

Justice At The Lunch Counters

It took bloody riots in South Africa and 72 dead and 184 wounded to persuade Prime Minister Hendrick F. Verwoerd's government to suspend its notorious pass-book policy against Africans.

Will the South's white leadership wait until some similar but less volatile shock treatment comes to emphasize the need for change at the lunch counters?

Gov. LeRoy Collins of Florida stands alone as the only top Southern political leader willing to acknowledge the injustice woven into a system which allows Negroes to shop freely at nine counters but turns them away at the tenth. Governor Collins doubtless is subject to castigation, from die-hards. But he had the courage of his convictions. He spoke out when nobody else would speak.

Other public officials may rationalize their failure to take a moderate stand. They may say to themselves that it would only fan the flames of racism and cause trouble. But truth is truth. And sometimes it needs to be acknowledged publicly to provide a rallying point for others in lesser position. A policy of drift and silence sometimes serves; but at other times the truth of an idea whose time has come simply rises up to overwhelm political expediency.

There are many white people in the South who recognize the injustice of the lunch counter system. It is based on circumstances which may have made sense 100 years ago; today it has a touch of medievalism. It smacks of Indian "untouchables" or Hitlerian Germany's Master Race theories.

Doubtless it is not feasible to do everything now that Negro extremists are demanding. But it is foolish to assume that the demands for justice which have spread over the South like wildfire have nothing to recommend simply because extremist organizations have jumped on the bandwagon. It is better to see the truth while there is time to see it than to wait until it is obscured by frenzy.

The South's reservoir of racial good will stands at a low ebb. It can become completely exhausted unless citizens of good will find a way to accept compromise. The challenge, in Wilma Dykeman Stokely's words, is to "confront boldly and realistically, the question of how the Southern way may be merged with the American way without becoming submerged."

We have confidence in Greensboro's Advisory Committee on Human Relations. Its members comprise the power structure of the community. They are serving in a difficult job without compensation and only because they think a job needs to be done. If these representatives of City Council, Chamber of Commerce and Merchants Association offer a compromise plan, it should be given fullest consideration by all the community.

For the men who offer it represent hard-headed business judgment touched by the leven of community concern. They cannot make their influence effective unless that great middle ground of citizenry—those people who want to be fair but who ordinarily do not feel strongly enough to speak out—make their support manifest.