

CAN THE LEOPARD REALLY CHANGE ITS SPOTS?

Even though the SABC has moved to appoint a new Board, it is not certain that the corporation's news coverage will be independent. MARK GEVISSER argues that in future newscasts may simply reflect the wishes of another Master's Voice

ONLY 10 seconds. That's how long it took outgoing SABC chairman Christo Viljoen to decide to broadcast the Chris Hani funeral in full in April this year.

Viljoen might well have appeared dumbstruck and flabbergasted before the nation a month later when, during the public hearing to select a new SABC Board, Judge Ismail Mahomed extracted from him a reluctant apology for the corporation's past bias. But after the Hani assassination the Chairman had been a decisive man: he repeated his "only 10 seconds" defence twice during his half-hour testimony before the selection panel as proof of his *bona fides* and of how radically the SABC has changed its news policy during the past few months.

During the hearings, Viljoen was asked by KwaZulu magistrate King Ndlovu whether the full broadcasts of the Hani and Tambo funerals were the result of pressure from the African National Congress.

"There was no pressure," Viljoen responded. "We didn't even debate it."

There might not have been pressure from the ANC to broadcast the funerals, but there were shades of PW Botha at his dial-the-newsroom worst in the way the ANC behaved over a pre-funeral address to the nation by Nelson Mandela. On its 7pm news broadcast on April 13, CCV carried the eight-minute address in full, but, an hour later at 8pm, TV1 news edited it down by half. Within minutes, Shell House (headquarters of the ANC) had called Auckland Park to protest, and TV1 'rectified' the situation by broadcasting the entire address later that evening.

Should the ANC have made the phone call? Should the SABC have listened?

The ANC, like any political organisation or any private individual, has the right to phone up and complain if it feels it has been unfairly treated. What's more, it is unrealistic to expect political parties — or even governments — not to try and influence things: as SABC Board candidate Wimpie de Klerk said during the public hearings, "all politicians from all sides want a finger in the pie". Indeed, while ANC policy favours an independent SABC, there are many in its senior ranks who privately look forward to that open line to Auckland Park, no matter what they say in public.

If the SABC had the moral authority of a truly independent public broadcaster, it would not feel compelled to please any party and would have no masters save accuracy and fairness. It is going to have to earn this authority, slowly and carefully

The SABC cannot prevent this, but it can control it: Wimpie de Klerk echoed many of his fellow-candidates when he continued that "the SABC Board and management must be very strongly against [such attempts at influence]".

Which brings us to the second question: should the SABC have acquiesced to ANC complaints about the Mandela address being cut down by half?

The answer to this question is more discomfiting, and is best answered by another question: Has the SABC really become more independent, or is it just re-tuning its airwaves to the drone of another Master's Voice?

"Sometimes," says a white TV1 news-producer of the Mandela broadcast hoo-hah, "I think we're so oppressed at SABC that we just take orders, no matter where they come from. It seems as if we already have a new master, and when it gives its orders, we click our heels and obey."

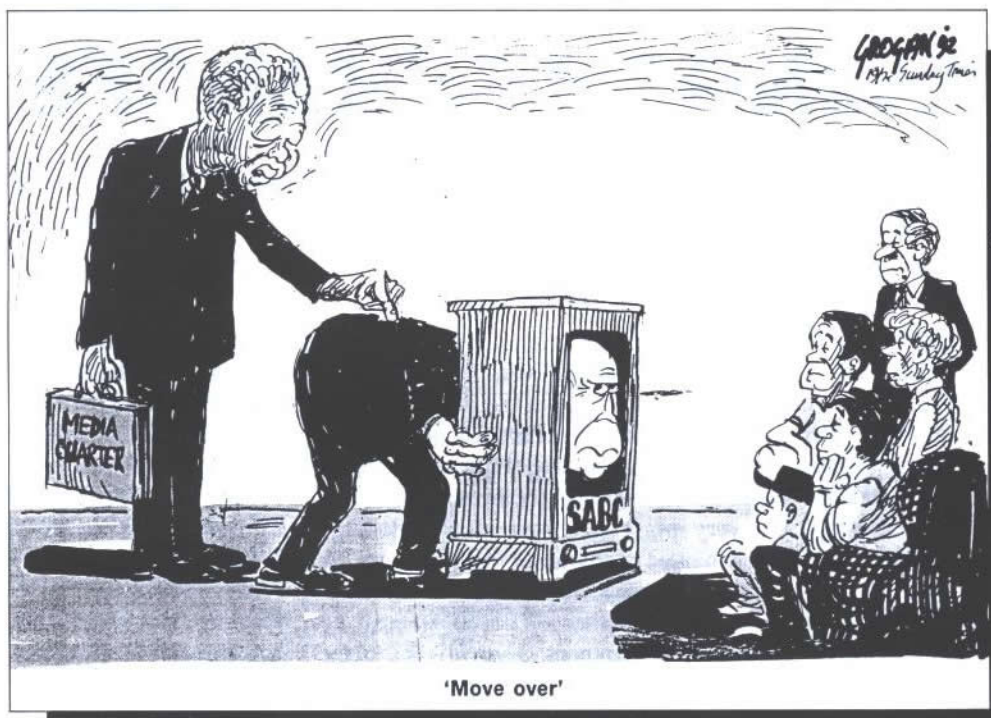
A black colleague at CCV couldn't disagree more: not only was it "imperative to broadcast Mandela's message in full to keep the peace," but "most of the news coverage was as biased as SABC has ever been". He points specifically to the way the news portrayed the massacre at Protea Police Station in Soweto as just another consequence of rioting and looting.

