

**See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak and Publish no Evil:
The Relationship between P.W. Botha
and the Pro-establishment Afrikaans Press during the 1980s**

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Our newspapers were created by Nationalists for NP purposes and are understood thereby to struggle for a national cause in accordance with the policy as stipulated by the representatives and official bodies of the Party ¹

This was how the National Party (NP) demagogue D.F. Malan described the NP's relationship with its press in 1936. As far as many NP politicians were concerned, this description still ought to have applied fifty years later – and in many ways it did.

Traditionally, the political positioning of the South African mainstream press was overtly and plainly divided according to language. The English press, in general, supported the liberal opposition parties and was anti-Nationalist. The Afrikaans newspapers were pro-NP and had a long history of supporting successive Nationalist Governments.² The most powerful Afrikaans press house was *Nasionale Pers* (NasPers). Besides the Sunday newspaper *Rapport*, their three provincial flagships dominated the Afrikaans newspaper market: *Die Volksblad* was based in the Free State, *Die Burger* serviced the Cape and *Beeld* covered the Transvaal.³

These three dailies, owned by the massive and influential *Nasionale Pers*, were the dominant Afrikaans newspapers. Their focus and influence fell inside the white party political landscape and they serviced predominantly Afrikaans whites. Most Afrikaans-speaking whites supported the National Party, as did these newspapers.⁴ As such, these papers had a far-reaching influence on the Afrikaans electorate.⁵

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1 “Ons koerante is deur Nasionale opgerig vir NP doeleindes en word veronderstel die stryd vir 'n groot volksaak te voer in ooreenstemming met die beleid neergelê deur die verteenwoordigende en offisiële liggame van die Party.” C F J Muller, *Sonop in die Suide*, (Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1990), p 665. All quotations from Afrikaans sources, including this one, have been translated into English. The original Afrikaans version of each translation is quoted in the appropriate footnote.

2 D van Pletzen, (ed), *The Official Yearbook of the Republic of South Africa 1988/89* (Department of Foreign Affairs, Pretoria, 1989), p 641.

3 Van Pletzen, *The Official Yearbook 1988/89*, p 644. *Die Oosterlig* was also an influential newspaper, in the Eastern Cape, but for the purposes of this study, focus will fall on the above-mentioned four newspapers.

4 W D Beukes, (red), *Oor Grense Heen – op Pad na 'n Nasionale Pers 1948-1990* (Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1992), p 538.

5 G S Jackson, *Breaking Story – the South African Press* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1993), p 17.

Traditionally, and holistically regarded, these papers had a very cosy relationship with successive National Party Governments. It is important to understand that the snug relationship between the National Party and the Afrikaans newspapers never was a secret. The mainstream Afrikaans press was proudly associated with the National Party and its policies.⁶

However, since the 1970s, and particularly during the 1980s, the Afrikaans press became increasingly sober in its critique of the National Party and the National Party Governments. This does not mean to suggest that the Afrikaans press abandoned their allegiance to the party.⁷ They still supported the basic tenets of the National Party's policy and the majority of the Government's plans and decisions. The Afrikaans press energetically propagated the Botha Government's more progressive – and also traditionalist die-hard – steps, including the demolition of petty apartheid, the creation of the Tricameral Parliament, Botha's firm handling of the split with the right-wingers in the Party and the Government's stance towards the international community.⁸ It must be noted that the Afrikaans press did not applaud all the State did blindly.⁹ It can best be described, as the *Sunday Times* did, that during the 1980s the Afrikaans press turned from "lapdog into watchdog".¹⁰

The new tendency of the Afrikaans press during the Botha years, was not to espouse everything the National Party did as gospel, but rather to accompany its still vigorous support of the Party with sober and defined critique. This was not always a pleasant experience for either the Afrikaans newspapers or the Botha Government, which took some time to get used to their traditional mouthpieces slowly becoming relatively inquisitive at times. Although the Afrikaans press continued to support the Party, the Government and particularly P.W. Botha still expected their indiscriminating loyalty.¹¹ This evolutionary process developed slowly and sporadically in the public eye, and although there cannot be any suggestion of a break between the National Party and the Afrikaans Press during the 1980s, the process was nonetheless a sobering experience for both parties involved. While neither of the two wanted or could afford to alienate the other and while they kept up appearances, their symbiotic affair was not nearly as intimate as it once was. This article will examine, in the broadest terms, the cooling of relations during the tense 1980s, that had gradually set in between the National Party and its closest of allies.

