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RACE RELATIONS

RACE RIOTS IN DURBAN

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PART ONE

THE RIOTS AND AFTER

BY

Maurice Webb

ON Thursday, January 13 1949, at 5 p.m., the area in Durban near to the starting place of the fleets of buses that serve the underlying Indian and Native districts was crowded mainly with Indians and Natives. Work for the day was ending. Crowds surged into the buses, always inadequate for the traffic at this peak hour. The scene was normal. The area had been thus crowded at this time of day for years; always some jostling, some shouting, but a faceable normal scene.

What happened can be described in the words of the Commis-ion which afterwards reported on the happenings that started that day and hour.

"The spark which caused this tragic explosion was almost ludicrous in its insignificance. If one sifts the obviously perjured evidence, the probable facts appear to be these. A Native boy, 14 years of age, had words with an Indian shop assistant, 16 years of age, and slapped the latter's face. The Indian youth lodged a complaint with his employer, also an Indian, who came out of a shop window, and in withdrawing it the boy received a blow behind the ears, which caused the blood to flow. Unfortu-
nately, this happened at a time when, as we have described, a mass of Natives and Indians had congregated in quest of conveyance to their homes. The Natives saw an adult Indian assaulting a Native child and they saw blood. That was enough. They went berserk and attacked every Indian within sight.

Order was not restored until late that night, but the ordinary European of Durban knew nothing of it until next morning. The area affected was an Indian area not ordinarily frequented by Europeans in the late afternoon and evening.

Next morning's newspaper reported the disturbance but devoted less space to it than to a storm at Mossel Bay. It reported that in addition to the central area, assaults by Natives on Indians had taken place in outlying districts, predominantly residential areas of poorer Indians. Total casualties were given as 62 persons injured.

To all but officials immediately concerned and the police Friday morning, January 14, was quite normal; calm prevailed after an unfortunate but local disturbance the night before.

But by lunch time rumours began to circulate: “The coons are going for the coolies”. In Grey Street, the chief street of the Indian merchant, brickbats were thrown through shop windows. Down the street leading to the railway station two Indians walked. A shout from a Native on the pavement was answered by other Natives in the vicinity who began to converge on the Indians who, taking fright, fled to the station, a shouting crowd of Natives in hot pursuit flinging stones and sticks.

A car went by driven by an Indian. A Native, inconspicuous among the people on the pavement, flings a half brick that shatters the windscreen. Europeans gather in office windows and on balconies watching the scene, regarding it with amusement. On the pavement a European comments: “I'm all for the Natives. Serve the coolies right”. Europeans stand aside, spectators. They do not go to the aid of Indians or try to restrain the Natives. Comment is widespread that there will be real trouble when the compound Natives have ceased work and get together after a few “pots”.

By evening the atmosphere throughout the city is tense. Appeals for order, for European employers to pacify their Native servants are made by radio.

Night of Horror

That night was a night of horror not known in South Africa since the days of Dingane. The District Commandant of Police reported to the Commission:

“Houses were now being burnt by the score, all in the vicinity of Booth Road. Almost all the Indians not evacuated from this area were either killed, burnt to death or left dying. While the men were clubbed to death, Indian women and young girls were raped by the infuriated Natives. This state of arson and looting continued throughout the night, and when further military and naval reinforcements arrived many instances occurred where the forces had to resort to the use of firearms to protect life and property.”

The police, heavily reinforced by military and naval personnel struggled to restore order over a wide area and to cope with eruptions of violence now here, now there.

Thanks to the display of considerable force, including a parade of armoured cars through affected areas, the riots diminished over the week-end. By the following Monday an uneasy quiet reigned.

The outbreak was unexpected. Responsible observers of international affairs in South Africa had for two years warned that international tensions were dangerously high throughout the country, but no-one expected the outbreak at that place and time. The limiting of it almost entirely to Durban and to the local Native and Indian communities was altogether unexpected. It was known that there were some Natives who nursed real or imagined grievances against Indians in respect of trading and transportation licences, prices charged in Indian shops, alleged interferences with Native women by Indian men, but no intensity of feeling of the kind exhibited in the riots was suspected; in fact, in the evidence given to the Commission by competent observers relations between Indian and Native in Durban were stated to have been “friendly”, “harmonious”, “cordial”.

Why did the Natives attack Indians, not Europeans? That is a question that has puzzled all observers. The Commission suggests that the Natives resented the intrusion into the country of newcomers. But Indians and Natives have lived peaceably side by side for three-quarters of a century. The answer is probably to be found in several directions; (a) accumulated resentment at the
rising costs of foodstuffs which Natives ordinarily buy at Indian stores, (b) jealousy of certain Indian advantages in such matters as trading licences and freedom from passes, (c) provocation of the anti-Indian statements of Europeans, (d) the belief that because of his weakness and the attitude of Europeans the Indian could be attacked with impunity.

