



THE Information scandal has blown up and burst. The Erasmus Commission has brought out its report. Dr Mulder has reluctantly resigned as a Cabinet Minister, although at the time of writing he has not yet resigned as MP. To crown it all, the Commission gave the public an alarming glimpse of the extraordinary influence wielded by General van den Bergh over the supposedly immovable Mr Vorster. As the report states: 'He saw himself as the power behind the throne; through the person of Mr Vorster, he tried to manipulate events in the direction that he wanted them to go...'

The report exonerates Mr Vorster and Mr Botha. On the basis of the evidence contained in it other people may conclude differently.

There were individuals who stood out by their refusal to meekly accept Dr Mulder's dictate that the end — the so-called defence of South Africa against its enemies — justified the means. General Magnus Malan, head of the Defence Force, refused to 'have my Department used as an excuse or explanation for State expenditure which in no way could be linked with us' and regarded the 'procedure as unethical and irregular'. (RDM, 6/13/1978). Some civil servants were sickened by what was happening, and one, Mr Waldeck, has paid for his principles with early retirement. The national press showed great courage, particularly the 'Sunday Express' and the 'Rand Daily Mail'. To its credit the Afrikaans press was appalled and refused to be muzzled, unlike the SABC. 'Die Beeld' justified its decision to publish the statement asking: 'Do we want a Pravda press?'

And yet what has changed basically?

Having given evidence to the Commission, Dr Eschel Rhodie was allowed to leave the country with amazing ease, and his whereabouts are apparently still unknown. The Commission will not release the evidence given before it because 'persons involved in the irregularities have refused to return to South Africa'. General van den Bergh has not yet been charged with his public disparagement of some of the Commission's findings, yet SAAN, the editor and deputy financial editor of the 'Rand Daily Mail' were charged within 48 hours for allegedly anticipating the Commission's findings.

And the secret powers of Government remain. People are still being taken into 'preventive detention' or banned. Some have been incarcerated in these forms of silence for over a year. People

are still being given 72 hours to leave a 'prescribed area' and are still being deprived of their South African citizenship without consultation and against their will. The future of Crossroads remains as precarious as ever. Freedom of speech in this country looks ever more threatened after Mr Botha's ominous threats of retaliation against the press made in early November.

Most important, the power of men in high places to wield extra-legal power in the alleged national interest remains unchanged.

For many of us in the Black Sash the whole Information affair was squalid, but scarcely surprising. The past 30 years of Nationalist rule have seen the wholesale substitution of the Rule by Law by rules by law. What appears to count, if you are the Government, is not actions and the responsibility for those rules, but unfavourable criticism and the revelation of unpalatable facts.



Leslie Hermer taking her turn in the Johannesburg Black Sash stand