

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER¹⁾

S J Terreblanche

It may sound like a truism, but a Public Broadcaster is a Broadcaster (of both radio and TV-programmes) that belongs to the public, operates on behalf of the public with the explicit role of promoting the public interest of the population of a country.

The best example of public broadcasting is the BBC. It is a public corporation, controlled by a Board appointed by the government of the day and with a clearly defined accountability towards Parliament and through Parliament towards the British public. The proposition or principle on which the BBC's accountability towards the British public and the public interest is based, is that the Board and the Management have the responsibility to take their clues concerning the "public interest" from trends in the democratic political process in Britain as they are reflected in democratic elections, in parliamentary debates and in the on-going public debate. The BBC as a truly Public Broadcaster is therefore not detached from the political process broadly defined. On the contrary, it is structured in such a manner that it is well-placed to promote the Public Interest as it is defined and redefined by the system of Parliamentary Democracy.

A public broadcaster must be sensitive not only towards the great variety of public interests but also towards the Public Interest or the Public Good. To appreciate the role of the public broadcaster, we should realise that the notion of public goods in the plural, is incomplete without a notion of the public good in the singular. If there is to be a public sector (or public household) supplying public goods (like broadcasting), the sector must operate on certain principles; and without some notion of the public good (singular), and of democratic politics as a process of defining the public good, we cannot know what these principles should be or how to determine them.

1) Paper read at the discussion on "The Role of the Public Broadcaster", organised by the Anti-Censorship Action group in Johannesburg on March 15, 1993.

There can be little doubt about the need for Public Broadcasting - in contrast to Commercialised Broadcasting - in a country like South Africa. If we take account of the sharp inequalities - in power, in property, in opportunities, in access to information, in the level of education and in income - it becomes obvious that it will be disastrous to have an American-type of broadcasting system in South Africa. As far as the printed media is concerned, "media power" is already to a very large degree concentrated in the hands of the three mainstream newspaper groups. These newspaper groups are also slotted into an Establishment or "Compact of Power" comprising the NP-government, the Bureaucracy, and the Corporate sector. It is generally accepted that the two main players in the current negotiation process are the De Klerk Establishment on the righthand side of the ideological spectrum and the Alliance (of the ANC, SACP and Cosatu) on the lefthand side of the spectrum. If one compares the media and propaganda capacity (or power) of the De Klerk Establishment (i.e. the three mainstream newspaper groups and the SABC) with the media and propaganda capacity (or power) of the Alliance, there is no comparison whatsoever. Against the background of the "Structural Inequalities of Apartheid" it is rather important that broadcasting (both radio and TV) should not be privatised - or that it should happen in only a very limited sense of the word. (If we take account of the very sharp inequalities in the distribution of property and media power, we certainly have reason to question the wisdom of the NP-government's decision to grant the M-Net-charter (and the "new property" created by that charter) to newspaper groups already in possession of near monopolistic media property. The net effect was to aggravate the structural imbalances and this was clearly not in the public interest. How to redress this newly created structural imbalance, is a topic on its own but one that should not be ignored.)

If we agree that the argument in favour of public broadcasting in South Africa stands above dispute, we find ourselves in the rather fortunate situation that the SABC has been moulded on the pattern and the example of the BBC. How lucky can a country be? But unfortunately, that is where our luck stops. Full stop. If we judge the SABC - both radio and TV - in terms of the above mentioned conditions necessary to qualify as a Public Broadcaster (like the

BBC), it is self-evident that in the whole existence of the SABC from 1936 until 1993 - 57 years in total - the SABC has never qualified to be called a public broadcaster in the true sense of the word.

The reason for the SABC's lack of "publicness" is very simple - it has never operated (even if we allow reasonable margins of error) in a manner conducive towards the public interest of the population as a whole. The reason for this is also very simple. Neither the Board, nor the Management Committee were ever in a position to have a clear notion of what the Public Interest or the Public Good of the people of South Africa is or ought to be. Perhaps all the successive Boards on Management Committees must not be blamed too harshly for this. Nobody in this country was ever in a position to have a clear notion of the Public Interest. But the problem is that the successive Governments, and Boards and Management Committees were consistently acting - and are still acting - with great arrogance as if there is no doubt in their minds about what the public interest was or is or ought to be. How totally mistaken have they been - myself included during my 15 years as a member of the Board. (All I can say in self-defence, is that I often spoke on the Board about the lack of a notion of the Public Good given the unrepresentative nature of our political system.)

