

## SHOULD WE HAVE NATIONAL SERVICE?

### DISCUSSION PAPER

#### FOR THE END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN

##### A. INTRODUCTION: NATIONAL SERVICE

ECC, as its name indicates, is opposed to the idea of compulsory military service. Our opposition to the present conscription system is based not only on our opposition to apartheid but also on a more general feeling that people who are opposed to serving in wars, any wars, should not be punished for this. But we have never really defined our ideas about the question of national service as a whole.

One of our posters says that "national service need not be military service". When we campaigned on behalf of objectors we called for them to be given alternative service rather than for them not to have to do any service whatsoever. The implication, surely, is that some form of national service, or service to the community, is acceptable. But what form?

What should take the place of the present "whites-only" national service system when it is done away with?

The following is an argument that rather than being scrapped altogether the existing national service system needs to be replaced by one which is morally defensible and which fits in with the needs of South African society. This national service system should be a non-military (ie. civilian) one.

##### Who should do national service?

Under the apartheid system the majority of people in this country have been deprived of the benefits of full citizenship. As a result finding a clear basis for requiring that people perform national service is possibly more difficult than it might otherwise be. The national service system should therefore essentially be voluntary but open to all South African citizens.

But what about people who have been provided with tertiary education at significant state expense? The position taken in this essay is that if people receive state subsidised tertiary education it would be fair to require them to perform a period of national service.

##### B. COMPULSORY OR VOLUNTARY MILITARY SERVICE

###### The debate on military service.

Over the past year, the issue of future military recruitment policy has started being seriously debated in the public domain.

If the major political parties do eventually reach a political settlement there would seem to be little chance of any system of compulsory military service (ie. conscription) being maintained

factors will dictate that we do not have a conscription system.

In selecting an approach to the recruitment of personnel for the armed forces, military and government leaders are inclined to be more concerned with political, military-strategic and financial questions rather than specifically moral ones.

Thus a combination of "cost" and "risk" analyses may be seen to underly the already considerable degree of agreement that South Africa does not have an immediate need for increasing the size of its defence force and even that a future defence force should be smaller than the present one. As it happens reductions in the defence budget are forcing the SADF to rationalise the Permanent Force. Thousands of SADF members have recently been offered retrenchment packages. The SADF appears to be orientating itself towards developing a smaller defence force.

The implication of extending conscription to people of all races would be that the conscript element of the armed forces would increase in the region of tenfold. Security analysts however generally agree that there will be no major externally based military attacks on South Africa in the immediate future. Secondly there is the urgent need to reduce state expenditure on defence in order to make money available to pay off debts and for spending in other areas.

In the minds of the generals and political leaders these considerations obviously rule out any argument that conscription should be extended to all (at least male) South Africans.

Despite these factors however a number of substantial arguments have been put forward which run contrary to the idea of the military relying purely on volunteer/professional soldiers.

The National Party for instance have in public continued to maintain that "some form of conscription" (\* see note 1) should be retained. If they are arguing for a type of ballot system then they obviously do not object to the fact that this would run contrary to the objective of establishing a well motivated defence force.

One concern that is often expressed is that non-conscript armies tend to be constituted from a narrow, usually not politically impartial, stratum of the society from which they are drawn. Associated with this is a concern that the military, not being politically representative of society, will have a tendency to intervene in the political process if its interests, or the political interests of those whom it represents, conflict with those of the political authority. A conscription or ballot system, it is argued, is preferable as it ensures that the armed forces are, to some degree, representative of the nation as a whole.

Another objection to the idea of an entirely voluntary military service system is that such systems are particularly expensive as the armed forces have to pay the full "market" costs of employing skilled personnel. However these days there is at least some acknowledgement that compulsory systems of service may be

far less cost effective than are some volunteer recruitment systems.