The crown and cross of the Afrikaans press

The one-time editor of *Die Volksblad*, Hennie van Deventer, explained the difficult position of Afrikaans newsmen in the 1980s. He noted that the Government expected special treatment from the Afrikaans newspapers. He wrote that as long as the newspapers agreed with the politicians, the relationship between them was positive, but when the newspapers differed from the Party, things got sour:

Call it the special cross of the Afrikaans newspaper. What that cross entailed, was an outlandish expectance amongst politicians of a special inside track, a priority status to state demands. And the candour to communicate wishes from a position of power, fairly

6 Jackson, *Breaking Story*, p 33

7 J McClurg, "Toeing the Line", *Leadership SA*, 5, 6, 1986, p 79

8 Beukes (red), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 483

9 McClurg, "Toeing the Line", p 79

10 McClurg, "Toeing the Line", p 76

11 H van Deventer, *Kroniek van 'n Koerantman* (Tarlehoet, Welgemoed, 1998), p 86

brusquely if needed be. As long as all were in agreement, it was a time of embraces. As the political pressure mounted, it became more, to use the Biblical word, far from embracing.¹²

One criticism that the Afrikaans press flung at the English press on various occasions was that they had no sense of patriotic journalism and that they were always negative deliberately – that they intentionally presented the state of affairs as being worse than they were.¹³ On the other hand, the Afrikaans press was accused of always and deliberately presenting the state of affairs in a much better light than was necessary and that it was disgracefully biased in its protection and support of the Government.¹⁴

The newspaperman and academic, Dr Willem de Klerk, wrote dramatically, as quoted by Tomaselli, about what the Afrikaans press felt was inherently wrong with the mainstream liberal English press:

In over-emphasising the negative aspects of South Africa, with under-emphasis of the positive, I feel that they are often guilty in this respect. There is often a fanatical wilfulness, even a wantonness, to be found in their columns, a one-sidedness and venom that looks suspiciously like an internationally orientated attempt to destroy South Africa's balance ...¹⁵

When the Botha Government started its clamp down on the liberties of the media, as part of the States of Emergency during the mid-1980s, the Afrikaans press did not attack the State, but instead reserved its harshest blame for the liberal English press. In March 1986, the Managing Director of *Nasionale Pers*, Ton Vosloo, gave a talk at the Pretoria Technikon about how he regarded the role of the press in times of social unrest. He started off by pronouncing how valuable “constructive journalism” [“opbouende joernalistiek”] was for developing the moral fibre of a nation.¹⁶ Referring to the liberal press, he spoke of how they were no longer simply messengers, but had become involved with the events they covered. He alleged that these newspapermen placed more emphasis on their own commentary than the facts, using the newspapers to propagate their own distorted viewpoints.¹⁷

Vosloo stated that those liberal reporters who were so ardently opposed to the *status quo* should remember that Oliver Tambo, whom they regarded as a freedom fighter, would not allow a free press should he come into power. He said that it was upsetting how many reporters wanted to be part of the revolutionary cause.¹⁸

Using some loaded language Vosloo beseeched newspapermen to follow the Government and support its approach to change. He said that if journalists did not adhere to objectivity and support the Government's reformist policies, the media would in no small way be responsible for pulling the country into a “hellish

12 “Noem dit maar die spesiale kruis van die Afrikaanse koerant. Wat daardie kruis behels het, was 'n buitensporige verwagting onder politici van 'n spesiale binnebaan, 'n voorkeurstatus om eise te kan stel. En die vrymoedigheid om wense uit 'n posisie van gesag te kommunikeer, taamlik bot ook as dit nodig is. Solank saamgestem is, was dit 'n tyd vir omhelsing. Namate die politieke druk opgebou het, het die tye egter meer geword om, volgens die Bybelse woord, ver van omhelsing te wees.” Van Deventer, *Kroniek van 'n Koerantman*, p 86.

13 K. Tomaselli, R. Tomaselli & J. Muller, *Narrating the Crisis* (Currey, Johannesburg, 1987), p 96.

14 Tomaselli, Tomaselli & Muller, *Narrating the Crisis*, p 97.

15 Tomaselli, Tomaselli & Muller, *Narrating the Crisis*, p 97.

16 T. Vosloo, “Robert Goldtron en die Rol van die Pers in Krisistye”, *Equid Novi*, 7, 2, 1986, p 78.

17 Vosloo, “Robert Goldtron”, p 79.

18 Vosloo, “Robert Goldtron”, p 79.

dictatorship". Vosloo put it to the press that, as the Government was busy working on evolutionary reforms, journalists had to make a choice:

... [journalists] had to fall in line on the tiring road to an evolutionary, open community with increasing prosperity for all, or have to be hauled across the cliffs of hell and oppression where the press will be the absolute tool of the political dictator who allows no opposition, open dialogue or open process of civilisation¹⁹

