

POWER

Player



RICHARD SMITH

THE DAY WILL COME, SAYS **TON VOSLOO**, EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN OF NATIONALE PERS, WHEN JOURNALISTS OF ALL POLITICAL PERSUASIONS WILL LONG FOR THE DAYS OF THE GOOD OLD NATS. IN THE MEANTIME, ANY SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PARTY AND PERS ARE PURELY COINCIDENTAL. "WE'RE THE MOST DEMOCRATIC PRESS GROUP IN THE COUNTRY," HE SAYS ■

ON THE BANKS of a man-made lake, between the Municipal Pension Funds building and the headquarters of the Citrus Exchange, I meet the Executive Chairman of Nasionale Pers at his hotel in the city of Verwoerdburg. He can't stand the place.

"Verwoerdburg" sighs Ton Vosloo, loosening his tie and attempting to order a Coke from a defiantly disinterested waiter, "is the heart and homeland of the Great Afrikaner Boerecracy."

True to his profession — newspaperman — Vosloo immediately acknowledges his source, a fellow journalist encountered at yet another seminar on Press Freedom in the New South Africa. Never mind. One of these days, Verwoerdburg won't even be called Verwoerdburg anymore. What about Nasionale Pers? Vosloo shakes his head. No change.

"We've been debating this thing for the last three years, 'Should we change our name, or shouldn't we?' Well, the other day I made the formal decision on behalf of myself. 'No'. There's nothing wrong with Nasionale Pers. We've got nothing to be ashamed of. We're actually the most democratic press group in South Africa. Many people might not want to accept it, but our editorial staff have been at the forefront of breaking down Apartheid."

Indeed, it was Vosloo himself, as editor of *Beeld*, who called for the scrapping of Group Areas and the Immorality Act, way back in the days when FW de Klerk was still a junior Boerecrat. It was Vosloo who said: "The day will come when the National Party Government will sit around a table with the ANC."

Unlike other newspaper editors of the time, Vosloo was not hauled into PW Botha's office for a tongue-and-finger lashing. But he did bump into the then Prime Minister at a braaivleis, "and

he really got stuck into me. I thought, ag, he's just like a volcano. Let him rant and rave."

Even today, in otherwise enlightened circles, the perception lingers. Nasionale Pers, publishers of *You*, *Huisgenoot*, *Beeld*, *Die Burger*, *Drum*, *True Love*, *City Press*, *Fair Lady* and others, is a faithful lackey of the National Party and the Broederbond, via Sanlam. Wrong.

As a matter of fact, the other NP don't own a single share of Nasionale, and even Sanlam's interest is limited to 21 per cent and 200 votes at the AGM. So who really owns Nasionale? The People. And they're not planning to sell.

With 11-million shares spread between 2 800 owners, Nasionale is able to serve its many markets without bowing to the power of vested interest: "We don't have to look to Anglo American or JCI for a decision," boasts the Executive Chairman. The same goes for the political monoliths.

"We've had two approaches," says Vosloo, "by Inkatha and the ANC, to buy *City Press* as a foothold on the Reef. On both occasions, before the Board made a decision, I went to the editor and manager of the paper and said, 'Look commercially, we can sell you guys'. They were fiercely resistant. They said, 'No ways'."

Although *City Press* has run at a loss since Nasionale scooped it up 10 years ago, Vosloo intends floating the paper to the community it serves as soon as it becomes financially viable. "I see no problem with letting *City Press* go, and by that I mean at least 51 per cent to the blacks. *The Argus* stopped short of letting the *Sowetan* go and I think the blacks saw through that, with due respect to my friend Doug Band."

Vosloo can't believe it. His Coke has finally arrived. He takes a deep sip, puts the glass down, and laments, once again, the ever-declining level of service in South African business. Of course, there are exceptions. One is a little >

by
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electronic media company Vosloo runs as a sideline. Well, he's the Chairman. It's M-Net.

Customer service, coupled with non-stop, Hollywood-style marketing, is one big reason for M-Net's success: 800 000 subscribers in just over seven years. But the real pull is entertainment. No news. No hidden Agenda.

The funny thing is, just a few years ago, M-Net was all set to go on-line with its long-awaited independent alternative to the SABC's version of the News, but the plan sank under the combined weight of financial and political apprehension. For one thing, M-Net's hard-won Government licence came with a built-in time-delay that barred any dissemination of the truth before 9.30pm. What was the point?

These days, if Ton Vosloo wanted to put the News on M-Net, anytime of day, all he would have to do was give the word: "Yes." But he's sticking to no. Let them beg and plead.

