

THE LAST WORD / DIE LAASTE WOORD

WHY SOUTH AFRICANS DON'T GET THE NEWSPAPERS THEY DESERVE

I leave the editorship of the Sunday Times with a heavy sense of work unfinished. I did not achieve what I set out to do, and I am leaving in part because for the past couple of years I have seen no chance of doing so.

I'm not asking you to feel sorry for me. Some people are good at success, I'm good at failure. I take it as proof that one has set proper goals.

And in fact, the goal I set myself in the past 10 years was soaringly ambitious: I wanted to produce a good English-language newspaper. To do that, it was clear, one had first to try to rehabilitate a shattered profession.

At Business Day, I used to mock the eccentricity of trying to build a good newspaper on a collapsing society. On my first day, I was given a staff list of 73, and found on my desk 14 resignations. Most of them from people who were emigrating. In that first year, one third of my staff did emigrate and hardly anybody believed Business Day would survive.

In the event, the society did not collapse, nor did Business Day, and today I look at the newspaper with pride.

The Sunday Times was altogether a dif-



Ken Owen, outgoing Editor of the Sunday Times

ferent challenge. My predecessor, Tertius Myburgh, used to call it a whore; the elder sister who went on to the streets to put her younger sister through university.

The younger sister, of course, was the Rand Daily Mail, and it was never quite clear to me why the Sunday Times continued its whoring after the RDM died. I well remember the disastrous day when Tertius sacrificed great chunks of editorial space to advertising, in order to cover the Mail's losses.

We have never regained that editorial space, and the loss has had a crippling effect on the newspaper: there has never since been enough space to produce a serious newspaper, and yet

publish all those things which the Sunday Times must publish to retain its multi-cultural mass readership.

When I took over in 1990, the market research showed the effects. The newspaper's market identification was "sex and scandal" and its credibility was virtually nil. Many good journalists simply would not work for the Sunday Times. My letter of appointment told me to use the newspaper to advance the use of democracy, and I could hardly do that if nobody believed a word we said. It was like pushing wet spaghetti.

Since then a good deal has been achieved. Credibility has in fact been restored. Serious people take the newspaper seriously and we were able to play a constructive and useful role during the transition and the elections.

The staff, taken as a whole, are probably the very best that could be assembled in this country. We recently had 300 applications for four vacancies. Both Steve Mulholland, former MD of Times Media Ltd, and Roy Paulson, present MD, supported me in devising new policies designed to stabilise the staff, and I am grateful for their support.

That staff includes black, coloured and Indian people of talent, some in positions of real authority and influence.

We have set the highest circulation ever achieved, by far, and we generated profits of such magnitude that I find them embarrassing. For a long time, I managed the neat trick of lifting circula-

tion while taking the newspaper steadily up-market. After the election, of course, circulations fell sharply and the Sunday Times is only now recovering from that loss, but I believe it is a temporary condition. So where does the problem lie? Well, success has been only partial. The Sunday Times is still not a good newspaper and the press as a whole is among the worst in the English-speaking world.

We have had ample warning of trouble ahead. Mr. Thabo Mbeki says we do not properly inform the public, and that is true. Mr. Justice Chaskalson says much the same thing about our failure to cover the Constitutional Court, and while he might in fairness have made an exception of Carmel Rickard's reporting in the Sunday Times, his criticism applies to other courts: justice is no longer seen to be done because the newspapers no longer cover the courts. Local and regional governments have become pits of corruption because the searchlight of newspaper coverage has been withdrawn.

The Speaker has asked me to give my mind, in retirement, to the question of what might be done to improve our newspapers, and to make them effective instruments of our new democracy. It is partly in response to their plea that I am trying to analyse the problem and to suggest a remedy.

Newspapers exist in a state of perpetual tension between the need to make a commercial profit and the need to serve the public interest, between advertisers

and readers, between editors and managers. Our newspapers are bad because that balance has become skewed. The accusation that we do not serve the public interest is true, if not wholly then substantially, and I cannot defend our newspapers against those attacks. Everybody knows that when a newspaper fails to make a profit, like the RDM, it is in desperate trouble. Fewer people grasp that when it fails to serve the public interest it is no less trouble: its privileges, which include access to powerful people and constitutional protections of its right to publish freely, can be withdrawn. That is the threat which every newspaperman discerned behind Mr. Mbeki's criticisms. But it does no good to berate Mr. Mbeki - we have to improve our own performance.

