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-5. SEP. 1

AUGUST 1956

THE NATAL SOCIETY
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MAILED FIST OR HAM FIST?

THE highly successful demonstration against passes for African women, staged at the Union Buildings in early August, produced a typical reaction from the Government. The Prime Minister was not to be found when the demonstrators arrived at his office to present their protest. The Minister of Labour and Public Works, into whose sphere such action apparently falls, took the first opportunity he could to announce that he was drawing up a law to prevent anyone coming to the Union Buildings, *who had no business there*.

Is this not typical of the Nationalists' approach to their job of governing South Africa? If you possibly can, you avoid letting anyone who disagrees with you come into your presence. If, in spite of this initial precaution, your opponents still manage to make effective protest against what they may regard as an infringement of their rights, you act with expedition. You promptly pass a law to infringe upon those rights still further and to ensure that the same sort of protest cannot be made again.

The Minister of Labour regards the women of the African National Congress Women's League and the Federation of S.A. Women as having no business at the Union Buildings. If they had not made their protest there where should they have made it? African women have no vote whatsoever. Even if they did have, and if it was on the same basis as that of their menfolk, it would not have helped them much. Natives' Representatives have talked themselves hoarse in opposition to Government policy for eight years. Has the slightest notice been taken of their arguments? The women might have sent a deputation to see the Prime Minister. Would that have had any greater effect? Judging by the reception accorded the delegation of the Johannesburg Joint Advisory Boards, it would not. This unanimously elected body representing half a million people was not even granted the courtesy of an interview when it went to Cape Town to place its objections to certain legislation passed last session before the Minister of Native Affairs. These channels being closed the alternative was a demonstration of the sort which took place in Pretoria. The demonstration was orderly and well-organised. The paths it trod are accepted as being the legitimate paths of democratic expression. Why then this violent reaction from the Government?

There are at least three reasons. This Government does not really believe in democratic processes for its opponents. It would prefer to keep them for the exclusive use of its own supporters. Secondly, the demonstration was a success and the Nationalists do not like success to come the way of those who disagree with it. Thirdly, the gathering was mainly African but really multi-racial. And there is nothing the Government dislikes more than evidence that African people can organise or evidence that people of different groups can achieve a common purpose together. Such evidence knocks the bottom out of the carefully thought-out philosophy of the Group Areas Act—that contiguity breeds conflict. Confronted with a phenomenon such as they saw at Pretoria the Nationalists don't ask what caused it, they ask how they can prevent it from happening again. And so, a law is passed and another perfectly legitimate avenue of protest is stopped. Is this not coming perilously close to the mailed fist of dictatorship? Is it not also the clumsy act of a group of people unable properly to adjust themselves to the circumstances in which they live and unwilling to accommodate themselves to the people with whom they must live? One form of protest may be stopped here, but it will give rise to another over there. Stop that one and you can be sure that another will crop up somewhere else.

The thickest statute book imaginable will not secure the present dominant position of white South Africans for ever. What is needed in this country is a government with the foresight and imagination to recognise and go to meet this fact, not one which throws up before it an ever-widening breastwork of Government Gazettes from behind which it hopelessly strives to keep the aspirations of the majority of its country's people at bay.