He added that overseas media people might not approve of his viewpoints, but that it was because their eyes were "glued shut with the wax of *naïveté*".²⁰

Throughout the 1980s, the Afrikaans press blamed the English newspapers' coverage of the South African political crisis for having prompted the Botha Government's clamp down on the media. The Afrikaans press clearly saw itself as the only really respectful press and it therefore, time and again, condoned the Government's steps, because it agreed with the authorities that not everybody could be trusted with something as precious as press freedom.²¹ The Afrikaans press argued that although no one wanted the web of media restrictions²² imposed on the press, they thought it to be necessary to ward off the terrorist onslaught of the immediate future. The Afrikaans press explained that in order to protect democratic freedoms, the Government sometimes needed to curtail them temporarily in order to guarantee its own long-term survival.²³

The English press scoffed at this and proclaimed itself the last bastion of press freedom in the apartheid-state. The Afrikaans press hit back by repeating that it was because of the English press' irresponsibility that the Government had been forced to take steps. Only when the English press proved that it could be trusted to act responsibly with these liberties – the Afrikaans press regarded itself as being 'responsible' – could they claim to be fighters for freedom of speech.²⁴

Not only did the Afrikaans press support and propagate their basic policies – they even went so far as to try and rationalise the State's media restrictions. It could not then have been too much of a surprise when the State President, speaking at the opening of the 1986 Cape Congress of the NP, warmly applauded the support of *Nasionale Pers*.²⁵ Although at first glance the relationship between the National Party Government of P.W. Botha and the Afrikaans press might have seemed like one happy family, it was not. In fact, tensions were mounting.

19 "...hy moet inval op die moeisame pad na 'n evolusionêre, ope gemeenskap met toenemende welvaart vir almal, of hy moet op sleptou geneem word die afgronde van hel en verdrukking in waar die pers die absolute werktuig van die politieke diktatuur wag teen teenspraak, ope gesprek of ope beskawingsproses ken nie" Vosloo, "Robert Goldtron", p 83

20 "...dik geplak is met die was van naïwiteit" Vosloo, "Robert Goldtron", p 83

21 Beukes (red.), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 155

22 By 1985, it had become illegal to take pictures of, videotape, draw, or make a sound recording (broadcast and distribution of the afore-mentioned was also prohibited) of any public disturbance, riot, strike, boycott, fight, killing and / or of the actions of a security officer – without the permission of the Police Commissioner or his appointed deputies. See C Cooper, *et al*, "Restrictions on the Media", *South African Race Relations Survey 1985* (South African Institute for Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1986), p 460

23 Beukes (red.), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 155

24 Beukes (red.), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 155

25 Chris Heunis Private Collection at Institute for Contemporary History (INCH): PV895: 4/2, volume 26

When the honeymoon is over: Problems between the Afrikaans press and Government

A number of thorny issues threatened to jeopardise the traditionally cordial relations between these two groups. The editor of *Die Volksblad* for most of the Botha-era, Hennie van Deventer (who later wrote extensively on the position of the Afrikaans press during this time) summarised the main points of contention.

Van Deventer pointed out the authorities' collective view of the various newspapers and publications as: *the press*. The Afrikaans press' problem was that they felt that although they supported the Government and subscribed to its web of rules and regulations, when it came to dishing out punishment, the authorities did not differentiate between them and the liberal and/or anti-government press.²⁶

Secondly, there were the mesh of regulations, some of which were important and others "simply daft," that prescribed the scope of media activity. Even as vigorous a supporter of the NP as Van Deventer noted that the publishing of a newspaper in South Africa, irrespective of its political tendencies, was exceptionally risky.²⁷ Van Deventer noted that the Afrikaans press became systematically fed-up with the Botha Government's cavalier attitude regarding press freedom and its endless attempts to silence the media. Included in this list of grievances was the Government's high-handed expectation of "respectful submissiveness" ["respekvolle onderdanigheid"] from the Afrikaans press.²⁸

Thirdly, Van Deventer mentioned the constant threat of Government interference. He stated that different Nationalist Governments had a tendency to handle the Afrikaans press as if they were childish. Furthermore, there was little consensus over what was meant by the term, 'freedom of the press.' The press was also blamed for the existence of bad news. He added that too many different role-players wanted to use the newspapers to propagate their goals and viewpoints.²⁹

