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150

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RECONSIDER,
MR. VORSTER

THE PRIME MINISTER would do the whole country invaluable service — his supporters as much as his opponents — if he reconsidered his refusal to order a commission of inquiry into the activities of the Security Police. The depth of public concern can no longer be denied.

Political leaders have called for an inquiry. So have church leaders. So have nearly all of the country's newspapers. So have prominent academics and hundreds of students. It is not a sectional protest, nor even a political one. The Nationalist newspaper Rapport must have been speaking for many Nationalists yesterday when it devoted its leading article to expressing grave doubts about the way in which the Security Police are operating. On Friday a judge urged a full investigation into the Essop case, saying there were indications that "all was not well."

The country must have an inquiry because decent people, no matter what their political beliefs, do not want to believe that detainees are being tortured or maltreated in their name. They need reassurance that they are not condoning a system that allows policemen secretly to abuse powers that are in any case, quite frighteningly wide.

Playing at words

The Prime Minister's blandly evasive comments on Friday did nothing to provide that reassurance. He did not bother to answer some of the pertinent questions put to him by the Rand Daily Mail. He parried the rest. Families of detainees were informed of the arrests "as soon as possible" (whatever that may mean); the circumstances of Mr. Timol's death would be "fully canvassed" at the inquest; detainees would be released or charged "as soon as investigations are complete." Playing at words like this does nothing to set the public mind at rest. We had more of the same in his general statement to the Press.

Rejecting calls for an inquiry, he said: "The police have strict orders to act within the provisions of the law. Despite extreme provocation and considering the seriousness of the matter, they do so." It is common cause that the law, the Terrorism Act *does* allow the police wide latitude. They can interrogate detainees in any way and for as many hours and days and years as they see fit. Detainees are kept in solitary confinement, a harrowing experience on its own, and presumably the police take full advantage of this in breaking down resistance.

Such treatment amounts to torture, legal though it is. Surely then it is not outrageous to inquire whether Security men are always willing to distinguish between legal torture and the illegal kind, even if there were not evidence to support the idea?

One-sided evidence

It is here that we begin to find Mr. Vorster's blandness thoroughly alarming. He cannot *know* what goes on behind the doors of John Vorster Square and elsewhere. So we must assume he gets his information on police methods from the Security Branch itself. And on the strength of evidence from the very people who are being accused, he — a lawyer — gives them an honourable acquittal. It is just not good enough.

Equally bad is the Prime Minister's parroting of a parliamentary phrase we have come to loathe. It is not, he said, in the public interest to divulge the names of those people who have been detained. We can see that it might not be in the interests of the Security Police. But there is no doubting that the country ought to know.

Unless Mr. Vorster changes his mind about the inquiry now, people will be left with the inescapable impression that it is the Security Branch that calls the tune for Mr. Vorster instead of the other way around.