

## Letter to Parliament

The following letter was sent by Richard Turner to all MPs on the occasion of the Parliamentary debate on the findings of the (Schlebusch) Commission of inquiry into Certain Organisations. At the time of writing (August 1974) Dr Turner was banned and his defence against allegations made by the Commission could not be published. We believe it is important that this be printed now for the record.

Dear Sir,

Parliament is about to debate the findings of the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations. As the second and fourth interim reports of this Commission refer to me in some detail, and contain the evidence on the basis of which certain administrative acts were taken against me by the Government, I feel that I should make known my views on these reports to the Members of Parliament. I apologise for the necessity of sending you a duplicated letter, but the very short period of time available between the publishing of the Fourth Interim Report and the debate in Parliament makes it impossible for me to write personally to each Member. The exigencies of my present position make it impossible for me to comment in a more public way.

The reports affect me in two ways. There is a certain amount of evidence and opinion about my personal behaviour. There is the more generalised implication that I was involved with a 'clique' which ran Nusas for certain purposes. In connection with this second charge, it would be necessary to analyse the whole report in some detail. I am unable to do this, both because of lack of time, and also because much of it refers to matters of which I have no special knowledge. I shall therefore concentrate on an analysis of the references made about me personally. I shall, however, conclude with some general reflections on the report as a whole.

## *Importance of talking*

The Reports contain no evidence that I either acted illegally, or encouraged others to act illegally. My own evidence, printed as Appendix M, shows two things:

1. It shows that over a period of four years I gave a number of lectures to students. These lectures dealt either with matters of general philosophical or political interest, or else with specific 'protest issues'. I shall discuss the allegations about the content of these talks in a moment. A rough count of the items referred to in my evidence shows that I gave talks or participated in seminars a total of 48 times during the four year period under discussion. In addition I prepared about ten documents. That is one talk per month, and one document every four months. I do not know how long it takes the average MP to prepare a speech, but I may say that most of the talks I gave were on topics which were very familiar to me. They required very little special preparation, and were usually given off the cuff. To suggest that it is difficult to understand how this sort of activity left me any time for my professional work is simply silly. It can only be made convincing by ignoring the time span involved. I should also say that during the period in question I would have been delivering an average of four lectures a week throughout the year to my students. This would be over 100 hundred lectures per year, or well over 400 lectures in four years. In other words, my professional activities produced 10 times as many lectures as did my extra-curricula activities. These lectures, being more specialised, also required much greater preparation.

2. My own evidence also shows that I frequently suggested possible courses of action to students or groups of students. Sometimes my suggestions were taken up, and at other times they were not. It has been implied that there was something sinister in this. This I find hard to understand. The Commission nowhere shows that any of my suggestions were undesirable. Indeed, it cites, apparently as evidence against me, evidence to show that on one occasion I prevented students from engaging on an illegal march, and instead persuaded them to go out and talk to members of the public in their homes. All the evidence quoted in connection with my activities shows that I attempted to offer peaceful and practical strategies to students; that I laid great stress on the importance of talking to people and using reason; and that I considered it to be very important to educate the white public. None of these things appears to be reprehensible. There is no evidence

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presented that I also did other things, or that these were merely statements for public consumption, designed to hide my true beliefs.

## Revolution

It seems that there can be no objection either to the fact that, on the average, I gave a public lecture of some kind once a month, or to the kinds of action which I suggested to the students. The fundamental objection, it would seem, is to some of the more theoretical ideas which I expressed in lectures. In particular, the use of the word 'revolution' disturbed the

Commissioners. In fact, an out-of-context quotation from a lecture on Marcuse in which I use this word was one of the main pieces of evidence against Nusas cited in the earlier debates on this issue. I would like to make two points in this regard. Firstly, as is clear from my evidence on page 563, I disputed the interpretation placed by the Commission on my use of this word. As I explained there, I understand by the term a fundamental change in the social structure.

I do not use the word to refer to a particular *method* of change, namely, violence. That is, the term does not refer simply to the question of political power.

