

Problems of the MULTI-RACIAL CONFERENCE

by BRIAN BUNTING

THE decision of the Congresses to take part in the forthcoming multi-racial conference has naturally aroused a great deal of discussion in democratic circles in South Africa. There have been those who have welcomed the multi-racial conference as a beacon marking out the road to a united anti-Nationalist front in which all sections of progressive opinion could participate and which could generate the strength to bring the Government to its knees. On the other hand, there have been those who look upon the multi-racial conference with suspicion, fearing that it will prove merely a trap for the unwary, and the militancy of the masses will be drowned beneath the calm waters of liberal complacency.

Contradictory though it may seem, both views of the conference are correct. The conference possesses great possibilities, but also great dangers. To ensure that the democratic cause achieves the greatest possible impetus from the conference, it is essential that all Congressmen and progressives who take part in it should be absolutely clear about what they are doing, and about the tactics of the united front.

Let us first make it clear that in the struggle against the Nationalists a united front is absolutely necessary. For what is the purpose of the united front? It is the mobilisation of the masses of the people in active struggle against the apartheid tyranny. What do we mean by the masses of the people? We mean in the first place all the millions of Non-European oppressed who suffer under the lash of the colour bar, who are hounded by the pass laws, deprived of the right to live a normal life by section 10, the victims of the police terror, the disfranchised — in fact, the majority of the South African people. But side by side with them we must aim to mobilise also all other sections of the people, European and Non-European, who are prepared today, for a variety of reasons, to oppose particular aspects of Nationalist policy. Why do we emphasise the mobilisation of the masses of the people? Because it is only when the masses of the people are mobilised and organised that a weapon will be forged in South

Africa which is strong enough to defend the people against the attacks of the Government, to win for them the rights enshrined in the Freedom Charter.

The Europeans alone cannot put things right. Those Europeans who are opposed to the policies of the Nationalist Government, and who yet restrict their political activity to taking part in and preparing for elections, have become the prisoners of the Nationalists just as much as the Non-Europeans. The restriction of the franchise to "Europeans only" is the basic reason for the United Party's ideological capitulation to apartheid. Therefore the solution must be sought outside Parliament and outside the electoral system, because it is only through extra-Parliamentary struggle that the mass of the people can make their voices heard.

Spearheading the extra-Parliamentary struggle against the Nationalist Government and for equal rights for all is the Congress movement — the alliance of the national organisations of the African, Indian and Coloured people with European progressives and trade unionists who have identified themselves completely with the Congress movement. Those who decry the need for a united front should recognise that the Congress movement itself is a united front. It is also instructive to remember that this united front was born of the great Defiance Campaign, where it proved itself as the only effective vehicle by which the protest of all sections of the people against the unjust laws could be organised. No united front, no defiance campaign — and the defiance campaign was perhaps the greatest organised demonstration of the people against the tyranny of white supremacy that this country has ever seen. The unity built up in the defiance campaign was strengthened during the campaign for the Congress of the People in 1955, at which the Freedom Charter was adopted, and was sealed by the treason arrests of December 1956.

THE BEDROCK

The unshakeable unity of the Congress movement, all should realise, is the bedrock on which all effective opposition to the policies of the Government is based. It was the foundation of the bus boycott and one of the factors which guaranteed the victory of the thousands who marched 20 miles a day rather than pay the fares increase. It is the foundation of all organised political activity by other sections of the population as well. Had it not been for the defiance campaign and the coming into existence of the united front, the Liberal Party would never have been born. Had it not been for the unity of the accused in the treason trial, the massive national and international support for the Treason Trial Defence Fund would never have materialised — and it is essential to appreciate that the Fund has not won support on this scale merely because it is a worthy charity, but mainly because it has provided an opportunity for thousands of people to do something concrete to express their hatred of the Nationalist Government and their fellow-feeling for the accused and the cause they stand for. The courage and spirit of the treason accused has not only inspired the thousands of rank-and-file Congressites to reach new heights of militancy in political action (against passes for women, the Mamathola removal etc.), but has also been the underlying factor which induced the clergy to protest against the Church Clause, the nurses against apartheid, the press against the threat of censorship, and even the United Party to come forward with its new Senate plan, feeble though it is.

Maybe not all those who are emboldened to speak their minds against the Government are conscious of this, but it is a fact all the same. What would be the picture in the country if the Congress movement did not exist, if the people simply accepted their fate without protest, took out passes, moved at the crack of Verwoerd's whip, were subservient and demoralised and made no claim for equal citizenship rights? Who then would dare to criticise apartheid? It is precisely the resistance of the mass of the people which is the basis of almost all opposition to the Government.

The Congress movement is an alliance of all sections of the people in the liberatory movement. At the moment, for historical reasons, each national group is organised in its separate national organisation, but there can be no doubt that, with the passage of time and ever-closer co-operation in active political struggle, with the growth to political and organisational maturity of each group, the tendency will be for the barriers to break down and ultimately for full political and organisational cohesion to be brought about. Each group at the moment still fears to abandon the protection of its own organisation, and, in view of the special situation facing each group it would be wrong to do so.

Not only inside the organisations themselves, but also among the masses of the people who are not yet organised there are still feelings of racial exclusiveness and antagonism which hinder the fullest and freest co-operation, and which make impossible the creation of one, united, all-in-Congress body as is advocated in some quarters. To deny this is to fly in the face of the facts. The existence of Africanists inside the A.N.C., the recent tribal clashes in Johannesburg and elsewhere, the separation in the trade union movement — these and many other proofs of surviving disunity can be adduced.

