

RELIEF FOR DISPLACED INDIAN TRADERS.

By the Hon. R. Feetham

On the 27th April of this year the Group Areas Board in Pietermaritzburg addressed a letter to the Town Clerk which frankly admits the disastrous effects on the future of local Indian traders which, in the absence of any special measures for their relief, are bound to result from enforcement of existing Group Areas Proclamations affecting Pietermaritzburg, and pleads for the City Council's active help in a suggested plan for mitigating the unhappy consequences of recommendations for which the Board, in discharge of its functions under the Group Areas Act, has apparently felt obliged to make itself responsible.

The opening paragraphs of the Board's letter read as follows:

"The Group Areas Board is experiencing some difficulty in the resettling of Indian shopkeepers on account of the fact that the Indian community is to a large extent dependent upon trade for its livelihood, and that the number of Indian shopkeepers is abnormally large in relation to the total Indian population.

"The relative group cannot, therefore, make a reasonable living, and exist as a separate and self-supporting group, if the shopkeepers are to be confined to their own racial group for trading purposes. It cannot also be expected of the Indian traders, some of whom are elderly people, to change their vocation all of a sudden."

The letter goes on to suggest that "in order to obviate a large percentage of the Indians becoming a burden upon the State after resettlement in their own Group Areas, it would appear to be desirable that the Indian areas should be so planned as to enable Indians to make a reasonable living" as shopkeepers in their own areas, and that the planning of Indian Group Areas must therefore be such as to make possible "a reasonable measure of trading with members of other racial groups", but "the concentration of non-Indians in the Indian residential areas" should, it is stated, nevertheless be avoided.

In the light of the above considerations the Board says that "it would appear to be desirable" for Indians to have

their shops "on as near the edge of the Group Areas as near as possible to an access road, and not in the residential areas as is customary", and the Board further suggests that sufficient trading lots to meet the requirements of non-Indian customers should be provided in such situations.

It is explained that the co-operation of the City Council is sought by the Board, in order to give effect to this scheme, because the zoning of lots for trading purposes falls within the scope of the City Council and not of the Group Areas Board.

There has so far apparently been no intimation of willingness on the part of the City Council, which opposes enforcement of existing Group Areas Proclamations, to co-operate on the lines suggested.

I have quoted at some length the Board's letter of the 27th April, which though issued to the Press appears to have been given very little publicity, because I regard its contents as highly significant.

For here we have a Group Areas Board in effect recognising and deploring the consequences of its own recommendations, and seeking to save Indian traders from the ruinous results of banishment from their long-established shops in Pietermaritzburg's main thoroughfares, by proposing - in what almost looks like defiance of basic principles of separation of races - to make it easy for customers of other races to go shopping in an Indian Group Area.

Admiration for the bold attitude of the Board in putting forward such a proposal must not, however, blind us to the inevitable weakness of the Board's benevolent scheme, which seems fated in the majority of cases to prove futile, because only a comparatively small proportion of former non-Indian customers can be counted on as likely to be tempted away from familiar and consequently frequented main thoroughfares to indulge in expeditions along access roads for the purpose of shopping in unfamiliar surroundings.

But the fact that such a proposal, for alleviating the hardships of displaced Indian traders, has come from a Group Areas Board should surely have a sobering and enlightening effect on many who may have hitherto been in favour of rigorous

application of the Group Areas Act in so far as Indian traders are concerned, and should lead to frank recognition that, as Indians are now to be fully recognised as part of South Africa's permanent population, they should no longer be subjected to deprivation of facilities for continuing to carry on their trading concerns side by side with other competitors, in central trading areas.

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The letter goes on to suggest that "in order to obviate a large percentage of the Indians becoming a burden upon the State after resettlement in their own Group Areas, it would appear to be desirable that the Indian areas should be so planned as to enable Indians to make a reasonable living" as shopkeepers in their own areas, and that the planning of Indian Group Areas must therefore be such as to make possible "a reasonable measure of trading with members of other racial groups", but "the concentration of non-Indians in the Indian residential areas" should, it is stated, nevertheless be avoided.

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9/15/11

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C/I/11

9th October, 1962.

Mr. A.I. Minty,  
Chancellor House,  
17 (c) Becker Street,  
Ferreirastown,  
JOHANNESBURG.

Dear Mr. Minty,

Thank you very much for your letter of 14 September, 1962, and  
the very helpful notes you enclosed. We are very grateful indeed.

Yours sincerely,

Quintin Whyte,  
DIRECTOR.

**Collection Number: AD1715**

**SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974**

**PUBLISHER:**

*Collection Funder:- Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation*

*Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive*

*Location:- Johannesburg*

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