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NOTE The last issue of Reality was incorrectly numbered and dated. The top of Page 2 should have read — Vol. 8 No. 6 — January 1977

EDITORIALS

1 1977-ANOTHER GRIM YEAR?

1976 was a bad year for South Africa. Will 1977 be any better?

1976 was the year of the student revolt — in Soweto, the Black university colleges, the Coloured and African townships of the Western Cape, and dozens of other places. It was the year in which an unknown number of Black people died or were injured through police action, or at the hands of thugs whose activities the police have been unable or unwilling to control for years, or in clashes between permanent urban dwellers and migrant workers which some people claim were provoked by the police. It was the year in which over a thousand young people fled from the attentions of these same police to shelter in Swaziland and Botswana — a much more spectacular potential accretion to the strength of an external guerilla army than years of PAC and ANC recruiting could have hoped to achieve. It was the year in which death

in detention became commonplace — it happened more than once a month on average. It was the year of the Angola debacle, of steady deterioration in the Rhodesian situation, of the withering away of 'detente', of total isolation at the UN. It was the year of the fall in the gold price, of massive inflation, of widespread and growing unemployment. And it was also the year of Transkei independence, an irrelevant distraction from the real issues which face us.

Looking at this catalogue it would be comforting to conclude that no year could possibly be worse than 1976, but could not 1977 be? Things in Rhodesia will almost certainly get worse this year. There is no one in public life in that country, either Black or White, who is big enough to pull its conflicting elements together. Our economic situation is also likely to deteriorate. Already the estimates of unemployment are starting to pass the million mark. Most

depressing of all, the attitude of the government towards the obvious and urgent need for change in the basic cause of all the trouble, its own policies, offers no hope that each year it remains in office can do anything but make our situation worse.

Although many boycotting Black children returned to school in the new year, and the Government has promised improvements in Bantu Education, the fact is that "Bantu Education" and "Coloured Education" remain, and these are what Black people don't want. Discriminatory education was a central issue in the upheavals of 1976. It is rejected by parents, teachers and students alike, and while it remains, any spark could set off a series of explosions as widespread as those of last year. And, of course, it is not only discriminatory education, but everything else that goes with it to make up the policy of apartheid, that people reject. But this rejection, as the opening session of the 1977 Parliament made sadly clear, is something the Government will neither acknowledge nor do anything about. While one Black person after another, in evidence before the Cillie Commission has given this deep-seated Black hatred of the present system as the basic cause of Soweto and its aftermath, the Nationalist response has been to blame it all on agitators, to take steps to protect its agents from the consequences of any illegal action they may have taken during the disturbances, and to threaten legislation which will ensure that, next time something similar happens, we won't know about it. Thus there will be an Indemnity Bill, retrospective to June 16th last year, to make it virtually impossible for anyone who has suffered as a result of police action, to get redress. And there are strong indications that a law will be introduced which

will make it impossible for the Press to publish accounts of future police action, before these have been cleared by the authorities.

What of any lasting value will all this achieve? The Minister of Justice started the year off, waving Russian-made weapons and booby-traps about in the House of Assembly, telling us they had been found in Soweto, where an urban guerilla movement had been crushed. He also told the Assembly that some people who die in the hands of the Security Police do so because they are under orders to commit suicide rather than talk. And he announced, with pride it seems, that there are already 52 trials under the Terrorism Act scheduled to be heard in 1977.

As well as making all these dramatic announcements, shouldn't the Minister be asking himself a few questions? Like — how is it that a policy, which it was said would bring only peace and goodwill, instead, after 29 years, has produced people who, if the Minister is to be believed, are prepared to die, either as urban guerillas or in detention, to get rid of it? Or, how have we moved from a situation in 1948 where political trials of Black people were virtually unknown to one where several dozen can be going on at the same time? Shouldn't the policy be changed?

But the policy will not be changed. Mr Vorster himself has said so. He has again told the House of Assembly, in his first speech of the year, that the only place an urban African can hope to exercise political rights is in a homeland. It is this unyielding adherence to the illusion that urban Africans do not belong to "White South Africa" which ensures that the rest of 1977 will be grim.□

2 A VALUABLE CONFERENCE

The Conference of the South African Institute of Race Relations, held at the Edenroc Hotel in Durban from January 11th to the 14th, was a success — but of course the word "success" has a very qualified, scaled-down meaning in the bleak South Africa of 1977.

The theme of the conference was "The urgent need for fundamental change in South Africa". The speakers — both those at the lectern and those on the floor — expressed a variety of viewpoints and emphases (at one end of the spectrum there were the classical capitalists, at the other were radicals and the proponents of black consciousness); but, in the face of the present situation in the country, there was an essential unanimity of attitudes: the structures of South African society must be changed fundamentally and rapidly if the country is to avoid ever-increasing violence, confusion and despair. This was found to be true of every important sphere of the national life — the political, the economic, the social, the educational, the ecclesiastical. And what is above all needed (it was agreed) is a real movement towards general participation, a sharing of initiative and power.

The conference was haunted — as such gatherings inevitably are — by the knowledge that the power of the state and of the police is directed specifically against any real sharing (Sham

sharing, of course, is another matter.) For many members of the conference the underlying sense of haunted gloom may have focussed on something more precise: the image, now familiar on television screens, of the face of the Prime Minister — hard, unhappy, impassive, incapable of any movement either of imagination or of generosity.

But gloom was not allowed to dominate and paralyse the conference. Everyone seemed to feel that certain things could be done and must be done; and indeed there was probably a tacit agreement that Mr Vorster's stolid misery is preferable to the smiling pseudo-omniscience of Dr Verwoerd.

And so there were many plans and suggestions. Of all these, two proposals stood out firmly: (i) that, after due investigation and perhaps in collaboration with other bodies, the Institute set up an agency which would have as its sole aim the changing of the attitudes of the white population; and (ii) that — while recognising that its own efforts could never be a substitute for the real thing — the Institute consider calling its own National Convention. Both recommendations were accepted, after the Conference, by the Institute's Council and Executive Committee. Let us hope, then, that before long some cheering events may begin to take place.□