The SABC has been part and parcel of the undemocratic Apartheid System. This system was not designed to define or to give content to the concept of the public (or general or common or national) interest. It has been designed to define and to promote the rather narrow sectional interests of the white community and more specifically the interests of the National Party and its support base. It is rather ironic that cabinet ministers in South Africa are in all probability using the term "national interest" much more frequently than their counterparts in other countries. When they refer to "die Nasionale Belang" they actually mean "die Nasionale Party se belang" as is defined and propagated in close cooperation with the Nasionale Pers. Over the last 45 years a remarkable trinity of gods (spelled with small g's) dominated this country. The names of these three little gods in the trinity are however spelled with capital N's: die Nasionale Party, die Nasionale Pers en die Nasionale Belang - and "Nasionale" in all three instances refers to something mystical and something very narrow.

To talk in the skewed and distorted situation created by the Apartheid System and the White monopoly of political power about a public broadcaster designed to promote the public interest, is a farce. The whole idea of a public broadcaster promoting the public interest will remain a farce until such time when a system of parliamentary democracy has succeeded to give a reasonably correct definition or content to the notion of the public interest of the South African population as a whole.

Apart from reasons related to our skewed political system, there is also another reason why the SABC - especially over the last 15 years - could not operate like a public broadcaster. When at least 70 per cent of the income of a public broadcaster is collected through advertising such a corporation is not free to serve the public because it cannot be anything but enslaved towards the commercial and financial interests of the advertisers. A public broadcaster can only be public if say 70 per cent of its income is collected as "public" money. The enslavement of TV towards the advertising industry is clearly reflected in the Dallas-Soapism that has become the main feature of our TV-programmes.

Because the SABC was up till now an integral part of the Apartheid System, it was not - and also could not be - a public broadcaster. To demonstrate its lack of "publicness" it is interesting to distinguish between say four phases in the sectionalistic history of the SABC. During the first 12 years it was very much an English orientated service in which Afrikaans and the interests of the Afrikaners were treated like Cinderellas. During the next 12 years the Afrikaners (with the support of the NP) fought very hard for an equal recognition of the "National" interest of the Afrikaner "volk". The 20 years from 1960 until 1980 was the period when the SABC was a very important (and effective) instrument to propagate the Verwoerdian ideology. Dr H F Verwoerd was the first prime minister to realise the necessity to underscore the apartheid policy with an ideology. To "transform" the SABC into a propaganda machine of the NP-government, Dr Verwoerd dismissed the then chairman of the Board, Dr Tielman Roos (a "bloedsap") rather unceremoniously in 1959 and appointed a personal friend and confidant, Dr Piet Meyer, as chairman

of the Board.²⁾ As a propagandist Dr Meyer was formidable. Dr Verwoerd would not have been nearly as successful in spreading the Verwoerdian ideology if it had not been for the excellent "service" Dr Meyer and the SABC delivered for him. In this period the SABC became "politicized" in a very unfortunate sense of the word.

During the 1980's the SABC became an instrument of yet another sectionalistic ideology. During these years it became an offensive instrument in the Total Strategy against the (alleged) Total Onslaught. The role the SABC played in the 1980's as an ideological and propagandistic instrument to promote the narrow "nasionale belang" as defined by P W Botha and the State Security Council must not be underestimated.³⁾

The fourth phase in the "non-public" history of the SABC is the period since Mr. De Klerk made his 2 February 1990 speech. In this period the SABC undoubtedly became more "open" and more aware of the interest of people other than White. But to claim - as the SABC is regularly doing now-a-days - that it has become "independent" from government instructions and interventions and that it is now "objective" and "neutral", is simply not true. Perhaps we should have sympathy for many of the senior employees at the SABC. Over the decades their minds were "programmed" and "encoded" according to the ideological preferences or whimsicalities of successive heads of state. Now suddenly they are told to be "independent" and

2) Like Dr Verwoerd, Dr Meyer studied in Germany during the early 1930's and was an admirer of Hitler and Goebels. He was an employee of Rembrandt and learned a lot about marketing from Dr Anton Rupert. In his dual capacity as chairman of the Board and as chairman of the Broederbond, he played a strategic role in "selling" the Verwoerdian ideology during the 1960's.

3) During the 1980's the SABC became, for all practical purposes, an extension of at least three state departments: the office of the prime minister/state president (who regarded it necessary to prescribe what is "good" taste), the department of foreign affairs (as the propaganda arm of the Botha government), and the secureaucratic departments (as the watchdogs on behalf of the Total Strategy). During this period Min. Pik Botha, as the minister responsible for the SABC, intervened directly and regularly with the Director-General's office and the news department whenever things were broadcasted or televised that were not to the personal liking of the government and the P.W. Botha household. In due time Pik Botha even appointed Kudu Eksteen from his Foreign Affairs "kindergarten" as Director-General, while Dr Brand Fourie, a former ambassador, was appointed as Chairman of the Board. During this period the SABC was also an extension of the pro-South African - or pro-Nationalist, or pro-Pik - propaganda of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

"depoliticized" without receiving sensitive training to become "decoded" from their deeply ingrained ideological orientations. Even if they are no longer subjected to ideological prescriptions by the De Klerk-government - and I am not so sure about it - the "imprints" of the old ideological "codification" is still present and very noticable in especially the news programmes.