A further theme addressed by Van Deventer was television – specifically the South African Broadcasting Corporation's television service (SABC TV). The problems here were twofold. On the one hand, the Afrikaans press was losing advertising revenue to SABC TV and the Afrikaans press bosses blamed the Government for not intervening. Secondly, the Afrikaans press was losing out on stories because of the SABC. Because of their longstanding relationship with the NP Governments, the Afrikaans press were treated to scoops from Government circles and they were usually the first to report big Government announcements. SABC TV however proved to be a far more alluring, not to mention glamorous, medium for Government officials.³⁰ He described NP officials' egotistical love for the medium and went so far as to say that they would sell their souls if it meant that they could get onto TV.³¹ He noted, rather bitterly, how politicians refused to give more emphasis to their dealings with the newspapers instead of jockeying for time on TV: "But all in vain. The newspaper was good enough to fight elections. But for the ego TV was the magic

26 Hennie van Deventer Private Collection at INCH: PV677 1/ 24/ 29 Speech no 52

27 Hennie van Deventer Private Collection at INCH: PV677 1/ 24/ 29 Speech no 52

28 Van Deventer, *Kroniek van 'n Koerantman*, p 76

29 Hennie van Deventer Private Collection at INCH: PV677 1/ 24/ 29 Speech no 52

30 Hennie van Deventer Private Collection at INCH: PV677 1/ 24/ 2/ 14 Speech no 83

31 Van Deventer, *Kroniek van 'n Koerantman*, p 90

potion.”³² Van Deventer urged the NP authorities to be more accommodating regarding their advertising support of the Afrikaans press and promulgation of their announcements in order to help the Afrikaans press compete with TV.³³ This service included, for example at *Die Volksblad*, that those journalists that were not supporters of the NP cordially requested to refrain from covering elections.³⁴

Van Deventer also complained about obtaining important press releases, speeches and comments from inept or elusive Government officials. He noted how some Government officials and departments became increasingly removed from the press inside a “cocoon of inaccessibility” although they still expected favours from the Afrikaans newspapers. Another problem, according to Van Deventer, was that some public relations officers of Government officials had the habit of fending the press away from these officials.³⁵

Lastly, it is worth mentioning Van Deventer’s observation that not all of the Afrikaans press’ journalists generally were Nationalists anymore. His cryptic notes read: “Some of them stand increasingly away from the NP and their lacking loyalty is felt if the party from its side does not treat its newspapers correctly.”³⁶

Initially the Afrikaans press rationalised the Government’s media curbs as necessary short-term measures to endure while the regime quickly and sufficiently dealt with the crises. However, as the Botha Government kept on weaving an increasingly tighter web of media restrictions, even the Afrikaans press was prompted to speak out – if only in a rather muffled voice. In August 1987, *Die Burger* expressed its reservations about the sensibility of intensifying the restrictions. The newspaper argued that people should not receive the good news without being informed of the bad as well. It warned that if people were not given all the facts, South Africans might very well lose touch with reality:

Not only the positive news must reach the public ... Also negative developments must not be muffled, otherwise a situation can develop as in the old Rhodesia [currently Zimbabwe] where a section of the population lost touch with the realities of their country’s situation³⁷

As has already been noted, during the middle and latter part of the decade, as the South African crisis reached climax after climax, State President Botha and his Government were prone to take an either-for-or-against-us stance when it came to dealing with criticism. When the Afrikaans press eventually did speak out against the authorities’ handling of the media, irrespective of how subtly, the Government instinctively lobbed the Afrikaans newspapers into the same category as its opponents in the media sector. This only served to sour the attitude of many stakeholders in the

32 “Maar pure verniet Koerant was genoeg om verkiesings te veg Maar vir die ego was TV die wonderekstrak” Van Deventer, *Kroniek van ’n Koerantman*, p 91

33 Hennie van Deventer Private Collection at INCH: PV677 1/ 24/ 2/ 14 Speech no 83

34 Van Deventer, *Kroniek van ’n Koerantman*, p 79

35 Van Deventer, *Kroniek van ’n Koerantman*, p 78

36 “Van hulle staan al verder weg van NP en hul gebrekkige lojaliteit word gevoel as party van sy kant koerante nie reg behandel nie” Hennie van Deventer Private Collection at INCH: PV677 1/ 24/ 2/ 14 Speech no 83

37 “Nie net positiewe nuus [moet] by die publiek uitkom nie ... Ook negatiewe ontwikkelinge mag nie verswyg word nie, anders kan ’n situasie ontstaan soos die in die ou Rhodesië [tans Zimbabwe] waar ’n deel van die bevolking geheel en al uit voeling met die werklike toestand in die land geraak het” Beukes (red), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 156

Afrikaans press against the Botha Government further – stakeholders who up to that time had supported the Government. One Government official was especially oversensitive and extremely easily offended if even the slightest criticism of him appeared in the Afrikaans press – State President P.W. Botha.³⁸

