

## D. N. PRITT: DEFENDER OF CIVIL LIBERTIES

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SOME of the most thrilling and exciting events in the colonial freedom struggle of the last two decades are related in *The Defence Accuses\**, the third and last of Mr. D. N. Pritt's autobiographical books. It is a magnificent and moving account of the work of this renowned legal and political fighter in the defence of those persecuted in the struggle for human rights and freedom. The soul-stirring events of which Mr. Pritt was in fact the hero are told with such humility that one is convinced from the start that here is a truly great man, a man of outstanding integrity and a man who has stood by his political beliefs, sometimes in a sea of hostility.

An outspoken defender of civil liberties and opponent of injustices, Mr. Pritt was called upon a number of times to express his opinion on extremely controversial matters. He never minced words and always proved to be courageous and bold in his opinions. Asked to comment on the Smith Act cases in the USA in 1950, when most of the leaders of the American Communist Party were indicted for their beliefs in Marxism, which the US Government alleged advocated the forceful overthrow of the government, Mr. Pritt accused the ruling class of breaking its most cherished rules and traditions because of its fear of criticism. The ruling class, said Mr. Pritt, practised the double hypocrisy of boasting of its observance of civil liberties whilst violating them.

Discussing the validation of the Smith Act in the USA, Mr. Pritt made some profound observations on the position of judges. He pointed out that judges, even of the greatest eminence, are subjected to the powerful influence of opinions and fears of the class from which they are drawn.

It cannot be expected . . . that judges should be immune from such considerations; . . . the theory that they live in 'ivory towers' untouched by the prejudices of the times, the countries and the class to which they belong, is untenable. . . . The myth that they are 'independent' has to rank with such myths as that . . . all armaments are purely defensive, all soldiers gallant . . . and all newspapers indifferent to the demands of large advertisers.

The Telengana Cases are perhaps the most fascinating of the many trials of colonial freedom-fighters that Mr. Pritt defended. As Mr.

\* *The Defence Accuses* (Volume III, Autobiography) by D. N. Pritt. *Lawrence & Wishart*, 228 pp. 42s.

Pritt describes the cases, 'the trials furnished an extremely bad example—even in the history of political cases—of rampant injustice'. These cases arose out of most unusual events in India. Telengana, a district in the south of Hyderabad, was the centre of a great peasant movement, which, before India's independence had succeeded in liberating an area of 2,500 villages, distributing some one million acres of land to the landless, requisitioned great hordes of food held by the landlords and distributed them among the starving villagers. The movement had established a government, a system of education and a peasant militia.

In 1949, Indian troops entered the state, which had not yet become a part of India and broke up the system of government, detained some 10,000 peasants and restored the appropriated lands to the landlords. The leaders of the movement were 'framed' for various offences, many charged with murder and sentenced to death.

It was at this stage that Mr. Pritt was invited to help in the appeals of the cases in which death sentences had been passed. His fighting spirit, his refusal to be defeated and his remarkable work in the defence of the accused brought a measure of success. The greatest tribute to his tireless work in Telengana was the fact that all of the accused were eventually freed and were able to join in the political struggles of their people.

During the ten years that Mr. Pritt devoted himself to the defence of political prisoners, his reputation grew to such an extent that in one instance, in 1956 in Dacca, East Pakistan, he was asked to appear for a group of political detainees held in the central prison. After his agreeing to represent the prisoners, the Government immediately released them. However, one of the most difficult cases he fought, and one of the longest, was that of Jomo Kenyatta and five others. The colonial government, in an effort to destroy the Kenya African Union and the influence of Jomo Kenyatta, charged him with managing a proscribed organisation—the Mau Mau.

In his appeal to the Privy Council on the Kenyatta case, some time after the trials in Kenya, Mr. Pritt remarked with a certain innocence untarnished by years in the courts that:

In the forty years in which I practised before the Privy Council, during which time I presented hundreds of petitions for special leave, I never had another which was as strong as this one of Kenyatta and his colleagues, and when I came to present it I did not believe that any consideration of any kind could prevent my obtaining leave. But I was wrong; after listening to my arguments for a day and a half, the Privy Council rejected it without giving any reasons. And the question of freedom or justice for Kenyatta and his

colleagues passed from the Courts to the political field . . . I fear that I was wrong in thinking that when it came to politics the Privy Council would behave any better than anyone else!

Describing a visit to Kenyatta at Lokitaung, close to the frontiers of Kenya with the Sudan and Ethiopia, where he was held, Mr. Pritt said that it was the only place he had ever been where he found the camels nicer than the human beings. The climate was unbearable. Kenyatta was one of his many clients who have become Prime Ministers after a long period of trial and persecution.

In his last chapter, Mr. Pritt declares his faith:

I stand for socialism, not 'utopian' or milk and water, but scientific or Marxist Socialism. I want and expect to see capitalism brought to an end in our own country and in all others, and replaced by a socialist system, under which the power to control our lives is taken away from the present minority ruling class . . . and put in the hands of the whole people . . .

And he ends on a final and convincing note:

These are my opinions. Why do I hold them? I hold them because fifty years of active political life and study, in many capitalist and socialist countries, have slowly convinced me that those opinions are the right ones.

And so ends a book which to me was a highly personal experience. I first met Mr. Pritt when he came to Guyana (then British Guiana) to defend two of our colleagues charged with sedition after the suspension of our constitution by the British Government. I listened to the whole trial and was impressed then with his genuine interest and his profound political understanding. To this day, people here remember him with warmth and it is apparent that this is the response in all countries where he has defended. Mr. Pritt's career is noted not only for his brilliant defences. His humanitarian devotion to justice and his courageous declaration of political faith have made him a man whom ordinary people love and understand.

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