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The Cape Coloreds, Part II:
Beginnings of Reaction

c/o J. M. Pennington
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

One long-shadowed evening in Cape Town, I went to visit a member of the City Council. Her home was only a few blocks from the center of the city, yet there was a long, tree-arched walk from the gate to the front door and a flowering garden stretching out on either side of the path. She met me at the door herself and invited me to relax in a comfortable chair in the living-dining room while she finished her dinner. As she ate, we talked, and she told me of her 16 years as a member of the Council and, before that, the long and distinguished career of her father, also a Cape Town City Councillor.

It doesn't sound like a particularly fascinating evening--but there were several things about this particular Councillor that lifted our talk far beyond the unimportant. For one thing, the Councillor was Mrs. Z. ("Sissie") Gool, a Colored woman. And, for another, she had been named two days before as a Communist under the Suppression of Communism Act.¹ And for a third, she lived in the heart of Cape Town's notorious District Six, a jammed, narrow-streeted collection of turn-of-the-century one-story houses where families of five and six live in single rooms and share a cold-water tap with six or seven other families.

She laughed about the Communist-naming as she fed pieces of her steak to the large, tiger-striped cat that came thumping through the window. "I just asked once too often for the Council to stop spending ~~£~~12,000 (\$33,960) a year on the municipal swimming bath for Europeans," she smiled. "I have an unfortunate habit of making speeches on behalf of Colored people at unfortunate times--like the formal opening of the Council session. I just pointed out that it might be a better thing to spend that ~~£~~12,000 on a housing scheme for Coloreds instead of on the bathing facilities of Europeans at Sea Point who could, if they cared to exert themselves, use the beaches at Camp's Bay, only a mile or so away." She finished her dinner as I winced. I was living at Sea Point, in a small hotel. I made a mental resolution not to go near the water in the very inviting swimming bath a quarter of a mile up the sea front.

"You have no idea how things have changed for Colored people in Cape Town in the past 10 years or so. During the war, there was no public housing for Coloreds and people kept pouring in from the country to work in industry. Now we're so overcrowded that little children must watch their parents having sexual relationships in the same room. As a result we have serious juvenile delinquency problems, the crime rate is increasing at a dangerous rate and disease like tuberculosis sweeps through whole families."

I asked Sissie, as I had asked other Colored leaders, whether she sensed the racial gulf that is widening between the Cape Coloreds and the Europeans--whether she felt,

1. One need not be a present or past member of the Communist Party to be named as a Communist. One need only, in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act, aim "at the encouragement of feelings of hostility between the European and non-European races." The naming is left to the discretion of the Minister of Justice (Mr. Swart).

as many other Colored leaders did, that her future lay in cooperation with Africans rather than Whites. Her answer was cautious. "It is not too late, even now, to save the situation," she said. "But it seems that the Government is determined to segregate us and in such circumstances it is hard to see how we can continue to regard ourselves as pro-European. Take my own case. I am not a Communist. I was named specifically because of a remark I made in a public in 1941 and although I have not yet been asked to resign from the City Council, I'm sure the Minister of Justice felt that by naming me he could force me to soft-pedal my demands for better living conditions for Colored people. It was just a warning--to let me know I didn't really belong on the Council because my skin is not white and my speeches and demands on behalf of my people were out of order.

"The Government is determined to prove to us that we are non-European. It shouldn't take long for them to convince us they're right and when they do the only people we can turn to for help and cooperation are other non-Europeans. It's already happening a bit--but when we get removed from the Common Voters' Roll, the process should speed up considerably."

Mrs. Gool touched on one of the factors behind the growing alliance between Colored, African and Indian leaders and the recent move among Coloreds to dissociate themselves from Europeans. The Cape Liberal Tradition--which has provided Cape Coloreds with political rights never offered to other non-Europeans¹--is proving that it cannot stand up against apartheid. One of the strongest symptoms of the Nationalist Government's efforts to put Coloreds into a separate racial category is the long struggle to remove them from the Common Voters' Roll and place them on a separate roll where they will be permitted to vote for a limited number of special representatives.

The Nationalists argue that the removal of the Coloreds from the Common Roll will, in the long run, help the Coloreds by giving them more representation than they enjoy at present. They point out that the percentage of Colored voters is so low that they have very little influence in the election of Members of Parliament.

