

The Case Against Poverty

By Margaret Roberts

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IN BRITAIN'S bad old pre-Welfare-State days—and they were bad compared with now, for the vast majority of the population, whatever they were for some of our well-heeled friends or relations—tired reformers would seem to be conceding diehards a point when they acknowledged, "Oh yes, it's the same law for the rich and the poor. . . ." They would so seem until they added: "Yes—the rich aren't allowed to sleep in doorways, either!"

Their argument was, of course, that freedom in a completely unreformed, unfettered capitalist society is really only potential freedom—you are as free as you can afford to be. For instance: if, for this reason and that, including your being neither clever nor lucky (however hard-working), and the way the economy is ordered, your children's bread depends *absolutely* on the whim of a reactionary employer, you are *not* in practice, free to make radical speeches in public.

How much more desperate is the plight of the poor in South Africa's unjust society. Here we not only take little or no effective State action to temper private exploitation of the masses, but public policy actually facilitates and ensures it. This economy is not merely "the free fox in the free hen roost": it is the free fox, given a daily dose of legislative and administrative vitamins, among hens that have had their legs and wings broken, or been tied to their roosts by Government action.

The result is a murderous poverty among four-fifths of our population, which is a sin in the soul of all of us who knowingly let it be so.

Such at least was the idea behind part of the Dedication drawn up by the Archbishop's Conference Continuation Committee for Union Day, 1960, when many thousands of South Africans solemnly dedicated themselves, in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, to the task of "ridding our country of the scourge of poverty."

There were two other parts to that vow—one concerned with securing a just Constitution, and the other with the protection of civil rights and liberties; but it soon became clear that in these

fields we would to a large extent be duplicating the work of other bodies—even, in some instances, using the same personnel. So the sub-committee on Poverty and Wages, set up under the chairmanship of Dr. Oscar Wollheim, soon came to represent the main "continuation" work.

This was concerned largely with helping certain non-White trade unions in their unequal struggle to help their members keep their families in decency and health.

Then we decided on this Seminar on "The Case Against Poverty." As you see from the invitation inset, four speakers presented the "evidence" in their fields—social work, nutrition, industry, and African Trade Unionism—with plenty of discussion from the floor in between; and at the end an advocate of the Supreme Court summed up the "indictment."

Our main object was to try and influence those sections of opinion, both public and private, which may in turn be able to affect Government action. We feel that public policy lags badly behind the enlightened industrialist, a generation behind the best medical advice on nutrition. . . . We did not want to say to industrialists, "Play the game you cads and pay higher wages"; we know that the good employer, if unskilled wages are a big proportion of his wage bill, does nothing so surely, by raising wages in isolation, as put himself out of business and leave a clear field to the bad employer. Indeed, South Africa is alone in the modern world in having employers who have abandoned their traditional role of resisting wage-rises, and taken on what should be the Government job of combating "sweating" of workers to whom the law forbids effective bargaining power.

DR. WOLLHEIM told us that about a third of the Coloured families in Cape Town have an income far below the poverty datum line—a weekly £5 15s. 4d. for a family of five—and that about 80 per cent. of the African families fall below that level. Yet this income is just enough to keep a family alive. "But people tell me," said Dr. Wollheim "that these workers and their families do in fact keep alive. My answer is partly that they don't—look at their infant mortality figures, the life expectation of a non-White worker compared with a White, etc.—and partly that when they do, it is a sub-life existence usually bought at the cost of a working mother, neglected children, juvenile delinquency, disease, crime . . ."

THE ARCHBISHOP'S CONFERENCE COMMITTEE

(Chairman — The Hon. A. v. d. S. Centlivres)

"THE CASE AGAINST POVERTY"

You are cordially invited to attend a Seminar at St. Saviour's Parish Church Hall, Claremont, on Saturday, March 31, at 9.30 a.m.

Speakers:

- 9.30 a.m. His Grace the Archbishop of Cape Town — Opening.
9.45 a.m. Dr. O. D. Wollheim — 'Trying to Live Below the Breadline.'
11.15 a.m. Prof. J. F. Brock — 'The Effects of Poverty on Health—the Cost to the Nation.'
2.15 p.m. Mr. W. R. Skeeles — 'Cheap Labour Is Not Cheap.'
3.45 p.m. Mr. T. Ngwenya — 'The Tragedy of the Unskilled Worker.'
4.30 p.m. Adv. D. B. Molteno, Q.C. — Summing up.

Teas and a light lunch will be available at a low cost.

PROFESSOR BROCK gave us the the devastating figures, in terms both of human suffering and economic stupidity, of preventable disease and death, particularly among pre-school children. Do you know, for instance, that 10,000 children die annually in our eight main urban centres alone, from gastro-enteritis, and that doctors are unanimous in indicting protein-deficiency as overwhelmingly the main cause of these deaths? And Dr. Brock was beautifully forthright in dismissing "fecklessness," "ignorance," etc., as comparable with poverty in causing this starvation.

