



A BRIEF COMMENT ON THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE AFRICAN FROM UNION TO WORLD WAR II

J. Verner (St. Stithians College)

"In a society organised on the basis of two mutually exclusive white and black groups, it will be the individual's race membership which will be of greater importance in determining his attitudes and behaviour than his membership of any particular class within his racial group." (MacCrone, quoted in **Conflict & Progress**). This social organisation has led the African to develop a wider nationalism than the tribe; based on a shared history of subordination and a common civic status (even the "liberal" Cape franchise was really of little meaning because of the economic situation). These factors were not enough in themselves to overcome the tribal and class differences. Further common factors came with increased urbanisation, western education and Christianity. By Union there was a definite emergence of political organisation and thought (especially in the form of newspapers such as **Imvo**) though mainly on a regional basis. African political opinion was first united by the draft Union constitution. Opposition to this constitution with its limits on Black citizenship led to protests and to the calling of a Native Convention in 1909 to petition Britain in protest.

After Union Pixley Seme wrote to **Imvo** (24 Oct 1911) pointing to the need to unite the voice of African politics. This led to the meeting of African leaders in January 1912 which created the South African Native National Congress with Dr. J L Dube as its first president. It was not to unite all Africa as a few months later Tengo Jabavu set up a separate South African Races Congress. The divergence between the two was shown in their reactions to the Land Bill. Jabavu supported it, while the S.A.N.N.C. opposed it strongly with deputations to both Sauer, as Minister responsible, and to the British Parlia-

ment. Neither had any influence. This political frustration helped the development of Black racial exclusiveness which was first to find expression in Ethiopianism — the movement towards the creation of separate Black Christian Churches. The S.A.N.N.C. was also frustrated by the failure of its 1913 passive resistance campaign against the extension of pass laws to African women; and the failure to be heard at Versailles (1919). This at a time when the war had led to an increase in both political awareness, and the awareness of their value as workers among the African peoples. The awareness shows in their petition to Smuts in 1920 in which they claimed to be "victim of three capital forms of injustice, viz." political ostracism, industrial helotry and insecurity of land tenure. . ." (Van Jaarsveld).

Political organisation took a back seat for a few years in the face of increasing labour organisation of which the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (I.C.U.) was the most important. Originally a Cape Town trade union for non-white dockworkers it expanded in 1920 when Clemens Kadalie, its founder "whose organising ability, drive and exceptional demagogic talent compensated for his inability to speak the South African native languages" (ed Muller) and Msimang joined forces in Bloemfontein. This could have become a major force in the labour movement but was without real Transvaal, or any Natal support. It collapsed and a revived I.C.U. became essentially Cape based — perhaps more politically inclined than labour oriented. The problem of the I.C.U. was that although it had a definite aim in a fundamental redistribution of economic and political power, it had no concept of how to achieve this — nor any real understanding of the political situation around them.

It was at this time that D.D.T. Jabavu drew attention to the discontent among the Blacks in his book **The Black Problem** published in 1920. Discontent focussed then on inadequate wages, political restrictions (taxation without representation, the Land Act, the pass laws), inadequate housing and education and the feeling of being regarded as socially inferior.

In the unrest of 1922 Blacks played little part and were unable to gain political advantage; indeed they came out of it worse off as the Apprentices Act helped close doors to skilled work by insisting on minimum educational levels for apprentices, and the labour regulatory measures of the Conciliation Act specifically excluded contract labourers (which most were). The opposition these gave to the government among the Blacks allowed Hertzog to appeal to Black and Coloured voters for their support. At first the I.C.U. decided not to align itself with either white party, thereby alienating the Coloured African Peoples' Organisation and the Cape Native Voters' Association both of which favoured the S.A.P. The African National Congress (as the S.A.N.N.C. had become in 1923) was, however, urging its members to vote for a change of government. A joint A.N.C. and I.C.U. deputation met Hertzog and here Kadalie offered to support him. Hertzog in return offered only to cover the costs of an election edition of the I.C.U. **Workers' Herald**.

At this time (1924) the Communist Party began its support of African movements, especially trade unions, and many African leaders were involved in the Communist Party as well as in both the I.C.U. and A.N.C. but there were disagreements in all three. The I.C.U. altered its constitution in 1925 and began a policy of expansion.

The diverging African institutions were again united by the introduction of Hertzog's 1926 Bills "to settle the Native question". The Transkeian Bunga was at first equivocal but most African thinking was strongly opposed to the Bills. In 1927 the first Non European Conference met, basically to oppose the Bills. The initiative had come from Abdurahman of the A.P.O. but it included both A.N.C. and Indian Congress representatives. From this conference was born the All African National Convention aimed at opposing racial legislation. The year 1927 also saw the passing of the restrictive Native Administration Act!