The CCV producer is right about the Protea shooting, and the Broadcast Monitoring Project of the Campaign for Open Media (COM) has published a damning 13-page Special Report on SABC Coverage on the Chris Hani Assassination, which proves, once more, in blow-by-blow detail, the pro-government bias at Auckland Park.

That SABC TV-news has changed for the better is obvious; the fact that Christo Viljoen's humiliation at the hands of Judge Mahomed was broadcast unedited on both TV1 News and *Agenda* is a case in point. But its metamorphosis into a more even-handed and challenging broadcaster does not necessarily mean that it is independent, and the evidence still suggests that it owes its allegiance to the Nationalist government — which, after all, has also changed for the better.

In his testimony at the SABC Board public hearings, IDASA director Alex Boraine actually made the point that, while indeed there has been a change in

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SABC news policy, "there has also been a change in government policy. It may be argued that the SABC still adheres to one party and is changing its policy in accordance with that party." It may well also be argued that the SABC's deeply-entrenched organisational culture impels it to adhere to power generally rather than to a single specific political party.

There was much I saw during the broadcasts following the Hani assassination which made me realise how dangerously easy it will be for the SABC to switch its allegiance to whatever new power replaces the FW de Klerk government. I do not believe that the current SABC has the remotest understanding of the term "Independent Public Broadcaster", and, unless its style and management is changed radically by the new SABC Board, I fear it will slip effortlessly from being the electronic serving-boy of this government to the next one.

Take the actual coverage of the Hani funeral at the FNB Stadium and at the Elspark Cemetery. Certainly, it was right and proper for the SABC to broadcast it in full, as befitting a man who was a national hero and leader. But there was something in the tone of the broadcast that went further than respect — it was

downright obsequious. A Zimbabwean colleague noted that it reminded him of the way his country's television behaved after independence in 1980: buttressing those in power by recording their pompous minutiae, all in the name of "progress" and "democracy".

Why, for example, were there no cameras outside the FNB Stadium, showing viewers the mayhem and anarchy outside that was a direct counter to the pomp and dignity inside? Whatever one thinks of the disaffected and alienated youths who threatened to turn the funeral into a bloodbath, their anger too was a response to Chris Hani's death; it too should have been recorded.

And so, while SABC's newscasts tended to highlight the bad (concentrating, for example, on the rioting and looting at the top of the TV1 8pm newscast on April 14, and only noting much later that most marches were peaceful), SABC's live coverage of the funeral itself showed only the good — a symptom, perhaps, of the current schizophrenia at Auckland Park, as the corporation tries to please both its current masters and its future ones.

Of course, if the SABC had the moral authority of a truly independent public

broadcaster, it would not feel compelled to please any party and would have need for no masters save accuracy and fairness. It is going to have to earn this authority, slowly and carefully. And the process takes a critical first step with the installation of a new Board and the transparency embarked upon to appoint it.

But the new Board is only a beginning. Now the tougher task of transforming the institution begins. Far from proving the SABC's independence, Christo Viljoen's "10-second" decision and his admission that there was "no debate" over the broadcasting of the Hani funeral is, in fact, evidence that the SABC still does not know how to think for itself. It continues to act, rather, in knee-jerk adherence to the powers of the day. That is why it changed its policy in 1989 to accommodate the government's own changing attitude towards the liberation movements, and that, ultimately, is why it took Christo Viljoen only 10 seconds to deliberate over a decision that warranted, at the very least, a good few minutes. ●

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