

Robben Island Gaol,  
Robben Island.

11th August, 1965.

Mr Benjamin Bogrand,  
213 Diamond Exchange Building,  
De Villiers Street,  
Johannesburg.

My dear Benjie,

There are already two letters of mine on the way to you. Certain ideas in your letters act as irritants on my mind, compelling me to think them through: I am nearly sharing my thinking with you.

I'll return to the international situation at a later date. At the moment I want to consider "liberalism" and "conservatism" which are very much in the news today.

They are, of course, not mutually exclusive at all; on the contrary they are complementary. Liberalism has been and continues to be the initiating and experimenting force. Without it there can be no progress whatsoever. This applies not only to politics but to all aspects of life. New ideas come exclusively from liberalism. In language, new expressions,

Liberalism.

words and styles are the product of liberalism: similarly in economics, religion and art. But liberalism unchallenged, undisciplined and uncontrolled cannot but lead to chaos because its very nature militates against equilibrium. And it can be challenged and stabilized only by conservatism. Take an example from language. If liberalism had unchallenged sway in language it would be impossible to communicate because words and expressions would be changing from day to day, if not from hour to hour.

Conservatism, on the other hand, can never initiate or develop anything. It is, by definition, a force that CONSERVES; that preserves what already exists. It resists change and is synonymous with routine. And this applies not only to politics, but to all aspects of life. An example from language is not only the resistance to new words, expressions, forms but also attempts to keep the language "pure".

Because it preserves the familiar, conservatism has a stronger appeal to the ordinary man than liberalism has for the ordinary man is

a creature of routine. It is only the creative thinker - the artist - who cannot stand routine. He is the "unstable" element in society. Conservatism then, unchallenged, uncontrolled and undisciplined leads to stagnation and sterility. It has to be continually prodded by liberalism which in turn has to be continually restrained by conservatism. It is the continuous interaction between the two that maintains a "progressive equilibrium".

You will probably say that I am using "liberalism" in a special sense and that it refers to the political philosophy of the Nineteenth Century which was the counterpart of economic laissez-faire. But even then it would represent individual freedom and initiative as interacting with the inertia of the community.

If we believe, as Marx taught, that political and other ideas are mere reflections of the economic reality, then liberalism might be becoming a weaker force just as private enterprise is being replaced by public enterprise. Logically, then, we should expect an ever-increasing accretion of power to the State - a regimentation of

thought congruous with the regimentation of the economy.

At the present moment, the Western democracies, particularly the Scandinavian countries, are attempting to complete the process of democratization. For years they have had political democracy but have not had social democracy as economic power and the social position that goes with it have been the privilege of a few. The Welfare State is an attempt to democratize wealth. In the Soviet Union and other Communist countries we have had social and economic democracy in so far as the wealth of the country ("means of production") is publicly owned and differences in income are due to inequalities of contribution. But the social democracy operates in a framework of political oligarchy. Complete democracy here would require the implementation of political democracy.

Prof. Laske argues, and I think convincingly, that in a Capitalist country, political democracy is possible only so long as the economy prospers. Once the economy contracts, the contradiction between the political power of the working man and his economic dependence

is exposed. The worker will want to use his political power to improve his economic condition; and this he can do while the economy prospers. But once it contracts, his interests clash with those of the owners of wealth who, generally, never number more than one per cent of the community. A government in a capitalist country then has no option but to protect the interests of the employers (the owners of wealth). It must take a stand against the workers. That is how he explains the emergence of fascist regimes in Italy, Germany, Spain and Portugal in the thirties during the depression. His thesis is that fascism is inevitable in periods of capitalist contraction. But U.S.A., Britain?"

Incidentally, political philosophers recognize that in organization and structure, fascist and communist regimes are identical. The only difference is that fascist regimes protect the interests of the few owners of wealth - the employing class - while communist regimes protect the interests of the working class. Whether this is how things turn out in practice is a matter to be empirically ascertained. ~~By~~ <sup>Further,</sup> political philosophers do not regard communism and fascism as either left or right: they are

off the spectrum!

Whether it is possible to have states whose economy is "planned" without ultimately having their politics "planned" is a matter on which I have severe doubts. However, the de-freezing in Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe reminds us of the eternal cycle of human development and behaviour. Nature is nicely balanced and the exclusive pursuit of a particular programme or idea leads to an imbalance, the correction of which leads to further imbalance.

So much for now. I turn to the ~~po~~ poetic a little. Thanks for the assurance about my wife and children and for news about little Jenny. And may I suggest that I shall feel happier and easier in my mind if you take ~~out~~ lessons in Karate purely as a precautionary measure. The newspapers are beginning to cause me some concern, particularly as "The Observer" too has now failed to arrive for three weeks running. It's my wasted money that prives me!

Best wishes, George

Yours sincerely,  
Bob

***PUBLISHER:***

*Publisher:-* **Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand**

*Location:-* **Johannesburg**

**©2010**

***LEGAL NOTICES:***

**Copyright Notice:** All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

**Disclaimer and Terms of Use:** Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

***DOCUMENT DETAILS:***

*Document ID:-* **A2618-Ba3-25**

*Document Title:-* **Letter to B Pogrund from Robben Island (copy of original handwritten) and typed transcript**

*Author:-* **Robert Sobukwe**

*Document Date:-* **11 August 1965**