This is true. There are only one or two constituencies where the numbers of Nationalist Party and United Party voters are so nearly equal that the Colored vote has the power to push the result one way or the other. The power of the Colored vote was lessened in 1930, when European women throughout South Africa were given the vote, almost doubling the number of potential white voters. Colored women were not included in this widening of the franchise.

There are other discriminating factors which act to minimize the effectiveness of the Colored vote. There are no longer economic and educational strings attached to the franchise for European men or women. And registration to vote is compulsory for Europeans. The only Europeans barred from voting are those under 21 or those who have been convicted of treason or murder or who have been declared insane. And several Nationalist cabinet ministers have suggested, in recent speeches, that men convicted of treason during World War II be reinstated as full-fledged South African citizens and that the voting age be lowered to 18 for Europeans.

The Colored voter remains today where he was at the time of Union. Only men are eligible; they must be able to write their names, addresses and occupations;

1. A few Africans were able to register on the same basis as Coloreds until 1936, when they were disenfranchised.

and they must live in a house which, together with the land on which it is built, is worth ~~£~~75 (or, alternatively, earn ~~£~~50 a year). Although the educational and financial requirements are not particularly tough by today's standards, changes have been adopted by the Government from time to time which have reduced the number of Colored voters drastically. For instance, in 1946 a new roll was opened when compulsory registration was applied to Europeans, but the names of Colored voters were not transferred from the old to the new list unless the men concerned re-applied. Many did not.

Sissie Gool admitted that the Colored vote is not a powerful thing. She pointed out that political organization among Coloreds is weak--that many Coloreds are afraid to register because in order to do so they must visit their local police stations where they are given anything but friendly treatment. She added that many Coloreds are reluctant to organize politically because they feel that if they become too strong they will lose the political rights that have been traditionally theirs for centuries. And she admitted that many Coloreds just do not care.

But, she pointed out, there is a great difference between having the right to vote and not having that right; that it is pure racialism to deprive the Coloreds of a traditional right that is doing no one any harm.¹

The removal of voting rights is not the only alteration to the Cape Coloreds' traditional way of living. For instance, the Group Areas Act, passed by a Nationalist Government, is designed to segregate all South African residential areas on racial grounds. The upper-class Coloreds, who for so long have lived in the same neighborhoods with middle and lower-class Europeans, are beginning to be weeded out. In Cape Town, under the provisions of the Act, a Land Tenure Advisory Board rules on all real estate transactions. It is the duty of this Board to approve or disapprove of every sale of a house or land on the basis of race. Although areas have not yet been finally designated as reserved for European, Asian, Colored or Native occupation as they eventually will be, tentative group areas have been drawn up and the Advisory Board can and does refuse to allow a Colored man to buy land in what will eventually be a European area. Or vice versa.

Another bit of legislation which will inevitably result in frustration for

1. The story of the Nationalists' attempts to remove the Coloreds from the voters' roll is a relatively old one and students of contemporary Africa are probably well acquainted with it. Briefly, it began in 1934 when Dr. Malan found himself the leader of the "Purified National Party," and began to draw up a racial policy which demanded the removal of Colored voters from the Common Roll in the Cape. In 1948, when he became Prime Minister, he began to put that policy into effect. An ordinary bill, passed by an ordinary majority of the House of Assembly was declared unconstitutional by the South African Supreme Court. The Nationalists then attempted to set up a "high court of Parliament," to reverse the decision of the Supreme Court. When this move was also declared unconstitutional, Malan and the Nationalists tried to build up a two-thirds majority of both houses of Parliament, as laid down in the South African constitution. So far they have not been able to muster the required majority. They tried again during the last session of Parliament. The next step, according to the political pundits, will be a reorganization of the higher House of Parliament, the Senate, in order to provide additional Nationalist seats. This depends, to some extent, on just who is chosen as the next Prime Minister. Strydom can be expected to press the issue; Havenga may be prepared to move more slowly.

Colored people is the Population Register. It is the aim of the Register to classify every man, woman and child in South Africa according to race. Every resident of the country will be compelled to carry a card on which will appear his picture, his name, address, age and race. By this the Nationalists hope to put an end to the stream of extremely light-skinned Colored persons who cut off all contact with their dark pasts and emerge into the light as Europeans. In doubtful cases, the identity card will be the final arbiter. Blue-eyed, blond-haired, white-skinned children who are born to Colored parents will find themselves labeled "Colored"-- and will find it next to impossible to cross the color bar as has been the practice in the past.