142 Killed

The worst of the riots over, the loss of life and property were assessed. Officially this was given as:

Deaths: 142 (1 European, 50 Indians, 87 Natives and 4 individuals whose race could not be determined).

Injured: 1,087 (32 Europeans, 11 Coloureds, 541 Natives and 503 Indians; of the injured 58 died).

Buildings destroyed: 1 factory, 58 stores, 247 dwellings.

Buildings damaged: 2 factories, 652 stores, 1,285 dwellings.

Deaths and injuries among Natives were due, in large part, to the bullets of police and military, in small part to retaliatory action taken by some Indians.

In addition to the dead and injured there were the thousands of refugees. Seeing the fate of their neighbours Indian men, women and children fled their homes which, in many cases, were looted and destroyed by the rioters in their absence. By fleeing, these poor terrified people saved their lives, but in many cases lost everything they possessed. Government, Province, municipality, private citizens and, most notably, Red Cross and St. John, combined to deal with this emergency situation. Camps were established in Indian schools (then vacant through the school holidays). Here they were fed, clothed and, in a measure, pacified by the efforts of a body of voluntary workers, mainly European. The Natal Distress Relief Fund was established to which £85,000 has been contributed to date. The fact that many of these refugees lost their homes and property, together with the terror they experienced during the riots, have combined to make the task of re-settling them into the life of the community extremely slow and difficult. Eight months after the riots 770 refugees were still in camps and £200 per month was still being spent on their maintenance. The refugees included many Natives from the shack area.

The attitude of the population to the events differs as from one racial group to another. Indians, the victims and chief sufferers were largely dazed and bewildered. Some complained at the attitude of the police alleging that stronger, prompter, or different action would have arrested the riot or minimized its consequences. They also claimed that the official figure of dead was too low, that many more Indians had perished in the flames of their homes leaving no recognisable trace. Natives showed little or no regret at the occurrences—even at the extreme forms of murder, rape and arson. A stereotyped form of national justification quickly showed itself. Europeans were much inclined to say “the Indians had it coming to them”, or “the trouble was that they got the wrong Indians”. Notably absent was any rallying of all groups to the defence of law and order, to the central concept that for all members of the community of whatever group the maintenance of order and the upholding of the Rule of Law is a common responsibility.

Strong representations made to Government to appoint a judicial Commission of Inquiry, the Commission to include members of the two racial groups immediately involved, Indian and Native, were rejected (for the composition of the Commission and its terms of reference see Part II).

The Commission Sits

The Commission appointed started with an initial handicap; it consisted of only European members, notwithstanding the strong representations that had been made to Government to include Indian and Indian members. Both Indian and Native communities were deeply stirred by the events of the riot. They were inclined to be suspicious of any action taken by Government; the Indians because they felt they had been left unprotected, the Natives because numbers had unexpectedly been killed or wounded by the police and other forces of Government. The inclusion of Native and Indian members on the Commission would have done much to allay this suspicion. As it was, when the Commission's membership was announced, an attitude of boycott towards it began to be formulated.

This attitude was reinforced by the decision of the Commission, announced at its opening session, not to permit the cross-examination of witnesses by interested parties, mainly on the ground that if everyone were to be permitted to cross-examine, proceedings would be unduly prolonged. During the adjournment that followed
In the riots, and the statutory local representative body of one of them, should have been able to contribute to an understanding of the riots and their causes. Lacking in omniscience it would be hazardous to assume that they had nothing useful to say.

Sign of Social Disease

Official evidence, particularly that of the District Commandant of Police disclosed with clarity the course of the massacre; an account made the more impressive by its unimpassioned presentation. The “considered” evidence came from Senator Brookes; a joint deputation led by the Roman Catholic and Anglican bishops and including representatives of all the principal local Christian churches, Catholic, Anglican and Nonconformist; the Department of Economics of the University of Natal; the South African Institute of Race Relations; the Indo-European Council; and several others. Although the content of this evidence, most of it presented in carefully prepared and documented memoranda, varied as from one to another they showed a basic similarity of approach.

They regarded the riots as a serious and tragic sign of social disease, and continued to analyse the situation, pointing to poverty, lack of homes and houses, inadequate transport, lack of opportunity for the satisfaction of ambition, as among the underlying causes of serious social unrest. Some also pointed to the prevailing anti-Asiatic attitude of the European population as expressed in the speeches of Ministers and others as likely causes of the deep dissatisfaction felt by Natives being turned against Indians.