The crocodile with the thin skin: The President's attitude towards the Afrikaans press

In a parliamentary debate in August 1987, it was argued that the Government and State President's desire to curb the media under the rubric of emergency conditions, was born out of an egotistical and paranoid intolerance of criticism. An MP of the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), stated:

There is a political paranoia prevailing in the minds of the Government about any kind of criticism. The Hon State President has shown very clear and dangerous signs of that

He singled out the President's attitude, saying that P.W. Botha

... has shown signs of having reached the stage at which he can actually no longer stand criticism, of whatever nature ... He has reached a degree of intolerance which makes it impossible for him to function sensibly within a democratic system³⁹

P.W. Botha demanded, and usually got, special treatment from the Afrikaans press. When stories about the Government appeared in the Afrikaans press that annoyed the State President, the editor could expect a personal phone call from a fuming Botha, demanding an explanation and an apology. State President Botha even told Ton Vosloo that if the newspapers of *Nasionale Pers* were going to print negative stories about him, he expected them to inform him beforehand.⁴⁰

It was not only criticism which upset the State President, but indeed anything less than total compliance. On 6 December 1986, he and senior members of his cabinet convened a meeting with the press bosses of both the English and Afrikaans press to try and get them to voluntarily accept and promote the Government's stringent Emergency Media Regulations.⁴¹ The State President warned that the Government was planning to act in order to protect the country and that included protecting the press. He said that if they did not want to cooperate, the press houses would pay the price. "The government is planning to act and to protect the country – protection, protection of the press groups included. If not they will have to pay the penalty."⁴²

This meeting was brought to an abrupt halt when the State President forewarned the press bosses that he had tried to be reasonable with them, because he wanted to join hands with them. He said that he was not a dictator, but that the time of toying with each other was over. He said that neither he nor South Africa was going to allow it any longer. The State President told the pressmen:

38 Beukes (red), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 483

39 HANSARD 27 August 1987, col 4699

40 Van Deventer, *Kroniek van 'n Koerantman*, p 87

41 P W Botha Private Collection at INCH: PV203 PS 12/ 93/ 2

42 "Die Regering is van plan om op te tree en die land te beskerm – beskerming, beskerming van die persgroepe ingesluit. So nie moet hulle die prys betaal" P W Botha Private Collection at INCH: PV203 PS 12/ 93/ 2

[T]he time for toying with each other is over South Africa will not stand for it any longer and the State President will not stand for it any longer There must be no misunderstanding⁴³

This meeting, or rather confrontation, took place in private, but in the remaining years of Botha's tenure as State President, he increasingly took his utter disdain for the media into the public arena. This included his growing contempt for the Afrikaans press. The journalists Alf Reis and Ebbe Dommissie, each a doyen of the Afrikaans press, described how during the latter half of the decade, pressmen noticed a growing change in Botha's attitude towards the media in general. He became increasingly reclusive and avoided contact with journalists irrespective of their political inclination.⁴⁴

These seasoned reporters noted that on top of this, the State President also clashed with friendly journalists.⁴⁵ The President's high-handed attitude regarding the Afrikaans press and criticism, soured many relationships between him and Afrikaans editors. Wiets Beukes, former editor of *Die Burger*, commented:

For a decade we at *Die Burger* lived with his volcanic style by letting it roll from our backs It was easier for us because we knew that the board [of *Nasionale Pers*] backed us⁴⁶

Nasionale Pers was not in the habit of taking the side of the Government against its own papers. Yet, it was not always as simple as that. In March 1987, Willem de Klerk resigned as editor of *Rapport*. This was after his *verligte* (enlightened, broadminded) political commentary in the popular Sunday newspaper had become just too liberal for the powers that be. In 1985, De Klerk wrote that the apartheid-system had no basis on which to build South Africa's future and not long afterwards he wrote that blacks had to be given a political say in South Africa. He also made waves by writing that South Africa's military ventures in Namibia/Angola had reached a point of saturation and that it was high time to negotiate the country out of that particular scenario; that Botha should scrap all discriminatory legislation; that the security acts had to be reviewed and watered-down as they threatened democracy; and that the ANC should be unbanned so that the Government could enter into negotiations with them.⁴⁷

State President Botha and his Government were not at all pleased by *Rapport's* outspoken liberal tendencies. At one point De Klerk was visited to by a Cabinet delegation and when this proved unsuccessful, the President took action himself. Botha attended the board meetings of *Rapport* as well as those of two of the holding companies controlling the newspaper and demanded that De Klerk be fired.⁴⁸ On top of that, National Party politicians also attacked the newspaper's political inclinations.

