

Letter to Popo Molefe

Tuesday, 23 August 1994

Letter to regional premiere, Mr. Popo Molefe about developments at Bophuthatswana Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

23 August 1994

TO: The regional premier, North-West Government, Mr Popo Molefe. FAX: (0140) 843695

Copy to the Media Worker's Association of South Africa (MWASA) RE: Appointment of Director-General to Bophuthatswana Broadcasting Corporation.

The Freedom of Expression Institute is dismayed at the procedure used to appoint the new Director-General of the Bophuthatswana Broadcasting Corporation, Mr Solomon Kotane. We believe that the procedure used to appoint him - he was appointed directly by the North-West Government - makes a mockery of the Government of National Unity's professed commitment to the independence of the broadcast media and presents a major reversal of democratic media policies and practices established over the last two years. Direct government appointments of managerial persons in public broadcasters is an utterly discredited practice characteristic of totalitarian regimes.

His appointment was also accompanied by the taking over of the administrative control of the BBC by the regional government by virtue of a proclamation approved by President Mandela and his Cabinet. The predecessor organisations of the FXI, the Campaign for Open Media (COM) and the anti-censorship Action Group (ACAG) were affiliates of the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting (CIB), which fought hard for the recognition that broadcasters should be free of government control. To this end, we successfully campaigned for the new Board of the SABC to be independent from the Government by a selection process involving public hearings. This ensured that the Board's mandate was derived from the public and not from the government. We also successfully campaigned for the establishment of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) to regulate the broadcast industry independently of the Government. It would appear in this instance that these procedures and principles, including those of openness and transparency, have been utterly disregarded.

We understand that neither the staff of the BBC or its Interim Management Committee were aware that the regional government was considering the appointment of a new Director-General. They were expecting a process whereby a Board for the BBC would be established first in a manner similar to that of the SABC Board, and that this Board would appoint a Director-General in the normal way. This would include advertising the position of the Director-General publicly in the media.

We are deeply disturbed that this has not happened. We call on the North-West Government to allow the BBC to restore the Interim arrangement put in place during the transition to democracy in Bophuthatswana. The arrangement consisted of an interim Management Committee, with John Letswamotse as acting Director-General. This arrangement should last until a new Board of Governors is appointed through a process of advertising and public hearings. This new Board will then advertise the post of Director-General and appoint the Successful applicant. The ultimate future of the BBC should be decided by the IBA.

We urgently request a meeting with the North-West premier, Pop Molefe, to discuss this matter further, as we feel it is of paramount importance for the future of media freedom. Should this matter not receive urgent attention, we will be compelled to draw the matter to the attention of various local and international bodies, including the United Nations, the Organisation of African Unity, the Commonwealth and the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

Yours sincerely,

Joe Thloloe

Chairperson, FXI