A substantial part of the evidence presented to the Commission came from large numbers of individual Natives, most of them poor, ignorant, ill-clad. They complained, through an interpreter, of being overcharged in Indian shops, of being refused change on Indian buses when they tendered more than the fare, and of interference with Native women by Indian men.

This evidence was tendered in terms so similar as between one witness and the next that the thought that it was prompted in some way could not fail to strike the mind of the hearer; no such prompting was, however, revealed. This evidence particularly showed a need of cross-examination in the interests of truth.

In spite of the volume of evidence that was withheld the three main lines of evidence submitted, taken together, offered useful and usable material; the official evidence gave a clear picture of...
the course of events, the personal evidence disclosed real or imaginary grievances which were the match that set fire to the powder barrel, and the considered evidence analysed the defects in the social structure that resulted in the presence of a powder barrel ready to be ignited. On the evidence as presented the Commission could, in spite of its initial handicap and unhappy start have produced a report of real social usefulness.

Epitome of Conflict

The Durban riots were a terrible tragedy of deep significance for they epitomised in one place at one time the bitter racial conflict that is the dominant feature of South African life everywhere. Rightly seen and interpreted they might have fulfilled the purpose of true tragedy; to purify with pity and with terror. So seen and interpreted a purification of South Africa's life might have followed and the death and loss, suffering and anguish, of the victims might not have been in vain. The Commission was in a position to comprehend and interpret this tragedy to South Africa's good. The pity is that in this task the Commission failed.

The reason is first, that the Commission failed to grasp the essential nature, the emotional content of the riots, seeing them not as an outburst of savage lust; to kill, to rape, but as a psychosis between two sections of the population. Perhaps it required personal experience of the riots, or imagination, or human pity passing beyond the barriers of race to comprehend the nature and meaning of this tragedy.

The second reason for failure is that the Commission set virtually the whole of the evidence that submitted a tragic event to social analysis. Those who attempted to help the Commission - and the country - in this way are dismissed as "intellectuals" or "theorists" or members of "mixed societies", possession of an intellect is clearly regarded by the Commission as an insuperable handicap, while any organization that contains members of more than one group must not be heard; it is seen as knowing something about race relations.

The Commission accepts the official account of the events as they occurred; it discusses the grievances against Indians voiced in the personal evidence of Native witnesses and finds that they have some substance but are exaggerated. Apart from that the evidence is vague, contradictory and much prone to generalisations.

The best that the Commission can say in the light of the tragedy of the Durban riots is a piece of complacency as smug as it is dangerous; "unfortunately South Africa is full of grave and exceedingly interesting problems, many of which are insoluble" (p. 21). For a full analysis of the Commission's report by Mr. Kenneth Kirkwood see Part Two of this pamphlet.

Remedy Given

The result is a Commission report that failed to understand a social situation of great significance and failing understanding of has neither analysed it nor indicated remedies. The report concludes with the words: "the position in Durban requires constant vigilance" - a vast understatement. The position in the whole country requires constant vigilance and much more, it needs to be understood, to be analysed, and where change or remedy is needed, courageous action.

Meanwhile those who, from the beginning, condemned the Commission and advocated boycotting it, have been justified. The victims of this veritable "Massacre of the Innocents" have lost home and property, family and livelihood. Large numbers are left homeless, their houses burned down, Natives in possession of their patches of soil. They feel deserted in the only country they know. Natives feel that they have won a battle. They have wrung from the authorities opportunities in the way of licences. Responsible Native leaders who counselled conciliation and constitutional action are discredited in the eyes of the bearers of a newly awakened aggressive national spirit, who
claim that not patience, not reasonableness, but violence, pays dividends.

And, except for the comparatively few socially conscious, Europeans are confirmed in indifference and complacency for after all South Africa is full of interesting problems many of them insoluble.

We are to-day, therefore, back where we were before January 13, 1949. Then, careful observers warned that inter-racial tension in the country was reaching danger point.

In August 1946, following the Native riots in Johannesburg and the consequent indefinite adjournment of the Natives Representative Council, the Institute of Race Relations issued a public statement which concluded:

"We feel bound to issue a warning that if this situation in the field of race relations is allowed to deteriorate further, it will before long reach a stage in which the voice of reason will not be heeded... In South Africa the period is drawing to a close in which honourable compromise is possible between the claims of various races that compose our community. This period can be extended only if a new spirit of goodwill is displayed."

To-day the situation is even more dangerous. One serious explosion has occurred. Nothing has been done to remove the causes of tension; indeed the events of the riots themselves and the outcome of them have worsened the situation.