43 "[D]ie tyd is verby dat daar met mekaar gespeel word Suid-Afrika gaan dit nie meer vat nie en die Staatspresident gaan dit nie verder vat nie Daar moet nie misverstand wees nie" P W Botha Private Collection at INCH: PV203 PS 12/93/2

44 A Reis & E Dommissie, *Leierstryd*, (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1990), p 73

45 Reis & Dommissie, *Leierstryd*, p 73

46 "Ons van *Die Burger* het meer as 'n dekade met sy vulkaniese styl saamgeleef deur dit van ons rug te laat rol Dit is vir ons makliker gemaak omdat ons geweet het die direksie staan by ons" Beukes (red), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 484

47 Beukes (red), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 273

48 Beukes (red), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 273

Eventually, De Klerk left *Rapport* and explained publicly that he was forced to do so, by among others, staff members of the newspaper and high-ranking Nationalists.⁴⁹

Most of the time when the State President and the Afrikaans press clashed, it was taken care of outside the public glare. However, by the closing years of the decade, P.W. Botha – whose increasingly erratic style was becoming worrisome to many of the Government’s supporters – made his displeasure with the Afrikaans press very public.

The climax came in 1988. The Afrikaans paper that drove State President Botha to publicly throw down the gauntlet was *Beeld*. A collection of standpoints that differed from Botha’s had been published in it.⁵⁰ Never one to back away from confrontation, Botha publicly blasted the Afrikaans press in August 1988 during a speech he delivered at the National Party’s Natal Congress.

Not referring to *Beeld* by name, but instead calling it the “Johannesburg morning paper”, he said that it was with sadness that he now had to deal with the paper’s content. Botha portrayed himself as having been betrayed by the Afrikaans press. He said that those who knew his history would know that he had lobbied on behalf of *Nasionale Pers* throughout his political career.⁵¹

State President Botha then portrayed himself as the protector of the Afrikaans newspapers, saying that whenever the Afrikaans press had come under attack, he had gotten into the trenches and fought on their behalf. He said that he had always believed that a certain camaraderie existed between the National Party and *Nasionale Pers*; that these two South African institutions were like twin brothers which would never try and dominate each other, nor would they try to embarrass one another. He said that he hoped to continue with that positive attitude throughout the rest of his political career.⁵² Having portrayed himself as the champion of the Afrikaans press, he returned to *Beeld*.

Botha said that the newspaper had now made a point of constantly embarrassing the Government by focusing on certain burning questions facing the country and that he couldn’t believe that this represented the standpoint of the board of directors of *Nasionale Pers*. He expressed his strongest displeasure at the way *Beeld* was behaving, which he said was totally irresponsible. He said *Beeld*’s behaviour, “... has recently played into the hands of our political opponents and I reject that.”⁵³ He said that the editor should have listened to Cabinet members who had telephoned him to resolve the problem.⁵⁴

If Botha’s strong language was meant to scare the Afrikaans press from questioning the Government, it did not have the desired effect. When compared to the English press, the Afrikaans newspapers were still very much pro-establishment. The latter were however growing more independent in their evaluation of South Africa’s political situation, although not abandoning their support of the National Party. As for the Government, their disdain for the media increasingly included the Afrikaans press.

49 Beukes (red), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 274

50 Beukes (red), *Oor Grense Heen*, p 484

51 P W Botha Private Collection at INCH: PV 203 4/ 2/ 170

52 P W Botha Private Collection at INCH: PV 203 4/ 2/ 170

53 “in die afgelope tyd ... [het] in die hande van ons politieke opponente [gespeel] en ek verwerp dit ”

54 P W Botha Private Collection at INCH: PV 203 4/ 2/ 170

Only three months after the Natal Congress, Botha delivered the coarsest condemnation of the media – including the Afrikaans groups – of his tenure as State President. In November 1988, he spoke at the National Party's Transvaal Congress. It was in this speech, as already noted in the above section, that the President called journalists “little jackals” [“klein jakkalsies”] and spoke of how they refused to tell their readers about the beautiful things that were happening in the country.⁵⁵ He went much further than that, though. Botha singled out the weekend press – specifically *Rapport*, the popular and influential Afrikaans Sunday paper of *Nasionale Pers* – for his criticism.

The State President spoke of the false representation of the country's crisis and said that the distribution of such wrong perceptions had been especially rampant over that weekend. He said that the newsmen who got so hung up with these stories over weekends were on heat. He added that they were plainly carnal [“hulle is orig.”]⁵⁶ Expanding on this theme, the State President remarked that the weekend papers started to get aroused around Thursday so that by Saturday night they were really hot and on Sunday morning they dumped their fabrications [“versinsels”] on the public.

