

# Censorship slowdown

## But no rust on the scissors yet

By Hans Pienaar

**THE NEW** mood in South Africa has been accompanied by much frankness and, with a little prodding, an almost eager airing of dirty linen. But what is the position regarding formal censorship itself, now that the bulk of the media regulations have been relaxed and the ANC has been unbanned?

During the successive States of Emergency of the past few years, formal censorship was all but forgotten. The cumbersome three-tier system only made the headlines when the Publications Appeal Board, chaired by "verligte" law professor Kobus van Rooyen, gave the green light for "Cry Freedom" - only for copies of the film to be confiscated by the police after its first showing.

Indeed, talking to Dr Braam Coetzee, head of the Directorate of Publications (the administrative arm of the system), is quite the opposite of talking to, say, tight-lipped morose police spokesmen, or the Bureau of Information. So frank is he, and so ready to help, that one only has to sit back - he will anticipate your questions and suggest criticisms you haven't even thought of yet.

On the surface, there are convincing pointers that the activities of our censors have actually slowed down. For example, before January 1989 Coetzee had to put together a committee (at the bottom level of the system) from a panel of 130 members to adjudicate a complaint from a member of the public at least once every week. That only happens once a month now.

As the system depends on the public for input, it is obvious that these "new times" (Coetzee insists that the term be placed in quotation marks) have also affected the man in the street. Even more important - the bulk of objections in the past have come from the police, and the marked decrease in the past year also reflects new thinking there.

It is also clear that there is some new thinking as regards the inner workings of the system. The media monitoring group of the Department of Home Affairs has been disbanded, and although the directorate only shares the same government building, this should have a strong effect on the approach of members of publications committees.

The system prides itself on keeping its ear to the ground as far as the acceptability or not of publications goes. Already the "future ban" ("toekomsverbod") on periodicals like the ANC's *Sechaba* have been

rescinded. This means every issue of *Sechaba* is not automatically banned anymore, but will have to be judged issue by issue by a publications committee.

Even more decisive is a change that seems very subtle. For the past three years, the panel of 130 from which committees are formed has consisted of applicants attracted by press advertisements. The minister makes the appointments, but he is advised by the directorate on as representative a cross-section as possible from all professions and levels in society.

Before this change, the minister himself selected the 130 panelists. These applicants

should not be allowed to possess books others may not. In fact, Coetzee says, the directorate itself has to turn to Jacobson's Index of banned publications, which is widely used by critics to attack the system!

For the rest, the directorate relies on those libraries exempted from bannings to re-submit books they feel should be readjudicated.

But even more alarming is Coetzee's revelation of the existence of what he calls a "written agreement" between the directorate and the Book Trade Association of Southern Africa (BTASA), in which the mainstream book industry is organised.

The society even appointed a legal adviser specialising in negotiation as its director, in order to ensure a smooth relationship.

According to this agreement, Coetzee says the directorate and the authorities undertake to allow the direct importation of foreign publications, without customs embargoes. In exchange,

book distributors and publishers undertake to apply the censorship guidelines in their selection of books to be imported and manuscripts to be published locally.

Coetzee calls this "self-discipline". The man who helped him negotiate the relationship, Mr M Landman, director of BTASA, calls it by its name: "This is censorship, out and out."

Doubtless there were practical reasons too for the "gentlemen's agreement", "recorded in correspondence" as Landman qualifies it, such as the fact that books are imported from many centres nowadays, and not only from Cape Town as in the past.

But the fact that distributors have agreed to apply the guidelines themselves is a significant addition to a grey area of similar agreements in other industries.

The big film distributors have for quite a few years now had a similar relationship with the Publications Appeal Board which allows them to suggest their own excisions.

In addition, the new film subsidy system, while minimising state control, ensures that power in the film industry remains in the hands of companies with close links to the SABC, which is still riddled with censorship.

How to push the censorship barricades back further is a challenge that must be taken up by all involved.

## A huge snag will continue to ensure that hundreds of books will stay banned

usually responded to Broederbond circulars. These particular "Broeders" tended to come from its conservative ranks, and more importantly, have entrenched a powerful channel for the dissemination of Afrikaner ideology.

Whether this will actually result in more conservative decisions or more enlightened ones, remains to be seen. Every member is expected to be totally conversant with the 40-odd pages of Appeal Board decisions and Van Rooyen's guidelines. This ensures at least a legalistically correct approach to censorship, but it also perpetuates a basically suppressive attitude - that there is a "correct" way to produce works of art.

But this is as far as the good news goes. Other developments should lead to some concern in literary and artistic circles.

Even if the system is becoming more liberal, a huge snag will continue to ensure that hundreds of books will stay banned. This is because the ban on a publication never expires - only when a member of the public resubmits the item, can the "liberal" approach lead to its unbanning.

This runs against the logic of the system, because a provision for unbanning also implies the recognition that the system may err - but the onus for rectifying the mistake is placed squarely on the shoulders of the public, and of those harmed by the decision.

Coetzee denies responsibility for rectifying past mistakes. Actually, the directorate has until recently kept no records of bannings through the years, reasoning that it

Hans Pienaar is a freelance journalist based in Johannesburg.