

Chris Whitfield @ V & A Forum

Speech Transcript - Cape Town Press Club

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Venue: The Forum, V & A Hotel, V & A Waterfront

I have been asked to talk on two subjects, which I believe should not be conflated but which have unfortunately been drawn together by those keen to make mileage in the current climate.

The two issues are the so-called Brown Envelope scandal - although I am told that brown envelopes were never used - and the government and ANC's assault on the media.

I am not going to deal with all the facts that have emerged about the Brown Envelope issue in detail - I am sure you are familiar with them by now and I will take questions on any aspect of it - but will make a few observations.

The first would be that I believe the revelations so far - that two senior Cape Argus journalists were effectively paid via a PR company they clandestinely set up to write stories which supported the agenda of a faction of the ANC - are the tip of a much, much bigger iceberg.

As Western Cape Premier Helen Zille has revealed, some R80 million to R100m was paid out to three public relations companies by the Western Cape government in just two and a half years. As far as we have been able to establish, the amount paid to the PR company founded by the journalists was around R200 000 to R300 000.

All of this lavish spending took place during the time that Ebrahim Rasool was premier of the province, but the vast majority of this money was disbursed by two departments. Coincidentally, or not, there was one particular individual - not Rasool, I must stress - who was in charge of the departments during the time that the spending frenzy took place. This is the same person who allegedly facilitated the payments to the Argus journalists and who, it seems, became more ambitious as the years went by.

It is beyond conception that this sort of money, R80m, could be required for public relations work in the circumstances and I believe that various people were busy enriching themselves by tender manipulation. Various of them should be in jail rather than enjoying the good life at the taxpayers' expense, as is presently the case.

As you might have read, Helen Zille has forwarded the results of an audit into these tenders to the commercial crimes unit. The Cape Argus has also forwarded the documentation it has on this issue to the unit, including the findings of its own investigation into the original scandal which erupted in 2005. As things stand we do not have any corroborated evidence to suggest more involvement by journalists in this corruption. There have been rumours and allegations, but we have been unable to verify them, and it is my passionate hope that no more have been involved, be they from our newspapers or any other.

What I do know is that the editor of the Cape Argus, Gasant Abarder, myself and the management of Independent Newspapers are committed to having every aspect of this issue resolved and aired, whether it involves more of our people or not.

I personally hope it will go all the way to court and I look forward to seeing a whole range of individuals in the witness stand.

All of that said, I find it ironic that the ANC is now using this saga as part of its reasoning for creating a media tribunal. Surely it should be looking at the immense beam in its own eye: the very people who allegedly did the corrupting in this case were senior ANC people.

And who was it that eventually exposed this issue in spite of the ANC having done its own internal investigation and (Ashley)

Smith having initially gone to them with his confession? It was, as you will know, the Cape Argus itself - the dreaded media.

I must confess to having believed until quite recently that there was hope that this media tribunal and the disastrous Protection of Information Bill would not see the light of day. We have confronted similar threats and seen them off before. Some of us are old enough to remember similar attempts to muzzle the media in the 1970s and 1980s.

Last week, however, I got the sense that all that hope was dashed. In the wake of the ArcelorMittal deal, we had the President of the country announcing a crackdown on corruption in carefully selected government departments and then flailing away at the media in his ANC Today newsletter. This all within days of the astonishingly heavy-handed arrest of Sunday Times journalist Mzilikazi wa Afrika.

All of those events speak to the media crackdown. The ArcelorMittal deal is the most striking example yet of what some have taken to calling crony capitalism: a *modus operandi* in which the politically connected are given favourable treatment by government. In this case the cronies include a relative of the President and the Guptas, businessmen who are reportedly very close to Jacob Zuma and his family and who are about to launch an ANC-friendly newspaper.

Instead of calling an immediate investigation into the rot in the Department of Mineral Resources, which facilitates this nonsense, the President has chosen to send his corruption busters after officials in a range of government departments. Basically he is going after the small fish while the big ones are given free rein.

