

# KENNEDY AND NUSAS

an injection of black students into South Africa's student movement is needed, for black students would act through their vested interest in social change and not through their consciences alone

LEWIS NKOSI

ULTIMATELY THERE CAN be no agreement as to the gains which flowed from Robert Kennedy's visit to South Africa. It is true that the South African Government was shaken by the experience; from the very beginning the Government had bungled things hopelessly in an effort to rob the visit of its full impact. Forty newsmen who were to accompany Kennedy into South Africa were banned by the South African Government; but even more controversial was the ban slapped on Ian Robertson, president of the National Union of South African Students, who extended the invitation to Kennedy in the first place and was to have accompanied the visitors throughout Kennedy's tour of student centres. Such actions, of course, merely helped to focus adverse publicity on South Africa and also insured that Kennedy's visit would be watched by the entire world. At home, writers Stanley Uys and Terry St Martin were entertaining thousands of readers of the *Sunday Times* with a skit on the South African Government.

As Uys and St Martin viewed the situation, a hilarious "Minister of Justice, Internal Security, Defence and Education", was about to call in the South African army, navy and air force to deal with the Robert Woolf menace. As one nervous staff officer reported it:

"I've got the latest 'Current Affairs' report on this Woolf. He represents the extreme left in America and he's a millionaire. He is backed by the Wall Street-Moscow Street Axis. He aims to be the first Red President of America and hand over the country to the blacks."

ON THE WHOLE THE STUDENTS found no humour in the repressive measures taken against their president. For the first time in years all the pent-up feelings against the Verwoerd regime spilled out from the harassed English-speaking universities. Mass demonstrations, nightly vigils, candle marches were held in big centres like Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town; and speakers from platforms throughout the country challenged Justice Minister Balthazar Vorster to state the reasons for banning student leaders Ian Robertson from participating in any organised life and banning him from leaving the magisterial area of Cape Town for five years. Failing this, demands were made for a fair trial through which the Minister's judgement could be publicly contested. At a public meeting of 1,500 people in Johannesburg the lone liberal parliamentarian in South Africa, Mrs Helen Suzman, attacked the ban in ringing, angry language. "There are signs," she said, "that the ordinary people are beginning to realise that the time has come to halt the erosion of ordinary civil liberty."

Condemning arbitrary arrests, and detention without trial, without even an explanation of the reasons, condemning also the various executive banning orders, Helen Suzman protested:

"Such methods are a disgrace to a so-called civilised country — and outside being used in a declared state of emergency — are, I believe, only found behind the Iron Curtain, in Black dictatorships and in Fascist countries. . . ."

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"I have some advice for parents — don't panic. Vorster wants to frighten you into warning your sons and daughters against that 'dangerous and subversive' body, NUSAS. Don't let him do it. He won't win — not if we stand by Ian Robertson and NUSAS in their moment of ordeal."

ELSEWHERE VORSTER SENT HIS POLICE to protest meetings to record the speeches and photograph the participants. Meanwhile at Cape Town university a first-rate row had broken out between the principal, Dr J. P. Duminy, and the students. To many students Duminy has not only seemed to run with the hares but is now firmly in the middle of the hunters. That is as they see it. Perhaps fearing the consequences of student activity at his University, Principal Duminy has always tried to dampen student militancy since the days when some die-hard activists and integrationists used to smuggle non-white students into Varsity dances. Hearing of the Government ban against Ian Robertson, Dr Duminy wrote the student leaders:

"I'm not entirely persuaded at the present stage that his (Robertson) banning has to do with his office in NUSAS, but I find it most distressing that it should have come at a time when it could hardly have proved to be a greater embarrassment to that body."

Duminy's words that Robertson was not banned for his office in NUSAS could only offer comfort to the Government and many Government supporters who view NUSAS as only a front for subversive activities. But since Robertson is a member of only a legal party, the Progressive Party, which is on the right of even Alan Paton's Liberal Party and is forever deplored by African Nationalists for its conservatism, it is difficult to see what Duminy intended to convey by that paragraph of his letter. That Robertson was a dangerous subversive militant? This I doubt. But what then?

The Student newspaper, *Varsity*, was naturally furious with Duminy:

"This university prides itself on its 'liberal tradition,'" it said in an editorial. "The stand taken by the students, certain members of the staff and convocation at last Friday's meeting was an expression of this tradition. But there was a deplorable omission — absence of and lack of support from the principal and vice-principal."

Finally, award-winning editor Laurence Gander for the Johannesburg *Rand Daily Mail* was only too glad to join battle on behalf of the students. In a full-page article Gander wrote:

"The Government fears and dislikes NUSAS for more straightforward reasons. First, it is an organisation of young people and it has always been a major aim of authoritarian regimes to capture the minds of the country's youth, knowing that it provides the leaders and the public of tomorrow.

