

THE SACKING OF ALLISTER SPARKS

by Jill Wentzel

Rand Daily Mail readers in Johannesburg have been shaken by the firing of the editor, Allister Sparks, who has, after twenty two years of service, not even been offered another job with the SAAN group. Sunday Times editor Tertius Myburgh has been appointed joint editor of the Mail and Sunday Times, and Ken Owen is to be managing editor, which latter appointment means demotion for the current assistant editor, internationally respected Benjamin Pogrand.

The Mail readership is uniquely a community of all races which has been nurtured and supported by the Mail in a tradition of steady liberalism based on a diligence in knowing and evaluating facts and a willingness, not common among white South Africans, to face the truth.

This community now feels itself betrayed by the board of SAAN and is unconvinced by assurances that there will be no change in policy, which seems to be contradicted by the passing over of all the Mail's senior editorial staff and also the able and popular Express editor Rex Gibson in favour of two men who are not crusading journalists in the Mail tradition, whom one cannot be sure will continue the important Mail policy of bringing all sections of the community under the umbrella of one news service.

This feeling of betrayal is all the stronger because of a widespread belief that the Avowedson Trust, which owns 29% of the Mail's shareholding, and which was set up after the Louis Luyt takeover scare some years ago, had been expressly formed by enlightened businessmen to protect and cosset the Mail. Suspecting that Anglo American is the dominant force in this trust, and in the Argus Group's 30% shareholding and that Jim Bailey is the other large shareholder, Mail readers felt gratefully relieved.

The Mail readership has begun to wonder why the editor and not management has been held responsible for a financial loss, which is less than that of the other morning papers — Beeld, Die Transvaler and The Citizen. Furthermore, the drop in circulation seems more connected with a rise in the price of the Mail, which is now 5c dearer than the other Johannesburg papers except The Sowetan — and in any case the circulation is now beginning to recover from this setback. The SAAN group as a whole is profitable.

Editorials in Die Beeld and The Star have voiced widespread suspicion that this is a deliberate move to the right

to forestall Government action against the Mail, and community leaders have begun to emerge from initial puzzlement to express a similar alarm.

Fourteen academics from the University of Cape Town in a letter to the Cape Times said they suspected Mr. Sparks had been offered as a "sacrificial lamb" to pre-empt the imposition of more direct controls by the Government.

Speaking at a Wits campus meeting called to demand the release of the Nusas president and three other Republic Day detainees, Prof. John Dugard warned: "If one is correct that Allister Sparks was dismissed for political reasons as I suspect, the action of the SAAN Board will be judged not by their peers at the Rand Club but by the people of S.A. and history."

PFM spokesman on press matters, Mr. David Dalling, said "The suspicion has been created that under threat of Government intervention pursuant to the anticipated Steyn Commission report, the Management of SAAN - owners of the Mail — have bent their knees to the authorities and offered a sacrificial lamb in the form of Allister Sparks."

Helen Suzman commented forlornly, "I can only say that this is bad news indeed. (Mr. Sparks') editorials were always courageous and relevant and he has been an outspoken advocate of reform, a champion of just causes and one of the best investigative journalists in the country. I hope that the Rand Daily Mail will continue with its unique role of acting as a link between the race groups in South Africa."

The Black Sash is calling its members and other organizations to an urgent meeting to discuss the firing of Mr. Sparks and its implications. In a statement to the Mail, so far not published, its National President Joyce Harris said, "We feel we have been betrayed and that all those liberals who care about individual rights and freedoms and about justice for all have been likewise betrayed. We despair about freedom of speech, about freedom of the press, about the right to be informed, and see our country sinking into a totalitarianism from which we shall only be able to escape through the eruption of prolonged violence."

It seems fairly certain that publications like Reality will become increasingly important.