



B|SA | CONF | 001 ANC'S ADDRESS TO THE CONFERENCE: 1

SA MEDIA IN THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

31st JANUARY 1992

A few months ago, Popo Molefe, of the ANC's National Working Committee, wrote a brief note to the manager of a large estate in Drakenstein. The note was occasioned by a complaint received from a recently established ANC branch among employees of the estate. The Secretary of the branch claimed that he had more than 130 signed up members, most of whom worked and lived on the estate.

Since there was a meeting hall on the farm where they were employed, they had asked the manager's permission to use the premises for the official launching of their branch. They duly paid, considering their wages, a sizeable deposit for use of the hall and proceeded to produce publicity materials advertising the event. A few days before the scheduled meeting a senior member of the branch was called in by the manager. After an unpleasant exchange of words, described as "interrogation" by the Secretary, he was informed that permission to use the hall was being denied.

The branch Secretary was aware that the Anglo-American Corporation, the owners of the estate, had quite often pronounced a commitment to democracy and therefore assumed they would receive a sympathetic hearing. He was however alarmed at the prospect of their meeting failing and sought legal advice. Lawyers duly contacted the manager calling his attention to the great inconvenience in which he had placed the ANC branch and suggesting that a meeting might help settle the differences between him and the ANC branch.

The manager promptly replied, indicating AAC policy did not permit political gatherings at the hall.

In Popo Molefe's note to the manager he too draws attention to statements of the management of the AAC, including senior executives and the Chairperson of the board, committing themselves to democracy. Molefe, perhaps naively, suggests that the manager is acting contrary to the spirit of the corporation that employs him and should reconsider his decision.

The ANC branch members live and work on the private property of their employer, the Anglo-American Corporation, which owns interests in

mining, manufacturing, banking, commerce, real estate, agriculture and the media. Unlike their manager and the shareholders of AAC, they have little access to private means of transport and economic circumstance restrains them from travelling too far from their place of work. This being the case, they sought to hold their meetings, social and otherwise, in and around their living space - the estate on which they work.

However, the manager and the corporate power he represents were quite ***within legal their rights*** in debarring the ANC branch from their privately-owned hall. Indeed, in terms of a law and morality that sanctifies the rights of property, the manager's argument was unassailable.

The effect however was that ANC members, 90 per cent of whom lived and worked on the AAC's farm, could not meet and exercise their basic right to freedom of expression. The manager and the AAC had invoked no spurious public safety law! They had issued no banning order! Not one policeman had been deployed to disperse the meeting! Yet they had silenced some 130 ANC members as effectively as any law! Unlike their employers, those farmworkers owned no newspaper, let alone a radio

station or some 20 per cent of a TV channel. Their sole means of communication was through a public meeting, employing their God-given power of speech. By withholding the opportunity to exercise that right, the Anglo-American Corporation suppressed their right to freedom of expression as surely as any totalitarian law.

Such little known facts, repeated a thousand times on numerous other large estates dotted throughout the country, throw into relief the real and palpable power those who own property exercise over those who are powerless and propertyless.

In 1910, there were at least five separate African-owned newspapers in South Africa, published in both the African languages and English. There is only one such newspaper today! At the end of the Second World War, there were at least three African-owned biweeklies, publishing opinion in the African languages and English. Not one of them survived beyond 1950!

Those who would have us believe that it was purely the uncompetitiveness of these newspapers and journals that led to their demise are peddling an untruth or are just ill-informed about the history of African journalism in

this country. To state the case plainly, the property-owning classes among the urban Africans were bankrupted and denuded of their property rights through racial laws. As a result they could no longer sustain newspapers and publishing houses. Other publications, like the *Guardian*, (and its numerous successors as *Advance*, *New Age* and *Spark*.) *Contact* and the *Torch* were banned and their assets were seized. An idyllic picture of a media free market in South Africa is very far from the truth. Extra-economic as well as purely economic measures have been employed for decades to create the situation that presently exists.

Control over the South African media today effectively rests with a three large corporations. The consequences are that the formation of public opinion, with the exception of one daily newspaper, The Sowetan, is firmly in the hands of persons drawn from one racial community, one gender and one class! Does anyone suggest that this is a healthy information order!? Does such an information order bear any resemblance to the plurality of interests that make up South Africa?

Consider also that the smallest language community in South Africa, made up of those who use English as their home language, controls the lion's

share of the print media - more than 14 daily newspapers and six weeklies - while language communities that are four times larger do not control even one daily newspaper!

The ANC media charter suggests that the right to be heard, and the opportunity to have one's views published, cannot be determined solely by ownership or control over economic assets, as is the case in South Africa today. And just as victims of racial oppression in other parts of the world were compensated for past discrimination, (the German and Austrian Jews and their immediate descendants are a case in point) a democratic state should consider similar, though not necessarily identical, measures in the case of South Africa.

The central issue which the ANC Media Charter seeks to address is how to entrench in a future constitution such provisions as will afford all South African citizens the right **and capacity** to exercise to the fullest their rights to freedom of expression.

Given the sad history of the SABC and other state-owned broadcasting systems the myth has taken root that an unfettered broadcasting free

market yields the best results? Anyone familiar with the quality of US electronic media as compared with the output of the state-owned BBC would find such a dogmatic laughable. The private ownership of broadcasting in the US has resulted in a diet of one-dimensional mediocrity, with audiences regularly bludgeoned with commercial breaks to sell soap, deodorants and mouthwash!

State-control of broadcasting in a range of western countries, including Britain and Canada, has not resulted in their transformation into government mouthpieces. Many other western countries have strict controls limiting concentration of ownership in television. In that haven of the free market, the USA, there are especially strong prohibitions on newspapers controlling television and vice versa. We do not suggest that future governments will be run by angels. Nor do we wish to claim that they will be free of the temptation to turn state-owned broadcasting to their advantage. This is why the ANC Media Charter suggests that the publicly -owned broadcasting facilities be placed under an Independent Broadcasting Authority, appointed not by the government of the day, but by all the parties represented in parliament plus various elements of civil society. We insist that institutional arrangements can be arrived at which

would make it impossible for any government to exercise undue control over public broadcasting. We could all make a serious contribution to the debate by addressing that issue rather than clinging to dogmas of dubious veracity.

While the ANC would defend the integrity of the public sector against would-be-privatisers, we do not and have never opposed participation of the private sector in broadcasting. The ANC, for example, welcomed the lifting of the restrictions placed on M-Net. We have also encouraged and supported Radio 702 and other private sector initiatives, including the most recent, undertaken by a group of African entrepreneurs seeking to carve out a niche in Television. We would, of course, greatly prefer an information order that opens new and wider opportunities for South African talent and creativity rather than one that would become a vehicle for the outpourings of the US and the dominant English-speaking industrial nations. In this regard the approach adopted by Britain in granting broadcast licenses has a certain appeal. However we have an open mind on the issue and various other options readily present themselves.

Our participation at this colloquium, because it is not much more than that,

is to hear from the principle players in the media their views on what can be done to ensure that South African media play a their proper role in the transition to democracy. We do not expect any binding decisions to come from this conference, but we hope a consensus could emerge that would inform the deliberations at CODESA so that the voice of the fourth estate helps shape our media in the future.

Z. Pallo Jordan.

Secretary of Information.

African National Congress.