"Second, in a period in which pressure for conformity of thought is becoming intense, NUSAS remains one of the few bodies still playing a valuable part in the struggle for a better social order here, and refusing to isolate itself from the main currents of human thought and feeling coursing through the wider world.

"More particularly it continues to reflect the social ideals and

moral values of the Western community of nations at a time when South Africa is busy contracting out of this community, just as she withdrew from the Commonwealth when the great family of peoples ceased to be a sort of club for white countries. . . .

"It is the vigour of youth, its idealism and its determination to think for itself that the Government fears in NUSAS. Here is a group of young people growing up without all the inherited prejudices and colour phobias of their parents and without their traditional attachments to political parties with ancient, frozen attitudes to race problems."

WHILE BY AND LARGE MR GANDAR'S analysis is true, someone with the background of South Africa may question some of the congratulatory sentiments published above. It is surely questionable to what extent are white university students "growing up without all the inherited prejudices and colour phobias of their parents". While it is true that in a country like South Africa the student movement seems to be the only one capable not only of uniting young people on non-party lines but of taking political action on mass scale, such action offers no real challenge to the status quo. Judging the temper of the Verwoerd regime concerning any action likely to upset the present political balance, white student leaders make it a point to confine themselves to generalities. As such they are not required to make up their minds about what kind of society they want, who should vote and should not vote; and in the circumstances it is questionable whether anyone is able to say with any certainty, as Mr Gandar says, that the students in NUSAS "reflect the social ideals and moral values of the Western community of nations."

There has always been a wing in NUSAS of Liberal and Left-wing students who, because of their fervour, have steam-rolled the organisation into challenging the status quo. On academic freedom — especially the Government's interference with the right of non-white students to attend the so-called "white" universities, or the right of these institutions to organise their own social life, to hire the kind of teachers they want and to teach whom they want, NUSAS has fought admirably and with persistence. This is perhaps one reason why the South African Government is so irritable with the organisation.

Though the organisation as a whole cannot be regarded as revolutionary in any sense, it is its tolerant atmosphere which has allowed Liberal and Left-wing students to take an active part that has annoyed the Government; for the government feels that the influence of these few students has been enormous and that NUSAS has only provided them with a cover. The truth is that the students who formed the Left-wing of NUSAS were already members of political organisations, outside the university, which were themselves more challenging to the status quo. The now-banned Congress of Democrats, the Liberal Party and others. These students' militancy within NUSAS was a natural extension of their political feelings or political work outside the university. Thus when some of them were implicated in the recent sabotage movement the Government tried as best it could to damn the entire National Union of South African Students as subversive and as a threat to the security of the state. NUSAS was guilty by association.

NUSAS IS CERTAINLY CHALLENGING the conscience of white South Africa at the moment. It has the natural idealism of youth but also the safety of all legal organisations in South Africa: for the fact is that it does not, like student movements in other countries, wish to carry its defiance of the South African Government to a point where an actual showdown would be inevitable. Unlike students in other parts of the world one does not expect NUSAS to run into the streets defying tanks, burning Government installations, or setting them alight in the interests of "freedom". If this analysis is true it brings us to another interesting observation about the South African student movement. That the only students who can have a stake in a real change are *black* and they play no *effective* part in NUSAS.

NUSAS has in fact been banned in Non-White universities, or tribal colleges; thus black students are effectively cut off not only from any political organisation in their own communities, but from the national organisation of all students. Without the black students playing a major role in NUSAS the South African Government is able to be charitable enough to allow protest meetings, demonstrations and even to see a delegation from NUSAS. It is understandable that where fear to offend the State is as strong as in South Africa, NUSAS should now be seen to carry the flag for social change; but a more realistic approach will in fact show that when the chips are down NUSAS cannot be expected to incur the full wrath of the State when it is the very privilege of its members that the Government is fighting to secure for all time. It is only an injection of black students into NUSAS in effective numbers which can take the organisation into anything like the student movements in the United States, Latin America, Europe and Asia, for black students would have a vested interest in social change, not merely a twinge of conscience.

Black students are naturally more harassed, more closely watched and less effective in their new apartheid universities. Not only are they forbidden from creating effective organisations like NUSAS but political activity is banned on their campuses. But even so the African, Indian and Coloured students have always been effectively cut off from the masses of the people — especially the African students. The Missionary Colleges like Adams College, St Chads, Ohlange and Mphumulo, (with perhaps the exception of St Peter's with its progressive Anglican Community) have been elitist schools effectively sealed off from the communities around for the entire terms of academic training; whatever political feeling there was has therefore been effectively bottled up and kept entirely within the institutions. When, as has often happened, there were strikes, premises burned, and official cars stoned, such news reached the African community in trickles as rumour, assertions and denials. Parents could see their children arriving home one day without a clear notion of why they had been sent down. This, in a way, has determined the character of African student movements. They cannot be compared with American students, or Vietnam students, or students in other open countries where as an organised academic community they are able to exercise enormous political influence on their governments, in some cases, are even responsible for their downfall.