The I.C.U. seemed now to dominate the African movement with a claimed membership of over 50 000 in January 1927. Kadalie went to Britain where he made contact with the Fabian movement and applied for I.C.U. membership of the International Federation of Trade Unions (a move defeated by the South African Department of Labour). He also sought an adviser who would come to South Africa to help bring order to the finances of the I.C.U. William Ballinger came and antagonised Kadalie to the extent that he broke away to form an independent I.C.U. in March 1929. Earlier quarrels between Kadalie and Champion, the Natal leader, had led to Champion's breakaway **I.C.U. yase Natal** in May 1928. The I.C.U. was collapsing rapidly and after 1929 was a spent force. The voice of the Black man was heard now through the less spectacular A.N.C. and Cape Native Voters' Convention. For a while under Gumede the A.N.C. co-operated with the Communist Party which had begun to work for a Black Republic since 1928, but the 1930 Riotous Assemblies Act led to pressure with the A.N.C. to drop the communist leaning and oust Gumede in favour of Pixley Seme.

Hertzog was still trying to pass his Native Bills — their defeat had led to the "Swart Gevaar" politics of the 1929

election, but nothing seemed possible during the depression. Meanwhile the 1931 Non-European Conference proposed urging the Government to abolish passes and it set aside a day for ALL Africans to destroy their passes. It also wanted to create a central body which would bring together Black, Coloured and Indian Associations. This did not materialise though opposition to the proposed legislation grew (it must be remembered that there was a steady retreat from what was offered the African in 1926 to what he received in 1936). In 1935 Seme and D D T Jabavu (of the Cape Native Voters' Convention) combined forces to set up an All African Convention to co-ordinate resistance to the proposed legislation. This led to a deputation to Cape Town and a petition of protest. The deputation (under Jabavu) met Hertzog but without success. The passing of the legislation created a crisis of conscience for many Black leaders. In December A.A.C. damned government policy but authorised its executive to investigate the possibilities of developing common citizenship within the framework of the legislation. An attempt to test the validity of the disenfranchisement of the Cape African in the Courts by Ndlwana failed so the new deal had to be accepted. Some A.A.C. leaders stood for the new Native Representative Council.

The A.A.C. changed its constitution in 1937 to allow it to become an umbrella organisation for all African organisations effectively making it a potential rival to the A.N.C. The A.N.C., however, revived itself at its 1937 Silver Jubilee Conference at which Z R Mahabane was again elected President (he had served as President in 1924-8).

The war years showed a return to trade organisation, partly under Communist Party influence. Significant was the creation of the African Mine-workers' Union in 1941 which caused much unrest on the mines through its demands for better conditions. It called a major strike in 1946. The war also saw a hardening of attitudes on both sides — the Black Trade Unions were illegal (as were their strikes). The N.R.C. was demanding to be more than a "toy telephone" and demanded a policy which recognised the Africans as citizens. The creation of the African Democratic Party aiming for co-operative inter-racial action reflected a willingness evident in voluntary organisation and parts of the economy for co-operation; its lack of success revealed the unco-operative attitudes of both sides when dealing with the government. In the same year (1943) the A.N.C. Youth League was created which preached an exclusive Africanism and, under the influence of the Atlantic Charter, the establishment of an A.N.C. committee under Z K Matthews to draft a Bill of Rights. (The Coloured Affairs Department was set up the same year). The A.N.C. accepted the Bill of Rights in 1945 with its demand for the repeal of all legislation discriminating on grounds of race, creed or colour. Confrontation with the government reached a peak in 1946 over the black miners' strike and the N.R.C. adjourned in protest at the government's refusal to consult it or even allow it information on the strike.

At this time too Black history was undergoing re-interpretation on nationalist lines with the Black man as wronged by the white. A similar revision to that of the Afrikaner in his outbursts over their struggles with Britain in the late 19th Century.

The end of the war was a crisis point for Black political movements. Smuts was prepared to offer concessions but did not know what to offer or how to concede to demands. Information like the Fagan Report of 1948 came too late. Blacks wanted change; racial exclusiveness was beginning to enter the constitutions of their political organisations: the mood hardened after

1948 and the Nationalist victory with its cry "Apartheid!" Since then African politics have been almost exclusively reactions to apartheid legislation. The wider concern of earlier years has been removed and reaction (increasingly sullen) dominates.

It is against this background that the African has had to try to create a political voice in a society which has never entirely forgiven him for wanting that voice. As a labourer he is welcome, as a person with needs, feelings and ambitions our governments have not wanted him. The scales have been weighted against him and yet he has largely refrained from the use of violence. His attempts to create a voice — political and economic — are also a struggle against a society which controls his very movements. That he has had little success is not surprising; that he has had any success is.

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