

# Woman talk

SHEENA DUNCAN

*Ms Duncan takes a look at women and South African politics in her speech to the International Convention of Women in Grahamstown in December ...*  
*... and focuses on the pros and cons of the Convention as a whole.*

I have three quotations:

'It is not necessary for women to serve on a Committee if we want to sound the conscience of a nation'.

'I prefer to believe that woman is in fact a component of man.

'if one had to go merely according to sex, any legislation would lose some of its values. Why then, should a certain number of ladies not be included on any select committee?'

These remarks are not from records of 18th century speeches, but are statements made in our own Parliament in February 1975 in the debate on the Abortion and Sterilisation Bill.

I had intended to speak this afternoon on male attitudes to women in politics, and how these attitudes prevent us from playing a really effective part in political dialogue.

The attitude blatantly verbalised in these quotations is more often expressed in a courteous tolerance which disguises a complete disregard of female opinion as a political factor.

In other western countries no candidate for public office would dare to so disregard the opinions and voting power of over 50 per cent of the electorate. It would be political death for him to do so.

But we have asked for it, and I feel we should instead spend some time in discussing how our own attitudes as women prevent us from having any meaningful role in shaping the future of this country.

I speak as a White South African and, because the overwhelming majority of us here are White, I am addressing myself to you as White women.

We have asked for our opinions to be disregarded in this country by the way in which we have failed to recognise our own role as political units.

We have chosen to opt out of the political arguments which rage about us.

We have chosen to be political half-wits and have not shouldered our responsibility to take part in shaping the society of the future.

To substantiate this statement, I want to use only two illustrations because I hope to be brief in order to allow time for discussion.

The first is from our experience (that is the Black Sash) as a political organisation in International Women's Year here in South Africa.

*The Black Sash, February 1976*

During this year, women's groups have organised endless meetings, seminars and exhibitions, and on several occasions these groups have objected to the Black Sash being invited because we are political. Sometimes we have been asked to attend as individuals and not as representatives of our organisation, because Politics with a capital "P" must not on any account be introduced. We are accused of being "political" as if this were some sort of crime.

There are several petitions on women's disabilities doing the rounds at the moment, and it is quite astonishing how many women will say: "I quite agree with you but I cannot sign anything that is going to the Government" OR "I must ask my husband first".

We are told that the place for politics is in Parliament as if our elected representatives found themselves in their seats there, by some process of osmosis, and, once they are there, are no longer answerable to the people for whom they legislate.

Women in this country do not recognise that, whatever field they work in, whether it be as housewives, in community development, in welfare, in education, family planning, the administration of law, or medicine — whatever they do or are able to do, is shaped and limited by legislation — legislation which is the final result of a political process and which gives legal expression to a particular political ideology.

In other countries, it is recognised that members of the public, men and women alike, have the right, and the duty, to limit the powers of the lawmakers, to lobby for legislation to be repealed, alerted, expanded or formulated in different terms, but here we are content to leave it to the party politicians to decide the fabric of our lives.

As consumers, taxpayers, mothers, patients or pupils, everything we do is decided by the



political debate. Why should we opt out and feel entitled to leave it all to be decided by the professional politicians?

The second illustration is closely connected with the first and is another indication of our failure as women. It arises out of one of the seminars at this convention yesterday.

A member of the audience registered an objection to the address of one of the speakers in the following terms: "I strongly object to Mrs Naidoo's address, because it is an attack on the Government".

The objector was clearly giving expression to the opinions of a significant percentage of the audience, and this illustrates what I am trying to say. The Government, any government, here or in any other country, is a collection of politicians who, for purely political reasons, act in a certain way to give practical expression to political ideas.

By standing for election and seeking power, they invite political criticism, and it is not a crime or treasonable to offer such criticism. It is our duty to do so.

To act in any other way is to abrogate our responsibility as citizens, and to invite the kind of dictatorship we most abhor when it exists in other countries, for example in communist countries in Eastern Europe.

It is precisely because such governments are not responsive to criticism by members of the public that we fear them so much, and it is because they are not vulnerable to defeat by democratic processes that we condemn them. Those problems in which we are all involved here are political problems and political solutions must be found.

Are we, as South African women, going to be content to dish out palliatives without at the same time seeking the political solutions which would make the palliatives unnecessary?

Jane Raphaely said yesterday that it is a well-known fact that bad news sells newspapers, but that women's magazines sell only if they present a rose-tinted view of life.

Are we content to be thus condemned?

ANY assessment of the Convention must necessarily be subjective, and there will no doubt be almost as many different judgements as there were delegates. With close on 800 participants, and a very crowded programme, it is impossible to come to any comprehensive over-all view.

