

**IDASA Conference in Natal calls for basic democratic rights**

PROTECTION of human rights, and in particular the right to speak, does not lie in a document but "in the citizens of a country struggling and fighting for human rights from the bottom up", according to NDM MP Peter Gastrow speaking recently at the IDASA conference on "The right to speak".

Speaking at the culmination of a day and a half conference held at the University of Natal in Durban, he was explaining and interpreting the KwaZulu Natal Indaba bill of rights in a session dealing with democratic frameworks for protecting freedom of expression.

"A bill of rights needs to reflect the rights and freedom for which people have worked and towards which they have aspired," he concluded, offering the historic joint declaration between COSATU and Inkatha as a step towards securing the right to speak.

This declaration reads in part "that all political organisations have the right to exist and the democratic right to espouse their own viewpoint."

The use of specific examples in which the issue of freedom of expression was being struggled for was a hallmark of the conference, which drew a wide spread of people together (see other story). Case studies confirmed and extended the theoretical papers given and provided participants with information often not available in the media.

One such case came movingly alive for participants as Mr J N Singh, an attorney restricted from 1963 until August this year, spoke of the effect this restriction had had on his life and that of those around him.

Unable to live or work outside the Durban magisterial district, even family holidays or the building of a house had been occasions for attempting to get ministerial permission.

For all these years a person whose name appeared on a list of those who cannot be quoted in terms of the Internal Security Act, he, to-

gether with Mr Nelson Mandela, was omitted from the list published in August this year.

Speaking during the same session as Mr Singh, Gilbert Marcus of the Wits University Centre for Applied Legal Studies led participants through the maze of laws and regulations affecting people's right to speak. This backdrop set the underlying theme of the conference: the attempt of the government to screen South Africans from both the reality of the situation and the reality of the resistance to government oppression.

"Censorship operates to shield and protect white South Africans from reality — the reality that the majority of the population are living in squalor and poverty and that years of oppression are giving vent to violent anger on an unprecedented scale," he said, pointing out that censorship must be seen not only in the more obvious laws but also in the control of school curricula, the selection of news and various other controls over the population.

Frank Meintjies of COSATU and Sefako Nyaka of the *New Nation* newspaper spelled out the manner in which the right to speak of their organisations was being controlled and restricted.

The Emergency continues to affect COSATU members in various ways," says Mr Meintjies. "There are continued detentions of shop-stewards, impromptu detentions at roadblocks, visits and threats of detention. In small towns in particular, security police behave as if COSATU is already an illegal organisation, and the harassment suffered by organisers and workers creates immense polarisation and anger."

The conference was the first major public event in the Natal region of IDASA and drew significant press attention. This was increased both by the press participation in the conference and by the timing of the event. It was held in the same week that the *Weekly Mail* was banned for one month and that

the furore over author Salman Rushdie erupted.

It was *Weekly Mail* editor, Anton Harber, closing the conference, who drew these two events together.

"Most crucial of all," he said "is the need to put the issue of censorship on the agenda of the democratic movement."

The controversy over the Rushdie event, in which the author's latest book was banned and his invitation to speak at a book week withdrawn, was "the clearest indication yet that the democratic movement in this country has not given serious thought and commitment to the notion of freedom of expression. If we are going to succeed in our fight against censorship, and put freedom of expression on the political agenda, we are going to have to get organisations to deal with it, take a stand on it, and join the fight for it," he said.

"The government controls information in order to control people; if they lose that control, then people will be able to think for

*Justice John Didcott chairs a session on the law and the right to speak, with Frank Meintjies and Gilbert Marcus*



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themselves and begin planning their own future. The fight against censorship is a fight for people to take control of their situation; it is an essential fight for a different and better South Africa."

## Ideological differences debated

THE Right to Speak conference provided an opportunity for a wide range of people and interest groups to meet.