The argument appears to be gaining acceptance that a core professional army supplemented by a volunteer short service and a volunteer reserve system can provide an alternative which is cheaper than and preferable to a conscript/ballot system and to an army constituted entirely of full-time professionals. In addition it appears that such systems would diminish the extent to which the armed forces become "cut off" from society and contribute to them being more representative of it.

### Recognising freedom of conscience

The motivation for the idea or principle of freedom of conscience is an essential humility about belief and morality. The principle is based on the acknowledgement that any one of us does not have absolute knowledge. In many judgements that we make, whatever lengths we may go to to inform ourselves as to the truth, however devoutly we may believe in something, we are often wrong. The idea of freedom of conscience therefore serves as a reminder of our human limitations.

The person who puts forward the principle of freedom of conscience is therefore concerned with the right of individuals or groups of people to make judgements about others. In asserting this principle they are saying that no-one has the right to sit in absolute judgement on the conscience of another person.

Whether one is true to conscience depends in the end not on what one believes in but on what one does. A full recognition of freedom of conscience implies not only recognising that others have different beliefs but allowing them to act in terms of these beliefs.

But freedom of conscience is not always a simple principle to apply. It cannot for instance be taken to imply that someone should be allowed to go around shooting people in the street even if he claims to be following his conscience in doing so. Alternatively, it would not be in any way practicable to operate a system of taxation in terms of the principle that one should not be required to pay taxes if this is in conflict with ones conscience.

Wars kill people in large numbers. Participation in war therefore has direct moral implications which are more serious than those attached to many other activities that human beings engage in. In consequence also, the denial of conscience which follows from being coerced into serving in a war, and therefore participating in the killing of other people, in circumstances where one believes this to be wrong, is all the greater.

Conscription systems are intended to compel people to serve in wars. Of necessity they therefore run directly contrary to the idea of freedom of conscience.

The fact that participation in war has particularly serious moral connotations associated with it provides a special motivation for

a full recognition to be given to the principle of freedom of conscience in relation to those who are called on to serve in defence of the people of a particular country in war.

Some people may perceive the idea of giving recognition to individual conscience as something of a luxury. People or nations which enter into wars may do so because they believe their entire existence to be threatened. When compared to considerations of this kind, protecting the right to individual conscience may seem to be of entirely secondary importance.

How should we balance these arguments against each other. If we are arguing from a "just war" (\* see note 2) rather than a pacifist position we can still accept that the practice of war needs to be questioned, that war is one of the most (self) destructive practices which is engaged in by human beings, and that wars are often engaged in for little or no purpose or for purposes which are expressly immoral.

But would it not be preferable, if our country were to be attacked for instance, for South Africans to share equally the burden of defending themselves, rather than allowing this burden to fall on the shoulders of a group of trained "professionals"?

If we refer to the just war theory as providing a general set of guidelines we can accept that wars may, under certain circumstances, be justified. Is there not then an argument that, if a war is morally justified, conscription may be the fairest way of recruiting people to serve in that war?

The duty of carrying arms in defence of ones countrymen and women is an onerous one. It carries not only the possibility that one can become culpable in the death of other people but also the possibility that one can oneself be killed, maimed or tortured.

Human beings, in the way that they conduct themselves, are guided by diferent mixtures and combinations of self-interest and morality. A voluntary system provides, not only those who are guided by conscience, but also those who have no sense of moral responsibility to their fellow citizens, with an easy way out.

It is therefore possible to argue that, rather than contradicting moral principles, conscription is morally preferable as a system, as it seeks to place the burden of war, to a degree at least, equally upon the shoulders of all (male) citizens.

South Africa is going through a period of intense difficulty, of violence, of uncertainty, and of fear. Associated with this there are the problems of lack of economic growth, increasing poverty, homelessness and hunger.

If there is any hope of building a "new" South Africa then bringing an end to the cycle of violence would appear to be a necessity. For the violence to be brought to an end there needs to be acceptance of a broader project of bringing people together around their common interests, and, where this is not possible, accommodating their differences.

