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**A South African Republic —  
democratic State or new form  
of oppression ?**

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Should democrats oppose the idea of a Republic? Should they support it? In this interesting statement of one point of view, Patrick Connolly airs his views on this question.

Do you agree, or not? Why not write and tell us — your letter, article or statement will be welcome.

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## **THE RELUCTANT REPUBLICANS**

by **PATRICK CONNOLLY**

**T**he Nationalist Party, especially at election times, goes round the country telling its supporters that it is a republican party. I suppose many of the rank-and-file members of the party really do believe in republicanism — of a special sort (I'll come to that just now). Yet, after ten years in office, they haven't taken a single step towards a republic. The only time the question was seriously raised in Parliament was by Sam Kahn: he moved that we set up a republic right away. Of course the Nats. didn't support him. (In fact it wasn't very long before they found a way to remove him from Parliament altogether, and told the voters they could send anyone to Parliament they liked as long as it wasn't Sam Kahn. Or Ray Alexander. Or Brian Bunting. Or anyone else on Swart's blacklist of reds.)

I am a republican too. There's nothing very odd about that. The great majority of the world's people today are republicans. They live in republics and don't want to go back to monarchies. Kings and Queens are a

hangover from the past; they're a hundred years out of date. There aren't many of them left either. There isn't a king or queen to be found in North or South America. All the newly-independent States of Asia and Africa are either republics already, or want to be. In Europe only a few countries in the North-West (Britain, Holland, Belgium, Scandinavia) run to the senseless extravagance of maintaining a royal family and all the parasitic Court aristocracy surrounding it. In the brief years since the war quite a few countries — Italy, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Egypt — have sent their Kings packing, with all their hangers-on. Just the other day Iraq dispensed with its monarch, rather violently. I suspect that when the British leave Jordan they'd better take King Hussein with them — he won't last long without them.

The concept of a republic is a very old one. It stems back to ancient Greece and Rome. The word (*res publica* — public affairs) comes from the Latin. Though the ancient republics of Athens and Rome were really aristocracies (slaves and "barbarians" couldn't vote) they at least showed that the public could run its affairs without a king or dictator.

But the modern conception of a republic, which has conquered the world over the past hundred-and-fifty years, really stems from the great French and American revolutions. Inseparably bound up with these revolutions were two glorious conceptions which won the hearts of men everywhere: democracy and national independence.

The French Republic was carried to victory under that wonderful slogan which still inspires people everywhere who suffer under tyranny, discrimination and oppression: "Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!" The American Republic was born in the fires of a war of independence against foreign domination. It proclaimed to the world that all men were created equal, and that government of the people, for the people and by the people should not perish.

Of course you can point to crying contradictions and hypocrisy. While France proclaimed liberty at home it continued to oppress millions in its colonies abroad. While America declared for equality it continued to hold millions of Negroes in slavery within its own borders. Nor could De Gaulle or Eisenhower be held up as particularly inspiring upholders of freedom and democracy in the modern world.

All the same, the fundamental principles of republicanism are valid and inspiring ones. If crimes have been committed in their name, it was because the criminals betrayed those principles. They turned from the shrine of liberty to worship the golden calf.

Any good principles can be distorted to evil ends, and the devil, as we know, can quote scripture. When republicanism came to South Africa it lost most of its libertarian and equalitarian content. Instead of liberty,



Paul Kruger's South African Republic openly proclaimed: "There shall be no equality in church or state." Rousseau, Danton, Robespierre and Washington must have turned in their graves.

What was it then about republicanism that appealed to the Voortrekkers? It was the national-independence, anti-imperialist side of it. They were striving to get free from British imperialism: naturally, like the American colonists of 1776 they thought of a republic. But their concept of a republic had very little of revolutionary radicalism in it. They did not imbibe at the clear fountain of Rousseau, Paine and Jefferson: their Calvinist clergy would have seen to that. The whole concept did not come to them, I should imagine, from France or America directly, but probably through the very diluted source of the Batavian Republic, a pretty respectable, bourgeois, commercial sort of affair.