I believe this so-called crackdown - and, for that matter, the belated decision this week to impose a moratorium on mineral prospecting rights - is a cynical attempt to manipulate public perceptions about the government's approach to corruption at the very moment when it attempts to force through the parliamentary process a piece of legislation designed to cover up corruption. I am sure you have all read about the Protection of Information Bill and will understand that if it becomes law it will have a devastating effect on the ability of investigative journalists to do their work - which is, in essence, to expose corruption.

The cherry on the top of this depressing passage was the President's letter in ANC Today. Having read the array of disingenuous arguments he marshals in that letter, I have no doubt now that the ANC and the government it controls is deadly serious about the media appeals tribunal and generally taking on the media.

No doubt the ANC Today letter was written by somebody else, but the fact that Zuma was prepared to lend his name to it is, to my mind, one of the more depressing developments in South Africa recently.

A telling bit of sophistry in it is the suggestion that the people of this country rejected the media's negativity by turning the World Cup into a great success. If anything, the media here was guilty of being overly anxious to make the thing a success. Foreign newspapers which dared to suggest the World Cup might be a disaster were savaged by the local media and the tournament in this country was covered as if it was one enormous party: if anything, journalists were wearing rose-tinted glasses.

Whatever the case, it is now clear that the current regime of ANC leaders does intend going ahead with its assault on the media.

There are a couple of other points I should make here. One is that as a journalist I find it uncomfortable being pitted against a particular political party in the fashion that is taking place at the moment - I believe objectivity should be the ultimate goal of all journalists and we should be wary of politicians of any stripe - but it is the first time in 16 years that I believe journalists are being forced to take a decisive stand in the interests of their craft or profession or whatever you want to call it, and in the interests of democracy.

Another point is that we must acknowledge that there are problems in the media itself. But if the powers that be are unhappy with the reach of the media, the skills in our newsrooms, the lack of investment in journalism and the complexions or nationality of our owners, surely they should be taking it up with them rather than punishing the journalism and, by extension, the people it informs and hopefully safeguards?

Then there is the imminent arrival on our shores of The New Age newspaper, the brainchild of the aforementioned Guptas. Is it a coincidence that the current wave of assaults on the media has gathered intensity just as this ANC-supporting newspaper poises to launch in late September?

While it seems that the Guptas might have other business objectives in launching a product that will no doubt please the government, everybody knows what happened to other recent attempts to launch national newspapers in this country.

In short, they need every bit of help they can get, and Blade Nzimande, Jackson Mthembu and cohorts are lining up to make their landing as comfortable as possible.

Finally, there is the role of big business in all this. I believe we are approaching what people are calling a tipping point in South Africa or, as somebody suggested, a moment when the canary that sings during the clean air of democracy starts to splutter.

Newspapers that retain a critical capacity - for they are clearly the target of this latest round of attacks - have responded vigorously, as has civil society.

I was struck by some analysis in the Sunday Times in which author Jonny Steinberg suggested that the ruling party effectively has two constituencies to accommodate: a grassroots one and another that makes up the bulk of its tax base, and which might not be a natural supporter of the ANC.

These steps against the media are designed to keep the truth from these constituencies, which are both becoming restless: as powerful players in one of them, business leaders standing for press freedom could play an important role in bringing this dangerous trend against the media, and democracy, to a halt.

The momentum in civil society against the bill and tribunal is growing. Ordinary people realise this is not just about journalists, but about restrictions on information which they need to make important decisions - be that data on the country's fishing stocks, how a city council has arrived at a rates formula or who is profiting from a housing development in your neighbourhood.

We have all been extremely heartened by Gareth Ackerman's intervention yesterday and Bobby Godsell's comments, but where are the rest of the big players?

For the business community - or any concerned South African, for that matter - to stand outside this debate would be terribly short-sighted. My fond hope is that they will all join us in resisting what I believe are steps that will ultimately choke the precious progress we have made in the past 20 years.

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