A revolution might occur with or without a change of political power. It might occur without anybody intending to bring it about (eg. the ‘industrial revolution’). It might occur without violence, or it might occur as a result of violence. Thus the term covers a wide spectrum of different possible events (including my slightly jocular use of it in referring to somebody planning a ‘revolution in the Sociology Department’: not even the Commission wished to suggest that I was referring to a violent attack on the Professor here.) Given that the term does, in current usage, have such a wide range of meanings, and given that I deny using it in the sense in which it refers to violence, the onus is surely on the Commission to show that I meant anything other than what I claim to have meant.

The second point which I wish to make is that the quotation from my paper on Marcuse was misused by the Commission. At the end of that paper, I wrote: “The situation I think shows that whilst a revolution cannot succeed without direct worker participation, nevertheless the initial student revolt can act as a vital detonator which suddenly illuminates the situation with new possibilities ...” (p. 562). Now, the Commissioners appear to have originally used this quotation in such a way as to imply that it was some sort of plan for a ‘revolution’ in South Africa. My evidence makes it fairly clear that the ‘situation’ referred to is the events in France in May 1968. The full text of the talk itself makes this indisputably clear. There is no suggestion at all that this tells us anything about what could happen or could be done in South Africa. It is simply an attempt to draw from the events in France some conclusions about the theoretical positions of Marx and Marcuse. As is clear from my evidence, I prepared two alternative endings to the paper (which was probably read to different meetings on several occasions). The discussion of South Africa referred to was in the other alternative ending, and is not linked in anyway with the part about detonators.

## *The essence of my opinions*

Having said this, I would like to make the following points clear:

1. I believe that South African society as it exists at present is unjust. I believe that there is overwhelming evidence to support the contention that 'separate development' does not only involve separation. It also involves discrimination and exploitation. I would be happy to document these charges more fully, but cannot do it in this letter, given the short time available.

2. I am a socialist. I believe that there is no justification for the claim that some individuals have an exclusive right to own the land and the means of production which have been produced and formed by the common labour and ingenuity of a whole society. I have argued the case for socialism publicly and at length, *inter alia* in my book "The Eye of the Needle".

3. I am not a pacifist. I believe that there are times when violence is justified, against foreign invasion or against the domestic use of violence for tyrannical purposes. That is, I believe that it can be legitimate to resist violence with violence. However, I do not believe that the sort of situation which would justify such a use of violence exists in South Africa. However, I do believe, in common with a large number of other people, that there is a great danger of violent conflict occurring in South Africa. I believe that such conflict can only be prevented by the development of social institutions which will enable compromise between opposing groups to occur. I do not believe that such institutions exist in South Africa.

These three points contain the essence of my opinions about politics and South African society. None of these opinions is illegal. I have stated them all frequently and publicly. I accept these principles because I believe that there are good rational reasons in favour of them. If I can be presented with better reasons against, then I will happily change my mind. But I believe that it is important that there should be rational debate about these questions. And my conclusion from a careful reading of the Reports is that it is essentially because I hold and express these views that I have been banned.

The only suggestion that there is any evidence of impropriety in my conduct that I can discover is an allegation by an anonymous member of staff from Rhodes to the effect that he "has every reason to believe from students" that I "abuse my position in the classroom to preach radical politics". As this allegation is linked in some way with my personal beliefs, I feel I ought to consider it in some detail. I should say in passing that the quality of evidence apparently accepted by the Commission about my pe-

riod at Rhodes is of some significance. It is quite unsubstantiated hearsay evidence. The above quotation comes from a man who cannot even remember if I am a psychologist or a political scientist (p. 90). Another lecturer from Rhodes is quoted as saying that I “used to address the general body at student meetings and so on” (p. 91). In fact, I joined the staff at Rhodes University on the 1st of September 1969; that is, less than two months before the end of lectures for the year. I left at the end of 1969. During the very short period that I was there, I have no recollection of addressing a single student body meeting, let alone several. The only student body meeting I ever addressed there, as far as I am aware, was about two years later, when I was no longer a member of staff. Whether the claim that some students had complained that I abused my position in the classroom is true I do not know. Given the vagueness of the allegations it seems more likely that the lecturer who cannot remember which department I was in is in fact expressing some personal antipathy. But the claim cannot be rejected simply because it is vague and unsubstantiated. In fact, I would be very surprised if there were not occasional students who felt that I was ‘preaching radical politics’. Such a risk is unfortunately inherent in the subject I teach. It is also to a certain extent inherent in my teaching method.

