

WAITING FOR DEAD MEN'S SHOES

What will the new SABC board look like? If a seminar for prospective nominees held in Johannesburg is anything to go by, it will be made up mainly of party political appointees. MARK GEVISSER reports

MR Chair," said Professor Njabulo Ndebele, vice-rector of the University of the Western Cape, "I fear we are behaving as if we were already the SABC board."

So animated was the horsetrading at a recent Institute for the Advancement of Journalism (IAJ) seminar for potential directors of the SABC board, that Ndebele's caution went unheard. Round the table were sitting 27 people, nominated to be there by the "progressive" political parties at Codesa. Among them: law professor John Dugard, sociologist Fatima Meer, broadcaster Pat Rogers, editor Zwelakhe Sisulu, the South African Communist Party's Pravin Gordhan, former editors Anthony Heard and Raymond Louw, and a cross-section of others drawn from universities, organisations and the media.

They were talking about what they would do if they were on the board, and through the many suggestions about making the SABC democratic and representative, one word came through loud and clear: "FIRE!" Some advocated a scorched earth policy, some advocated removing "key ideologues", but all saw the need for heads to roll.

Funds for the pow-wow were raised from the Australian trade union movement by the ANC, which then gave the money to the IAJ to organise the event. Despite the fact that the Democratic Party also nominated some attendants, it felt very much like an ANC-alliance event.

"We need to build up a body of informed opinion about public broadcasting," explained the ANC's Pallo Jordan who attended most sessions as an observer, "because, at some point or an-

other, we'll be called to restructure the SABC, and we don't want to be found scratching our heads and wondering what to do."

IAJ director, Allister Sparks added that "in no way is this a shadow board. But the reality is that the current SABC board contracts expire in March. So I approached the parties at Codesa, and asked them who they might nominate. All this seminar is doing is giving those people suggested the background they might need if indeed they are nominated."

And so the appointees — many of whom had clearly never thought about broadcasting before — spent four days learning about the vagaries of spectrum management, the role of directors and plans for an independent telecommunications authority.

They also listened to an impressive array of foreign public broadcasters from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the British Broadcasting Corporation and the American Public Broadcasting Service.

In the presence of such fine and forward-looking company, SABC-TV News editor-in-chief, Johan Pretorius came across as inspired as the SATV test pattern. Like a *bete noire* to the slaughter, he gave the tired excuse that "we are being criticised and hammered by everyone, including the National Party, for being biased." Sure, he said, "we are carrying baggage, of course, and it might also be that we have certain mindsets, but so has everyone else."

So what's the problem? countered the floor. Get rid of the baggage. Jordan said the SABC had done "a grave disservice to the country", not only because of "the manner in which it has been controlled", but also because "of the sheer lack of

quality of the product." Not mincing his words, Jordan called SABC fare "drek".

This is a predictable response from the ANC. But, astonishingly, the foreign PBS broadcasters spoke with as much vehemence about their South African colleagues: "SABC gave public broadcasting a bad name," said Peter Manning, controller of the ABC. "Advertising has made it lose its mission. Listening to Johan Pretorius was like listening to a dead man. It's time to start again from scratch. We're talking about total and utter reconstruction."

PBS's David Fanning added that "the SABC has lost the trust of its audience, and I don't know if it's something they'll get back."

But the challenge, cautioned Sparks, is to make sure that a new SABC doesn't lose trust as quickly. "The day after a new board is announced," he said, "there will be viewers around the country who will be looking for hijacking in the opposite direction and who will go 'Aha! I told you so!' at the first sign of bias."

There was consensus that a new SABC must play a "transformative" role. But the problem is the following: when the National Party decided to introduce television, it too had a "transformative" mission — it wanted to use the nation's airwaves to effect its agenda of changing South Africa into a rigid apartheid state. Now we have a situation where a new group of people, tomorrow's leaders, have their own agenda of transformation. Their goals might well be nobler and more valid than those of BJ Vorster and his telehenchman, Piet Meyer but, as Sparks said, there is a dangerously thin line between being proactive and being propagandistic, particularly when "transformation" is a key-word in the ANC lexicon.

Ditto with another word that came up often: "healing". If a public broadcaster is to "heal", who is to provide the diagnosis and the treatment? What the ANC-appointed members of a board might see as "healing", the Nat hangovers might see as rubbing salt in the wound.