Economic discrimination is also grating on the Colored person. Since the days of slavery he has traditionally held jobs requiring skill or semi-skill. But the Cape Colored Commission of 1934-37 stated flatly that in spite of an increase in the number of jobs going and the Colored population itself, the percentage of Coloreds in industry was decreasing. It is still decreasing. A big reason for this decrease is the Apprenticeship Act, passed in 1922. It rules that, in order to become apprenticed to take a skilled job, the applicant must have passed Standard VII (eighth grade). In addition, he must find an employer willing to apprentice him. It is only natural that Coloreds do not enter the skilled trades, seeing that only 2.2 per cent of all Colored students go beyond primary education in an average year. And the period of apprenticeship, usually several years, is an expensive one for the apprentice's guardians.

Even in the trade unions which admit Colored members, there is discrimination-- it is accepted policy to protect skilled and most semi-skilled jobs for Europeans, letting the poorer paying jobs go to Coloreds. Prof. H. J. Simons, of the Department of Native Law and Administration, University of Cape Town, told me that it is not a simple matter of racial discrimination or "keeping the black man down." It is a system of protection--white workers trying to maintain their higher living standard in the face of an employer who would be all too willing to lower the rate for the job and employ non-European labor. The new Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act, now in committee (PBM-24), encourages the splitup of mixed unions (unions made up of Coloreds and Whites) into smaller units in which there will be no racial mixture. It will mean that Colored workers will be cut off from contact with European workers and will lose the strength they enjoyed as members of strong mixed unions. It is not hard to see the economic advantage that will be lost by Coloreds in industry.

Many of the factors which are separating the Coloreds from the Whites cannot be blamed on the Nationalists. They spring from social attitudes and economic fears of long standing. But the recent Nationalist Government legislation--the Population Register, the Group Areas Act, the Industrial Conciliation Amendment Act and the efforts of the Nationalists to remove the Coloreds from the Common Roll--has pointed out to Colored leaders that they are not to be allowed even to hope for a better life in the future. In effect, the Government is trying to repeal the Cape Liberal Tradition as a fundamental stumbling block to apartheid.

"That's the reason we react much more strongly to the Government's program than the Africans," I was told by Dr. Abrahams, president of the Moslem Organization of Cape Coloreds. "It is because the Government is depriving Colored people of rights that have been traditionally theirs, whereas they haven't been depriving Africans

of anything traditionally theirs--they merely have been trying to keep the Africans where they are.

"You see, you get a much stronger reaction from a child if you deprive him of sweets to which he has become accustomed than if you make it your policy never to allow him sweets in the first place. It is the same with us. We are losing rights we have enjoyed for centuries. The Africans have never had these rights--and therefore they do not object as strongly as we do now and as we no doubt will in the future. But in order to fight back we must teach the Africans what they are missing. Our future lies with other non-Europeans--the Whites have rejected us.

"Look at your American Revolution. If the colonists had never enjoyed rights as free Englishmen, they would never have attempted anything so extreme as a revolution when they were denied those rights. Naturally, as we lose the rights and privileges that have been ours, traditionally, for three hundred years, we must react against the Europeans who take them from us."

There are other factors which irritate Coloreds in everyday living. Dr. Van der Ross, Colored headmaster of a Colored secondary school, made no mention of political deprivation as we talked our way through his reactions to recent trends. He spoke most strongly about the social color bar--the segregation on trains and the proposed segregation of the municipal bus service. He seemed most incensed at the law which permits Colored men to purchase only one bottle of brandy and one bottle of wine each day--and how, when he had to entertain friends on short notice he had to break the law (with the connivance of the liquor store proprietor) to get enough to drink. He sensed the rejection that met him as he traveled to and from school--the lack of neighborly feeling between him and Europeans living next door in Wynberg. He spoke of his early days in Cape Town when such racial feeling was less.

Whatever form it takes, it is obvious to the most casual observer that the traditional solidarity between White and Colored is going. It is not because the Coloreds are losing the vote--not because they are losing residential, economic and social advancement--that they are turning away from Europeans. It is more because of the sense of rejection they feel growing up around them.

Individual Colored persons mention different things that have been taken from them. But the feeling in common among all Colored leaders I talked to was a sense of loss and betrayal. Many do not know what to do to help themselves and therefore do nothing. Others, finding they can no longer look to Europeans for leadership and help, are turning to Africans and Indians. It is an important turning--one that, eventually, must have an effect on the growing conflict between European and non-European and the outcome of that conflict.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin

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