As in August 1988, the State President backtracked and restated that he had always been a supporter of *Nasionale Pers* and that some of his closest friends were newspaper people. He then went on to deliver one of his most quoted pronouncements. He said that in spite of the esteem in which he held the country's newspapermen, there were too many bad apples; too many dirty bounders [“te veel lunsriems [sic]”], too many scoundrels, who just wanted to spread mean stories about Cabinet Ministers.⁵⁷

The Sunday newspapers of *Nasionale Pers* were particularly full of *lunsriems* [sic], according to Botha. He said that *Rapport* had become a poor edition of the *Sunday Times* and that in order to get *Rapport* back in line, he was going to talk to the Press Union and Media Council and have them take care of the matter. The State President said that he expected them to correct the situation and added threateningly that if they would not, the Government would: “If they cannot, we will help them.”⁵⁸

He placed his problems with the newspaper in the broader context of state security. As already noted, the Government increasingly took a narrow either-for-or-against-us view and saw those who did not graciously accept its management of the crisis, as enemies of the State.

Anyone who disagreed with the Government, irrespective of on what point or to what extent, was simply depicted by the authorities as being irresponsible or an enemy. One anonymous official told Hennie Van Deventer that the Government was beginning to see communists and the media as equal threats to its authority.

It is then not surprising that the State President would see *Rapport's* criticism as dissident agitation. Botha said that during these tense times, South Africa could not allow itself to be jeopardised by irresolute groups:

55 P W Botha Private collection at INCH: PV 203 Speech delivered on 14 August 1988

56 P W Botha Private collection at INCH: PV 203 Speech delivered on 14 August 1988

57 P W Botha Private collection at INCH: PV 203 Speech delivered on 14 August 1988

58 “As hulle nie kan nie, sal ons hulle help” P W Botha Private collection at INCH: PV 203 Speech delivered on 14 August 1988

But you see, in this time of international turbulence, in this time of subversive forces in the world, South Africa, South Africa cannot afford to have itself torn apart by irresponsible people⁵⁹

Botha also threatened South Africa's news media by saying that he believed the authorities should tend to the problems with the press. He said that the Government should ensure that "responsible [respectable] papers" ["ordentlike koerante"], in other words those that didn't make waves, could continue with their work, while the scoundrels ["lunsriems" [sic]] dropped out.⁶⁰

He furthermore stated that to be too horny too often, always led to a miscarriage. ["Want om te veel op hitte te wees, beteken net 'n miskraam."]⁶¹ After this speech, which left many loyal Afrikaans pressmen speechless and furious, groupings of senior members of the National Party became somewhat distressed about the State President's constantly deteriorating relationship with the media and the effect it could have on the Government and the Party.⁶² If nothing else this speech, which in many respects was an upsetting display of megalomania, proved even to the most superficial commentator that the National Party Government and the Afrikaans press were no longer hand in glove. As long as P.W. Botha headed the National Party, there was very little chance for the pressmen and the authorities to return to the brotherly embraces of bygone times.

Conclusion

After all the dramatic clashes between the Government and the Afrikaans press, and in spite of the Afrikaans newspapers' denials that they were Government lackeys, some believed that it was a storm in a teacup. "They can protest as much as they like," the outspoken alternative pressman Max du Preez would say during the 1990s,

... but one truth remains: until the very last few months of P.W. Botha's term as State President, Afrikaans newspapers never opposed the National Party or their security forces on any important issue⁶³

This is a valid point in many respects, but it should also be pointed out that the Afrikaans press never saw its role or biggest political contribution to be the opposition of the *status quo*. Its political beliefs lay too deep for that. While the Conservative Party was gaining ground in the 1980s, the Afrikaans press energetically tried to prevent the whites, particularly their Afrikaner readers, from political and ideological regression. The Afrikaans press' interest and influence was to be found in white party political politics. From their pro-establishment platform, the Afrikaans press rationalised, moralised and justified Botha's reform policies to their Afrikaner readers and also enforced the sensibility of progressive political change away from Verwoerdian-apartheid.⁶⁴

59 "Maar u sien, Suid-Afrika kan in hierdie tyd van wêreldwoelinge, in hierdie tyd van ondermynende magte in die wêreld, kan Suid-Afrika nie bekostig om homself aan flarde te laat skeur deur onverantwoordelike mense nie" P.W. Botha Private collection at INCH: PV 203 Speech delivered on 14 August 1988