In South Africa there are some who have already directly suffered at the hands of one or other of the military formations which will become part of a new defence force. There are also people with many different varieties of opinion who identify with divergent political ideologies. It can perhaps be hoped that as many of these different political viewpoints as possible will eventually be accommodated by a political system that emerges from negotiations. But in some cases this may not be possible. To conscript those whose political ideology is not accommodated would be to add fuel to their antagonism against a new dispensation.

Ultimately one has to decide what weight to give to the idea of conscience and of freedom of conscience. There will obviously be those who argue that "national security" is an imperative which is of a much higher order than "freedom of conscience".

In South Africa's recent past the need for "national security" was seen to exclude freedom of conscience. The political climate associated with this emphasis on "national security" was one where excesses, such as the murder of civilians, came to be regarded as acceptable forms of conduct within the security forces.

Recognition of the right to freedom of conscience is essential to a democratic society. We need a concept of national security which has at its centre the value of conscience and the importance of protecting freedom of conscience. Recognition of the right to freedom of conscience implies recognition of the right to conscientious objection (\* see note 3).

### C. SOUTH AFRICA'S NATIONAL CRISIS

It is stating the obvious to say that South African society is going through a period of sustained crisis. The political institutions that provided the framework for the exercise of political power in the past are seen as having little authority. Political leaders are in agreement that South Africa needs to find a new political dispensation but cannot agree on what form this should take. Throughout South African society there is a pervasive uncertainty about the future and associated with this a variety of social maladies.

South African society is not only in a political crisis but in an economic crisis as well. In a context of already severe unemployment, many businesses have been closing down or retrenching employees (\* see note 4). The severity of the unemployment problem is borne out by social indices such as the high crime rate.

This crisis of unemployment is however only part of a much wider crisis of poverty in South Africa. Successive South African governments have followed "a deliberate policy of under-provision of social services in African townships to discourage family settlement. Housing backlogs, inadequate school facilities, neglect of infrastructural development such as roads, electrification and general public space management were all designed to make townships unattractive to potential settlers."

(Mamphela, September 1991). These backlogs and inadequacies continue to be a feature of life, reflected in high rates of illiteracy and lack of education, in communities which have little access to water or electricity, not only in urban but in rural communities throughout South Africa today. By means of illustration, more than 50% of blacks in urban areas are estimated to live in backyard shacks or squatter settlements. (the Star, 12/11/92).

The magnitude of the problem of poverty is reflected in the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and AIDS, in widespread malnutrition, hunger, and starvation.

Within this context South African society is experiencing a severe breakdown of order and unprecedented levels of violence. In part the violence is connected to a massive upsurge in criminal activity and is carried out for criminal ends. In part the violence is political, related to the confrontation between various political forces. Often it is difficult to identify whether violence is specifically "political" or "criminal" in nature.

While South Africa's economy is in a recession and all of the above problems are being aggravated, social disorganisation, in part attributable to rapid social change over the last century, in part attributable to apartheid policies such as the influx control and migrant labour systems, continues to take its toll, particularly on black communities.

"Communities undergoing social disintegration have been observed to display some behavioural patterns: family breakdowns with rising divorce, separation, single parenthood and high teenage pregnancy rates. Low job participation with both high unemployment and unemployable rates. High alcohol and drug abuse... Low performance in all spheres of life including school and skills training. High crime rates and endemic violence at all levels of social interaction: family, interpersonal, neighbourhood and wider community." (Mamphela, September 1991)

The policy of the National Party government during the period of apartheid was to provide black South African youth with an entirely sub-standard education. Part of the black uprising against the apartheid system during the 1970's and 1980's involved a full-scale rebellion against this "gutter education" system. Not only the governments policies but also the rebellion against them has taken it's toll on black society. At this point we are still a long way away from establishing a properly functioning and effective education system.