In a speech in Cape Town recently, President F.W. De Klerk declared himself and his government in favour of a depoliticization of the SABC. He also made an appeal to the Management Committee to take disciplinary steps against employees making themselves guilty of favouritism towards any group or political party. I am rather surprised to learn from what circles the State President is getting support for his ideas about the depoliticization of the SABC to change it into an independent and neutral broadcaster. To think that a high-power media instrument - that has been misused for sectionalistic party political propoganda for decades - can *uberhoubt* be changed into an independent and ideologically neutral and depoliticized broadcaster, is idle talk. Let me be honest and straightforward: it is simply not possible - and also not desirable - to depoliticize a matter of such high public relevance as the SABC. The challenge is not to depoliticize the SABC, but to democratize it and to restore it as part and parcel of a new political dispensation to ensure that it will become - for the first time ever - a truly public broadcaster.

If by "depoliticizing" the SABC in the present circumstances is meant that the SABC should be "liberated" from the narrow and dogmatic grip of NP politics, I cannot agree more. But we must be careful not to regard an opportunity to "liberate" the SABC from NP-politics as an opportunity to take the public broadcaster out of the public or political arena altogether.

I am aware of the rather strong distaste many people are showing lately for politics. This distaste is often so strong that we even witness a detestation for politics. This attitude is not restricted to South Africa. During the Reagan and Thatcher periods the Libertarians and the Freemarketeers have had a field day to demonstrate their anti-government ideology and their hostility for politics. According to these people, general legal rules should be

laid down to enable individuals and institutions to act freely and to do as much as possible individually and as little as possible collectively or "politically". This kind of legalistic individualism and libertarianism either do not understand what democracy is about or their stand represent an attempt to entrench their vested interests against the (public) demands generated by the democratic processes. Although we must always be alert towards the excesses in politics, the solution for such excesses is not less politics but better, - i.e. democratically controlled - politics.

If South Africans are obsessed with a detestation against NP-politics, - after 45 years of Natspeak and doubletalk - that is quite understandable. But we should realise that there is - or ought to be a world of difference between NP-politics in the Apartheid System and democratic politics in the New South Africa.

Although the wheelings and dealings and the messy compromises that are inseparable from politics may be anathema for many people, there is not an alternative for democratic politics when the public interest (Public Good) of the community at large is at stake. All the important areas of public policy must be subjected to political scrutiny and control. This implies that from an organisational point of view any institution trusted with responsibilities of an important public nature - and for that matter also public broadcasting - must be structured and financed in a manner that can be controlled and scrutinized through political and democratic procedures. This implies that those entrusted with authority to supply a public service (like public broadcasting) must have a controlable obligation for accountability towards the public through parliament and through an open democratic process.

When I argue the case that a public broadcaster can only be "public" if it is placed squarely in the political arena (broadly defined), I am not making a plea that the public broadcasting should become a State department or that it should be subjected to daily political or ministerial intervention. On the contrary. When the Board of the Public Corporation responsible for public broadcasting is appointed by the government, it and its employees must enjoy the highest degree of autonomy. The only "contact" between the Board and the government must be the Board's accountability towards the government when it

presents its annual report to the minister responsible for the SABC. As far as the employees are concerned, the highest degree of professional autonomy must be given to them and this autonomy must be protected effectively - legally if necessary. Over the last two or three decades a pattern has developed in South Africa whereby Ministers are calling senior employees of the SABC directly - especially in the news department - to give them all kinds of instructions. (I know of at least one minister who will be almost paralysed and unable to do his daily work if his "privileges" to intervene with the SABC are withdrawn!) This kind of party political intervention with the Public Broadcaster should be stopped immediately and effective precaution should be taken to ensure that it should never happen again.

Let me conclude by saying that I am not in agreement with those who are in favour of an independent Board for the SABC and are of the opinion that the so-called independence can be attained if four judges are empowered with the task of electing a so-called independent or representative Board. There may be merit in this procedure given the very delicate phase in the transition towards a system of parliamentary democracy. But it should not become the pattern for the future. I am of the opinion that the appointment of the new board should have been postponed until the Transitional Executive Council (TEC) will be in place - hopefully in three months' time. The appointment of a new Board - for say a period of only 18 months - could then have been the first point on the agenda of the TEC.