

The media and parliament:

“Media coverage of parliament is scant to put it politely; diabolically indolent to put it more accurately.”

Richard Calland

THESE WERE THE WORDS that IDASA Public Information Centre Director Dr Mamphela Ramphele used when addressing an informal gathering of SABC Radio's political team and government Media Liaison Officers (MLOs) in August. She was not wrong, especially, although not exclusively, with regard to the print media. No South African newspaper has a page or section devoted to parliament. None informs its readers as to the schedule of parliamentary committee meetings that particular day or week, let alone the subject matter or import of the meetings. Apart from a one-page piece in the *Mail & Guardian* in the spring of 1994, no newspaper has to this writer's knowledge tried to explain the parliamentary committee system or put it in any sort of comparative or theoretical context, notwithstanding the fact that it is in the committees where the real action is now to be found. Nor has there been any systematic attempt either to de-mystify the process of legislation-making or to evaluate the performance of individual parliamentarians.

This is just to mention a few of the more serious gaps in the reporting of parliament. Where there is coverage, the quality is unhelpfully and painfully poor and superficial. Even the weeklies, with the exception of the *Mail & Guardian* which regularly seeks to cover at least one parliamentary issue in greater depth and is prepared to make space for some detailed assessment of the institution, fail badly despite the fact they have time on their side. The *Sunday Independent* is a particular disappointment. It is a strange and unsatisfactory state of affairs to discover that it is *The Citizen* newspaper that has the widest coverage of parliament, if only by virtue of its enthusiasm for running column after column of SAPA copy. The other dailies need to examine their performance critically.

The best and most exasperating example of the poor coverage of parliament is the reporting of the so-called "grave train". It has become apparent that there is a Gravy Index which may be of use to media analysts: the poorer or lazier the political journalist, the greater the dosage of "grave" in his or her reporting. It attracts the unskilled and/or the lazy because such stories require little contextual understanding and only meagre research. In short, they are easy to churn out.

The reporting of the Melamet Commission in May 1994 set the tone for the year. The new salaries did sound high. But which correspondent troubled to put them in the context within which they must necessarily fall,

namely, of a working MP who, if he or she is doing their job properly, will have substantial outgoings, given the current rules concerning allowances and expenses, and the appalling lack of administrative and research back-up in parliament itself?

The *Sunday Times* is one of the worst offenders. On 10th September 1995, for example, they splashed their front page with the "revelation" that MPs were planning to "vote themselves more gravy". What the report failed to make clear to the reader was that the extra R3000 a month allowance that was under consideration was to be a constituency allowance to be paid directly, and only, to a person employed at the MP's constituency office. What does the *Sunday Times* want? MPs who can adequately attend to their constituency duties or not?

Thus was the ground sullied, with possible serious consequences. So too in relation to MPs' outside earnings. If one argues that MPs should not have second or third jobs, as they currently can, and are likely to be able to continue to have, then the quid pro quo is that their basic salary be sufficiently high to allow for this. It is doubtful if that can now be achieved because it is unlikely that public opinion would either contemplate or permit a significant rise in MPs' salaries. Hence, MPs will improve their financial position by other means. Is that desirable? What are the main or possible consequences of that fact? Did the editor or political correspondent of any of the newspapers that ran such stories take this into account or even have any remote understanding of the wider and more profound considerations?

All of this helps explain why the newspaper that we produce fortnightly during parliamentary session — the *Parliamentary Whip* — has been so popular both in parliament and elsewhere. It seeks to cover parliament in a comprehensive, in-depth, entertaining, yet balanced way, putting the issues that arise into a more profound context. A diverse range of people and organisations appear to rely upon it. The *Whip* was born into something of a vacuum and so to a large extent its success was inevitable, but this in itself reflects badly on the print media's own coverage and approach.

South Africa is not unique. Elsewhere around the world in the so-called established democracies coverage of parliament has become thinner and thinner. The following exchange from the evidence heard by the Nolan Commission in Britain is of wider interest and relevance:

● **Tom King MP (former Tory Cabinet Minister)**

to Simon Jenkins, former Editor, *The Times*:

If you look at your own newspaper, or the one which you previously edited, that used to have a full page of Parliamentary report. It now has nothing. It now has Matthew Parris writing most engaging and very entertaining articles, but of a sketched, somewhat caricature nature, which certainly form their part and

I certainly enjoy them enormously, but on many days that is the only report of what is happening in Parliament. Do you think that is right?