### *Politics and Political Science*

It is relatively simple, I imagine, to keep politics out of psychology or physics. But it is rather difficult to keep it out of political science. Of course, one can avoid supporting a particular political party, and one can avoid advocating particular policies. I have always avoided doing either of these things. But the fact remains that students come to class with preformed political opinions. These Political opinions do not only refer to which is the best political party. They also include beliefs about how societies and political processes work. These beliefs are always oversimplified and sometimes, from the stand-point of informed academic judgement, plainly wrong. Under these circumstances, it is evident that students are bound to have some of their firmly held beliefs about the nature of society challenged. And often this challenge will seem to be a ‘radical’ challenge. This can only be avoided by pretending that political science is not about society at all. As far as my teaching method goes, I think Paula Ensor summarises what I have always tried to do: “He was good for me in that he would raise objections to the way I thought, or he would challenge my assumptions, and he would force me to crystallise things a lot more” (p. 93). (It is worth pointing out that Miss Ensor is referring roughly to her present outlook

here, and not, say, to the assumptions which she acquired at school.) I find her description flattering, since it describes what any good teacher ought to do. But it does involve possible difficulties. In order to help students to challenge their own assumptions, it is necessary to encourage them to articulate those assumptions.

I do not believe that students learn very much if one simply lectures to them and expects them to take notes. I believe that class discussion is essential, so that students can explore the texture of arguments for themselves, rather than simply accept them preformed from the lecturer. Thus I encourage questions and discussion in class. I also believe that students should read a fairly wide range of opinions and approaches to a particular topic. For example, when teaching US Government at Rhodes I encouraged students to supplement their reading of the academic textbooks with books such as Norman Mailer's account of the 1968 Conventions. I can well understand that this approach, combining classroom discussion and the reading of a wide range of material, might appear to some to constitute 'radical politics'. Personally, I believe that it constitutes good pedagogics.

Thus it seems to me that the evidence presented in the two Reports shows:

(a) that I took my duties as a South African citizen seriously, by interesting myself in the nature of my society, and by making attempts to improve it where I thought it necessary;

(b) that my influence on students was positive; I offered them practical and peaceful strategies, and discouraged hasty and ill-considered demonstrations:

(c) that I was a good teacher who was able to get the students interested in the subject, and taught them to question their assumptions and to think logically and systematically.

I find it a little difficult, therefore, to understand why the Commission thought that this evidence showed that I was undesirable. I find it even more difficult to understand why the government thought that it constituted grounds for banning me.

## *Report on Nusas*

But I think it is obvious that the question has to be considered in the context of the whole report. I must therefore now consider the report as it deals with Nusas in general. Unfortunately I am at a disadvantage here.

As an adviser to Nusas, I knew very little about the details of its operations. I knew virtually nothing about topics which interested the Commis-

sion, such as the source of funds and Paul Pretorius's visit overseas. But I must at once say this: although the report reveals the existence of opinions with which I would disagree, and examples of apparent irresponsibility in the use of funds, it reveals nothing which would cause me to change my general attitude towards Nusas or towards the people involved. I shall therefore confine myself to a general discussion of some of the main points which emerge, rather than attempt to unravel all the insinuations, misunderstandings and misinterpretations which go to substantiate the charge that Nusas leaders acted wrongly.

The most striking aspect of the report is that it produces no examples of illegal or violent acts. Whenever the Report spells out the actual nature of any Nusas programmes, it is clear that these programmes are legal, and the Commission can produce very little argument against their desirability. The Commission's objection, then, is not that Nusas acted illegally, but rather that its motives were bad, and that all its legal acts were part of an overall plan which itself was bad, and quite possibly illegal. It is therefore of crucial importance to analyse the arguments which the Commission uses to establish those motives. There are three methods of argument. The first method relies on quotations from various Nusas leaders. The second method relies on an argument from the nature of their financial sources. The third method relies on a comparison of the views of various Nusas leaders with the views of communist theoreticians.

