

The South African press and the coming disaster

By Christopher Young

There is no longer much point in arguing the moral issues of South African policy. It is preaching either to the converted or to those who have long since set their minds against conversion. What struck this traveller on a first, brief visit to South Africa was the overwhelming practical argument against the racial policies of the Nationalist Government. What is so appalling is not just that *apartheid* remains in all its essential aspects, or that political control still rests with the white minority, but that the trends of policy are towards more repression, not less — towards less freedom of expression, not more, towards harsher treatment of those who dare to test the limits of liberty or press the case for reform. It is like watching a busload of people careering out of control down a mountain highway while the driver guns the engine instead of trying to make use of the brakes. South Africa is rushing headlong to disaster. It is a terrifying sight.

Prime Minister Vorster's decision to call an election a year and a half before the end of his term seemed to herald the Nationalist Party's harder line, especially in relation to the press. The death in prison of the young black "guru" Steve Biko, and the reaction of the Nationalist leaders to it, dramatized for the whole world the human issues involved. James Kruger demonstrated why his chief parliamentary critic, Mrs. Helen Suzman, refuses to refer to him by his official title, Minister of Justice. She calls him Minister of Injustice, Minister of Prisons and Police, or some equally pejorative name. Kruger revealed a callousness that was almost unbelievable when he said Biko's death "leaves me cold". He even tried (successfully) to raise a laugh about the matter from the platform of a Nationalist Party convention.

Prime Minister Vorster suggested that, if Biko had not been so well known, there would have been little fuss. This was probably true. Biko was the twentieth person to die in detention over a period of a year and a half, some of them barely noticed in the press. It was the fact that Steve Biko had been recognized as an inspirational leader

by South Africa's black youth, and therefore by foreign liberal politicians and journalists as well, that gave his death its impact. Donald Woods, the white liberal editor of the *East London Daily Dispatch*, had written a column in 1976 warning Kruger that there would be serious trouble if anything happened to Biko while he was in detention.

Vorster's comment was revealing in another, unconscious way. It suggested that, if Biko had been an unknown troublemaker, his death in prison would not have mattered much; only his celebrity gave his death significance. This was typical of white South African attitudes, developed by the conditioning of three centuries. Blacks are not really seen as people in the sense that whites are people. Blacks are seen, perhaps unconsciously, as another kind of being, somewhere between human and animal. It is common, even normal, for whites to be kind to blacks as individuals; after all, most people are kind to horses and dogs too. But the death of a black person, even if linked as this one was to police beatings, would not be seen by most whites as a tragedy or an outrage, as the death of a white man would be.

It was noticeable that, when, following the outcry over Biko's death, Government action was taken against both Percy Qoboza, the black editor of *The World*, and Donald Woods, Qoboza was imprisoned but Woods was "banned". Heaven knows, being banned was bad enough. It meant that Woods could not work at his job on his newspaper, or any other newspaper. He could not leave the environs of his town. He could not make public speeches or express opinions in public on any subject. He could not even

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Blacks seen as another kind of being