

MILITARY CONSCRIPTION IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE PAST,
THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE.

A JOHANNESBURG ECC DISCUSSION PAPER.

INTRODUCTION

This paper has emerged from a series of formal and informal discussions with a wide range of political and religious groupings in South Africa. These include members of the ANC, members of the Democratic Party, Citizen Force officers in the SADF, office bearers of various religious organisations, and others. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate debate, both within ECC structures and in public forums, on the future of military conscription and possible alternatives to it. The paper does not purport to be a definitive exposition of ECC policy, or to provide all the solutions to a complex problem. Rather, it is a contribution to what we believe should be a popular debate on an important issue, one which is of concern to all political groupings in South Africa.

ECC'S OBJECTIONS TO THE PRESENT SYSTEM OF CONSCRIPTION

The ECC's opposition to the current system of military conscription in South Africa is based on the racist nature of the call-up, and the nature of the role played by the SADF in South Africa. Without dwelling unduly on the past, it is important to remember key elements of the SADF's defence of apartheid and white minority rule in southern Africa:

- * The occupation of Namibia.
- * The invasion of Angola.
- * Military raids into neighbouring states.
- * The assistance of rebel elements in neighbouring states for the purpose of destabilising those states.
- * The ruthless suppression of popular resistance in the townships under the state of emergency.
- * The murderous activities of the Civil Cooperation Bureau.

It must be borne in mind that the present Nationalist government and the present leadership of the SADF were responsible for the above listed events.

The fact that only whites are forced to perform military service is, in itself, an anomaly. This is particularly so in the present climate of de-racialisation and normalisation of our society. The maintenance of such a racist system continues to suggest that only whites have enough to defend to accept being conscripted. It also casts doubt on the bona fides of the government and the SADF, who are suspected of wanting to maintain a white-dominated force which can be deployed against the black majority in a last ditch "backs-against-the-wall" scenario.

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Whites-only conscription continues to polarise our youth, the very section of society which should be encouraged to prepare for a social and political future in which race plays no role. Finally, there are the social and economic costs of conscription, including the loss of skilled workers from the economy, the brain drain, and many hidden costs.

The ECC believes that it is absolutely clear that the existing racist system of conscription is entirely unacceptable, and must be done away with urgently. The question is, what will replace it?

CONSCRIPTION AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

The main argument in favour of retaining conscription in a future democratic South Africa is one of economics. It is argued that poorly-paid conscripts are cheaper than professional soldiers. It is further argued that a conscript army is much less likely to be susceptible to involvement in a coup d'etat, or to commit atrocities in times of war. There are also arguments that compulsory military service has a beneficial effect on the conscript himself - it "makes a man of him". Let us examine these arguments.

The economic argument for conscription is the most superficially compelling. If we can't afford an alternative system, won't we just have to accept conscription? The economics of conscription relate to scale. Obviously, if one wants to raise a huge army, conscripts will be cheaper than professionals. Saddam Hussein, for example, has no option but to use conscription to raise an army of 500 000. But what number of soldiers will be required in South Africa? At the Lusaka conference held in May 1990 between SADF members, ANC representatives and a range of other groupings, it was widely agreed that the SADF's present active strength of approximately 100 000 should be halved to approximately 50 000. Assuming a Permanent Force of approximately 20 000 (as at present) this would require 30 000 conscripts to be serving at any one time. Let us assume that the average conscript is paid R150 per month, compared with a professional soldier's pay of R1 000 per month. The annual salary saving brought about by conscription is thus R306 million. A lot of money? Yes indeed, although a small proportion of our present military budget of R10 billion, or R10 000 million!

So we see that even in a realistic future South African scenario, using conscripts instead of professional soldiers will reduce military expenditure, on the present military budget, by just 3%.

For that saving, we are faced with having to train 30 000 new soldiers per year, from scratch. Assume that the period of conscription is one year, as at the present. In order to achieve high standards, approximately 3 to 6 months of the year will be consumed in training, so that the availability of trained soldiers is reduced by 25% to 50%. Needless to say, the cost of facilities and personnel allocated to training will be disproportionately high. In fact, this cost alone can be expected largely to cancel out the wage saving due to conscription. At the end of their year of service, conscripts will be released into

the economy, there to unlearn their expensive military skills. Of course, in a military conflict, those ex-conscripts might be called up, retrained and sent into battle. In the past, that is exactly why conscription was employed in South Africa - to ensure the existence of a large pool of all-white cannon fodder in a scenario which looked increasingly threatening to the government and its militaristic advisers. In peacetime, of course, this waste of resources becomes even more difficult to justify.