For a Convention of Women in International Women's Year, the average age was astonishingly high, and what Professor Margaret Mead refers to as post menopausal zest, was sadly lacking.

We were a very passive audience waiting to be fed and not much concerned to feed back, and when Emily O'Meara, full of enthusiasm from the Mexico Convention, prefaced her address with

a "right on girls!" she might have been exhorting a gathering of male chauvinists for all the response she received.

We were all too smart, and much too formal. Our name-tags labelled us as Mrs X. Browns and Miss Y. Smiths and Christian names were undiscoverable, which is odd at any kind of conference these days.

The urinals in the Gents were bedecked with potted plants and bouganvillea, and the no doubt apocryphal story went the rounds, of the woman quartered in a male university residence, who said that it was all very comfortable, but she could not get near enough to the wall in the showers to get wet all over!

Sexism was hardly mentioned. Only one hour in the whole week was devoted to the subject of feminist action, and one of the small group of young feminist activists was overheard to say that if she heard the word "tea" once more, she'd scream.

We did eat endless meals, and drink tea and coffee for interminable hours, from 8 o'clock to 9.30 am; breakfast; through 10.30 to 11.15 am, tea; through 12.15 to 2.30 pm, lunch; through 3.30 to 4.15 pm, tea; to 5.30 pm when some of us made a thankful dive for alcoholic refreshment prior to 6.30 pm dinner.

It is true that at conferences some of the most useful contacts are made, and the most stimulating discussions take place over meal breaks, and it is enormously difficult to get 800 people into their seats in the right auditorium at the right time for the next session.

The organisers did a grand job with everything going like clockwork, but it so often happened that, just as discussion looked like getting off the ground with a degree of interest and audience participation, it was tea time again.

Each day was divided into four one-hour sessions, and in no case did the subject matter of one session follow on the one before, so that a summary of the week becomes a series of unfinished thoughts, undeveloped ideas and unanswered questions.

There were many stimulating addresses from outstanding women with brilliant minds, and we did long to be able to prolong these sessions to discuss and debate the ideas they laid before us.

Conflict arose early on in the week with the good old South African custom of labelling all facts we don't want to hear as "politics". It was OK to thank the Government for all it has done in the sphere of Black education or to cheer the new Chairman of the Coloured Representative Council, but not OK to detail differentiated spending on education in different race groups, or to mention the Group Areas Act.

You were OK if your organisation received its directives from Holy Scripture, but not OK if you were a political pressure group. It is very OK to say that you work for the removal of



legal, economic and social disabilities of women, but not at all in order if you actually want to do something about the dreadful disabilities suffered by Black women.

So the conflict grew through Tuesday and Wednesday, expressed more in the conversation of like-minded groups during tea breaks than in the more healthy open forum of the sessions. In response to the escalating ill-feeling, the organisers (full credit to them for being able to make arrangements at such short notice), scheduled a special lunch-time session to allow people who were not featured on the official programme a chance to speak.

Most women there came away from this session feeling that all had been smoothed over, so maybe it is unreasonable of me to complain, but I received a strong impression that we talked *past* each other, not *to* each other, so we thankfully cheered the two delegates who denied that there was a conflict at all and blamed the Press for

making it all up. We had found a scapegoat.

We did not resolve anything, but took refuge in our shared courtesy to leave it there. Probing each other's wounds had just before too painful.

There were relatively few Black women there, and those who did come were not on the whole representative of radical Black thinking. Radical women had refused the invitations, or withdrew at the last minute.

This is part of the reason for the feeling of depression with which I left Grahamstown. If we cannot even bear to hear the truth when voiced in quiet and gentle voices, how will we encounter the truth when it is shouted at us?

So many women were saying what a wonderful week it was, and how wonderful it was that we, Black and White, had lived together, eaten together and talked together for the first time.

The trouble is that it is too late for first times, and we are overshadowed by the fear that the first time will also be the last time.

## Jean Sinclair

The election of Jean Sinclair by readers of the Johannesburg evening newspaper, The Star, as Woman of the Year, is a tribute indeed.

And the honour is all the greater because it was bestowed by a spectrum of women, most of them, probably, uncommitted, some, perhaps, even hostile to the principles for which the Black Sash and Jean Sinclair stand.

It is recognition of determination and dedication, of care and concern, the qualities for which Jean is admired and loved by everyone who knows her.

The Black Sash is proud that Jean's years of hard work have culminated in so fitting an accolade.

## Eulalie Stott

The Black Sash is also proud that one of its longest-serving and most active members, Mrs Eulalie Stott, has been elected a member of the Executive Committee of the Cape Town City Council, which makes her one of the five managers of the Cape Town Municipality. This is well-merited recognition for services rendered, and we congratulate both Mrs Stott and the Cape Town City Council.

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