● **Jenkins:**

Yes, I took the decision to stop it. I stopped it because I couldn't find anyone who read it apart from MPs. We are not there to provide a public service for a particular profession, or, for that matter, for a particular legislative chamber. Newspapers are about providing people with news.

● **King:**

But you think, therefore, it is a responsible position for a newspaper to take — a journal of record — I mean, I am not talking, obviously, about tabloid journalism which works by rather different rule, but the major newspapers of the country — to give no reporting whatsoever factually of what happens in parliament on the grounds that people don't read it?

The exchange raises an important question — and an important challenge — for newspaper editors and proprietors: to what extent do they have a duty to play their part in protecting and enhancing democracy by covering parliament irrespective of the popularity of the coverage?

There are three points to be made:

● Firstly, newspapers which aspire to the epithet "quality, serious" should regard it as their duty to inform people about what is happening in the elected legislature. Information is a key ingredient in empowering people. If the supply is cut or reduced then the gap between the elected and the electorate is widened. Only a fascist or a 19th century Whig paternalist would want that. The gap has already widened: people simply do not know what is happening in their parliament. They feel out of touch. The issue for South Africa's print media is this: does it wish to be an accomplice in this process or not? Given its own (generally) inglorious part in the apartheid conspiracy one would have expected the media to be anxious to play an empowering role now. It is, therefore, a question of conscience as well as principle.

● Secondly, Jenkins misses the point: what happens in parliament is news, even if it does not necessarily come ready-packaged in sensational form. What Jenkins means is that news about parliament does not conform to the new concept of news which the media has allowed to develop by act and omission in recent years; a concept of news which is based on the superficial, rather than the profound. The "grave train" obsession is the principal example in this context. In any case, South Africa is a million miles from Britain. The politics here represents a kaleidoscope of colour compared with the dull shades of grey of Britain. What is happening in the new parliament is unrelentingly fascinating, the people and the occasions full of fertile texture, and with virgin territory constantly being explored. There are stories aplenty. And only a

do we need to thicken the gravy?

relatively small number of journalists to chase them. In so many ways, a nirvana for political journalism. So why the paucity of quality coverage?

• Thirdly, the assumption that proper coverage of parliament would not be popular is misplaced: our evidence suggests otherwise. When we take copies of the *Parliamentary Whip* to township areas, to taxi ranks, to rural areas, people have at times literally fought to get their copy. People are hungry for information. They want to know about the politicians they put into parliament. They want to know what those individuals are doing now that they are in power. They want to know about this place in Cape Town, from which they were so long excluded. As things stand their desires are in this important respect unrequited; they are being starved of the information to which they are entitled and which they have a legitimate expectation that the media will provide.

There is some mitigation for the parliamentary correspondents. Although some are plainly flabby in both the mind and the spirit, most — not all — work hard. But there is a huge amount of ground to cover. There are now 60-odd parliamentary committees of various sorts, sometimes as many as 12 will be meeting at any one time. Because, shamefully,

and increasingly inexcusably, there is no Hansard — verbatim — record of the committee hearings, it is impossible to catch up: either you are at the committee hearing yourself or you miss out. Thus, the lobby is completely over-stretched: even the biggest newspapers have just two correspondents in the lobby and SAPA has only five or six. Additionally, it has been a sharp learning experience. It must be recognised that the transformation of parliament from cynical rubber-stamp to an active place of work, and the speed of that transformation, has presented itself as a huge challenge for the Fourth Estate.

What has been most disappointing is how few of its members, editors and owners have simultaneously recognised it to be a great opportunity. To take that opportunity specialism, energy and creativity were required. There has been very little. As Tom King intimated to the Nolan Commission, witty, even erudite, parliamentary columns are no substitute for substantive coverage (not that there is exactly a surfeit of wit or erudition to be found). Few editors or proprietors appear to realise that complex current affairs demands specialist journalism (By the same token, it is worth noting in passing that government would also be well advised to see that complex policies require specialist MLOs with genuine

enthusiasm for, and depth of knowledge in, their field, not generalist, centralised "communication services", and that such people are far more likely to attract the sort of positive reporting that Mr Mbeki is demanding.)

