

# We must go on

SHEENA DUNCAN

*The text of Ms Duncan's Presidential address to the Grahamstown Conference in March.*

**I**T is with a good deal of trepidation that I stand here tonight. For so many years Jean Sinclair has inspired and encouraged us, goaded us on to greater efforts by the power of her personality and the drive which she is so well able to impart to others.

Not only can I not begin to measure up to the high standard she has set, but I must try to do so in circumstances where we, in common with all the people of Southern Africa, feel anxious and unsure about the future of our different countries and when we are sometimes fearful about our own personal safety in the times that are coming.

I do not propose to try to analyse the contemporary situation and the South African responses to it. People far better qualified to do so than I am offer us reasoned articles almost daily in the national Press. What I do want to do is to speak to you, the members of the Black Sash and to those of you who befriend and support us in our work; to try to think through what we can be and do now to forward the cause of peace and justice in this our beloved country.

For this IS our beloved country in spite of the attacks made upon us and upon others like us by both Black people and Afrikaners. Because we in the Black Sash are mostly White and largely English-speaking, our identification with South Africa and her people is questioned.

Many Blacks believe that White liberals will leave the country one by one if they have to live through a confrontation instead of the controlled changes they advocate — changes which Blacks see as designed to maintain Whites in their present comfortable prosperity, although hopefully allowing the majority of our citizens to gradually come to share in the power and the privilege.

Blacks feel that it is unrealistic to expect the radical change necessary to bring about social, economic and political justice to happen without enormous changes in the circumstances of life for

all Whites. They believe that we will go elsewhere rather than face fundamental changes.

We must recognise the degree of justice in this accusation and ask ourselves whether we are truly committed to the shared society of which we speak so often. We must ask ourselves if we really believe in the necessity for change and what we are prepared to sacrifice to bring it about.

Afrikaner nationalists are also reluctant to regard us as committed South Africans. The other day I had a meeting with the Chief Director of one of the Administration Boards. His first question was phrased like this: "I have a son-in-law fighting on the border; where do you come from?"

It is difficult to keep one's cool when faced with attitudes of this kind. We are in the Black Sash and have worked as we have done for the last 21 years precisely because we are South Africans. We are committed to this country and to her people.

But we must recognise this as well, that because we are English-speaking we do feel at ease in the outside world and the assurance which this gives us sometimes seems to others to be arrogant and expressive of divided loyalty.

Closely related to this accusation is another which I am quite sure we are going to need all our reserves of courage to resist in the coming months — that of being "unpatriotic" and assisting South Africa's enemies by voicing protest and criticism of the dreadful wrongs which are being perpetrated upon our country and its people by our Government.

To be a patriot is to be one who truly loves and serves his fatherland and the true patriots in South Africa are those who love and serve all its people, not just one group of its people. This is what we strive to do, to be loving and serving and caring and we must all remain firmly convinced that we are not guilty of the charge. On no account must we let it prevent us from doing

what we must do and saying what must be said. Should we be silent, then it is that we will betray our country and allow the forces of unreason and disorder to take over — surely the greatest treachery of all.

Dreadful wrongs are perpetrated every day. Those large promises to move away from discrimination have served one purpose — that of concealing from the outside world and our own White population just how terrible are the violent acts committed every day against people.

These people's lives are not altered one iota by the insulting and discriminatory permits which allow 10 per cent of a selected hotel's guests to be Black (provided, of course, that they do not sully the dance floor) or by any of the other window-dressing permissions which are, in fact, as degrading and dehumanising as anything which has gone before. The Government-initiated changes which have taken place merely entrench the status quo by drawing selected Blacks some of the way into the privileged White society.

No one of us who has ever worked in the Black Sash Advice Offices has any illusions about the daily violences to humanity. Wives go on being forbidden to sleep with their husbands — except by permit; men and women go on being forbidden to work — except by permit; children go on being forbidden to live in their father's households — except by permit.

One promise which would have meant something had it been carried out is the restoration of leasehold title for Blacks in the urban areas (excepting the Cape Peninsula) — title which was taken away by this Government in 1968.

This promise was made nearly a year ago and still the necessary regulations have not been published. Worse than this, it has been officially stated that people wishing to apply for a leasehold house will first have to apply for homeland citizenship certificates with the threat that this implies to the last remnants of their security.

Unless there are far-reaching changes in the Citizenship Act, people who do apply for homeland citizenship because they are forced to do so by their urgent necessity to have a roof over their heads, will find themselves foreigners in their own country as their particular homeland becomes independent. No doubt the Government will claim, as it has done so often before, that they "voluntarily" renounced their South African citizenship.