But the time will undoubtedly come — the sooner with each joint campaign, with each shared disaster or united victory — when the fullest possible unity inside the Congress movement will become a reality.

But the Congress movement is not only in process of building unity between people of different races. It is also a uniting of people belonging to different political and class groups within each national group. Inside the premier national organisation, the African National Congress, for example, we find working together for the achievement of common aims the worker and the businessman, the lawyer and the intellectual, the communist and the nationalist. They do not see eye to eye on all issues, but they do agree to work together in defence of their rights as Africans, against the oppressive policies of the Nationalist Government, and for the achievement of the aims of the Freedom Charter. What unites them most strongly at the moment is their participation in the work of their national organisations as Africans.

But what gives the A.N.C. its distinctive and almost unique militancy in the present situation is its overwhelmingly working-class character, in the sense that the workers make up the bulk of its membership and are in a position to determine the nature of its policies to a far greater extent than was the case (and still is) with, say, Gandhi's Congress in India, or

the national liberatory movements in most other countries (Ghana, Egypt, Indonesia the Sudan etc.), where the rising national bourgeoisie were (and still are) the dominant factor.

The position is different with the Indian Congress in South Africa, for example, which has a larger middle-class element, and again with the Coloured Peoples' organisations, many of which are entirely dominated by intellectuals (though SACPO has made a conscious effort to base its activities on the organised strength of the working class). But it is the A.N.C. which, by virtue of its leadership and initiative and its greater membership, sets the tone and the pace for the whole Congress alliance, and it is the unique role of the A.N.C. to demonstrate that the national struggle in South Africa is inextricably bound up with the class struggle.

FIRST PRIORITY

The unity which has already been achieved within the Congress alliance, then, based on the Freedom Charter, must be seen as the first priority in all our political efforts in the immediate future. Why? Because it is this alliance, and only this alliance, which has shown itself capable of mobilising the widest section of the oppressed peoples in effective political action.

No single one of the organisations could have achieved so much by itself, nor even attempted it. For it is precisely the spectacle of the growing unity between the different national groups which has been the most inspiring feature of the political scene during the last few years.

It is necessary to emphasise the word "growing", for the whole Congress alliance is all the time in process of developing — the ties become stronger, the unity deeper, the separatist tendencies weaker with each campaign in which they participate together. But the unity is not complete and will not come to fruition by itself. It must all the time be fought for consciously and with determination. The need to deepen the unity between the Congresses must always be in the forefront of our political calculations.

In view of the fact that the Congress alliance exists, is growing stronger and has already achieved country-wide recognition as the leader of the mass opposition to the Government, what is the need, many people ask, to broaden the front? Why should we work with the liberals and the bishops? How can they help us? Will we not merely be forced to water down our policy and capitulate to their opportunism? Most of those who will be attending the multi-racial conference cannot be expected to agree with or accept the Freedom Charter as a basis for action. What, then, can be hoped for from this conference and from working with these people?

To answer these questions correctly, we must take another look at the general political situation in the country. The Nationalist Government is in power and, as far as can be judged, still firmly in the saddle. Many people are predicting that in the elections next year they will win with an even greater majority than ever before. But, win or lose, Nationalist Party or United Party, the plain fact is that the forces behind the maintenance of colour-bar policies in this country are still strong, while the forces be-

hind the Congress alliance are still comparatively weak. Great though are the achievements which stand to its credit, the Congress alliance is still not in a position to draw into political action the vast majority of the Non-European peoples, let alone the Europeans. The Freedom Charter lays down a very fine programme of principles to fight for, but the Congress organisations, while potentially capable of achieving them, have actually not quite measured up to them. There is a long way to go before we can say we are in sight of our goal.

Meanwhile the Government continues with its ruthless and inhuman attacks on the people. Daily people are suffering, homes are broken up, men and women endorsed out of town, beaten up by the police. New and more vicious legislation is promised for the next session of Parliament. With the growth of opposition against it, the Government is driven to adopt ever more drastic means of maintaining itself in power. As more and more people are drawn into the fight against it, the Government responds by widening still more the area of the conflict. Where, in 1950, it was the Communists and the Congress leaders who were their main target, today the ranks of the victims have been swollen to include members of the Liberal and Labour parties, non-conformists of all types, the Anglican clergy and many others.

NATIONALIST FAILURE

In fact, one of the most convincing portents of the coming Nationalist defeat is their complete failure either to isolate and destroy their enemies or to win friends and influence people outside the ranks of the "bitter-einders". It is stock Nazi technique to pick off your opponents one by one and, while the bystanders hold their breath and hope they won't be touched this time, wipe them out. Ever since they came to power the Nationalists have been trying to do the same thing, but all they have succeeded in doing has been promoting ever-deeper unity in the ranks of the opposition against them. Meanwhile their own failure to win adherents to their cause from the other sections of the population has been startling. Today it is the Nationalist Government and its apartheid policy which are execrated not only in this country but throughout the world.

At the same time, though there is widespread opposition to Nationalist policies amongst both Europeans and Non-Europeans in South Africa, the Nationalists remain in power for the sole reason that their opponents are disunited. Outside of the Congresses, there is no agreement as to what should be done and how it should be done. As between the bishops and the Liberals and the Labour Party and the Unity Movement and the various organisations and individuals who profess to abominate Nationalist policies (not to mention the United Party, which is almost unmentionable), there are few points of contact and almost no measure of understanding. That is precisely why the multi-racial conference is so important.

At the multi-racial conference there will be gathered together for the first time practically all shades of anti-Nationalist opinion — for though the formality has been gone through of inviting Nationalists to attend, it is doubtful if any will, apart from the Special Branch.

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