

Our National Motto: “Don't Quote Me”

WILF NUSSEY

WHEN the Nationalists bring their second republic into being the backroom broeders should redesign the South African coat of arms to replace the motto 'Unity is Strength' — a weird one, anyway, for a party which believes separation is strength.

In its stead, below a shield of Whites dexter, Blacks sinister and bureaucrats rampant, should be that ubiquitous South African comment on everything: 'Don't Quote Me'.

So widely used is it now in every niche and strata of South African society that it can take its place beside our other national buzzwords like sunshine, rugby, voetsek and boerewors.

Situation: A reporter doing a spot opinion poll in a city street asks: 'Madam, do you believe that better living conditions for servants should be enforced by law?'

'Oh no, I can't say anything about that, I might wind up in detention'.

Or, 'Ma'am, what do you think of the miniskirt?'

'Ar, it's very nice if you got long legs, y'know, but please don't quote me 'cause my husband's a company director'.

Or, 'Should schools have tuck shops?'

'Ooh you can't quote me on that, the school won't like it'.

Controversial

Situation: You want information from a government department on a subject of immediate public interest, like the critical nurse shortage, squatter removals, police pay or a certain party at the Mint, and if it is even faintly controversial, the response is likely to be:

'I am afraid I cannot comment on that, you will have to speak to the Director-General/Minister/Whoever'.

Or, 'I do not talk to the Press', or 'We are not allowed to talk to the Press'.

Or, if you know the man well enough, 'Look, I'll explain what's happening but for God's sake don't quote me or I'll be sacked'.

Some top rankers, once reached, dodge behind thick hedgerows of red tape. Ask the Transvaal Education Department about teachers' salaries, or the Prisons Department about conditions inside, and the reaction is almost invariably: 'Please submit your questions in writing'. (Answers take up to three weeks, and then say little or nothing).

Cabinet Ministers, too, have their boltholes, the favourite being 'It is not in the public interest to disclose . . .' — this even in Parliament, the nation's major forum, which has a greater right and

privilege to know than any other institution or individual.

The best ministerial example of the 'don't quote me — no comment' syndrome in recent years is that of the Minister of Police, Mr Louis le Grange.

Secrecy

Of all public service departments none is more concerned with serving the public than the police. They should be part and parcel of the public, its first and continuous contact with the State, its guardians, its helper in all things from giving the time of day to fending off terrorism.

Conversely the public must be concerned about the welfare of the police as members of the community. Their well-being is the guarantee of the public's security. Therefore police pay is very much the concern of the public, who pay it.

But Mr le Grange deems it otherwise. Last year he announced that he could not allow the issue of police salaries to be discussed publicly. His logic is strange: it was not pleasant, he said, for policemen to hear in public that they had rotten salaries and bad working conditions.

So strongly does Mr le Grange believe this that when a Cape Town reporter revealed police pay details earlier this year, the police summoned him before a magistrate to reveal his sources.

Gilbert and Sullivan would have loved it but the Attorney-General, sensibly, did not and quashed the case.

Disease

Mr le Grange's attitude reflects a yen for secrecy which has permeated the bureaucracy like some insidious disease since the National Party came to power in 1948. Confronted by powerful criticism of many of its actions, the Government decided to avoid this by the simple expedient of hiding them.

The result is the present all-pervasive timidity, indecision and 'we know what's good for you' arrogance which would not be tolerated by the public of any normal democratic society like Britain's, America's or Australia's.

But here the 'don't quote me/no comment/not in the public interest' response has been current for so long and is so commonplace that it is taken for granted as the norm and is creeping well outside officialdom into commerce and industry.

Consider the many aspects of life which the public is denied details of and prevented from questioning freely: the Defence Force (where official secrecy hides much more than it needs to),

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Obituary

RUTH HAYMAN LAZAR

It was with great sorrow that we heard of the death of Ruth Hayman. Ruth was one of the early members of the Black Sash and she willingly and generously gave us support and help on many different occasions.

An Attorney by profession, she worked selflessly and courageously and with compassion to give legal assistance to those many people of all races who were accused of political offences.

From the days of the Treason Trial in 1956 until she was served with a banning order and house arrested in 1966 she worked tirelessly to preserve the rule of law and to fight for justice in South Africa.

When the Black Sash in Johannesburg opened its Advice Office in 1962, Ruth gave advice and help on how to deal with the many problems with which Black people were faced. The cases which required legal action she handled herself and our cases with which she dealt were done Pro Deo.

After she was banned and house arrested, Ruth tried to carry on with her legal practice, but found it almost impossible. When she realised the detrimental effects on her family and on Mervyn, of the life they were now forced to live, she decided that they should emigrate to Britain.

Ruth had not been long in London when she noticed in the supermarkets that foreign immigrants were having language difficulties. She

decided to help them and on her own she started a class to teach these foreign women to speak English. This idea caught people's imagination and an organisation of neighbourhood schools was set up. Now there are nearly a hundred of these classes all over London.

Comparatively recently she assisted in forming the National Association for Teaching English as a Second Language.

During the last five years I have seen a great deal of Ruth in London. The last time I saw her was less than a month before her death. This year Ruth was most concerned about the unemployment in Britain. She wanted to do something to help so she asked me how to make a Hay Box. I made one for her and gave her the instructions on how to set about making them. She was about to start workshops where unemployed women could make these hay boxes not only to earn a little money but to help save fuel for cooking which costs a lot in Britain today. As well she wanted to make Black Rose Furniture Polish.

Ruth will always be remembered with affection and will be admired for her courage, her generous mind, her enthusiasm and above all for her kindness and compassion. She will be greatly missed not only by her family and the Black Sash but by many thousands of people in South Africa and London whom she helped in so many different ways.

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Prisons, most of the activities of the police, Marx, our fuel resources, mental asylums, an array of banned organisations and people, homelands, anything the Government declares a 'key point' under the National Key Points Act . . .

Law barrier

The list goes on and on, piled up by some one hundred laws which specifically bar knowledge from the public and behind which the overnment can act with virtual impunity, responsible to nobody but itself.

The result is such a plethora of spokesmen on everything from dog licences to attacks on Angola that a visitor might think the country is run by them.

Fulsome

While Government reaction to questioners tends to be blunt (occasionally to the point of simply slamming down the phone), that of commerce and industry is usually suave, smooth-tongued and fulsome.

That does not necessarily mean, however, that it is informative.

A typical reply by an in-house public relations office to an embarrassing question would not be 'No comment' but a silky 'At the end of the day, at this point in time, the board is in a rethink situation and production is not expected to be affected'.

Sickness

It might be funny were it not a symptom of a sickness which makes hollow our frequent claims of democracy, most frequently from those who refuse to answer questions and hide behind laws.

Democracy thrives only in a climate of free and open debate. No government can claim to be of and for and by the people unless it can stand the bright light of public questions and give honest answers.

But when a people have lost the wit and will to ask questions, or simply could not care what the answers are anyway, they deserve the government they get.

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