As far as the hidden economic costs of conscription are concerned, the 1989 report by the Centre for Policy Studies at the Business School of the University of the Witwatersrand provides detailed and startling figures of the cost to the country of withdrawing economically active people from circulation, and losing thousands of graduates to foreign countries in the "brain drain".

How would conscription be effected in the above scenario? Assuming, again, a halved personnel requirement in the future, one half as many conscripts as at present would have to be selected from the entire population - a pool five to six times bigger. (The pool is bigger still if age distribution is taken into account). Thus, only 1 in 10 male youths need be conscripted. This figure drops to 1 in 20 young people. This can be dealt with by a ballot system. Of course, the arguments for the benefit to conscripts of military service are rather diluted by such a system. And what about the problems? Imagine 1 in 10 or 1 in 20 whites, about half of whom could be called "right-wing", being conscripted into a largely black, non-racial defence force. Would they go? Don't bet on it. Recently, the Conservative Party put the issue of resisting conscription on its agenda. It is suggested that such a system is a recipe for ongoing conflict and polarisation.

What about the arguments that conscripted armies are less likely to commit atrocities or to become involved in coups? On the first score, the history of the last two World Wars, the Vietnam war and our own border war should convince idealists that atrocities are not committed by fanatical "gooks". They are committed by people like us, pushed beyond breaking point by a situation not of their own making. Were all the soldiers involved in World War Two German atrocities volunteers or card carrying members of the National Socialist Party? Were the Americans responsible for the My Lai massacre all professionals? What of the rapes, murders, torture and even, mutilation of cats committed by our very own "boys" on the border? Atrocities can only be prevented by top quality training and discipline, instead of blatant propaganda and the dehumanisation of the "enemy".

AS FOR COUPS, these generally involve a small coterie of senior or middle ranking officers, and not the rank and file of the armed forces. The best way to prevent a situation developing in which a coup becomes a possibility is to ensure full accountability of the military to civilian government, and to stamp out secret empires and power cliques within the military. If our own recent history has not taught us how important this is, then truly we have learned nothing.

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ALTERNATIVES TO CONSCRIPTION

What are the alternatives to conscription? The ECC believes that the exact details of a new defence force for South Africa should be hammered out democratically, either in a process of negotiations or by democratically elected representatives. In constituting a new defence force, we believe that the following points should be taken into account:

- * It should be non-racial.
- * Its primary role should be the protection of South Africa's territorial integrity.
- * It should uphold democratic values and be completely accountable to the civil government.
- * Appointments and recruitment should be on merit alone.
- * It should adhere to the Geneva Convention and all other treaties and protocols governing the conduct of war.
- * The new defence force should be a professional organisation with high standards of efficiency.
- * The new defence force should be committed to the non use and non development of nuclear, germ and biological modes of warfare.

It is suggested that the new defence force comprise a fully professional permanent force and a short service volunteer force. The latter force would be recruited from the public and recruits would serve a period of between two and four years (depending on practical requirements) before retirement into a reserve force. Present SADF and MK members should be invited to serve in the new defence force voluntarily. A joint SADF/MK committee could decide on appropriate placement, rank, and any necessary retraining of such personnel. Members of the "Homeland" armies should likewise be invited to serve. The type of equipment required by the new defence force will tend to be "lower tech" than much of that presently in use or under development. In any event, the United Nations arms embargo can be expected to fall away, so that the uneconomical development of local "hi-tech" weapons systems will become redundant. The resultant saving will also compensate for the slight extra cost of replacing conscripts with professionals.

What about interim measures? Won't it be a long and difficult process to replace conscripts with volunteer professionals? Not at all. The problems are mainly political, not practical. Firstly, the basic training infrastructure is already in place, and is geared up to deal with twice as many recruits as the number envisaged. As early as the time of the next August call-up, conscripts could be replaced with volunteers. Accommodation, training facilities and equipment are available for them. All that is required is an acceptable political framework within which to operate. In the meantime, no doubt, the government and the SADF will continue to rely on the crumbling system of whites-only conscription. It is to be hoped that the inevitable morale crisis in the SADF will not contaminate the new defence force.

WHAT IF CONSCRIPTION IS RETAINED AFTER ALL?

The ECC believes that conscription is undesirable, even in a new, democratic South Africa. However, if a fully democratic decision

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were made in future to retain or reintroduce conscription, we would have to abide by that decision. In such a case, we would insist on the right to conscientious objection for any conscript, with an option of non-military community service on a non-punitive basis. In any event, we believe that the chances of conscription being retained in the future are negligible.

In summary, the ECC believes that the existing racist system of whites-only conscription is doomed, and must be replaced urgently by a system acceptable to all South Africans. It is hoped that the above proposal will stimulate an open debate on the issue, a debate which is long overdue.

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END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

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