It is often pointed out that these different dimensions of the crisis are deeply interrelated. As a result people often argue that the economic crisis will resolve itself if the violence can be brought to an end or if there is a political settlement and greater confidence about the countries future.

What these arguments fail to acknowledge is the depth of the crisis. Even if some kind of political settlement is reached and the economy is stabilised, South African society will still have

structured into its massive social problems which have the potential to intensify in the coming decade.

### The "lost" generation

The legacy of South Africa's recent history is a situation where large numbers of black youths have received little or no education and are not capable of performing any other than the most menial tasks within the economy. The present unemployment rate and the present problem of widespread crime bear witness to the existence of a whole stratum of youth in our society who, by their historical circumstances, have in effect been excluded from participating in the economic life of this country. "The community affected comprises the majority of South Africans; it cannot be dismissed as functioning outside the mainstream. On the contrary, it threatens to become the mainstream." (Ramphela, 1991)

What is more, black youths are not the only ones who are suffering the consequences of bad times. A white skin no longer serves as a virtual guarantee of privilege and comfort in South Africa.

With even relatively well educated youths finding it difficult to find jobs, one may anticipate that young people, in particular, will increasingly find themselves locked into desperate, and often futile, competition with each other for jobs. Frustration and a pervasive insecurity will most likely express itself in intensifying racial conflict.

At the same time many, particularly young, South Africans, finding themselves with little prospect of entering the mainstream economy, will be disposed towards career paths in the world of crime.

Taking into account the effects of high birth rates, the logical projection is that, in the next decade, the magnitude of this crisis will continue to grow, and that violence, be it "criminal" or "political", will get worse.

### D. CIVILIAN NATIONAL SERVICE

The most serious "threat" to the well-being and future stability of South African society is therefore not an external one. If there is not direct intervention in the position of the "lost generation", this marginalised portion of our civilian population will in future, become even more locked into a culture of violence.

They need the opportunity to be able to participate as economically active citizens in this society and to enter into the economic mainstream. The main emphasis of a national service system must be in dealing with this problem.

#### How would it work?

The development of a civilian national service system should be accorded the highest priority. The civilian national service

system should be aimed at providing skilled and unskilled labour of various kinds for the purpose of improving the living circumstances of those who are most desperate in South African society. Work that could be done would include:

- \* poverty relief
- \* primary health care work - particularly PHC in the field of AIDS
- \* building homes, roads and other facilities
- \* improving irrigation, sanitation, electricity and water supply
- \* literacy programmes

At the same time an essential part of the national service system would be that national service volunteers would benefit educationally during the time of their service. This would be in the form of on the job training as well as the development of a variety of focused appropriate "essential" education courses which would be provided to them. The key objective here would be to ensure that, when national service volunteers complete a period of national service, they are better equipped to either find employment or to participate in some other legal way in the economy.

It should be noted that a wide range of groupings as well as influential members of the public have given their support to an idea of this kind (\* see note 5).

#### Financial and other considerations

A proposal of this kind will inevitably meet with different forms of criticism.

One general argument is that participants in a programme of this kind will have little incentive to contribute to the programme and to ensure that it works effectively. As a result the proposed system would not achieve the objectives which it sets out to achieve.

One positive motivating factor for participants in the national service system would be that the work that they were doing would be for the good of people in society generally. The national service system would also have to be organised so that there would be clearly identifiable gains associated with participation in it.

The competence and effectiveness of the administration of such the civilian national service system would also obviously be a crucial factor. The civilian national service system would have to be managed under strict financial discipline with the usefulness and effectiveness of each aspect of the program being subjected to regular re-evaluation. In general the intention should be that participants in the system are not establishing permanent careers. The value of the program would have to be evaluated in terms of it's effectiveness in providing skills to people and it's contribution to building up society more broadly.

The proposed civilian national service system should not serve to increase the dependence of individuals on the state. Neither



should it serve as the basis for providing sheltered employment to another state bureaucracy who, after working at minimal levels of input, retire with enormous pensions.