I shall not bore you with tales of old battles, won or lost, except to say that our newspapers are to an increasing extent mere advertising media, crammed with special supplements, so called "sponsored news", phoney business success stories, advertorial and other forms of disguised commercial propaganda.

The main battles of my editorships have been fought not in the public arena, but on the line that separates editorial matter from commercial propaganda. The advertising community, which includes some of our own staff, exerts unrelenting pressure to force commercial propaganda into editorial space, and to disguise advertising as independent editorial matter. The reason is obvious: editorial matter has some credibility, advertising virtually none. In the battles I have had support from Steve Mulhol-

and Roy Paulson, but pressure comes from old quarters.

If half the newspaper or more is devoted to advertising, and the other half to sport, entertainment, manbites-dog stories, Everest, Miss South Africa, and your future in the stars - all things necessary to sell the product, where is the space to do what Mr. Mbeki, and the Speaker, and Judge Chaskelson want us to do?

To do the job properly I would need, say, an eight-page review section which would attract hardly any ads, and would take millions off the bottom line. As matters stand, I cannot even get an extra half-page for important events, and I have been trapped throughout my editorship under the restrictive advertising-editorial ratio that Tertius Myburgh thought justifiable to save the RDM. I simply could not do my job properly, and in the end, I suppose, I lost heart. Any-way, I ran out of time and energy.

I do not dwell on constant production breakdowns, 19 weeks out of 52, or the vagaries of our distribution, or the failure to develop a proper home delivery system, or the use of inferior paper, or our truly dreadful printing. To do these things properly, as they should be done and are done by leading newspapers around the world, would cost money. Over the year I have put forward ideas to deal with the problems, within the context of profitable operation, but I can't think of any occasion on which my view prevailed.

I did try three times to discuss these matters with Ian McPherson, then chairman of SAAN, and on each occasion he averted the discussion by telling me the same story: how American millionaire Charles Engelhardt made farting noises. The fourth time I spoke to him, I asked him: "Why did you fire me?"

"I was told you could not read a balance sheet," he replied. "Can I read a balance sheet?" I asked. He answered: "I don't know." At that, I gave up talking to members of the board.

My troubles came to a head under David Kovarsky. I will not bore you with details, but that period saw a full-scale assault on editorial space, with entire sections being set aside for the advertising people to produce ostensible editorial matter.

It was, of course a direct assault on my authority and status, and it descended to levels where written promises were broken, written guidelines - painfully negotiated - were ignored, and junior advertising staff felt free to insult me at will.

In the end, Kovarsky tried to force me into submission by putting me on a probation, with monthly performance reviews and a threat of dismissal after six months. I nearly resigned but was persuaded by Joel Mervis to fight it out. After six months, Kovarsky gave me a written apology, but it was a monumental waste of time and energy. But it did give me a fresh understanding of why the institution of editorship in this country, and the stature of editors, has de-

clined so catastrophically from the levels set by men like Rene de Villiers and Joel Mervis and Rainer Ellis. Editors as a class are a diminished breed. Certainly, I have found the latter years of my editorship to be demeaning and sometimes humiliating and I am glad to have reached the end.

I have served newspapers for 40 years to the limit of my health and my strength because I am a democrat who sprang from the very bottom rungs of this society, and newspapers educated me. They gave me a voice. They enabled me to campaign for a humane, liberal, free society. I regret none of it. But, I depart with a plea to the owners, whoever they may be: that tensions between profit and public interest, between managers and editors, between good business and good newspapers, require their mediation. I ask them make a public commitment to the development of at least one or two good newspapers and to accept the responsibility to see that good is achieved. I do not believe it is possible to produce a good newspaper in English in South Africa unless the overseers will it.

• *This is an edited extract of a speech given of a farewell function in Johannesburg.*

The Editorial Board of Communicare thanks Sunday Times for the permission granted to publish this extract.