Even in the homelands there are the same kind of unacceptable conditions and controls as pertain in the common area. Hostels are being built in the homelands to house so-called "single" workers and the Advice Offices are increasingly being approached by people who are finding difficulty with the regulations which control them inside what are supposed to be their own areas.

For example, a man who lives in Mdantsane, a homeland town inside the Ciskei, was refused a

permit to work in the skilled job he was offered in East London. He was told he could not register because he was living in his brother's house and, as he is a bachelor, he was ordered to go and get himself a bed in a hostel before he would be allowed to work.

This kind of thing makes a total mockery of South African claims to be granting people freedom and independence through the policy of separate development.

One of the objects of the Black Sash, as written into our constitution, is "by non-violent and peaceful means to strive to secure the recognition and the protection by law of human rights and liberties".

South Africa has never been further away from these ideals than it is at present. There is no recognition of human rights and liberties let alone any protection in the law for such rights.

The independence of the Transkei which is presented by our Government to the world as being just such a recognition of human rights falls far short of being so.

There are hundreds of thousands of Black South Africans who value the territorial integrity of their country above all else, whose opinions and desires have never been tested. Their only choice has been to co-operate in the fait accompli of separate development or to have it forced upon them. Their citizenship of their own country is threatened, whether they like it or not — and they will not lightly give it up.

All this adds up to a rapidly developing alienation of the Black community from our society and a serious and growing hatred of Whites by Blacks. †

Recently, in a letter to his parishioners, the Dean of Johannesburg, a truly loving Black man, said this: "Deep hurts have been inflicted on Blacks and those of you who are White and who are striving to be disciples of our Lord have a very painful vocation ahead of you.

"All the bitterness and the hurt and the hatred in the hearts and souls of Black people will be directed at you who are wanting to be loving and caring and colour-blind.

"That is going to be your part in the Passion of our Lord. You are going to be clobbered by Blacks because you are White; you are going to be clobbered by Whites because you seem to be selling the White pass. Blacks are going to learn to be really forgiving, but they must get it all out of their systems first. We desperately need one another if we are going to be human together."

In this situation it is so obvious that what we have to fear is not outside the country, but is the direct result of what we do inside our borders.

The indications are that many Blacks support those whom our Government regards as being the external enemies of South Africa and that in any conflict, Black South Africans will identify

with any political movement or ideology, whatever its nature, if it, opposes South Africa and our way of life.

When we talk to Afrikaner nationalists about doing away with influx control and allowing all our citizens freedom of movement, they more often than not say that this would be "national suicide". Which is the suicidal road — the one we are so far advanced on, or the difficult strong road which will take us towards true liberation?

With this serious threat to peace inside South Africa and the disorder and chaos which threaten to engulf us, there is a terrible temptation to panic; to grab the nearest gun; to seek escape routes; to join in the war hysteria which is evidenced all around us.

In our parish churches, where we have failed through the years to pray for those involved in the struggle against institutional violence, we are now exhorted to pray for our men on the border, who certainly need our prayers, but so do all Southern Africa's people of all political persuasions, whatever group they are fighting for or wherever they are suffering the depredations of war and terror.

Small White children are given Christmas presents of camouflage uniforms and lie on our suburban pavements aiming toy guns at passers-by. Newspaper headlines scream "State of War"; "White Women slaves strip for Frelimo"; "White Terror in SWA".

In the midst of all this, our primary concern must surely be to remain rational; to refuse to be stampeded by the forces of unreason; to strive to encourage rational thought and reasonable reactions to the pressures we must face, to meet hatred with love.

We must fearlessly continue to state the truth, secure in the knowledge that what we believe in is valid because it expresses the fundamental desire we share with all people for peace, justice and security.

In all this we have always been and are strengthened and supported by our belonging to a group of women whose ideals and attitudes we share. But now we may have to learn to do without even this.

The threat of PISCOM, the Parliamentary Internal Security Commission, hangs over us all. This is the latest weapon with which the Government seeks to destroy all those groups which advocate a different way of life for South Africa.

One by one over the years we have seen organisations, political parties and people put out of action by the succession of security laws which have turned normal political activities into crimes and destroyed all liberty. Whether it be by bannings, detentions without trial, or sophisticated smear techniques, opposition has been hampered and prevented.

But our strength lies in the knowledge that none of this can stop the struggle for freedom. It may be delayed or halted for a period, sacrificed and suffered for, but it cannot be destroyed.

