

Koos and SACP pitch for media freedom

By Sue Valentine



THE highlight of the discussion on political parties' views on media freedom was the sharing of a platform by the two "CPs" of South Africa - Essop Pahad of the SA Communist Party and Koos van der Merwe of the Conservative Party.

The lowlight was the failure to appear of the ANC's Pallo Jordan and the PAC's Benny Alexander. As many of the conference delegates mused at the time, it is to be hoped that their absence from the conference was no indication of the ANC's or PAC's attitude towards the media and its future in this country.

Opening the discussion, Piet Coetzer of the National Party said freedom of the media had to be related to other rights and freedoms such as privacy and the right of reply.

"Democracy must depend on a network of checks and balances - the media should be part of them. Statutory limitations on the media

should be kept to the bare minimum."

Democratic Party spokesperson Peter Soal said the media should be as free and responsible as any individual. "There should not be any limitations on the press."

He said the baggage of the old South Africa was not needed in the new South Africa, reminding the audience of how the old restrictive legislation of the Rhodesian regime had been seized on "with glee" by the incoming Zimbabwean government.

In an entertaining presentation, the Conservative Party's Koos van der Merwe attacked the NP bias in the mainstream Afrikaans press and the SABC, saying that the Afrikaans newspapers were actively organising for the NP.

He said the CP could not live with a totally free press. "When we come to power there will have to be some form of limitations on things such as drugs, pornography, satanism, terror-

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Long road to freedom



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Conference delegates also grappled with issues such as control and access to the media, journalistic ethics, media freedom and the thorny question of the extent to which journalists had a responsibility to build national unity and whether racism, tribalism or sexism should be outlawed in the media.

Under the theme, "Towards an Open Media for a new South Africa", Gavin Stewart of Rhodes University's journalism department painted a bleak picture of repressive regimes and the systems that succeeded them.

"We will inherit intolerance and repression, along with a state monopoly of broadcasting and a corporate monopoly of newspapers and magazines," he said.

In the opening address to the conference, the manager of Ravan Press, Glenn Moss, said support for freedom of the media by political organisations was contradicted frequently by the actions of their followers. "Journalists in the townships face enormous pressures and are subject to disciplinary hearings and structures," he said, and emphasised that perilously little had been done to develop a culture of diversity and pluralism by the leadership of organisations.

Stewart said a survey done by his department among rural people late this year showed that a vast number were unaware that Nelson Mandela had been released, while others did not even know who Nelson Mandela was.

Amps (All Media Products Services) figures for 1989/90 painted a vivid picture of media poverty among rural South Africans who comprise more than 40 percent of the population.

According to research by the journalism department at Rhodes, 83 percent of people in the Eastern Cape are illiterate. By stark con-

trast, 98 percent of these people listen to radio and 96 percent listen to black radio stations.

Of South Africa's total population, one in four is illiterate and only about two people in 10 could read a newspaper. The only medium which shows some signs of reaching the majority of South Africans was radio.

This was confirmed later by the SABC's editor-in-chief of news management, Louis Raubenheimer, who said that the corporation's black language service was the only medium with any penetration in the rural areas.

He said despite the fact that such services were often labelled "apartheid services", independent research had shown that 80 percent of black listeners preferred programmes in their own language. Only about 17 percent had a reasonable understanding of English and about five percent understood Afrikaans.

Raubenheimer, who emphasised that he spoke in his personal capacity and not on behalf of the SABC, said there was a definite need for services in the Nguni and Sotho languages.

"The SABC is not opposed to competition, provided the wishes of the public are given recognition," he said. The SABC's privatisation drive as well as its task force examining the broadcast media came under attack time and again during the conference amid calls for the issue to be opened as a public campaign.

The workshop on broadcasting suggested to the conference that alternative research be done forthwith so that information would be on hand to evaluate and, if need be, to counter the conclusions presented by the task group.

The manager of Radio 702, Stan Katz, said if broadcasting were deregulated, the private sector could operate commercial stations dependent on advertising, alongside the state-funded service which would form the nucleus of public broadcasting but would be indepen-

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