A system of this kind would obviously be very expensive. We should however take into account that South African society has been maintaining a (military) national service system for a number of years now. The infrastructure developed for the military service system should be put at the disposal of the civilian service system.

The social (and ultimately financial) benefits of the proposed national service system should be able to justify whatever expenditure there may be on such a system.

"It should be borne in mind that additional expenditure on employment creation would probably reduce crime and unrest levels, thus facilitating some saving in policing costs and infrastructural damage in the medium term. A reduction of crime and unrest would simultaneously improve domestic and foreign business and investor confidence, with a positive impact on economic growth and thus on government revenues. Furthermore, the improved economic growth eventually resulting from higher skills levels and better infrastructure would boost the tax base, curbing the long-term effect of the programme's expenditure on the fiscal deficit." (Econovision, November 1991).

### Skills

The proposed national service system would have to achieve a clear balance between the availability of skills and the various skills which would be required for the system to function effectively. Three kinds of skilled labour inputs may be differentiated:

- those required to direct a public works and services programme.
- those required in the educational dimension of the system. To some extent these would be passed on in the form of on the job training. There would also have to be specific educational programmes such as literacy programmes.
- those required in the organisation and administration of the system.

If a civilian national service system is to be significantly big enough to constitute a significant intervention in the predicament of the "lost generation", a large number of skilled personnel will have to be channelled into the system.

If the national service system is to be capable of achieving its objectives it would therefore be advisable for people who have received state subsidised tertiary education to be required to render a period of national service.

People who have just completed tertiary education often have extensive training but very little practical experience in the work environment. It can therefore be asked whether people in this position would be of any particular use to a civilian national service system.

Obviously trained professionals would have to oversee the work engaged in under the civilian national service system. In addition to the skills which they have been provided with in their tertiary training, recipients of tertiary education would have many basic skills, such as literacy and computer skills, which would be of value if at the disposal of the civilian national service program.

#### The debate on military service: further comments

If the need existed consideration could be given to offering people who are liable for national service as a result of having received tertiary education the alternative option of doing their national service in the military.

National service personnel who had already received tertiary education would, arguably, often opt for national service where the skills that they had acquired could best be put to use.

National service personnel who do military service would have to perform an initial period of service as well as a certain number of later periods of service in a reserve force. These would have to be balanced, from the point of view of fairness, against the duration of service of those who perform one continuous period of civilian national service.

#### E. UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

This paper provides an outline of what, it is argued, would be a fair and viable basis for developing a national service system in South Africa.

There are obviously a range of issues which have not been addressed in this paper. Firstly there is the question of the size and scale of the national service system. How many people would be available, due to having received tertiary education, to serve in such a system? How many people would be interested in volunteering for service in such a system, how many would the national service system be able to accommodate?

Would it be viable to aim to accommodate, for instance, all unemployed people in the system if they wished to perform national service, or would this impose too great an administrative strain on the national service system and too great a financial burden on the state?

There is the question of duration of service. Those who serve in a voluntary capacity could be asked to commit themselves to periods of service of six months duration at a time. Recipients of state subsidised tertiary education could be liable for four months of service for every year of tertiary education received. But, for instance, in addition to the fact that most tertiary education is heavily subsidised by the state, some recipients of tertiary education receive additional state bursaries. How would one differentiate in terms of liability between these different levels of "subsidisation". What would be the national service liability of part-time students?

A further question relates to remuneration. Bearing in mind that such a system would be state financed, what kind of rates of pay would be affordable to the paymaster and acceptable to the recipients?

Finally, if the civilian national service system is independent of, though operating in co-operation with, the military, how would it be organised and who would it be controlled by? How would it be best to manage and organise such a system so that it's objectives are actually achieved and so that it justifies the large amounts of money that would need to be pumped into it?