1. The first argument, I think, establishes that many Nusas leaders use rather loose rhetoric in some of their pronouncements. It establishes that they were opposed to capitalism, and to what is loosely described as 'authoritarianism'. It establishes that they were influenced in their use of language by students elsewhere, which is scarcely surprising, given the amount of publicity which such student movements have received. But does it establish, as the report claims, that they were actively following a postering [sic] 'polarisation' of the races, with the hope that this would lead to some kind of, presumably violent, revolution? To the extent that the evidence is produced in the form of context-less extracts, it is difficult to judge. But one paper, which the Commission evidently believes is of great significance is reproduced virtually in full. This is Neville Curtis's position paper on student action (p. 418-426). It seems to me that what Curtis is saying here, and what emerges clearly from a careful reading of the paper, is this:

There is a developing polarisation in South African society. We cannot avoid this. So in this context we have to choose what to do. We cannot 'help the blacks' because they do not want our help in such a paternalistic way. We cannot simply

join with those who control society at the moment, because we believe that they are acting unjustly.

His conclusion, once the problem has been formulated in those terms, is the much quoted statement “I believe that students must align themselves against the white polarity and with the black polarity”. It is, once it is seen in context, not an argument in favour of bringing about polarisation ... in fact it could not be, since the only way in which white students could increase polarisation between black and white would be to be anti-black ... it is an argument about what can be done, given that polarisation exists. His answer, put simply, is that students ought to work for the kind of society in which whites would stop acting in such a way as to bring about polarisation. Now his analysis may be wrong, although the Commission brings no evidence to refute it, but the point is that it is an analysis which is widely accepted in academic and non-academic circles, both here and outside. To produce such an analysis as evidence of a desire for ‘polarisation’ is nonsense.

### *Funding peaceful change*

2. The second argument is based on an analysis of the sources from which Nusas gets its funds. This I found one of the oddest arguments in the whole Report. Pretorius explained clearly in his evidence in this regard that there is a widespread belief overseas: (a) that South Africa is an unjust society, and (b) that there is no possibility of working peacefully to change it. As a result of this, funding sources are unwilling, often, to give money to be used for such peaceful work inside South Africa. As a result of this, when Nusas applies for funds, it has to persuade people that such change is possible peacefully. It has to establish ‘credibility’. Now, incredible though it might seem, the Commission believes that it is wrong to try to convince people overseas who are concerned about change in South Africa that it is possible to work for such change by peaceful means. Does the Commission wish people to believe that change can only be brought about by violence? The Commission claims that Nusas was competing for funds with ‘terrorist organisations’. Would the Commission then prefer the money to go to the terrorist organisations, rather than to Nusas? The fact is, that the Commission’s argument here is simply nonsense. The evidence which it presents establishes that the projects so funded are peaceful Nusas projects, and nothing more.

3. The third argument is, if anything, even more bizarre. It consists in producing quotations from Lenin, or some other Communist source, to

establish that what they said is in some way similar to something that Nusas has said. It is not possible here to analyse these arguments one by one. Rather I shall analyse the structure of such an argument. If I say ‘The sun is shining’, and a Communist says ‘The sun is shining’, this does not establish that I am a Communist ... unless, of course, it happens to be the middle of the night. That is, we are living in the same world as the Communists, and it would be scarcely surprising if we did not sometimes make the same judgements about it. Most of the quotation comparisons seem to me in fact to deal with these kind of banal similarities (I am not here referring to the discussion of ‘black power’). In order to establish that these similarities were evidence of Communism inside Nusas, it would have been necessary for the Commission to hear evidence about whether the statements referred to are or are not reasonable judgements to hold about South African society. Are they statements accepted only by Communists, or are they also accepted by at least a large number of other people?

### *Absurd insinuations*

I will discuss only one of the more obviously ridiculous examples of this kind of argument. In their discussion of a paper by Keith Gottschalk (pp. 415-16), the Report claims that “Gottschalk’s version of South African history differs in many respects from what is currently accepted to be the real facts”. In fact the observation can be made that there is very little difference between his version of the history and that published in the South African Communist Party’s “The Road to South African Freedom”. It then goes on to point out that he refers to the Oxford History of South Africa, from which he makes one quotation, and to an article by Johnstone. Both were apparently also referred to in a number of the African Communist, which also used the same quotation as was used by Gottschalk.