Sociologists agree that race riots are a symptom of deep social disorder. It would be well to heed them even though they are intellectual for this is a subject on which they speak with authority. The Durban riots provided a serious warning that (a) violence may break out in unexpected ways and that insignificant events may start an explosion; and (b) that when there is an outbreak of lawlessness there is no reasonable certainty that all sections of the community will rally to the support of the law on which they depend for security.

The task then can be simply stated though the performance of the task in South Africa will be difficult. It is: to remove the main causes of tension and to promote a situation in which all sections of the people feel that they share a common purpose in the maintenance of law.

Preliminary to taking up this task must be the genuine recognition on the part of Government and people that all sections of the population are an integral part of it. There must be no question of any section of the population being regarded as an unassimilable element or an "alien" element in the population. Once citizenship has been established by birth or by residence then there can be no question of their not belonging.

Root Causes of Friction

The main causes of dissatisfaction, resentment and ill-will that are behind our inter-racial tensions are:

1. Poverty.
2. Discrimination.
3. Lack of opportunity to excel in accordance with ability and energy.
4. Exclusion from participation in Government.

The bulk of the South African population has always been poor in a money sense, but the deterioration of the reserves and the rapid urbanization of the previously rural Native has brought about conscious poverty which means inability to pay for a home or for adequate food and clothing. Seventy per cent of Durban's Indians live below the poverty datum line. While poverty of this kind, which deprives people of simple minimum needs, obtains, there is bound to be bitterness and resentment; when riches and race appear to be associated inter-racial tension will result.

The abolition of poverty is no easy matter especially in a very poor country. The burden of poverty cannot be eased until national production is raised. This means a long-term policy of education, training, occupational opportunity according to ability and energy. Though the remedy is long-term we can turn our faces in the right direction and see to it that we advance towards the goal of higher national income and higher standards of life for all.

Discrimination on "racial" lines is fruitful of tension. While a member of one race has to carry a pass and another not; one may purchase land and another is prohibited; one may go to a cinema and another may not; there is sure to be resentment and resulting tension.

The only remedy is to reduce as soon as possible and as much as possible the discriminations that obtain.

To the person of ability and ambition nothing is more galling than to be debarred on ground of race from opportunity to use
his abilities to the satisfaction of his ambition. Increasing opportunities to undertake work in accordance with skill, to secure promotion on ground of ability, would not only remove a deep grievance but would also benefit the country which needs to utilize all the abilities available to it.

Exclusion from franchise, from membership of legislative bodies and administrative posts necessarily leads to a sense of grievance; it also excludes from responsibility. Lack of responsibility leads to irresponsibility.

The way to a South African society freed from dangerous tensions and the threat of further serious riots, with a diverse population united in respect for the law can easily be pointed. To take the road is a question for the electorate, a small minority of the total population.

But such a programme is our only hope. It has to be clearly stated and carried out progressively as stages of advance become practicable. The only alternative is tyranny of the Hitler-Stalin model. Those who think that it is possible to drift aimlessly on the belief that were it not for agitators the mass of the South African population would be content to be an inarticulate mass of docile cheap labour are out of touch with the real world; contented cheap labour is disappearing everywhere. Nor can industry dependent on such labour compete successfully with industry that utilizes the utmost skill in improving products and increasing production.

In a final “live happily ever after” sense a solution to our inter-racial problems cannot be found, for ours is a living and changing society which will throw up problems and difficulties at every stage of its development. “Live happily ever after” belong to fairy tales. This is a real world. But, a solution in the sense of removing dangerous tensions and giving ground for hope is quite possible, given the will; that is the essential test.

PART TWO

FAILURE OF A REPORT

BY

Kenneth Kirkwood

Terms of Reference and Composition

In this section of the report of the Riots Commission of Inquiry attention is confined to the actual report (U.G. 36-49) of the Commission which was appointed “to inquire into and report upon the events which led to, and the causes of the recent riots in which Natives and Indians in Durban and vicinity were involved; and should the Commission find that the riots were preceded by strained relations generally between the said two racial groups, the causes of strained relations”.

Unless otherwise stated all quotations are taken from the Report.

The chairman of the Commission was Mr. Justice F. van der Merwe, with Mr. Ryle Masson and Mr. W. Schulz, both Chief Magistrates, as members. Mr. B. C. van der Merwe was secretary. Despite representations, no Indian or African members were appointed.

After detailing its lines of procedure, the incident itself leading to the riots which was “almost ludicrous in its insignificance”, and the damage done, the Commission sets out the following points:

Alleged Concomitant Causes

(a) “Owing to negligence on the part of the authorities, a fore-seeable and preventible disturbance may occur;

The report notes that the authorities had no reason to anticipate silence between Indians and Africans and there was thus no neglect of the part of the authorities to prevent the initial outbreak.