Notes

1. In an interview with Leadership magazine, the then Minister of Defence, Roelf Meyer, said that the Government believed that, in a future dispensation, the defence force should have a full-time permanent force component and a part-time component, and that this would mean that "conscription of a kind" would continue.

2. The most important of the principles which underlies the just war theory is the idea that for a war to be justified it must have a just cause. This means that essentially it should be conducted for the purpose of defending people against violent aggression. Secondly war must be a last resort under circumstances where non-violent means of defence, or of resolving the conflict, are not available or have been tried and failed.

3. Under the present system of "whites-only" conscription people who have "moral, ethical, or religious" objections to serving in the SADF may apply to the Board for Conscientious Objection to be officially recognised as conscientious objectors. An officially recognised conscientious objector will be ordered to do a period of community service one-and-a-half times as long as his outstanding military service obligations.

If one can ignore for a moment the fact that the present Board for C.O.s is an appendage to a racist system (only white may have the need to and can in fact apply to it) it may be possible to give a certain degree of credit to this system in that it does, to a certain degree, uphold the idea of freedom of conscience.

Nevertheless this system is deficient in two respects. Firstly, the period which officially recognised conscientious objectors have to serve, is substantially longer than the period of military service. This means that while the system does not expressly criminalise conscientious objectors who do not wish to serve in the military it remains as a punitive and coercive system for discouraging people from declining to do military service.

Secondly, it requires of people who wish to be recognised as conscientious objectors that they submit to a "test of conscience" ie. in some way have to provide proof to the Board that they are acting in terms of conscience. This contradicts a full recognition of the principle of freedom of conscience in

that the Board are, in effect, judges as to what is, and what is not, conscience.

The Conscientious Objectors Support Group has proposed that:

"In a post-apartheid South Africa:

1. The right not to be conscripted into an armed force should be entrenched in a Bill of Rights guaranteed by the constitution.
2. If there is conscription into military service, a non-military national service should also be available. It should:
  - 2.1. Be available on application to anyone unwilling to do military service.
  - 2.2. Be independent of the defence force.
  - 2.3. Be the same length as actual military service.
  - 2.4. Allow participants to serve in State or in non-governmental (welfare) organisations.
  - 2.5. Those who choose non-military service should not be penalised in any way: this would include pay and service conditions.
3. Opting for non-military service should be a matter of simple choice; there should be no enquiry into the motivation of anyone who chooses non-military service." (the Objector, Feb/March 1991).

Protection for the rights of conscientious objectors in the Bill of Rights could take the form of a provision perhaps to the effect that "no one should be forced to bear arms or punished for refusing to do so".

4. Estimates of the number of unemployed in South Africa vary considerably. The 1991 census put forward a figure of 2 million (census quoted in Triegaardt, 1992). Others have suggested the number to be as high as 7.5 million (Heystek, 1992). Econovision projections put the figure at 5 million by the end of 1992 (November 1991). The Economic Project at the University of Stellenbosch estimated 6 million people unable to find formal employment (quoted in Siluma, November 1991). A senior policy analyst at the Development Bank of Southern Africa estimated 8.4 million people outside formal employment (figures quoted in Keet, 1991 (1)). An obvious difficulty in arriving at exact figures arises from uncertainty as to the number of people employed in the "informal sector".

5. Bankorp have supported the idea of a "national community service corps" (Econovision, November 1991). The Congress of South African Trade Unions, together with the National Economic Forum and civics are putting together a plan for a public works scheme (Weekly Mail, 5 February 1993) The National Consultative Forum for Drought Relief has also supported the idea of a national public works programme (the Star, 29/10/1992). The Democratic Party's Bob Rogers proposed that a community service corps be established "to build housing and other requirements (Star, 27/493). See also Keet, October/November 1991(2 articles) as well as, for example, Cock (1992), Sparks (1992), Rumney (1992), and Madden (1992), Abedian (1993), and Cleary (1993).

References/Bibliography

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