A tea-time debate between supporters of Inkatha and members of student and community organisations drew its own audience in one of the extended breaks planned for conference participants.

The debate, heated at times, ended in friendly disagreement, with on-lookers and debaters surging back

into the plenary hall for a session in which the KwaZulu Natal Indaba and ANC proposals on human rights protections were to be discussed.

## Journalists call for conference on the press and a democratic future

A conference of journalists and press people is essential to talk through issues of freedom of the press, concluded journalists present at the Right to Speak conference.

After a session chaired by Clive Emdon of the Natal Technikon department of journalism and addressed by Sefako Nyaka, Richard Steyn of the *Natal Witness* and Rickie Naidoo of the "Save the Press" campaign, discussion on the role of the press provided one of the highlights of the conference.

Differences over responsibility and objectivity, markets and accountability, commercial and "alternative" newspapers left specialists keen to pursue their craft in more detail.

This call was sounded again by Anton Harber in his closing speech. "One can no longer be satisfied with the simple dichotomy between 'objective' journalism and 'advocacy' journalism. We need to be thinking and developing these notions to ensure that we are developing a profession that is going to be useful and valuable during and after political change."

Earlier, Richard Steyn of the *Natal Witness* had sounded his warning against the call for the press to take sides. "Without reporting that owes

no allegiance to any cause, the ordinary citizen cannot be properly informed and there can be no proper debate on democratic alternatives."

The debate was continued in other sessions with David Niddrie, a freelance journalist, spelling out the commitment of the ANC to decentralise media control and to provide for significant interests in society, including the trade unions, to have access to their own media.

It would be seeking the widest possible debate, and according to Niddrie, believed that "dictatorship knows no better breeding ground than a sycophantic press."

## The underside of human rights: corruption of truth and enforced silence

TWO presentations cut right across the issues of censorship and the right to speak, providing participants with completely different perspectives.

The first of these tackled the corruption of truth in a presentation, by the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit of Natal University, of the disinformation campaign waged against the now restricted End Censorship Campaign, and a series of five theses on corruption of truth by Dr James Cochrane, a theologian.

"When the truth is corrupted, that is, made to be whatever suits the powers and authorities who control the means of public discourse, then a common language, shared symbols and ideals, mutually accepted ways of understanding each other are also demolished; this in turn means that the foundations of human social intercourse, and thus of the political possibility of a healed society, are eroded and ultimately ruptured," he concluded after giving a description of the corruption of truth during the Hitler regime in Germany.

Defining corrupted truth as distinct from distorted truth — distorted "wherever people's biases, material interests and socialisation limit their perspectives" and capable of management by education, exposure and debate — by the nature of the systematic curtailment and destruction of the public's right to speak and be heard, Dr Cochrane quoted Lewis Carroll in attempting



to describe what was happening in South Africa:

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

The other perspective was given by educator and video producer Costas Criticos in a speech illustrated with cartoons and media images and concentrating on the "nation of refugees" which South Africa has become.

"Apartheid has stripped a nation of its citizenship — so that the majority of South Africans are refugees in their own country. The denial of political expression, education, housing and health are part of the universal experience of refugees."

He spoke of providing media literacy and access to media production as collective rights "more profound than the individual right to speak" and of the use of video to enable people to dialogue with their own situation.

Describing the use of video in presenting contrasting images to the official media in Marcos's Philippines, he pointed out that the revolution had been called the "Beta-max revolution" because of the wide distribution of this form of alternative media.



Co-Editor of the Weekly Mail, Anton Harber, closes the conference on *The Right to Speak*.



Mr Sefaka Nyaka of New Nation with Professor Keyan Tomaselli of the University of Natal.



David Niddrie (centre) talks with conference participants after providing information on the ANC constitutional guidelines.



Poet Chris Mann (right), who read his own poems at the conference reception, talks with David Marks, chairperson of the Musicians Association of Natal, and IDASA regional director, Paul Graham (convenor of the conference).