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CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

A report to the Executive Committee of the SACC by the Commission on  
Violence and Non-Violence.  
February 1983

Despite other explanations given by the SADF, it seems that the moral pressure exerted by a few conscientious objectors who have been jailed has led to changes to the Defence Act being prepared.

These changes include two aspects which SACC related churches have urged for twenty years or more:

- (1) Recognition of conscientious objection is to be based on what the individual believes rather than on the tenets of the religious body to which he belongs;
- (2) Alternative service outside the SADF is envisaged under control of another Government Department than Defence.

These changes should be welcomed.

However, the other aspects of the proposed legislation restrict the recognition and make the alternatives so severe that the positive aspects of the proposals are virtually cancelled out, i.e.:

- (1) Recognition appears to be limited to religious pacifists who will be examined by a secret tribunal. All other objectors would be liable to long terms of imprisonment.
- (2) Alternative service would be of such long duration as seriously to jeopardise a young man's preparation for his career and would include a form of political banning.

I believe the reason for these drastic restrictions is the fear of the Government and the SADF of an irreversible and escalating growth in conscientious objection as happened in the USA during the Vietnam War. The two situations are not alike in important aspects, but evidence given by the SADF to the Eloff Commission in fact mentions this fear.

So although the religious conscience of the Nationalists and their unease at publicity on the CO issue has produced some change, their fear of a breakdown of the defence system has led them to plan the very minimum of change and to take the opportunity of making penalties on what they call "political" objectors more immediate and severe.

Such draconian measures will probably increase sympathy for COs and consolidate behind them the support of those SA Churches which have understood their plight. At the same time we need to apply creative imagination to ways of helping the others out of this whole situation of fear.

With current political developments conscription may soon face people who have been classified as Coloured or Indian as well as whites. The Churches therefore need to be very clear on their principles and goals in this field so as not to fall into dangerous compromises.

The latest case of Adrian Paterson, who refused his initial call-up and received a mere four month prison sentence with ignominious discharge from the SADF, seems to indicate an intention to proceed with the provision of alternative service and to call him up again for such service.

It seems to me important in present circumstances that SACC member churches should press for and accept nothing less than was specified in our proposals



put to the Government in November 1980. We should beware of being lulled by a partial reduction in the severity of the present SADF proposals and accepting something that is still unfair to COs.

This legislation is likely to be dealt with in this session of Parliament because there are now nearly 400 Jehovah's Witnesses sitting idle in Detention Barracks for 3 years and making the Army lads envious because the latter now have to serve more than 4 years!

If the legislation as currently proposed goes through, the Churches will need to consider what new actions they can take in the face of it.

Robert J D Robertson  
Convener  
Commission on Violence & Non-Violence.  
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