MEMORANDUM TO

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO CERTAIN ORGANISATIONS.

I have been invited, apparently in my capacity as a member of the NUSAS Advisory Panel, to give evidence before your Commission. I would like to stress that I place this memorandum before you in my private capacity as a South African Citizen, rather than in my capacity as a member of the Advisory Panel.

As it is not clear to me why the Commission was set up in the first place, nor of what offences NUSAS and the other organisations concerned stand accused, I cannot, in this memorandum, either support or refute those charges. However, NUSAS has, in recent months, been the subject of a number of vaguely worded ministerial attacks. It has been accused of such offences as "internal terrorism" and "corrupting the youth". It seems to me to be important for the work of your Commission that these charges should be analysed.

The above, and similar, charges, may be referring to one of two things. Either -
a) it is being alleged that, in addition to its normal public activities, NUSAS is carrying out clandestine activities which involve "subversion" etc. or
b) it is being alleged that the normal public activities of NUSAS are of such a nature as to subvert and corrupt.

However, it seems reasonable to assume that if these charges refer to the first case, to clandestine subversive activities, then, as this is a police matter, NUSAS, or those members of NUSAS allegedly involved in these activities, would have been brought before the courts, rather than before a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry. Thus I conclude that the accusations refer to the second case, to the alleged results of NUSAS's public activities.

If this is the case, then it must be said immediately that these accusations involve a misunderstanding of the nature of the university, a misunderstanding of the nature of democracy, and a misunderstanding of the central values of Western civilisation. So before considering NUSAS any further, I feel that it is important to get some clarity on these issues.

The function of a university is to seek the truth. And the only method by which we can discover the truth is the method of continually asking questions, and, in particular, continually questioning critically our basic assumptions. If it is to fulfil its function, therefore, the university is of necessity a critical organisation. Knowledge progresses through the rejection of old "truths". If a belief is true it can stand up to criticism. Nobody has expressed more concisely than John Stuart Mill the practical importance of critical thought. "First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility. Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience".

The role of the university, as delineated above, is no mere impractical ivory tower principle. Society is regulated by beliefs, and therefore people are affected by the sort of things which other people believe and act upon. So it is very important that we continuously examine those beliefs to make sure that they are true. We might, for example, discover, in our pursuit of truth, that a certain social institution, for example, apartheid, is based on incorrect beliefs, and that the consequences of the institution are not what they were expected to be, and are in fact damaging to many people. It is therefore important, both for those who design the institution and for those who are affected by it, that the untruth on which it is based be revealed.

From the above it can be seen that the university is, in a sense, necessarily political. But we must be very clear in what sense it is a political organisation. If we see politics as purely the competition for power amongst various interest groups, each seeking power for its own ends, then of course the university is not a political body. It neither has a partial interest of its own, nor may it legitimately become the servant of some social interest group. If the university propagates a belief which is in the interest of a particular group, and does so because it is in the interests of that group, rather than because there are good grounds for believing that it is true, then of course, it must be condemned.

However, the sense in which the university is legitimately political is the opposing one. Its aim, the truth, is necessarily universal rather than particularistic. A truth which members of the university discover may not be in the interest of some particular interest group. As a hypothetical example, if a particular group benefits from social discrimination, and if it is discovered that the beliefs in racial difference or racial inferiority on which that discrimination is based are false, then that truth is not in the interest of the discriminating group. But by propagating that truth the university is serving the interests of the society as a whole against the interests of the particular group.

In a democracy the presupposition is that the government should serve the people as a whole, but that, since no human beings are either omniscient or morally perfect, certain institutions are necessary to prevent the government from acting either through ignorance or through self-interest, in a way which serves only partial interests. The university is one of those institutions, and this is why the principle of academic freedom is a basic principle of democratic government. That is, democracy is not defined by one principle, the principle of elections. It is defined by a number of principles of equal status. The university does not exist at the government's pleasure. A free university is as necessary to a democracy as is an elected government. The only responsibility which the government has in respect of the university is to protect its freedom.

It is important to stress that the functions of the university as I have described them cannot in any way bring the university into conflict with the basic values of Western civilisation, for these values are universalistic. They are the values of concern for others, justice, reason and truth. Only a person intellectually incapable of distinguishing between trivial conventions and basic values could suggest that the critical activity of the university could undermine Western values.

Having attempted to clarify the relationship between the university, democracy and Western values, let me now return to a consideration of the role of a Student Union. All of us at the university, staff and students, are in a sense privileged individuals. We are, for shorter or longer periods, freed from concern with immediate matters of physical survival, and placed in a position where we have the time to study our society from a more general perspective. To whom do we owe this privilege, and what duties do we have to justify our privileges? We owe the privilege to the people as a whole, since they pay our salaries or subsidise our tuition. The government does not do this. The government is merely a middleman, and it transfers the money to us not so that we may carry out its policy, but so that we may perform our own particular social role - the role of discovering the truth.

In the university all its members, both students and staff, have the duty to try to ensure that it carries out that role. Students may not try to impose their will undemocratically on the rest of the university, but they do have the right to be heard, to criticise, to engage in debate, and to attempt to communicate their criticism to other people. Unless there is criticism within the university it will atrophy and die.

In society, the corrolary of the students' privileges is that they have a duty to try not only to discover truths for themselves, but also to bring what they have discovered to the attention of the people. Of course students, like anyone else, will often be wrong, and may therefore not impose their ideas on others and should be equally willing to listen to criticism. So we need to distinguish between situations in which people attempt to impose their ideas on others, and situations in which they attempt to convince others.

The former is a power situation, while the latter is a communication situation.

In looking at the controversy over "student protest" it is absolutely crucial to bear this distinction in mind. For demonstrations can be of two kinds, and each kind involves different political and moral principles. A demonstration - for example a strike - can be an attempt to generate power in order to force one's opponent to capitulate. Or a demonstration - for example, a group of people standing with posters - can be an attempt to communicate certain ideas to the public.

A power-demonstration is only legitimate as a response to the illegitimate use of power by some other group, whereas a communication-demonstration is always legitimate. Nearly all the student protests associated with NUSAS have been of the latter kind - poster protests, marches, public meetings, the distribution of pamphlets and so on. They have never involved the attempt to mobilise power either to overthrow the government or to defeat the legitimate ends of government.

The attempt to communicate through protest can only threaten a government when that government is incapable of producing valid counter-arguments. Far from being undemocratic, it is of the essence of democracy that protests of this kind should occur. They are essential for the spread of political debate, help to keep the public informed of opposing view points, and, in the best cases, can bring new and important truths to the attention of the public.

I have been willing to associate myself with NUSAS over the past three years because it seems to me that within NUSAS students were indeed trying to understand their society from a universalistic position, rather than trying to act as a pressure group for the interests of a particular segment of society; and because it seems to me that they are doing this in an open-minded, peaceful and democratic way, and as such are carrying out their duty to the public who finance the university.

If I have,in this memorandum,engaged largely in conceptual analysis, rather than in a study of factual situations, it is because the facts of the situation seem to me to be clear. Dispute arises rather out of the conceptual confusions which I have tried to analyse and dispose of here. I hope that this memorandum will be of use to the working of your Commission.

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