(b) “...because of further neglect an outbreak of insignificant proportions may degenerate into riots with consequences of national portance.”
The allegations which were made that the police failed to suppress the initial outbreak with vigour, that the police failed to foresee the possibility of a renewal of hostilities on January 14, that the police failed to use tear gas, and that the police failed to put down the renewed outbreak with vigour, are dismissed.

(c) "Again, partisans in the disturbances may be aided or abetted by the authorities, or by the instigators, and a small flame may thus be fanned into a serious conflagration."

Further allegations that the police and auxiliary forces were ruthless in putting down the riots and that the police encouraged the rioters are also dismissed. So far as the alleged incitement of Africans by European civilians during the riots the Commission states: "We consider it established that when the rioting was in progress certain Europeans actively incited the Natives to further acts of violence, while others encouraged them by their presence and attitude." The European women "who went dancing up the street" urging the Africans to "hit the coolies!" were "degraded specimens of their race". The Commission had "no evidence of Europeans lending countenance to the Natives when they had recourse to murder, arson and rape".

2. Alleged Antecedent Causes

In a preliminary statement before cross-examination was refused, Dr. Lowen, representing the Joint Committee of the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress stated: "We want to prove that horrible slum conditions, for Indians and Africans alike, are at the bottom of this to a certain extent. We want to prove that racial antagonism, racial hostility, racial hatred has been propagated for years by the Government held office prior to the present Government, and has been continued by the present Government ever since this Government has been in power... We want to prove that speeches made by Ministers of the present Government, by the Prime Minister, Dr. Malan, by Dr. Dombes, by Mr. Schoeman, by Mr. Swart and Mr. J ain, these speeches had the effect of propagating hatred in the European and in the Native; and we want to show that with all this work up to hostility there was a great likelihood that explosions may take place, and there was a great probability that these things may occur."

This statement is quoted and the Report then lists three alleged antecedent causes of the riots.

(a) Statements made by politicians

"Our attention was directed to news items appearing in the Press during a number of years prior to the riots, reporting some lamentable speeches made by politicians... We made every attempt to elicit reliable evidence which could establish a causal connection between the public speeches complained of and the riots, but were unable to do so... From their evidence it is clear that they (the Africans) were not motivated by outside influences."

(b) Slum Conditions

"There is some truth in the allegation that the slum conditions in which many Natives live have a bearing on the (riots); but it sees from a different angle from that suggested by the Indian and mixed organizations." These mixed organizations included the South African Institute of Race Relations and the Indo-European Joint Council.

(c) A feeling of frustration on the part of the Natives

The Commission thought it significant that the idea of Native frustration emanated from the "intellectuals" and observe: "It is surprising, that the type of Native who took part in the riots is in general quite satisfied with the housing available to him, with the entities he can enjoy and with the "disruption" of his family life; this last is in accordance with his tradition."

The Commissioners indicate that "lack of discipline" should be substituted for "frustration" and that many of the organizations which gave evidence confuse cause and effect, and that by "constantly drumming it into the Native's ears that he is unhappy and bears many grievances", they cause the African to become disconcerted and to get out of hand.

In short, the above "alleged antecedent causes" were dismissed minimized.

Causes of the Riots

Factors which rendered the Durban situation dangerous are in the following order:

Lack of discipline on the part of the urban Natives who are in-
creasingly given to lawlessness and who are ready to take the law into their own hands.

(b) Bad precepts and bad examples by certain sections of the Indians who opposed the Government, engaged in passive resistance and who did not scruple to invoke overseas assistance. "In the result the Indians were hoist with their own petard."

(c) The racial characteristics of the Indians and Africans: "The Indian has nimbler wits than the Native" who "is inclined to assess merit in terms of physical strength." "The Zulu is by tradition a warrior... The Native is hostile to strangers merely because they are different." These "racial characteristics... played an important part in the riots."

(d) Increasing tension between the Indians and the Natives was gradually but surely building up before the riots because the Natives regarded the Indians as strangers; Natives were forced to settle upon Indian-owned land owing to the lack of accommodation in the Native locations; certain Indians began to ride the high horse because of events in India and sections of the Indian community conducted "rather strident propaganda."

The African allegation of Indian rack-renting was found to be without substance and the report notes that "in fact, very often the Native is himself the rack-renter."

The African is afraid of the "explosive fecundity" of the Indian in Natal and resents miscegenation between Indian males and African women. Although the report notes that the African complaints about miscegenation are exaggerated, these complaints provided powerful motives for anti-Indian feeling. The Commission suggest that the Immorality Act be extended to cover illicit intercourse between Natives and Indians.