If one is prevented, another takes over. If the forces of oppression seem to succeed for a year or a decade or a century, they will not prevail. The human spirit is indestructible and nothing can destroy us if we can only believe this. Nor can anyone destroy our own personal integrity unless we allow them to do so.

The truth of this has been demonstrated over and over again in this country, during the past 28 years. Wherever and whenever the victims of oppression have found the courage to meet attacks with integrity and faith, they and their ideals have remained inviolate.

We may have to do without the security of our group belonging and find the courage to continue with individual unsupported action.

We must plan as individuals to ensure that peaceful efforts towards justice will continue whether or not we at this moment can foresee any peaceful solution to our internal conflicts.

We all have the feeling that nothing we can do will any longer influence the course of events. I have no easy answer to this. We simply do not know what tomorrow will bring and whether what we do will change anything. There are too many imponderables.

Perhaps all we can do is to learn to live, with reason and personal peace, within events as they happen around us. At least in our local situation, the way we behave and speak is bound to affect those around us. It could be that just to refuse to give way to fear and panic will prove to be an achievement.

The way we each live is of great importance. We all have much to learn about showing in our own lives our rejection of violence, injustice and oppression and our total opposition to what is presently the South African way of life. As one of our members put it the other day, we can learn to step sideways out of the system and live in the way we say life should be lived in this country.

Whether the Black Sash is put out of existence or not, the past 21 years have not been wasted. We can be proud of what we have done and assured of the value of what we have stood for. We can ensure that our work will continue if each one of us acknowledges an individual and personal responsibility to continue to work and struggle for the things in which we believe.

If chaos overwhelms us, we will work for reconstruction, as so many Black people, whose condition of life has been chaos for a long time, are working for reconstruction.

I personally believe that one of our primary tasks as Black Sash in the next months, must be to encourage our members to become personally involved in at least one politically constructive activity outside Black Sash work and to use what they have come to understand through their membership of the Sash in all other groups and organisations to which they, as individuals, belong.

If we do survive as an organisation, the cross-fertilisation of ideas and stimulation we thus gain, can only strengthen, expand and enrich our work.

If we do not survive as the Black Sash, we will have laid the groundwork for our members to continue that work in other ways.

If we succumb to the temptation to say we have done all we can and can now opt out of the fight with a clear conscience because the Government has stopped us, then we will indeed be handing them a victory. We must recognise that we cannot be defeated if we refuse to concede.

After all, you do not need an organisation to seek out and expose injustices and violations of the human spirit. You do not need an organisation to seek reconciliation between Black and White. You do not need an organisation to speak

the truth. You do not need an organisation to work for peace and reconstruction.

You do need friends and love but these we have in plenty, whether or not we are allowed to remain bound together by a constitutional discipline.

The bonds which have grown between us cannot be severed by Government action nor can the bonds which bind us to all our fellow citizens, both Black and White, be severed because we and they share in the fundamental human aspirations for spiritual fulfilment, peace and freedom and these cannot be destroyed.

I don't know about you, but I feel an increasing sense of unreality at the constant repetition of words which express those concepts which now seem to have become unattainable in our lifetime.

Justice, the rule of law, liberty, freedom. These are our ideals and must be spoken to keep the ideas they enshrine alive. They are the goals towards which we strive and the ideas we hope our children will also understand and value. But, perhaps what we need to help us now are the small words, the ones we can do something about and these I leave with you now — hard work, truth and reason, a quiet will, to keep faith; love and joy and peace.

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‘AS Shaw put it: “Poor people, abject people, dirty people ill fed, ill clothed people poison us, morally and physically, they kill the happiness of society, they force us to do away with our own liberties and organise unnatural cruelties for fear they should rise against us and drag us down into their abyss”.’

From “BEATRICE WEBB — A Life — 1858 to 1943”

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## Humane story

WESTERN COLOURED TOWNSHIP by Marianne Brindley (Ravan Press, R4,20)

**M**ARIANNE BRINDLEY, a qualified social anthropologist, presents an in-depth analysis of the major problems facing the Coloured people in a Johannesburg slum.

The research is objective, compassionate, and takes account of studies conducted elsewhere in the world. It offers practical recommendations for community rehabilitation and examines problems of housing, productivity, social work, alcoholism, gangs, motherhood, family planning, the marginal father, and the identity crisis of the Coloured people.

The book should not only provide useful material for the social scientist, but should aid university students in the humanities and paramedical spheres in its comprehensive portrayal of life in a disadvantaged environment.

This is a humane story of a people in need which should have a wide appeal.

Available from leading booksellers or from Ravan Press.

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