

Seldom, fortunately, is a security debate in Parliament illuminated by anything as spectacular as the burning fuel dumps at Sasolburg.

One says "fortunately" not just because the Sasol attacks are a setback but also because the atmosphere created lends itself so to emotionalism and vituperation, rather than cool discussion.

Things became so heated across the floor in the Assembly last night that Mr Speaker eventually ruled that he would have all references to "snakes and baboons" excised from the Hansard record.

The MPs involved were talking about one another, not the people who placed the explosive charges at the Sasol installations.

It was rather sad. The Assembly was debating the Second Police Amendment Bill, which seeks to prevent Press publication of police anti-terrorism activities (including arrests) without the permission of the Minister of Police or the Commissioner of Police.

Debate was acrid

Security debate fuelled by Sasol

and emotional, the PFP opposing the Bill and the NRP and SAP supporting the Government.

The words "nazi" and "communist" were bandied about a good deal.

The official Opposition attitude, as spelled out by Mr Ray Swart (PFP, Musgrave), was that the Government already had enough legislation to protect security needs, that the Bill interfered with the public's right to know what is going on in the country and that there is nothing to prevent the police establishing a working relationship with the Press without draconian legislation.

The Government line

Graham Linscott

Debating Points



was that the Bill does no more than offer police operations the same protection from damaging publicity as is given to military operations — in line with the recommendations of the recent Steyn Commission.

The argument went that there would be no gagging of the Press — only control of information while anti-terrorist operations were under way.

The NRP, which had roundly condemned the Bill in its original form — before a clause absolutely forbidding even verbal information about arrests was removed — was enthusiastic and extravagant about it last night, to say the least.

Mr Brian Page (NRP

Umhlanga) referred to the Sasol affair and asked why details should be splashed in the Press?

What country at war advertised its troop movements in the daily Press?

Would it get to the ridiculous situation where the Government would have to ask newspaper editors and their lords and masters (whoever they might be) for permission to move troops around the country?

It was a remarkable speech, going far beyond what Nationalists said, but it lent pertinence to the contribution by Mr Tiaan van der Merwe (PFP Green Point), who wanted to know what publication of details

of terrorists attacks at Silverton, Booyens and Sasol had done to aggravate the situation?

The Minister had given not a single practical or theoretical example of how publication of the facts could aggravate matters.

Mr Van der Merwe asked why police-press co-operation should be impossible. He was sure the Press would agree to withholding certain facts if asked.

Surely there was room for police-press co-operation as with the recent successful anti-terrorist operation in Britain, which had been so impressively screened on television.

The bill, he said, had nothing to do with security secrets otherwise there would be a complete ban on publication.

As Mr Alf Widman (PFP Hillbrow) asked: If the Bill were already law, would South Africans have been forced to rely on overseas broadcasts to find out about the Sasol attacks?

The PFP questions seemed rather more than rhetorical.

Basson attacks 'faceless' manner of censorship

Political Staff
THE ASSEMBLY — It was wrong that drastic decisions affecting the freedom of writers should be left to "popular committees" under the publications control system, the Assembly was told yesterday.

Mr Japie Basson (PFP, Bezuidenhout) said this affected a fundamental principle of democracy.

Speaking in the budget debate on the Interior vote, he said there was consensus about the need for restrictions on revolutionary propaganda and ordinary smut, but publications control should not be subject to popular decision.

The introduction of "popular committees" had been an experiment of the former Minister of the Interior and of Information, Dr Connie Mulder. It

was an experiment which had definitely not stood the test of time.

Mr Basson said one of the most difficult tasks of a government was to decide at which point a person's freedom had to end.

It was wrong in principle to leave such matters, especially in the fields of politics, religion and literature, to popular decisions by committees that remained faceless, and were not accountable to anybody outside their own circle.

Defending the system, Mr Daan van der Merwe (NP, Rissik) agreed that the Publications Control Act should be debated again in Parliament but said the popular committees consisted of balanced people with a sober outlook.

Authorities to probe 'underground' sex shops

Political Staff
THE ASSEMBLY — The Minister of the Interior, Mr. Schabusek, said yesterday

want to allow the conditions that exist in certain Western countries," Mr Schabusek said

MINUTES

PM's increased power

No amnesty