the halcyon days when we were able to mount huge protest stands in the Town Gardens, we did so under the surveillance of the special branch, which had an office in one of the buildings overlooking the Gardens. The less serious-minded among us claimed that it was Zilla's hat and

gloves which were the attraction!

Like other regions, Durban has had its share of men who are able to dine out on the stories of the posters they have snatched from Black Sash women. Oddly enough, when I have smilingly offered mine to the creatures, saying how glad I was that they should be so interested, they have never accepted my kindly offer.

In the first and subsequent years, we foregathered in the spacious elegance of 'Muckleneuk', the Campbell family seat where we partook of china tea from bone china cups.

When Miss Killie went to join her distinguished forebears, protesting to me the day before her death that she had left too many things half done to be ready for death, we were without a home. But, before the date of the next meeting, Miss Brown had solved our problem and we continued our deliberations in the stately home of that Natal family of commercial consequence.

When Miss Brown's health made it impossible for her to continue living in the great house with her companions and innumerable dogs — each with his/her own blanket on the leathered upholstered chairs and couches in an enormous foyer — Patty and David Gearts opened the doors of yet another early Natal tree-shaded homestead with a view to eclipse the Mediterranean littoral.

And in the deliberations under so many distinguished roofs, the Natal Coastal Region has worked tirelessly, identifying themselves with the rage and sorrow and suffering which continue to mount in the townships on Durban's well-heeled doorstep.

Now in my eightieth year — and



still Scottish-country-dancing — I find that I don't hear any better than I did after my mastoid operation in my early twenties. In this context, my stage training prompts me to suggest that speakers — both from the floor and the podium — should hold their papers up rather than their heads down: that they should take enough breath to enable them to THROW their voices. I come away from meetings irritable or enlightened according to the speaker's capacity for projecting the voice.

As I look back, I think of those who have given day-in-and-day-out of their health, their hearts and their leisure — and for whom no tribute can be high enough.

Nor is it an afterthought that we pay tribute to husbands who have, in so many instances, made it possible for us to continue labouring in the vineyard.

The recent increase in Natal Coastal's membership by a huge influx of the Young, Beautiful and Enthusiastic had brought a glimmer of hope to my harassed heart ... a hope that dies as I see not only the youngsters, but so many of those with whom I have worked in the past, turning in desperation to the left.

For me, socialism is unacceptable. I am — in utter desolation — beginning to wonder whether the Black Sash and Zilla have not come to the parting of the ways. □