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The call-up

THE discussion in the House of Representatives about conscription has fastened attention on critical questions of defence policy which are overdue for review. The Labour Party MP for Hanover Park, Mr Ken Lategan, said in the debate that his party would continue to reject conscription until all groups participated in government, including blacks. He said the youth were not prepared to defend South Africa when discrimination and racial separation remained the order of the day. Mr Lategan had in mind, presumably, the youth of the so-called coloured group and the Indian community but his remarks are likewise true of the youth of the African community.

So the way things are now, the army remains for the most part a force of white conscripts. Would an attempt to extend conscription to other communities in present circumstances be successful? There is also some unease among the white youth who are required to bear the entire burden of military service. Now that the border war is fading and the SADF is increasingly mobilized to deal with black unrest in the townships, young whites find that their military service does not involve defence of their country against foreign invaders so much as a bearing of arms against their aggrieved fellow-citizens who are black.

So the system of whites-only conscription is becoming untenable, particularly when it is recalled that the SADF now finds itself having to conscript middle-aged men, the so-called under-55s, requiring this generation to register for military training in increasing numbers of magisterial districts, most recently in the Strand, Stellenbosch and Somerset West. Failure to register is a criminal offence. If this latter scheme is carried to its logical conclusion, as the SADF seems

intent on doing, the effect on the economy will be catastrophic. It makes no sense at all to pull managing directors, key executives and highly-skilled specialists out of the economy for extended periods and to allocate this highly-priced manpower to tasks such as guard duty. This economic folly is the inevitable consequence of having to rely on whites only to staff a conscript army. It highlights the fundamental flaws in reliance on conscription in South African circumstances.

If this argument is accepted, various conclusions follow. The use of the SADF (consisting mainly of white conscripts) for curbing black civil unrest is highly undesirable. It is bad for race relations. It is damaging to the defence force as a non-political national asset which has a primary duty to keep a protective shield in place behind which peaceful resolution of the country's problems can proceed in good order. Accordingly, the under-manned and manifestly inefficient state of the South African Police needs to be urgently redressed so that the police can resume sole responsibility for keeping the domestic peace.

It is unhealthy in the extreme that the SADF should be seen in the townships by blacks as the repressive arm of a political system of white domination. In the place of an army of white conscripts, there should be brought into existence a formidable fighting force of South Africans of all races, with an appropriate balance of full-time professionals and part-time volunteers, which would steadily divest itself of reliance on whites-only conscription, and would concentrate on genuine national defence. This is the only sensible way ahead. Reform of the police and re-structuring of the SADF are urgent national priorities and should be treated as such by all concerned.