60 P.W. Botha Private collection at INCH: PV 203 Speech delivered on 14 August 1988

61 P.W. Botha Private collection at INCH: PV 203 Speech delivered on 14 August 1988

62 Reis & Dommissie, *Leierstryd*, p 74

63 S. de Villiers (ed), *TRC Report 4*, (Juta & Co, Cape Town, 1998), p 178

64 Van Deventer, *Kroniek van 'n Koerantman*, p 31

While speaking at a conference of newsmen in England during 1988, Hennie van Deventer said that those accusators of the Afrikaans press who criticised *Nasionale Pers* for being Government stooges and for not being more outspokenly anti-apartheid, should remember the divisions that existed in white South Africa. He said that should the National Party be ousted, it would be replaced not by liberal whites, but by right-wingers who would “tear up the constitution” and take the country back into the dark ages of apartheid. According to Van Deventer, the Afrikaans press’ biggest contribution was to fight the spread of right-wing radicalism amongst whites and to “strive for the biggest coalition of moderates” while at the same time, subtly pressuring the Government to continuously move faster and further with reform.⁶⁵

With regard to the latter point, one easily can and often does forget that the contribution of the Afrikaans journalists was their personal pacifying influence in the National Party. This contribution usually took place behind the scenes and was not chronicled. Harvey Tyson, the hard-hitting liberal English editor of *The Star*, wrote that particularly during the last stages of apartheid, Afrikaans newsmen played a valuable role. He argued that just as the English press defended the so-called alternative press, so

... did the Afrikaans press sometimes fight in later years to keep the windows open for the media in general. Their editors and managers might have done it mainly behind closed doors ... but often that was the best place from which to reach the window ... Newspaper people, with their penchant for stereotypes, often forget that the ‘good guys’ and the ‘bad guys’ are found in all camps.⁶⁶

The systematic crumbling of relations between the Government and the pro-establishment Afrikaans press signalled not only that the Botha Government was starting to fall out of step with a powerful representative of the establishment. It also illustrated how the apartheid system was increasingly demanding sacrifices the minority was no longer prepared to offer unconditionally. The dramatics concerning State President Botha, his Government and the Afrikaans Press can be read as part of the writing on the wall which chronicled the prologue to the final end of the apartheid system.

65 Hennie van Deventer Private Collection at INCH: PV 677 1/ 24/ 2/ 13 Speech 73

66 H. Tyson, *Editors under Fire* (Random House, Sandton, 1993), p 404

Abstract

In the greater history of apartheid the Afrikaans newspapers of *Nasionale Pers* stood steadfastly behind the National Party and its policy of separate development. With the eruption of the violent political crisis of the 1980s, the government of P.W. Botha tried, to a growing extent, to place media coverage of the country's political crisis under State-control through a series of laws. Gradually the situation started to affect the Government's relationship with the Afrikaans press. The latter undoubtedly still was a supporter of the National Party, but its relationship with the Government started to sway. While the Afrikaans press, compared to its past, became politically more independent – the Botha Government demanded greater loyalty. Previously, problems between press and Party had been solved behind the scenes, but now the Government – and the State President in particular – did not hesitate to berate the press publicly. This article focuses on how the once warm, symbiotic relationship between the National Party and the Afrikaans press, cooled drastically in the 1980s.

Opsomming

Sien niks boos, hoor niks boos, sê en publiseer niks boos: Die verhouding tussen P.W. Botha en die pro-establishment Afrikaanse pers gedurende die 1980's

In die breë geskiedenis van apartheid het die Afrikaanse dagblaai van *Nasionale Pers* bankvas agter die Nasionale Party en sy beleid van afsonderlike ontwikkeling gestaan. Met die gewelddadige politieke krisis wat in die 1980's uitgebars het, het die regering van P.W. Botha tot 'n groeiende mate gepoog om die media-dekking van die land se politieke krisis onder Staatsbeheer te plaas deur middel van 'n mengelmoes van wette. Stelselmatig het die situasie begin om ook die regering se verhouding met die Afrikaanse pers te affekteer. Laasgenoemde was weliswaar nog steeds 'n onbetwisbare ondersteuner van die Nasionale Party, maar sy verhouding met die regering het begin wankel. Terwyl die Afrikaanse pers, anders as in die verlede, meer polities onafhanklik geraak het – het die Botha-regering groter lojaliteit geëis. Vantevore is probleme tussen pers en Party agter die skerms berek, maar nou het die regering – en die Staatspresident by name – nie meer gehuiwer om die pers in die openbaar aan te spreek nie. Die artikel fokus op hoe die eens warm, simbiotiese verhouding tussen die Nasionale Party en Afrikaanse pers in die 1980's drasties afgekoel het.

Key words

political violence, 1980s, apartheid, draconian laws, freedom of speech, Afrikaans press, censorship, media, politics.