

THE ABOLISHING OF THE GROUP AREAS ACT

= A POLITICAL MILESTONE?

The government has implied that the Group Areas Act will be scrapped during the first session of parliament this year. The abolishing of an Act that displaced approximately 630 000 people and reserved over 84% of the country's land for white people should be heralded as a major event. However, the majority of our people will not be overly-enthusiastic about this.

The history of our struggle has been marked by a phenomenon whereby the apartheid government promulgates so-called "major" changes a few years after the masses of our people have invalidated racist laws through their own actions. This was the case with the Immorality Act, Mixed Marriages Act, Pass Laws and other legislation. The same applies to the Group Areas Act. Black people have invalidated the Group Areas Act in most major cities in S.Africa. Johannesburg is a non-racial city with people of all races living side by side, despite the Group Areas Act. This piece of legislation has been put on the scrap-heap by our people and the government would simply be legislating what people have already brought into being within the context of the struggle for a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist S.Africa.

The lifting of the Group Areas Act will thus not be of tremendous political significance for the majority in S.Africa, although it will be seen as being very significant by the government. The scrapping of the Act must be seen within the context of the broader socio-economic problems in the country. Some of the legacies of apartheid are a serious homelessness crisis, a high rate of unemployment, astronomical building costs and interest rates and abject poverty amongst thousands of our people. Most unused accommodation units, be they houses or flats, have been occupied because people are desperate for a roof over their heads. Large tracts of land are in the hands of the private sector and business sector and is financially beyond the reach of millions of our people, particularly those in the most dire need of accommodation. Only the privileged few have access to elite areas created by the grossly unequal distribution of resources and wealth in our country. The more accessible areas are already saturated. The scrapping of the Group Areas Act will have little, or no, effect on the reality I have sketched.

The abolishment of the Act must be accompanied by a positive programme by the State to make land and housing accessible to the poor in our country. Failure on the part of the government to do this would reduce the scrapping of the Act to simply a pen-push-ing exercise.

We must also guard against the propensity by the government to introduce forms of control that could have the same effect as the abolished Group Areas Act.

We hear of whispers about standards and protection of the rights of those who choose to live with their own kind. These are ominous attempts to retain some form of "Group Areas" without having the Act on the statute books. The state argues that the scrapping of the Group Areas Act must not compromise standards. We are fully supportive of any position that advocates the maintenance of adequate health standards and adequate standards of hygiene. However, we are not blind to the fact that those who have benefited from apartheid in S.Africa have enjoyed an inordinately high level of standards; while those who bear the brunt of apartheid have been forced to become used to excessively harsh living conditions. The transition to an apartheid-free S.Africa must include a "normalisation" of standards across all population groups. This would of necessity mean a less luxurious life for the haves and a better standard of living for the have-nots. The scrapping of the Group Areas Act must facilitate this process. Better use must be made of all available land for accommodation, even in the elite areas created by apartheid. The scrapping of the Act must also be part of a process that makes racism a punishable act. Any desire on the part of people to have a racially-exclusive area must be outlawed and be punishable in law. Any attempt to bar a person from living in the locality of his/her choice must be outlawed. If the Group Areas Act is scrapped, racial practices must be outlawed.

The abolishing of the Group Areas Act will thus not be an instant panacea to all the ills created by the act since 1950. The homeless will still be without homes, the poor will still be restricted to the ghettos of our land and the divide between the haves and the have-nots will still be there. The struggles that have been waged against the Group Areas Act must be continued until all the consequences of the Act have been reversed and all our people have an equal claim on the resources and wealth of our land.