The bad treatment of Native passengers in Indian-owned buses and the exploitation of Natives by Indian shopkeepers were alleged causes of tension. The Commission found both allegations by Africans to be exaggerated and largely without factual foundation and note that "the Indian bus services cater for poor passengers at exceedingly cheap rates", while "the Native prefers to make his purchases at the Indian store, where he feels more at home than the European emporia because he is treated more courteously by the Indian storekeepers."

4. Causative Factors Arising out of the Situation Itself

"With the enormous industrial development in Durban during the last decade, the usual urban services could not keep pace."

(a) Transport Facilities

Durban and the peri-urban areas have very poor communications. "Virtually all transport services debouch in one spot; traffic regulation in this congested area is primitive and ineffectual, and no provision is made for the protection of the passengers from the elements or for their convenience." "Masses of irritable human beings" are found here during rush periods.

(b) Undesirable Elements

"In Durban there are numbers of Native loafers" who took a leading part in the riots. The law providing for their removal from sanitariums is to a large extent a dead letter and cannot be enforced because of the housing situation.

Housing

"The slum areas on the fringes of Durban are a disgrace to any community which calls itself civilized... in these human rabbit warrens something like 23,000 Natives live under the most sordid conditions."

The fact that numbers of Native males are herded together in compounds also seems to have a bearing on the riots."
The Commissioners "do not agree that the Corporation (Durban municipality) has been guilty of criminal neglect" in respect of providing suitable housing for Africans, principally because the city area was enlarged in 1931, and there was a shortage of building materials and skilled labour during the war.

While the report dismisses the alleged feeling of frustration suffered by the Native as "largely imaginary" it does state "you cannot get pure water from a cess-pool" and describes the unnatural congregation of migrant male Native workers as "easy tinder to any spark" and states that "it is clear that the compound dwellers took an important part in the excesses".

5. General

In this section of the report it is first noted that the terms of reference did not ask for "recommendations upon the steps to be taken to remove stresses and strains from the body politic and to avoid a recurrence of disorders". The report then continues "we refrain from offering advice, therefore, in the conviction that once the underlying causes are diagnosed the remedies—insofar as the condition is capable of cure—will suggest themselves."

This is followed by the statement: "Unfortunately South Africa is full of grave and exceedingly interesting problems, many of which are insoluble."

A number of additional comments then appear. These may be summarized briefly as under.

(a) "One of the most unsettling influences upon the Native mind is the fact that South Africa has a hostile press abroad."

(b) "Contrary to the prevalent opinion abroad, the average Native is a keen supporter of segregation."

(c) "There are two considerations which our foreign critics must well keep in mind."

(i) "Of all the colonies settled abroad by peoples from Western Europe, South Africa was the only one which allowed a sufficient number of its aborigines to survive to create a Native problem."

(ii) "Such abstract notions as a good form of government and a claim at natural law to exercise public rights exist only in the mind of the visionary."

"The publicist, especially of British stock, is inclined to regard the vote as the panacea for all social and economic evils... he has exported it to neighbouring nations"... (and) "in those countries British institutions have thrown off the most startling spots of revolution, often malignant. Yet our publicist will have it that, politically, even traditionally vegetarian peoples would thrive on red British beef and that, if they do not take to it kindly, they their caterers should be taught some sense."

There is one recommendation, however, which we regard our duty to make... if everything is quite on the surface it does mean that the danger is past... Native witnesses have openly expressed their intention of squaring the account... it is not only between Natives and Indians that tension exists... 70 per cent of Indians in Natal are desperately poor... the less privileged Indians... are talking of lynching those of their race who overcharge associate with Native women."

"The position in Durban requires constant vigilance."


There is little need to deal critically with each point which appears in the report itself over the above summary of the essentials. It is a poor report and throws little light on the riots or their underlying causes and is of little value to the authorities or citizens directly concerned. There are certain matters, however, which might be commented upon.

The magnitude of the Durban Riots is both of interest and importance. Dr. Gunnar Myrdal in his "An American Dilemma" writes: the most notorious was the Chicago riot (1919) in which 15 Negroes and 23 Negroes were killed, and 178 Whites and 342 Negroes injured", and again, "Before the War (1914-18) the most dead- riots were the Atlanta, Georgia, riot of 1906 which killed 10 Negroes and 2 Whites, and the Springfield, Illinois, riot of 1908, which the lives of 2 Negroes and 4 Whites." "During the 1914-18 the most notorious were the East St. Louis, Illinois, riots which at least 39 Negroes and 8 Whites were killed", etc. One recalls the excellent report of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations on race riots.

The Gold Coast Riots of 1948 which centred principally in Accra amounted for 29 deaths and injuries to 237 persons. The report
creasingly given to lawlessness and who are ready to take the law into their own hands.