- Do you know that skim milk provides all necessary protein?
- That Dr. Mitchell of the Cape Divisional Council went on record years ago with the fact, at once hopeful and horrifying, that a daily tablespoon of skim-milk powder per child would virtually wipe out gastro-enteritis, even leaving housing and hygiene untouched?
- And do you know that the Government is quite desperately *embarrassed* by milk surpluses?
- That in the first 12 months after Bremer bread—containing skim-milk powder—was discontinued, about three years ago, 370,000 gallons of skim-milk went down the drain on the Rand alone?
- That even allowing the abundance of a daily pint per child, this would have kept over 8,000 children, killed that year by malnutrition, in full health?
- That to cure one case of *kwasiorkor*—the main protein-deficiency killer, which hospitalises many thousands annually—costs the State about R150?

MR. W. R. SKEELES showed us unanswerably how costly to us all, in terms of productive efficiency, and of miserably inadequate home-market demand, is our "cheap" labour; and how astonishingly Government lags behind employers in their attempts to have the Wage Act amended to combat this stupidity.

MR. THOMAS NGWENYA gave us a devastating picture of what it is like on the inside of that "home market," where, because civil liberties ensuring freedom of movement, effective bargaining power, etc., etc., are by law denied to our African workers, "real" wages have been falling for a generation, and are still falling. Unemployment is rising.

MR. DONALD MOLTENO'S masterly summing-up gave *proof* of four propositions—that the most desperate poverty prevails among the vast majority of our people; that this poverty is deepening, alarmingly; that Government policies on the whole tend to aggravate rather than alleviate this poverty; and finally—and most important of all—that "in terms of productive potential, poverty in South Africa is totally unnecessary, and could immediately be alleviated and shortly be abolished if the will were there to adopt the appropriate measures."

For the first three, he depended largely on analyses of speakers' evidence. He supported fully, on the third, those speakers who showed that, in essence, colour-bar legislation (such as the pass laws) which is as destructive of national prosperity as it is restrictive of personal liberty, substantially pre-dated this Government, although this Government made it worse. And in the field of nutrition he, like Professor Brock, made the

Continued overleaf

THE CASE AGAINST POVERTY—

(Contd.)

same charge of *inaction* against previous governments. Both, for instance, quoted the 20-year-old work of that distinguished nutritionist, the late Dr. T. W. B. Osborn, M.P., and its failure to evoke official response.

On the fourth proposition, I feel it imperative to quote Mr. Moltano directly—I wish very much that it could be in full:

“It is my final proposition that this poverty is totally unnecessary. I wish first to debunk a fallacious approach often repeated—that the Government, or the privileged White class, “does so much” for the non-White people, the main victims of poverty. . . . Even if this were true, and I dispute it, I believe it to be a total fallacy to imagine that poverty can be abolished by any form of bounty. . . . The only way in which poverty can be alleviated . . . is by an increase in the national income, which, in turn, is dependent upon the co-operative efforts of all classes of the community directed to the best use of material resources. The role of governments, therefore, is . . . to promote the conditions for increasing productivity.

“On the physical side the evidence is clear that South Africa is materially well endowed. Twenty years ago, the Van Eck Commission presented irrefutable evidence of this. . . .” Mr. Moltano then quoted extensively from the Report (very exciting to hear, “for this evidence has never been contradicted”) and its recommendations (very depressing to hear, “because never acted on”).

“The country therefore possesses the human and material resources to enable it to overcome poverty. The problem thus is one of organization: to mobilise those resources and direct their use to the alleviation and ultimate abolition of poverty.

“And that task pre-eminently is the function, I suggest to you, of Government, and should be one of any government’s two principal functions—the other is the promotion of personal freedom. The two must go together, they are complementary: the one is impossible without the other.”

And, after detailed advocacy of the economic measures, like anti-cyclical budgeting, necessary to the conquest of poverty, Mr. Moltano warned: “Although Parliament is the only organ that can take or authorize the measures that I have suggested to you are required, I do not think it is likely to do so, so long as it is exclusively composed of the privileged class in this country. . . . I know of no historical case where an organ exclusively composed of the privileged has made the radical reforms needed to alleviate the condition of the masses of the people. . . .”

The Black Sash, throughout the length and breadth of the Republic, must surely respond to these sentiments with a very solemn AMEN—and act accordingly.

A BRILLIANT and telling exhibition was arranged for the Seminar by Aileen Moodie, the Research Social Worker in the Nutrition Unit of the University of Cape Town, in kiosks around the hall, giving facts and figures of malnutrition in diagram form.

Dr. O. Wollheim also set out on a table the actual food which could be bought from the average weekly wage of an unskilled worker.

Posbus

A. J. Marais, Johannesburg, skryf:

Die Radio se Plig

EK stem saam met die inhoud van u inleiding in die Maart/April 1962 uitgawe. Ek wil graag die gevaarlike rigting onderstreep deur te herinner aan 'n praatjie wat geruime tyd gelede uitgesaai is oor die Afrikaanse sender. Dit was in die reeks „Uit ons Aarde”, 6.45 vm. In die besondere praatjie word die volk gewaarsku dat hulle nie kan beskik oor alle feite nie en dus maar „die oogklappe moet dra” en vertrou op die oordeel van die leiers.

Die Radio het 'n dure plig om opvoedkundig op te tree en die volk aan te moedig om so wakker te loop as moontlik voordat hy by die stembus sy oordeel uitspreek. Dit is betreurenswaardig dat in die genoemde geval mense aangemoedig word om blindelings te volg.

Freedom is not a gift from a State or leader, but a possession to be won every day by the effort of each and the unity of all.

Albert Camus.