Specialism requires investment, in time and money. As Dr Ramphele put it in August: "Let us be clear: our criticism of many in the media not only extends to, but is especially directed at, the owners, executives and senior editors of the media, the print media in particular. Decent coverage of complex issues requires resources, whether it be the recruitment of specialist journalists or their training, or else the page space or air time that such issues need if justice is to be done to them." If the print media are serious in wanting to meet the needs and interests of its readership and in playing a full and constructive part in the democratic transition, then they must review their policy towards parliamentary coverage. They must do so urgently if South Africa's emerging democracy is not to be stunted by the inadequacy of its press in this most critical area of democratic activity.

Richard Calland is the head of the Parliamentary Information & Monitoring Service (PIMS) at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA)'s Public Information Centre in Cape Town.

But journalists are doing the best they can...

Kaizer M Nyatumba

PARLIAMENT. Until about five years ago the word used to have something about it that inspired awe, respect, fear and even loathing, depending on one's political leaning. Although it then denoted an unrepresentative institution from which all the nefarious and odious laws which governed our daily lives were made, the word "parliament" nevertheless had some ring of respectability about it.

I still remember only too well my first visit to parliament three years ago. Although then less important in our fast-changing politics than it used to be in the past, the institution was still a potent symbol of white hegemony over the African majority.

I remember feeling singularly unwelcome at the place, from the very moment I arrived. The police officers manning the entrance leading to the parliamentary press gallery were rude and unfriendly to darker-hued individuals seeking to gain entry into the building; there was a strict dress code for both parliamentarians and those who worked there as well as for visitors; and parliament itself was a very structured — and perhaps well run — organisation. It was also much easier for the press to cover.

Since the advent of the new South Africa, however, a lot has changed in the new bi-cameral parliament. The strict dress code has gone; there are many more MPs than

used to be the case; there are two important houses of parliament, the 400-member national assembly and the 90-member senate supposedly representing the nine provinces' interest; and there are more than 30 parliamentary portfolio committees, which are more powerful than their predecessors used to be, and whose meetings are open to the public/press. Clearly, then, covering parliament in this era of political transparency is much more difficult than it used to be in the past. Added to the complication of having to cover two houses and the 30-plus parliamentary committees, there is also the constitutional assembly (CA), the body charged with the responsibility of writing the country's final constitution. It consists of a joint sitting of the national assembly and the Senate.

How do the media cover parliament? Obviously not exhaustively, for it is not possible to do so, but well enough to give the public some idea about some of the major legislation being debated and passed by parliament.

There are at least two reasons for this inability to cover parliament comprehensively: the acute lack of adequate resources and the sheer volume of information flowing from the august institution. A paper like *The Star*, for instance, has one person in Cape Town, the political correspondent, whose brief is to cover the important developments in parliament. He cannot possibly monitor debates in the national assembly and the senate simultaneously, be at all the parliamentary portfolio committees's meetings and cover some of the press briefings usually given by ministers.

But that does not mean that there are important things happening in parliament that we do not cover because we have only one person there. Although on the major political developments of the day we use stories written by our own political correspondent, on the many other stories we do not hesitate to use other political correspondents employed by our sister newspapers in the Independent Newspapers group as well as copy from SAPA and Reuter, for which services we pay handsomely. But once we have all these stories available to us in Johannesburg, the next problem is placing them in the newspaper. Space is always at a premium, and inevitably there are stories which then get hacked and used as fillers and those that are not used at all. This is not a problem peculiar to *The Star*, but applies across the board to all newspapers — except for *The Citizen*, which has no advertising worth speaking about and therefore runs the entire SAPA service — and the electronic media. The result is that the South African public cannot claim to be fully conversant with either the parliamentary process or the developments taking place there. This is a problem which will persist for years, and to which no solution is possible. Even if parliamentary debates were to be televised throughout the day, this would still not account for the parliamentary portfolio committees' meetings.

The media, therefore, can only do the best they can, by ensuring that the public is reasonably informed about, at the very least, the major developments taking place in parliament and the decisions taken there.

Kaizer Nyatumba is the Political Editor of The Star.