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(d) Increasing tension between the Indians and the Natives gradually but surely building up before the riots because the Natives regarded the Indians as strangers; Natives were forced to settle upon Indian-owned land owing to the lack of accommodation in the Native locations; certain Indians began to ride the high horse because of events in India and sections of the Indian community conducted "rather strident propaganda".

The African allegation of Indian rack-renting was found to be without substance and the report notes that "in fact, very often the Native is himself the rack-renter".

The African is afraid of the "explosive fecundity" of the Indian in Natal and resents miscegenation between Indian males and African women. Although the report notes that the African complaints about miscegenation are exaggerated, these complaints provided powerful motives for anti-Indian feeling. The Commission suggest that the Immorality Act be extended to cover illicit intercourse between Natives and Indians.

The bad treatment of Native passengers in Indian-owned buses and the exploitation of Natives by Indian shopkeepers were often alleged causes of tension. The Commission found both allegations by Africans to be exaggerated and largely without factual foundation and note that "the Indian bus services cater for poor passengers at exceedingly cheap rates", while "the Native prefers to make purchases at the Indian store, where he feels more at home than the European emporia because he is treated more courteously by the Indian store-keepers."

4. Causative Factors Arising out of the Situation Itself

"With the enormous industrial development in Durban during the last decade, the usual urban services could not keep pace."

(d) Transport Facilities

Durban and the peri-urban areas have very poor communications. "Virtually all transport services debouch in one spot; traffic regulation in this congested area is primitive and ineffectual, and no provision is made for the protection of the passengers from the elements or for their convenience." "Masses of irritable human beings" are found here during rush periods.

Undesirable Elements

"In Durban there are numbers of Native loafers" who took a leading part in the riots. The law providing for their removal from urban areas "is to a large extent a dead letter and cannot be enforced" because of the housing situation.

Housing

"The slum areas on the fringes of Durban are a disgrace to any community which calls itself civilized... in these human rabbit-holes something like 23,000 Natives live under the most sordid conditions."

"The fact that numbers of Native males are herded together in compounds also seems to have a bearing on the riots."
The Commissioners “do not agree that the Corporation (Durban municipality) has been guilty of criminal neglect” in respect of providing suitable housing for Africans, principally because the city area was enlarged in 1931, and there was a shortage of building materials and skilled labour during the war.

While the report dismisses the alleged feeling of frustration suffered by the Native as “largely imaginary” it does state “you cannot get pure water from a cess-pool” and describes the unnatural congregation of migrant male Native workers as “ready tinder to any spark” and states that “it is clear that the compound dwellers took an important part in the excesses”.

5. General

In this section of the report it is first noted that the terms of reference did not ask for “recommendations upon the steps to be taken to remove stresses and strains from the body politic and so to avoid a recurrence of disorders”. The report then continues “we refrain from offering advice, therefore, in the conviction that once the underlying causes are diagnosed the remedies—insofar as the condition is capable of cure—will suggest themselves.”

This is followed by the statement: “Unfortunately South Africa is full of grave and exceedingly interesting problems, many of which are insoluble.”

A number of additional comments then appear. These may be summarized briefly as under.

(a) “One of the most unsettling influences upon the Native mind is the fact that South Africa has a hostile press abroad.”

(b) “Contrary to the prevalent opinion abroad, the average Native is a keen supporter of segregation.”

(c) “There are two considerations which our foreign critics may well keep in mind.”

(i) “Of all the colonies settled abroad by peoples from Western Europe, South Africa was the only one which allowed a sufficient number of its aborigines to survive to create a Native problem.”

(ii) “Such abstract notions as a good form of government and a claim at natural law to exercise public rights exist only in the mind of the visionary.”

“The publicist, especially of British stock, is inclined to regard

the vote as the panacea for all social and economic evils... he has exported it to neighbouring nations”... (and) “in those countries British institutions have thrown off the most startling sports of evolution, often malignant. Yet our publicist will have it that, politically, even traditionally vegetarian peoples would thrive on good red British beef and that, if they do not take to it kindly, they or their caterers should be taught some sense.”

(d) “There is one recommendation, however, which we regard if our duty to make... if everything is quite on the surface it does not mean that the danger is past... Native witnesses have openly expressed their intention of squaring the account... it is not only between Natives and Indians that tension exists... 70 per cent of the Indians in Natal are desperately poor... the less privileged Indians... are talking of lynching those of their race who overcharge or associate with Native women.”

“The position in Durban requires constant vigilance.”


There is little need to deal critically with each point which appears in the report itself over the above summary of the essentials. It is a poor report and throws little light on the riots or their underlying causes and is of little value to the authorities or citizens directly concerned. There are certain matters, however, which might be commented upon.

