

Not so long ago the SABC was a symbol of everything that was wrong with South Africa.

Now it is staking a serious claim to a vanguard role.

MOIRA LEVY reports.

IF THE South African Broadcasting Corporation had been a political party contesting the April poll, it probably would have got my vote. Somewhere below the PAC and above the Soccer Party on the ballot paper, I would have placed my cross beside the latest symbol of racial harmony and goodwill.

An unlikely candidate on a platform of progress and reform a short time ago, the SABC has flipped its image into the reverse of what it once was. Now the in-joke in the Auckland Park newsroom is that the national broadcaster is the real alternative press.

Pretty improbable perhaps, but then consider that today a proportion of its top presenters and producers come from *Vrye Weekblad* and *The Weekly Mail*, and the person behind a lot of the thinking that went into Election '94 is the former editor of the gutsy *Indicator of Lenasia*, Ameen Akhalwaya, a top journalist who only recently was much reviled by the very establishment for which he now works.

For the tens of thousands who stayed glued to their TV screens for Election '94, the image of non-racial, non-sexist harmony and goodwill that was beamed into their living-rooms held out more of a hope for a new South Africa than many of the parties could offer.

Ebony-ivory images of Lester Venter alongside Thandeka Gqubule and Tim Modise cosily snuggling up with Penny Smythe possibly did more to create the heady atmosphere of the election days than even the carnival spirit of the voting queues.

The SABC as a symbol of the new South Africa does stretch the imagination. But, given that these days anything is possible, and that since its inception the new SABC board has declared its commitment to affirmative action and fair and impartial news coverage, it's a giant leap forward the imagination may take.

How much the SABC's new image is the result of policy and how much due to politics is difficult to discern. The people behind the scenes suggest that they set out to do something new and different with the election coverage, and then the enthusiasm of the SABC team and the spirit of the times just added their own momentum.



Reborn SABC rides

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The result was an on-screen atmosphere that was palpably invigorating and exciting, and unlike anything we have come to expect from the SABC. Television coverage over that crucial time probably did more to advance the cause of non-racialism, co-operation and goodwill than much of the political posturing of the election campaign.

According to Andre le Roux, executive director of the television election unit, Election '94 was carefully conceived; it had to be. "We realised that this was so big that nothing of this nature had been done in this country before. We had to start from scratch. We had no previous election guidelines."

Planning the technical side of the operation began last November – that was the easy part. "We were well suited to do this," said Le Roux. It was the rest that proved the real challenge. From the beginning of January, Le Roux and Akhalwaya, assistant executive editor of the television election news, began planning their moves.

Their first was to collect SABC journalists of different races, genders and skills, from various news departments, and shuffle them together into a single election pool. What they dealt out was a mix of teams that gave the election coverage its distinctive stamp.

Said Le Roux: "This was not a white event or a black event. We knew people had preconceptions about TV – that TV1 was for whites and CCV for blacks. There was no way we were going to approach the election with that in mind."

The key to the successful formula lay in the usage and spread of languages over the two main channels. The approach was two-pronged, according to Le Roux: coverage had to be accessible and easily understandable, and it had to recognise the equality of all South Africa's languages.

What that meant was that the predominant language would be English – the language most people understand – and the other official languages would receive even treatment. "We even succeeded in broadcasting in some of the minor languages – Tsonga, Venda and Swazi – during the course of the exercise."

The rest flowed from the language policy. Le Roux and Akhalwaya say they did not set out to structure anchor teams that were carefully balanced in terms of race, gender and age. "We had to deploy everyone we had to their full capacity. That in itself broke down racial and gender barriers," said Le Roux.

He and Akhalwaya are at pains to emphasise that although the SABC has an affirmative action policy, they did not make affirmative action choices when it came to deciding on the Election '94 team.

They chose people "who understand the democratisation process". "South Africa is changing, and the SABC is changing with it and attracting different people who are prepared to work for it," according to Le Roux. And there will be no going back on that – "there is no way you can unscramble that egg".

He described what he called a real *esprit de corps* in the ranks. "It was an extremely gratifying experience. We really had a situation where people came together, stayed together, and rediscovered each other. They displayed a

common goal and a common purpose, and that was the success of the election."

Akhalwaya agreed, paying tribute to the people behind the scenes who "laboured long hours under hot lights and came up trumps".

He points out that the election coverage represents a high point in a process that the SABC began some time ago. "We have been trying to be as equitable as possible in our current affairs and news coverage, keeping the important issues alive, and giving coverage to as many players as we can. We started redressing imbalances in terms of staffing some time ago. We realised we needed a wider input. We wanted to avoid stereotyping and bring in fresh voices and faces."

The less than enthusiastic response from right-wing viewers to black and well-known left-wing newsmakers and anchorpersons has not deterred the team. "We knew what we were letting ourselves in for," Akhalwaya says. "We are trying to reflect the wider South African reality. Our aim is to introduce South Africa to South Africans." ■

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the waves

Is this the funeral of apartheid?

By Lindiwe Kulu

ON THE night of 25 April 1994, youths in the black townships took to the streets. Lights were on in every house, showing that people were not asleep. They were singing and toyi-toying for joy on the streets of Khayelitsha.

Around 4.30am on the morning of 26 April we heard screams of joy. "Give your grandmother, your grandfather their IDs! The time they have waited for so long has arrived! The funeral of apartheid has arrived!"

I was preparing to go to Victoria West and Prieska as an observer but I was so excited that I could not wait to vote. I was travelling with a group of people in two cars. We decided to cast our votes in Guguletu at the Uluntu Centre.

The centre was full of old people waiting patiently to vote. When I was given the first ballot paper, something stuck in my mind and I asked myself, "is this really the washing powder that is going to wash out apartheid? Is this the funeral of it? Is this going to be done freely and fairly?"

My hand could not write properly because of my excitement and when I put the cross on the last ballot I prayed that God would be on our side, that the violence would not interfere with our election.

Then we started our journey to Victoria West. We arrived at 6.30pm and went to the nearest voting station for the closing. Things were going very well. It went well the next day too, and the next, although there were small problems. Voter education had been done and most people did attend these seminars.

I think the washing powder worked. Now we look forward to a democratic South Africa. ■



LINDIWE KULU:
In observer attire.