What do these coincidences prove? The Commission neglects to point out that Gottschalk is a post-graduate student in African Government, doing research into South African history. It apparently called no expert witnesses to judge the quality of Gottschalk’s interpretation of South African history. It was apparently unaware that the two books and the article to which it refers are widely known and discussed in academic circles. A student of South African history would scarcely have to wait to see a copy of the African Communist before hearing about them. The whole argument is a tissue of absurd insinuations. It shows clearly the extent to which the Commissioners were apparently willing to make damaging insinuations on the basis of inadequate investigation.

Thus it seems to me that the arguments used fail to establish that the motives of those involved in Nusas were suspect. I should also mention that the Commission fails entirely to establish that there was some organised group of conspirators, equipped with these sinister motives, and manipulating the whole concern.

A point which obviously disturbs the Commission is the stress sometimes placed on the idea of 'changing values'. The Commission seems to have made up its mind from the beginning that any change in values is bad, and therefore does not seem to have investigated what might have been meant by the idea. But the fact is that the call for 'new values' or a 'change in values' is commonplace. 'We must get away from the materialistic values of the modern world' is a frequent speech-day sentiment. Is Nusas saying something vastly different from this? Curtis is quoted as defining his values as follows: "In essence I see it as a belief in people, in humanity — our own and that of others. A belief in the rights of people — ourselves and others — to live in such a way, and to live in such a society that we can realise our own humanity to the full" (p. 423). Kegan is quoted as saying that the aim of his cultural action is "to promote interpersonal contact and to eradicate the crippling intellectual drought facing every South African campus. It is only when students start thinking and questioning intelligently and rationally that they can initiate any form of political action, or develop a political sensibility." (p. 336). These values do not seem to me to be very sinister. It seems to me that the Commission has not been interested to find out what people mean; they were only interested in what students could be made to seem to mean. Understanding somebody else is always difficult, of course. But there is no evidence that the Commissioners even tried to understand the concern of the students.

## *Violence*

I would like to conclude with some remarks on my own motives and values. I have also to make what would count, using the Commission's rules of evidence, as a confession. An interesting feature of the Report is that it begins with an account of a speech made by Jonty Driver in 1964. This speech is allegedly the blueprint for the take-over of Nusas by an inner core engaged in secret activities. The Report then jumps to 1969, without any account of how the conspiracy progressed in the interim. Had they delved a little further into my past, they might have been able to establish, to their own satisfaction, the missing link. When I was a student, Jonty Driver was a close friend of mine. I shared a house with him for a while in Cape Town.

Another close friend at the time was Alan Brooks, referred to in my evidence. I shared accommodation with him for several years. At the time he was, I later learnt, part of the African Resistance Movement, which is probably what Legassick was referring to obliquely in the paper referred to in the opening chapter.

Had the Commission discovered these facts they would probably have used them to at least imply that I was the missing link; that I was the survivor of the early plot, and that I then infiltrated back into South Africa and into Nusas five years later.

But the same evidence could in fact be used to establish quite the opposite. In fact, the ARM episode, in which disillusioned students tried sabotage, shattered their own and others' lives, and did great damage to the cause they were fighting for, made me acutely aware of the danger of students turning to violence. It has made me aware of the crucial importance of providing them with meaningful ways of working peacefully for change if they feel that change is necessary. The ARM sabotage movement occurred because there had been a sudden decrease in political liberty in South Africa. Many avenues of working for peaceful change had suddenly been closed, and these students could think of no alternative strategies. So they wasted their idealism in violence.

I find it ironic that the government now seems to be intent on recreating those very conditions. I find it ironic that in the light of all the evidence that I have consistently offered students peaceful strategies for working for change, the government has nevertheless concluded that I am a bad influence on students.

I believe that the second and fourth interim reports of the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations are documents which do discredit to the South African parliament, and which do a disservice to South Africa. My main emotion on reading these reports is a sense of acute intellectual embarrassment. I believe that Parliament should reject the Fourth Interim Report.

Richard Turner