The magnitude of the Durban Riots is both of interest and importance. Dr. Gunnar Myrdal in his “An American Dilemma” writes:

“The most notorious was the Chicago riot (1919) in which 15 Whites and 23 Negroes were killed, and 178 Whites and 342 Negroes were injured”, and again, “Before the War (1914-18) the most deadly riots were the Atlanta, Georgia, riot of 1906 which killed 10 Negroes and 2 Whites, and the Springfield, Illinois, riot of 1908, which cost the lives of 2 Negroes and 4 Whites.” “During the 1914-18 war the most notorious riots were those in East St. Louis, Illinois, during which at least 39 Negroes and 8 Whites were killed”, etc. Here one recalls the excellent report of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations on race riots.

The Gold Coast Riots of 1948 which centred principally in Accra accounted for 29 deaths and injuries to 237 persons. The report
of the special Commission appointed to enquire into the Gold Coast riots is an incomparably superior document (See Col. No. 231) to that of the Durban Riots Commission and a thorough analysis of the underlying causes makes the Gold Coast report worthy of serious study.

It can be no exaggeration to say that Durban riots must be one of the most devastating outbreaks of mass violence in time of peace within a state subject to the administration of peoples of Western European origin. The magnitude of the Durban riots does not seem to have been recognized by many South Africans.

Anticipation of the Riots. Although the report rightly states that there was no reason to believe that an outbreak of violence between Africans and Indians would occur, it cannot be said that responsible officials and citizens had not predicted serious unrest and physical protest from the Africans. To those citizens aware of the living conditions, economic position and thoughts of Africans, violence seemed inevitable if nothing positive was done immediately to provide, or at least to show some determination to provide land, housing, transport, recreational facilities, and economic and political avenues of achievement for the African people. Frequent references were made to the fact that the Europeans of Durban were sitting on a volcano of African slums and discontent.

Again persons in South Africa or overseas who had read the reports of the recent "Broome" and "Fagan" Commissions, the "Smit" report on the conditions of the urban African, the annual reports of the Department of Native Affairs, the publications of the South African Institute of Race Relations or the local press were not surprised when the Africans eventually gave way to violence.

Finally, students of race relations who have read of "poor white lynchings of Negroes in the United States in times of stress and difficulty were not surprised when they came to consider why Africans had attacked Indians in South Africa.

Certain Characteristics of the Report

Certain threads appear to run through the report of the Commission. First there is a recurring indication of fear or resentment of overseas reaction to, and criticism of, South Africa racial policy. This is most striking and gives rise to such absurdities as the conclusion that the anti-Indian statements made by local politicians had no effect on African attitudes, and that the Africans were not motivated by external influences whereas "one of the most unsettling influences upon the Native mind is the fact that South Africa has a hostile press abroad." Again the Commission states that it "did not consider that it was called upon to serve as a sounding-board upon which noise could be made, both here and abroad."

Secondly there is the marked tendency to spurn and reject the views of "intellectuals", Africans and otherwise; as well as the evidence of these organizations which sought to point to well-known social, economic and political factors as providing the fundamental causes of the riots.

Thirdly there are the references to the law as an agency of social control, and the need for the more stringent enforcement of certain laws. The obvious need to provide the bases for stable community life so as to permit the more important agencies of social control, such as organized public opinion to operate, are scarcely touched upon.

Again one finds that no attempt is made to disguise an obvious hostility to British democratic concepts and British institutions.

The startling defence of South African Native Policy which is offered, and the scornful references to the colonial policies of other nations are of considerable interest.

Finally the most obvious weakness of the report lies in the over-concentration upon African-Indian relationships and Indian and African "racial characteristics", to the exclusion of other considerations.

Conclusion

In the concluding section of the report the Commission emphasized that the danger is not past. Writing in October 1949 when many riot victims are still homeless and African slum conditions continue one realizes that Durban still sits upon its volcano. South Africa's economic position has worsened and no serious attempt has yet been made to see the Africans housed adequately. Political power rests in the hands of the European electorate and European administrative officials are powerless to undertake even urgent reforms without the full backing of the European voter. There is still no sign that the enfranchised Europeans have any determination to press their representatives in the City Council to
make a vigorous attempt to improve the conditions of the subject
Non-European peoples. The negative nature of the Riots Com-
mision report and its conclusion that South African’s problems are
insoluble possibly accounts, in part, for the general air of resignation
and apathy.

The report of the Commission ended with the words: “The
position in Durban requires constant vigilance.” It is for the
citizens of South Africa to demand not only vigilance but construc-
tive action. Race relations in Durban are a matter of national con-
and further racial conflict in this city will cause incalculable damage
to South Africa’s reputation.

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