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EDITORIAL

THE LIBERTY TREE

The original Liberty Tree was an elm which flourished on Boston Common, fertilised no doubt by the leaves which remained after the celebrated tea party in the nearby harbour. Jefferson, as Margot Beard reminds us in this edition of *Reality*, saw the blood of tyrants and patriots as its natural manure – clearly with his own country's revolution in mind.

The image crossed the Atlantic with ease, for E.P. Thompson entitles the first part of his classic work **The Making of the English Working Class** "The Liberty Tree", whose planting takes place against a background of repression and violence.

The same image recurs today in the funeral speeches which punctuate the continuing "unrest" and so often, tragically, sow the seeds for their own reproduction. The millenarian vision is that freedom lies on the yonder side of suffering and bloodshed.

The elm is, perhaps, peculiarly suitable for the role of Liberty Tree. It grows quickly in congenial, well watered

soil and is soon a magnificent sight. But apart from its susceptibility to the Dutch Elm disease, it is also inclined to shed substantial branches on the unwary who think that they can shelter from the wind beneath it.

How often have such hopes of liberty been betrayed. The French revolution consumed its own architects and spawned Napoleon; the Russian revolution brought in Stalin who far out-Tsarred the Tsars; Kenyatta led Kenya through freedom to corruption, to die unmourned by a generation whose hopes he once personified; and Jefferson's own democracy took a generation longer to achieve emancipation for the slaves than did that of "Old Corruption" at Westminster.

South Africa is entering a revolutionary phase in its development, characterised by violence, polarisation, idealism and millenarianism – the features observed in most revolutions. With a longer history of revolutions and decolonisation from which to learn, we, and the contending forces, have a greater opportunity to avoid the repetition of past follies, but little time. □