Above all, while they were proclaiming their own right to independence from British imperialism, they were busy destroying the independence of other people — the Africans — and imposing upon them their own particularly revolting variety of imperialism, rooted in the degrading slave-owners' mentality they had brought with them from the Cape.

That's why the Afrikaners' republicanism was always contaminated, emasculated and suspect. They fought a rousing and heroic struggle to maintain their independence, against the greedy grab of Rhodes and British imperialism; and they won world-wide sympathy from freedom loving people in this struggle. But the sympathy was tempered by an unhappy consciousness that the freedom the Boers fought for for themselves was the very freedom of which they deprived others.

The Afrikaner people are justifiably proud of the war their grandfathers fought fifty years ago. For two years the two tiny Boer republics defied the mightiest empire in the world. But in the end God proved to be, as usual, on the side of the big battalions. The British won. War is a dirty business, and the British used cruel and merciless methods — though not nearly so cruel and merciless as those they have used before and since in their various wars against dark-skinned colonial people. After their victory, the British subjected the defeated Boers to various forms of humiliation and degradation, denial of language rights, discrimination in the economic field, refusal of self-government etc., — though none of them so severe as have been inflicted by Britain on its dark-skinned colonial "subjects", and still are today.

British brutality in the war, and arrogant imperialist jingoism in their victory, left deep and bitter scars on the Afrikaner people. That's why, even today, nearly sixty years later, republicanism and anti-imperialism are potent emotional levers among the Afrikaner people, capable of evoking a vigorous mass response. (Though, it should be added, there is something peculiarly narrow and self-centred about this sort of anti-imperialism:



Afrikaner nationalism has never shown the slightest sympathy with the sufferings of other victims of British or any other imperialism, or the least sign of rejoicing at their splendid victories; quite the reverse.)

Nationalist politicians and businessmen have cashed in heavily on these sentiments and aspirations of the Afrikaners. That is how they have won three general elections in a row and built up a flourishing Afrikaner capitalism. The republic is the carrot they keep dangling in front of the electorate. Every time they promise they are going to do something about it. Every time the promises are more emphatic, as Malan gives way first to a Strijdom and then to a Verwoerd. Yet they do nothing. (This is where we came in — excuse the long digression!)

Why not? Why this strange reluctance? Surely it's not so very difficult! Nehru's India has declared herself a republic — inside the "Commonwealth" Ireland and Burma have proclaimed republics outside the British connection altogether. What's stopping us?

The Nationalists claim that they are good democrats, and don't want to offend the English-speaking section of the population. But that has never stopped them doing anything they really wanted to — they have ridden rough-shod over the most bitter opposition from every non-Nationalist section of the public. Remember the uproar over the Suppression of Communism Act. And the High Court of Parliament. And the Senate Act. And Church Apartheid — and a score of others. If they were really worried about not offending English-speaking lovers of the Empire, why did they abolish God Save the Queen and the Union Jack?

The fact of the matter, it seems to me, is that most of the proclaimed "republicanism" of the present Nationalist leaders is sheer bluff, cynical demagoguery to deceive their voters and followers. I don't say that Verwoerd and Company have any love for the British Empire. But their association with Britain and the Empire offers them certain solid advantages which they are exceedingly loath to part with. For one thing, Britain always backs them up at UNO when, as usual, they are in the dock on charges of deliberately flouting the Charter. For another, Britain is still their best customer for agricultural exports, and still (though America is overtaking her rapidly here) the main source of investment capital in the Union. Despite the Statute of Westminster, the Union remains tied to London by a hundred invisible ties of economic dependency. In reality, the Nationalist Party is terrified by the collapse of the British Empire and colonialism generally. It regards the advance of Asia and Africa to inde-



pendence as a mortal threat to the maintenance of White minority rule in the Union — and rightly so too! And, therefore, it has to recognise that the Empire, or what is left of it, is a bulwark of baasskap.

