

Guest Editorial

Anthony Sampson on the need for a press truth commission.

Is there a case for a truth commission to report on the South African press? It would not be set up by government or chaired by an archbishop, I hasten to add. It would be initiated by the media themselves, in their own self-interest, to establish their own credibility, as the recorders of their country's transformation.

The thought kept recurring to me when I was recently revisiting South Africa from London, talking to old black friends now in government, visiting Robben Island and watching President Mandela opening parliament.

Like many other visitors, I was struck by the discrepancy between the rapid shift of power in South Africa over the last two years, and the appearance of normality and "business as usual", as Mandela called it.

And that appearance seemed to be magnified by many South African newspapers, which preferred to pretend that nothing much has changed—including themselves.

That sense of normality can be wonderfully reassuring to conservative whites, to old-fashioned tourists or anxious investors. To them, it is part of the "miracle" that the change of power has scarcely affected their everyday lives.

The trouble is, the pretence evades the central fact of recent South African history, that the system of apartheid was until a very few years ago supported or condoned by the majority of whites, including much of the media.

It evades the fact that the end of apartheid requires a drastic re-thinking and restructuring, everywhere. And if whites ignore that necessity, they are storing up huge trouble for the future, from the black majority who voted to bring down the system.

The problem of the media struck me most forcibly when I read the *Sunday Times*' celebrations of their 90th anniversary in February, congratulating themselves on their courageous past record.

They included, it is true, some criticisms of the paper's endorsement of the government's referendum in 1983, and a reference to the lamentable press coverage of the transition after 1990.

And Ken Owen, in a remarkable interview by Ivor Powell in last December's issue of this *Review*, admitted that he made an historic failure in disbelieving the existence of a "third force".

But the *Sunday Times*' celebrations never really faced up to the fact that their paper had for long periods been manipulated by successive apartheid governments, and used as a

receptacle for leaks to smear the black opposition—which is now in power.

And most of the "mainstream" press has never really acknowledged the fact that in the dark years of the eighties it was the alternative press that set the pace for the exposures and revelations which discredited the government. Much of the mainstream press, as Ivor Powell wrote in the same piece, "failed in the dying years of the apartheid regime to see the obvious".

It is hardly surprising that they now face a credibility gap among many of their readers, particularly black readers, and that the *Sunday Times* for instance is increasingly challenged by *City Press*.

Of course this habit of evasion is far from uniquely South African. Many overseas newspapers, who had far less excuse for conniving with South African governments, became the willing allies or dupes of apartheid politicians or businessmen, because they found it more comfortable or profitable to enjoy their hospitality and friendship.

The London *Sunday Times*, in the run-up to the 1994 elections, became notorious for propagating any story which would discredit the ANC, absurdly influenced by John Aspinall, the editor's friend who was fanatically pro-Inkatha. They published hysterical reports, about an impending race-war, about secret communist influences, or about Mandela's senility.

Other foreign correspondents who loved the South African climate, the easy living and friendly Afrikaner sources were only too glad to provide stories which their proprietors, and many of their readers, wanted to believe.

The mere thought of being recalled to a London winter could deter them from offending the apartheid government: while a journey to darkest Soweto, and the patient pursuit of a shadowy black politician, was far riskier and much harder work than picking up leaks at a convivial party in the white suburbs.

Now many of the same papers, inside or outside South Africa, which thrived on attacking the communist terrorists of the ANC, are glad to join in the praise of President Mandela as if nothing had happened.

But readers are not so forgetful, particularly black readers who endured the full horrors of apartheid who cannot forget how little they were reported at the time. They may continue to read the same papers. But they have their own sanction: they can simply stop believing them.

The only effective remedy is to come clean: to go over the past, to try to record what went wrong.

It has been done before. Before the second world war, the London *Times* had an appalling record of appeasing Hitler—a record which cast doubt over all its subsequent reporting and ponderous editorials thereafter.

But it was *The Times* itself which revealed the full truth when it published its official history of that period in 1952, describing how its editor Geoffrey Dawson censored his correspondents to avoid offending the Nazis. He boasted how he "did my utmost, night after night, to keep out of the paper anything that might hurt their susceptibilities".

And this belated candour did much to re-establish *The Times*' reputation for objective reporting—at least before Rupert Murdoch came in with his own agenda.

Few newspaper histories have dared to be so candid. *The Economist*, which is privately ashamed of its past record of condoning apartheid governments, glossed over the subject in its recent history of its 150 years.

It is certainly a painful task, to analyse past mistakes; like a corporate psycho-analysis, digging down into past secrets and trauma, which can upset many individuals concerned.

But the truth will come out in the end anyway. And the sooner the media can confront it, the sooner they can perform their crucial role of recording and explaining the transformation of their country.

The truth will set them free.

♦ Anthony Sampson was editor of *Drum* magazine in Johannesburg from 1950-1955, and has frequently returned to South Africa since. He is a member of the Scott Trust in London which owns *The Guardian* and *The Observer*; and is also on the international advisory board of *Independent Newspapers* in South Africa.