

# CAN YOU SERVE WITHOUT A GUN?

"IS SOUTH Africa worth fighting for? Can young white men go in good conscience to the border, to fight against men who almost without exception are black, and who believe that they have a duty to liberate this country from its present rulers, and in particular from the oppression of its racial laws."

Alan Paton's words on the occasion when he delivered the Hoernle Memorial Lecture at the S.A. Institute of Race relation conference in July this year.

The veteran liberal thinker was almost certainly addressing himself to those who believe that love of country should be synonymous with defence of its borders and its system.

Dr Paton, however, believes there is only one decent reason for going to the border — and that is to fight for the chance to make South Africa a more just society.

However, some have decided against serving for any reason — ranging from political to religious, have failed to report for military service, or having reported, have failed to serve.

Those who stay face imprisonment. Others flee abroad.

It is not an easy road to follow: In London recently I asked a young white South African who had chosen this path, how he felt knowing he could not return home.

It was a cold northern winter's day. Outside the sleet had turned to a thin rain. He was out of work. "It would have been easier for me to have done military service, but my

conscience wouldn't allow me," was his reply.

He remains apolitical. In direct contrast, another Natalian I know is an activist member of Cosawr (The Committee of S. A. War Resistance) in London, who supports others avoiding the Defence Force call-up.

There are others:

- The publicised case of deserter Barry Sirmons who flew to America to confront the U. S. authorities with a test case on whether he should be granted political asylum.

- Former Durban University Students' Representative Council president Bernie Wolsdorf who fled to the U. S. earlier this year.

- According to other reports two prominent white student leaders have left recently — Patrick Fitzgerald (former Nusas secretary-general) and Heinz Klug (president of the S. A. Students' Press Union) — and are now in Botswana.

- Hugh Lugg from East London who was to be deported by the Tory Government after arriving in the U. K.

But what of those who stay behind to face the music?

Conscientious objection is a sensitive issue in South Africa today. On the one hand the authorities firmly believe that if a man is a citizen of a country and derives benefit

THE decision by the conference of the Methodist Church meeting in Cape Town to approve a blueprint for a system for dealing with non-combatants both inside and outside the Defence Force structure, and the recent controversy surrounding the establishment of a Voluntary Service Corp in the Western Cape, has again highlighted the dilemma facing a minority of young white men who want to serve their country but do not want to carry arms. **Rory Lynsky reports.**

from it he should be prepared to defend it.

The majority of young white South Africans do defend their borders — but there are exceptions.

The S.A. Institute of Race Relations in its 1978 survey notes that according to Hansard, 3 814 young men were charged with failing to report for duty in 1977. Of these, 507 were convicted (again 86 of these men claimed exception on the grounds of conscientious objection.) Twenty-five men were charged and convicted of failing to serve after having reported.

At present the South African Defence Force recognises only one form of conscientious objector — Jehovah's Witnesses. It makes no provision for pacifists and other men who refuse to serve on any other basis, including the claim to be conscientious objectors.

There are draconian

penalties. For failing to serve, a conscientious objector who is called up off a period of 12 months or longer, will receive three years' imprisonment. Other cases, apart from conscientious objectors, carry a R2 000 fine or imprisonment for two years or both.

Incarceration and flight abroad is fruitless. At present the SADF has yet to provide any non-military form of National Service.

Recent months have seen a number of individuals and organisations exploring the possibilities of alternative forms of service — with the emphasis on service and not avoidance.

One is the special Voluntary Service Corps which went into operation in the Western Cape in September.

Professor Paul Hare, head of the Sociology Department at the

University of Cape Town, is one of the men behind the multiracial corp.

"We are going ahead with the plans which we have initiated. We are operating these units to show that they can be successful.

"We will then report to the SADF in the hope that at some time in the future when and if they do consider alternative service, they may see this as an example," Professor Hare says. The SADF has dissociated itself from the scheme.

Professor Hare emphasises that his organisation is not advocating conscientious objection, but the provision of alternative service.

This is also the thrust of the Milcom Committee into Alternative Forms of National Service — established at last year's Nusas congress.

In recent statements the student committee has urged that the Government introduce some form of alternative service to stop the flow of conscientious objectors who are leaving the country.

They are not opposed to national service but ask that conscientious objectors be given the opportunity to serve in a non-military capacity, extended, say, over three years.

Mr Ray Swart, deputy chairman of the Progressive Federal Party and MP for Musgrave, believes that South Africa should start a multi-racial "peace corps" on the American model.

"Military leaders are agreed that South Africa is faced with twin threats to its security, one from outside and one from within stemming from the frustration and the poor quality of life of masses of our people," he says.

"I believe that the establishment of a peace corps, which would in no way exclude active army service, would add essential variety to the type of service young men of all races could give towards meeting the threat to our security."

"This could include those who are generally opposed to participation in armed conflict and also those young South Africans who look for a greater idealism than is offered by the essential but often negative task demanded by the continuing need to man our borders to ward off attacks from outside.

"I have in mind groups of young South Africans of all races moving into under-developed areas among the less privileged sections of our population and helping to provide essential social services."

# Give conscientious objectors a chance, pleads RC journal

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CAPE TOWN — A call to modify the laws to make "humane provisions" for conscientious objectors, providing they accept some other form of service, is made in a leading article in the current issue of the Roman Catholic newspaper the Southern Cross.

The article refers to the recent court martial sentence on a Cape Town objector, Mr Peter Moll.

It says: "In South Africa one could be fined five thousand rand and imprisoned for six years for even suggesting to any persons that he or they should refuse military service to which he or they may be liable in terms of this country's Defence Act.

"This draconian law inhibits discussion, even on an abstract level, of the rights and wrongs of conscientious objection.

"The seventeen church leaders headed by Owen Cardinal McCann who recently published a statement about Mr. Peter Moll's arrest and detention, were therefore quite daring to plead with the South African Government to understand that in the present circumstances of our country, conscientious objection can be based on genuine religious and moral convictions."

The article concludes with the plea that South Africa's laws be modified to make "humane provisions for the case of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided, however, that they accept some other form of service to the human community". — Sapa.

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