As against all this, it may be urged, there are powerful reasons why the Nationalists nevertheless should and will seek to set up a republic. Afrikaner capitalism is jealous of the preponderant role which British and other foreign imperialist interests still play in our economy — especially in gold and uranium mining. This resentment was recently given outspoken expression by the doctors Louw and Hertzog (we have passed from the era of the Generals into the era of the Doctors!) Republicanism is a political expression of the desire of the Afrikaner capitalist class for economic independence. But, if you come to think of it, the Afrikaner capitalists are not all anxious to end the dependence of the Union on foreign imperialist capital. In fact the Government spends a great deal of time and energy trying to coax more British and American investment into the Union. All these fellows are really doing is whining for a bigger share of the cake for themselves; the Chamber of Mines has never had a more obliging and abject administration, not even that of Smuts; at the least suggestion of foreign capital being withdrawn they nearly have a stroke — Verwoerd, Hertzog, Louw. the lot of them.

Again, it is said, a republic will facilitate the more radical and drastic transformation of the country into a full-fledged fascist state. The Nationalists will take advantage of a constitutional change of this character in order to put an end to such vestiges of democratic rights and institutions as remain after a decade of their government. The independence of the judiciary will be abolished, once and for all, city councils will be replaced by the "burgomaster" system, appointed by the State, the last remnants of legality, open opposition, court procedures and civil rights will be abolished. The notorious Transvaler "Draft Constitution" will be imposed on South Africa.

There is much weight in this argument, and it is probably for this reason that the democratic forces of our country will, willy-nilly, find themselves involved in a bitter struggle against any attempt by the Nationalist Party to introduce its conception of a republic.

Yet we must not forget that there is nothing in this evil programme which the Nationalists cannot do, and are not already attempting to do, within the framework of the present State and within the Empire. The bulwark of our liberties is and always has been not the Crown or the



British Empire, but the determined resistance and unity of the people of our country themselves. The British Government sold out the Non-European people of this country at the time of Union; it never has and never will lift a finger to protect them from persecution at the hands of White South Africa. All the British ruling classes are interested in in this country and this continent is high profits and cheap labour, they remain one of the most bitterly reactionary forces in the world, the stranglers of the peoples' liberties everywhere.

If the situation should change, if pressure from their followers, or new relations of international forces should impel the Nationalist Party into pretending to honour their long-dishonoured promises by establishing fascism in the name of a republic, we who belong to the forces of democracy and liberty should never forget that it is the fascism we are fighting against, not the noble principles of republicanism.

Indeed, now while there is yet time, we should be rescuing the proud banner of republicanism from the soiled hands of those who have betrayed it; who have prostituted its name and forfeited all right to call themselves republicans. Are we not, indeed, the true republicans? And are we not, by default, allowing that noble title to be usurped by ignoble men, who have no claim whatever to follow in the illustrious tradition of Cromwell, and Milton, Washington, Paine, Jefferson and Lincoln, Rousseau, Danton and Robespierre, Toussaint, Bolivar, Sun Yat-Sen, Wolfe Tone, Pearse and Connolly, and other great Republicans of the past?

Well, for the most part I have just been thinking aloud in this essay, on a subject which I feel is long overdue for fresh thought and open discussion. And I should much like to know what other readers of our magazine, "Liberation", think about the matter.

I cannot, however, leave the subject, without a final thought. No democrat can for a moment tolerate the idea that a new state form and structure should be decided upon in this country by any sort of vote or referendum of the White minority alone. Any such procedure would run counter to the whole basic conception of self-determination, the foundation of the U.N. Charter. The spokesmen of the voteless majority, therefore, have a most urgent duty immediately to serve notice that this is the concern of the whole people, that the whole people must take part in deciding it, and that no changes otherwise decided upon can be recognised as having any validity. If we are to have a republic, let it be a republic of the people; not another monstrosity like the Union, decided upon by a privileged minority in order to maintain its privileges.