

LESSONS OF SOWETO

A White View.

by E. M. Wentzel

There have been many warnings of disaster-round-the-corner. Clerics, Liberals, the OAU, Buthelezi, all have said it. And we whites have gone on our way as before. No doubt the Soweto riots will suffer the same fate in the short run.

We are united at least in this : we whites are all drawing our particular conclusions. We know the "natives" are restless; we are at odds why.

We are, of course, singularly unqualified to express any view at all. For us Soweto is a vast nothingness to the South West of Johannesburg; much better for **them** than the shanty towns from which they were moved; which, like Soweto we had perhaps seen from the train on the way to a seaside holiday.

What are our particular conclusions?

The Government, like Tzar Nicholas, makes contradictory responses. Most likely, however, it will react authoritarily as is its wont. Certainly merely to praise the Police, promise law and order and blame the agitators, is not constructive at all. Mr Botha's reminder that the Nationalists have their seats but not their hearts in Parliament may be no more than a ritual homage to their past. Heaven knows they are not lacking in power; Parliament is no brake on that. Perhaps a twin desire to shackle the Treurnichts in those private ways that even our Parliament inhibits, and to quieten even the restrained irritations of the Progressives will join to get rid of the British legacy. More probably we will let Parliament be and follow our traditional path and gobble up those we say are agitators and those who would have been if they had not been gobbled up. One thing is sure, Parliament or no Parliament, BOSS will be alive and well and living in Pretoria but visiting Soweto even more often than before.

Let us agree with the Government that Afrikaans was not the cause of the riots. Of course it was much more than that. It is the whole system of imposing us and our plans and desires on **them**; both the ugly side of us and even the side which has concern for **them**. **They** did destroy **their** things

which we had built. These things were available in Soweto and not separated as we are in our cities and suburbs. It is this separation between our affluence and power and their poverty and impotence which has caused this anger. It is this separation which thus far has saved us from the traumas of knowing about, understanding and trying to deal with Black poverty and aspirations, even at the cost of some of our wealth and power. Separation has saved us from the riots and upheavals which American society had to face in coming to grips with not dissimilar issues. Separation has made us quite unequipped to deal with these issues as we are made to face them.

No doubt much of the violence was the work of tsotsis. This would not surprise the people of Soweto. On their way to and from work and in their houses bolted at night they have had to learn to live with these dehumanised youths who are truly the children of apartheid.

There is a lesson to learn or perhaps an observation, for lessons are for those with the power to change things. After Sharpeville 16 years ago the Black people responded in organised political terms and not as a mob. There was a stay-at-home, a pass-burning, organised marches, press statements. At that time there were political organisations and leaders : from these came the response. Then it was truly the day of the agitator; today it is the day of the mob.

Over the past 16 years the Government has smashed these organisations. The response in 1976 is the street mob, the tsotsis, the unnamed agitators, not the politicians with whom one can parley and compromise. This is Mr Vorster's legacy for Whites; confrontation not compromise. And because of this policy our future in South Africa is in jeopardy.

When Mr Vorster returned from seeing Mr Kissinger he was given a standing ovation as he walked down the aisle of the Jumbo. Let there be no mistake : if we and he continue as we have, our very place in South Africa is in danger. Will we cheer him then? □