

Let us talk of CODES AND ACTS

by GAVIN STEWART

JOURNALISTS generally expect doctors to abide by their Hippocratic oaths; union members to honour their contracts, and politicians their election promises. But we see no reason to declare our own standards, except perhaps in an occasional editorial.

We take it as self-evident that we will pursue a code of truth-telling, justice, freedom and humaneness, and will honour and safeguard the powers given to us. Perhaps we attempt to do so. We certainly see no reason to write it down. When somebody does, like a Press Council, worse still, a government, we resent the intrusion into what we regard as our exclusive domain.

When Richard Steyn, editor of *The Star*, suggests there might be good reason to declare such a code (*Rhodes Journalism Review* 7), our developed reflex says: Who is he? What for?

For ourselves, that's who. And for our new governors and for a whole range of new constituencies, because they are not at all sure that we can be trusted with the power we have, whether or not we think of it as power.

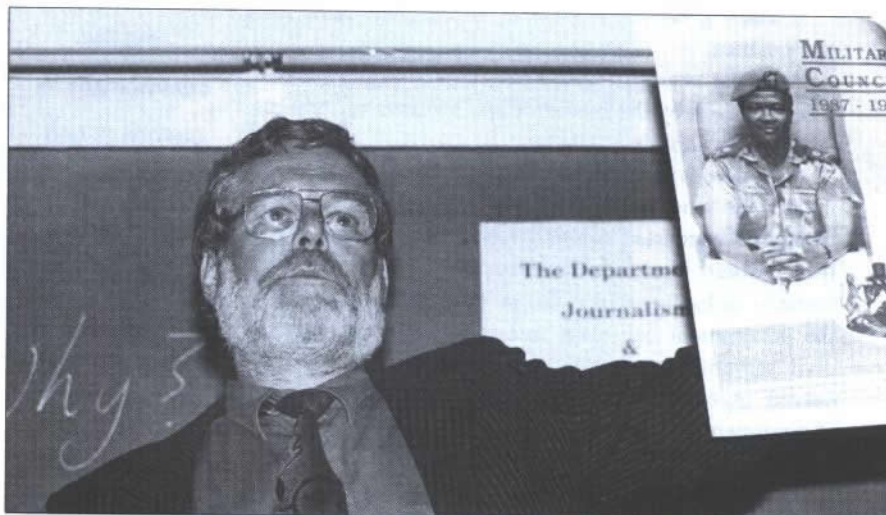
The same journalistic reflex says they cannot be trusted with the power they have: we would like to see our access to information made enforceable by a Freedom of Information Act.

This requires a detour.

In any traditional democracy, the government crosses the floor to power after many years on the opposition benches. During its time in power it seeks allies in the media, providing inside stories in return for the publicity it needs to win votes.

Relationships develop between politicians and journalists which endure the ascent to power. Politicians learn the curious rituals of journalism and its conventions: If you say "don't quote me" before you speak, it's off the record; but you can't say "don't quote me" after you speak: as in "No comment, and don't quote me" (Harry Schwarz, quoted by Anthony Holiday in the *Rand Daily Mail*). They learn, in Gatley's words on Libel and Slander: "Those who fill public positions must not be too thin-skinned in reference to comments made upon them." Those who fill public positions tend to have even thinner skins when it comes to publishing facts about them, as we have seen in some recent cases in South Africa.

A liberation movement arrives in the seats of power by a different entrance. If the government is all bad — and it was almost all bad — the human mind, in its



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thirst for simplicity, insists the liberators must be all good.

This appears logical, but it is not. There is no logical reason to suppose that the opposite of anything is necessarily better: no more so than to suppose that shoving one's feet into a fire is the best cure for icy toes.

Liberation movements consist of people, who are flawed in much the same ways as all people, and are seen to be so by the media. As Shaun Johnson put it at the IPI conference earlier this year: "After April 27, the liberation movements which could do no wrong will be another nasty old South African government."

With power comes all the temptations of power. The bright smoke of election promises is not easily conjured into reality. When journalists begin to peer up the sleeves of the conjurer and intrude behind the curtains, the liberators are soon irritated.

The souring of the relationship is beset with all sorts of complications.

The journalists are perceived to be predominantly white; the media owners and managers are predominantly white. Intuition alone must tell us that there will be deep suspicion on both sides. While our governors have no doubts about their own commitment to non-racialism — that would be unthinkable — many undoubtedly suspect the media of this sin.

Those who doubt this proposition should go back through the speeches of the new leadership dealing with the media. Great credit is given to the alternative press for its part in the struggle, none to the mainstream press. Richard Steyn, again, took up this issue with President Nelson Mandela after the IPI confer-

ence in Cape Town in February. Mr Mandela revised his words, but the indication of a deeply-held doubt remains.

Another predictable tendency of a government which has not been an official opposition is that it is likely to be somewhat uncertain and tentative. The failing is as understandable as its antidote: a resort to secrecy and an autocratic style.

It takes great confidence to be magnanimous to one's critics.

A recent example of the problem is this passage from a speech by the Eastern Cape Minister of Public Works, Mr Thobile Mhlahlo:

"We note with contempt attempts by the media to undermine and destabilise provincial government, through a concerted campaign of disinformation and lies. I would like to draw your attention to one such instance. It has been reported in local newspapers that the government has been 'secretly rehiring' former civil servants. It implies a corrupt government involved in covert and undemocratic practices. Our commitment to openness and transparency is totally disregarded..."

"This is but one example in an overall attempt to destabilise the provincial government. Notwithstanding this vilification, support has been expressed for the provincial government..."

Since the speech contains no unequivocal denial that the government is re-employing civil servants — the factual content of the newspaper report has not been publicly disputed — the Minister is seen to be objecting to one adjective: "secretly". In the esoteric but useful jargon of journalism, this one word may indeed be a comment, rather than a fact. But there was no public announcement on re-employment and "secret" therefore seemed, to the newspaper, to be a fair interpretation of what was going on.

The Minister's other comments suggest the kind of suspicion already mentioned. Those in doubt should read the quotation again.

"We must insist that the commitment to openness and transparency be enshrined in a Freedom of Information Act. Such an act would not only, or even primarily, protect journalists, who should have no more privileges than any other citizen."

The Minister's references to a "concerted campaign of disinformation and lies" and to "one such instance" and "but one example" suggests that, even if he can produce no other examples, he honestly believes that they exist.

Other reports have produced similar complaints from the South African National Civics Organisation, Sanco. They are not a daily event, but they come frequently enough to suggest there is a deep well of suspicion about the media. And suspicion, like many diseases, invariably infects both parties. Those who imagine the problems can be overcome by affirmative action or unbundling should review the experiences of our colleague Fred M'membe in Zambia.

So we return to Richard Steyn's endorsement of the suggestion by Dr Gordon Jackson in his book on the South African press *Breaking Story*: that we who practice journalism need to declare our commitment to a value system; that we will pursue "a code of truth-telling, justice, freedom and humaneness, and will honour and safeguard the powers given to us".

Some may still believe such codes belong in the province of doctors, union members, politicians, estate agents and sellers of used-cars, but not journalists. We need the code, as much as anything, for our own protection: as an additional tool for the long task of persuading our new governors — and their many constituencies — that we are engaged in a responsible enterprise.

From their side, we must insist that the "commitment to openness and transparency" be enshrined in a Freedom of Information Act. Such an act would not only, or even primarily, protect journalists, who should have no more privileges than any other citizen.

What we should seek to create and protect is the public right of access to information about government. And the right and duty of public servants to provide such information.

■ *Gavin Stewart is editor of the Daily Dispatch.*

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