"I had two calls the other day from my good friends in the Government," recalls Vosloo. "They said, come on, take the licence, we'll do away with all the restrictions. I said, listen boys, that would be so transparent. We'll stick to our formula, thanks. We're an entertainment station. In any case, if we were going to broadcast news on M-Net whose news would it be? Would it have to be pro-Government news, to offset the SABC, who are not the anti-Government channel?"

Not that Vosloo has anything personal against the SABC. But he is by nature a pugilist, a staunch defender of his territory against contenders big and small. Preferably big. As editor of *Beeld*, he relished the bitter circulation war against the *Transvaler* in the '80s. He won.

As Chairman of M-Net, his contempt for the SABC is all-encompassing, and laced with exasperation: "They won't listen to me. I mean, if they want to make a success, I've got a wonderful recipe for them. Stop acting like the SABC, and start acting like M-Net. Get commercial. Go through a decoder. Do what sensible people would do."

Vosloo pauses, mulls over his words, and concedes that the SABC might have other responsibilities as the National Broadcaster. Still, that's no excuse. What really bothers him, as an old-school newsman, is the corporation's blatant abdication of journalistic standards.

"I mean, I'm so disheartened by what they're doing at the SABC," he says. "Advertorial has become endemic. They'll tell you, look, you can have this programme, as long as you put up the funding. Now where the hell is the integrity, man, where's the pride? I want them to appoint an editor who has got standards, so that the whole of the staff can shield behind his back. That's the only way you can guarantee editorial independence and freedom. But as they're structured now — sorry, no hope."

And M-Net? Vosloo shrugs.

"Ya, well, M-Net also fall into the same trap. There's a lot of these, you know, free rides going on. But let's face it, M-Net is a commercial entertainment station.

I would expect more, in a sense, from the SABC. In any case, I would rather that journalists at all levels try to preserve their independence. You know, the *New York Times* never accepts a free ticket."

"Where the hell is the integrity, man, where's the pride?"

After almost 40 years in the business, it's fair enough to assume that Vosloo has paid his dues. Born in the Eastern Cape, Vosloo kicked off his journalistic career as a stringer for the English-language *Uitenhage Times*, but his driving ambition was to get as close as possible to the real roots of the newspaper industry.

"I worked for the Department of Forestry for a while, I thought it would be romantic. It was

totally boring." So he gave it all up and joined *Die Oosterlig* as Uitenhage correspondent. Years later, at the editorial helm of the country's most influential and financially viable Afrikaans newspaper — *Beeld* — Vosloo was gently persuaded by the Chairman of the Board to consider a career switch to management.

"At the time," recalls Vosloo, "I thought to myself, what worlds do I have left to conquer? We had just overthrown the *Transvaler* in the morning market. I was in my element, immersed in my job. But I liked the idea of a different kind of challenge. I made the switch."

Today Vosloo is probably the major power player in print and electronic media in South Africa, with interests in everything from radio to books to cellular telephony. But at heart, at soul, in the ink that runs through his veins, he remains a newspaper journalist.

"I've got a soft spot for the print medium," he confesses. "I've got this great romantic feeling that at the end of the day, print is going to come out tops. At the same time, it's wonderful to be associated with all these other areas of convergence. The electronic highway. The global village. The digitalisation of words."

Somehow, it sounds a lot more romantic than *Nasionale Pers*. Never mind the name, what future for the language? While Afrikaans is today only one of the dynamics in *Nasionale's* shifting market place, it is not one that Vosloo would like to surrender to the forces of change. But the language is going to have to speak up for itself.

"In the totality of South Africa," says Vosloo, "I think we've been stupid. We've been defining Afrikaners as being whites. It's all wrong. Our only growth will come from the other side of the colour line — *Die Burger* today has 52 per cent brown readers.

"But we've got to have a complete change of mindset. The only Afrikaner we can take note of is anyone who speaks Afrikaans. No ifs and buts, no Christian Nationalism, if we accept that, then we can have the feedstock to give us a place in this country. If we don't we're stuffed."

There is time for one last question before Ton Vosloo picks up the tab and exchanges his view of Centurion Lake, Verwoerdburg, for the foreshore, Cape Town. With all the seminars on Press Freedom in South Africa these days, what hope is there for Press Freedom in South Africa these days?

"I think the day will come," says Vosloo, "when a lot of people will long for the days of the good old Nats. I'm not even saying it tongue-in-cheek, I was at a Niemann Conference a while ago, where all the political parties were represented. Cyril Ramaphosa, the whole gang. And they all said, 'We are a hundred per cent in favour of Press Freedom'.

"I tell you, it's hogwash. All hogwash. When the real pressures are on, they're going to behave just as badly as the Nats did. Never trust a politician. That's my motto." ●

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