"Is the function of television," asked Rogers, "to encourage and promote change, or is it to criticise and analyse, even if that means scuttling reconciliation and negotiation?"

Let's assume that a government of national reconciliation is formed next year and an SABC journalist uncovers a scandal that will bring the government down and return this country to the badlands of the interregnum. If the SABC is bound by a code of promoting reconciliation, would — and should — the story be run?

In this society, where the rights to information and freedom of speech have been so seriously abrogated, television and radio can transform merely by broadcasting information that is unbiased, fair and comprehensive. The consensus was that truth, just by being told, transforms. And that truth, no matter how much it hurts, heals.

But a question remains, lurking in the subtext of Ndebele's earlier comment: will a new board be chosen, as Jordan stated, according to the rules of "transparency and accountability", or will this nation's airwaves, a "national asset" as one person described them, be traded off between the parties in closed Codesa-like rooms?

While there was consensus in Codesa's Working Group 1 that appointees must not be officials of political par-

ties, even having political parties nominate potential members is highly problematic.

The IAJ seminar was preparing for the possibility that other parties will be asked to nominate members to an expanded SABC board. But if this board is to consist of political appointees, the risk is they will spend most of their time advocating the policies of their nominators rather than fostering an independent public broadcaster.

"Certainly," said Sparks, "having political parties nominate members is far from ideal, but it is the closest to reality at present. As an interim measure, it might be the only possibility." ●

MARK GEVISSER writes for *The Weekly Mail* where this article first appeared.

With Buller Hildyard there was no easy way out

IN the years past the benchmark 40, there is little comfort in being addressed as "My Boy".

But, that seemingly patronising familiarity from the figure of Buller Hildyard, hunched over a desk or a J&B, was more his own acceptance of you than a slight.

In the typically unconventional way of this doyen of sports editors, it was an accolade.

And, perhaps more than any other journalistic legacy he left behind after his death at the age of 61 in October, 'Buller's Boys' will be his epitaph.

You only have to look at the list of award-winning sports writers who had been his 'Boys' to find one simple proof of that.

For a young man learning the trade, Buller often set impossible standards. But, in setting them, he was human enough to understand that those standards could not always be met.

It was not so much reporting or writing brilliance that he demanded, but integrity of intention and honesty of effort.

With Buller, there was never an easy way out.

I remember — red-faced still — falling into the trap all young sportswriters must do at some stage of their development.

I was finally given a Currie Cup rugby match to cover and had begun the preview with an "all roads lead to Ellis Park tomorrow" intro.

Just 10 minutes before deadline, Buller jerked his head in my direction. It was unspoken summons enough.

"I am going to cover the Transvaal-Natal golf at Country Club tomorrow," he said. "How do I get there from here?"

He sat stoically through a verbal roadmap and then asked: "Do I go near Ellis Park?"

"No," I said and started going through the directions again.

Buller stopped that dead by taking the preview I had agonised over for days and unemotionally ripping it in half.

"Then all roads don't lead to Ellis Park," said Buller. "Rewrite it!"

There was too, the time I had been sent on a cold night to cover a bottom-of-the-table mid-week soccer match that was so inept, so lacking in football skill that even the handful of fans went home at halftime.

There was no score at the final whistle and I used the chance to write what I thought was a humorous commentary on the proceedings.

Buller, in a break from his normal practice of running match reviews inside the newspaper, used it on the back page.

Then he cornered me. "You're buying," he said and stomped out of the sports office at *The Star*.

This, you knew, was the time serious stuff was to be discussed and debated, and Buller's judgement — always fair but always without appeal — was to be pronounced.

"I like the way you wrote that," he said, settling over his drink. "But you forgot one very important thing... there were 22 players out there ready to break a leg and you belittled them. Don't ever do that again." I hope I never have.

Farewells, especially to someone you admired, respected and liked are never easy. In the case of John Edmund Buller Hildyard, they are — and I hope I speak for all the 'Boys' — virtually impossible. ●

By **JON SWIFT**, just one of many South African sportswriters who passed through the hands of John Edmund Buller Hildyard who moved from sports journalism to edit first *The Saturday* and then *The Sunday Star*.