

CONTACT

-8. MAR. 1957

FEBRUARY 1957

THE LAND

THE NATAL SOCIETY

COPYRIGHT SECTION

THERE are many vital questions facing those who try to find a just solution to South Africa's great problems today, but is there any more vital or far-reaching than the question of the land? Indians face enormous losses in their already restricted land-holdings when the Group Areas Act is enforced. Africans spill more and more rapidly over the boundaries of their small portion of the Union. Even European political parties find the African land situation awkward and they don't know how to meet it.

In September last year we discussed in *Contact* the wrangling which had been going on for months, between Mr. Maree (Nationalist) and Mr. Mitchell (United Party), over the purchase of land for Africans in Northern Natal. Each had been asking the other embarrassing questions about his party's plans to honour the 1936 promises to provide more land for Africans. At the time we suggested that whatever answers were given to these questions they would be sure to be such that they caused no concern to local white voters. And, of course, we were right. When the whole business was finally brought to a head at a debate between the two at Ladysmith last December the solutions proposed were as interesting as they were shocking. Mr. Mitchell felt that *no* more land should be given to Africans until that they already occupied had been properly conserved, Mr. Maree proposed to hand over some of Natal's game reserves to the Native Trust. So were their prospective supporters spared any hint of a sacrifice!

This sort of slick, trick solution contributes nothing towards resolving one of the thorniest problems which confront us. For one thing, in common with usual United Party and Nationalist practice, it completely disregards one of the most important single elements in the situation—the opinions and hopes of Indians and Coloureds and particularly of Africans. Thinking Non-White South Africans—no matter to which group they may belong—are quite rightly determined that the time must come when they will be free to buy land where they wish and to live where they wish. The Liberal Party is equally committed to the establishment of a society in which just those conditions will obtain. The question is, of course, how to get there? A second question which must be answered is at least as difficult. How can a more just distribution of land be brought about in our country without revolution?

If at the time the Liberal Party comes to power the full provisions of the 1936 Act have been carried out Africans will still hold less than 15 per cent. of the land. They may well comprise over three-quarters of the population. It is quite possible that even the 1936 promises may not have been carried out, for the rate of growth of the Liberal Party is considerably more rapid than the rate of increase of African land. Whatever the position is, it seems certain that the privileged place White people have held over many years will have ensured that they hold the lion's share of the land and they will hold the lion's share of the capital necessary to buy still more land and to develop it effectively. It simply won't be enough to throw the gates open and say that anyone can buy anywhere. The most likely result of that policy would be that more land would end up in the hands of those who already have enough and less in the hands of those who have next to none. To prevent this happening, adequate and generous financial assistance must be available to people who, devoted to the soil, have suffered decades of frustration through lack both of capital and of being suffered to earn at a rate which might allow capital to accumulate. At the same time productivity must be maintained and increased and strict tests will have to be applied to ensure that those who wish to acquire land for farming are capable of using it to advantage. There would be no point in making agricultural land easily available to people who hadn't the faintest idea of how to use it. People who are producing efficiently must continue to produce efficiently without interference, if we are not all to starve. Another ticklish question is that of the present "Native Reserves". They must be converted to productive holdings. For some time at least, until a thoroughly integrated

and balanced economy has been achieved, African rights in these areas will have to receive special protection. Again, steps will have to be taken to ensure that idle land is brought under production and that the complicated matter of absentee landlordism is thoroughly investigated.

The Liberal Party has a Land and Agricultural Commission sitting at this moment. These are some of the extremely difficult questions with which it will have to grapple as it tries to hammer out a constructive blue-print for the future. Somehow the Party must produce a programme which strikes a balance between rights at present enjoyed and the disequilibrium which has resulted from years of White privilege. Somehow individual ownership must be assured while, at the same time, land is made easily available to those who could and would use it productively. At the moment it is understandable that people who have no land and see no hope of ever getting any should find consolation in thoughts of nationalisation. Those of us who believe that the right to ownership of home and property is one of the most precious rights which a man can enjoy must produce a bold, imaginative and attractive plan which will give clear hope to the landless of today.

(Correspondence on this subject will be welcomed from members—Editor.)

THE BUS BOYCOTT

IN his speech at the public opening of Congress in Cape Town last month, Alan Paton pointed out that the Leader of the Opposition had at no stage consulted African leaders, and he felt that this was a fundamental defect in the United Party.

How true this is has been borne out most forcefully by the present bus boycott in Johannesburg and Pretoria. For five weeks 15,000 people from Alexandra and 8,000 people from Lady Selborne have been walking to and from work daily as a protest against the action of PUTCO in raising the fares, and all attempts at finding a solution have foundered, mainly on the rock of the absence of consultation with the boycott leaders.

The Institute of Race Relations has frequently pointed out that a majority of Africans are living below a minimum economic level, but this has apparently had little influence on government and industry. The tremendous support which the boycott received on its first day has been maintained steadily, and it seems reasonable to deduce that economic motives have succeeded in uniting the people where political appeals have been less successful. Indeed, the boycott has been an eye-opener for many of us, and in many different ways. The cheerfulness of the people has not flagged for a moment. There is a common determination to see this through to the end, and the threats from above have only served to strengthen this feeling. The Minister of Transport has talked of intimidation, and there has, no doubt, been some. The most blatant form of intimidation has, however, hailed from the police force. If any bolstering of the spirit of the walkers has been required, this has been supplied by the immediate practical support offered by so many motorists. Estimates have it that between 3,000 and 5,000 lifts are being given daily, and, although even this figure (which to the writer seems somewhat high) means that the majority of boycotters are still walking, the impact on the people of Alexandra seems enormous. This was especially the case when the police set up road traps and interrogated every motorist carrying Africans.

The attitude of the authorities and of local bodies gives rather less cause for optimism. After the first statement from the Minister, a delegation from the consultative committee representing the Johannesburg City Council, the Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Industries hurried to Cape Town for discussions with the Minister. Little but confusion resulted from this meeting. The Chamber of Commerce issued a statement opposing the idea of a wage increase to cover the increased fares, but must have thought better of it since it later withdrew it. The City Council let it be known that it was considering wage increases for Africans. And the Chamber of Industries found it easiest to say nothing, to hold meetings of its members, and generally to sit on the fence. At one stage Dr. Ray Philips, of the Hofmeyr Social Centre and the Bantu Men's Social Centre, tried to mediate between the parties, but, as he nominated his own "responsible Native leaders" instead of calling in the boycott leaders, his move had a very brief life.