

RAND
Daily  Mail

THE FALLIBLE MACHINE

MOST SOUTH AFRICANS are vaguely aware of a vast Security Police machine humming away ceaselessly beneath the surface of our society. But only once in a while, briefly, do they get a glimpse of the machine itself and of the workings of some of its cogs. Such a glimpse came during the trial of the Dean of Johannesburg.

For several days as Security Police agents gave evidence the general public had a picture of the scope and methods of its operations. They learnt of how there are informers at work in and around the churches, submitting regular written reports back to their headquarters of who says what; of how spies are assigned to keep tabs on such events as Black Sash house meetings, and even on conferences so seemingly unsubversive as one to discuss "the generation gap"; of men with recording machines under their jackets; and of others with machines that can be tuned in to a conversation from a car parked in the road outside.

There is another side to the picture as well. This is of recording machines failing to work; of confessed amateurs taking notes, without shorthand, of what people are saying; of a 20-year-old apprentice diamond polisher (whom no newspaper would allow to do the simplest reporting job) being assigned to report to the Security Police on the activities of important citizens.

With a shock the public will have realised that on the reports of such men people are liable to be banned, or house-arrested, or deported, or otherwise have their lives arbitrarily ruined — with no explanation and no check by the courts on how accurate the reports are. In this case, one of the rare occasions when a matter did come before the courts, a judge gave the Security Police three out of ten for accuracy (on the other seven accusations the dean was found not guilty).

Which makes their fallibility even more frightening than their apparent omnipotence.

FAMILIAR TACTIC

WHENEVER the Nationalists are in trouble they turn nasty. And they are in trouble now with a surge of public disquiet over what is going on in the Security Police interrogation rooms. The death of Mr. Ahmed Timol and the mysterious illness of Mr. Mohammed Essop caused a national shock which is by no means confined to Opposition sources; it runs deep into the ranks of Nationalist supporters as well. All sorts of people are asking worried questions — and in particular they are worried about the Government's unwillingness to investigate these matters openly.

The result is that the Government is lashing out at its favourite scapegoat, the English-language Press in general and the Rand Daily Mail in particular. Since the Timol affair this newspaper has been subjected to one of the most furious campaigns of vilification it has known — for daring to report the facts and state boldly that a public inquiry was urgently necessary.

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This reached its fatuous height yesterday with a front-page call by Die Vaderland for a commission of inquiry, not into the thing that is worrying the public, but into our motives for keeping the public informed — and even those of the Timol family for having harsh things to say about their son's death.

Funny thing, but that is just the kind of commission the Prime Minister *might* appoint while letting those 17 deaths remain in darkness.