

THE PRESS: STRIJDOM'S "LAST BARRIER"

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THE purpose of this article is to prove that the Nationalist Government intends muzzling the English-language section of the Press in South Africa. Nine years of threats and intimidation have failed to break the back of a Press which, for all its infirmities, has played a major part in resisting Nationalist tyranny, and Strijdom now has the choice of continuing merely to rant, or of clamping legislative control on the Press. The dilemma is not a unique one for Strijdom. He has encountered similar situations before in other spheres, and always the decision has been to go ahead. Naturally. Once apartheid ceases to move forward, it falls on its face.

The Nationalists have hesitated to smother the Press till now because it would have meant packing away their shabby façade of democracy. It is indicative of what South Africa has already become that they seem ready now to do this.

This article deals, first, with the composition of the Press in South Africa; second, with the evidence pointing towards control of the Press; and, finally, with the ways in which control may be introduced.

Party Organs and Newspapers

The essential fact about the Press in South Africa is that the English-language newspapers dominate the circulation field.

Every Afrikaans newspaper in South Africa, with the exception of one assiduously non-political weekly (*Die Landstem*), is pro-Government, and every English newspaper is anti-Government. The three Nationalist-Afrikaans dailies (*Die Burger*, *Die Transvaler* and *Die Volksblad*) and the tri-weekly (*Die Oosterlig*) are pure party organs, with Cabinet Ministers among their directors. The Prime Minister, Mr. Strijdom, is chairman of the Board of Directors of *Die Transvaler*, the most politically extreme of all the Nationalist publications. Mr. Strijdom is also chairman of the Board of Trustees of *Dagbreek en Sondagnuus*, a successful Johannesburg Sunday newspaper which makes occasional flourishes of independent thought. Finally, *Die Vaderland*,

a tabloid afternoon newspaper in Johannesburg, formerly controlled by Mr. N. C. Havenga's now dead Afrikaaner Party, faithfully upholds the principles of Afrikaner Nationalism and apartheid, but allows itself, too, infrequent excursions into independent thought. This is the total of Nationalist publishing endeavour.

The success of the English newspapers lies in their appeal to Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking readers alike. There are large English dailies in all the major towns: 16 in the nine big centres, as against six Nationalist newspapers. Not a single Nationalist newspaper (apart from an insignificant periodical) is printed in the entire province of Natal, and in the whole Eastern Cape, there is only the tri-weekly *Die Oosterlig*. By contrast, in the Nationalist stronghold of the Free State, there is the important Bloemfontein English daily *The Friend*.

The combined circulation of the English newspapers is roughly 1,450,000; that of the combined Nationalist Press, 350,000. Since Afrikaners constitute more than 60 per cent. of the White population, many of them (including Nationalists) must necessarily read the English Press. The small number of non-White readers would not explain the big English circulations. Nor is the reason for the dominance of the English Press hard to find. The English newspapers deal principally in news, only secondly in politics; the Afrikaans Press offers a dreary staple diet of politics.

Hatred and Envy

Shortly after he became Prime Minister (in 1954), Mr. Strijdom told a Nationalist Press gathering that the struggle on the newspaper front had become as important, if not more important, than the struggle in Parliament. The English Press, he said, was the last remaining barrier in the path of Nationalist aspirations. For this belief of his, there are four main reasons:

- (1) He sees the English Press as an anglicizing influence, constantly sapping the fervour of Nationalist Afrikanerdom and implanting alien ideas in the life of the "volk."
- (2) The English Press is sharply critical of the intentions and accomplishments of apartheid and so "incites" non-Whites against White rule.
- (3) It enjoys a huge readership—a glittering economic prize much coveted by the small Afrikaans Press.
- (4) Finally, it is a link with critical overseas opinion and is blamed for South Africa's bad name overseas.

The Nationalists have never had any real hope of beating the English Press on the field of economic competition. The resources massed against them are too great (the giant mining houses are involved). And so the only alternative existing is political control. The Nationalists have been working towards this end, step by step, over a number of years. The record is a long one, but we give it at length, because there are many people in South Africa, otherwise realistic and hard-headed, who still need convincing on this score.

Treason

§ "Die Republikeinse Orde," a wartime document on the Nationalist Party's republican policy, which was issued with the approval of Dr. Malan, stated: "*That section of the Press which, up to the present, has served foreign interests, will have to be kept within bounds. Should it try to cause the Republic to be undone, this will be regarded as high treason and will be treated as such.*"

§ Immediately after the 1948 General Election, in which Dr. Malan captured power from General Smuts, Mr. Wentzel du Plessis (who won General Smut's personal seat in Standerton and who is now the Union's Ambassador in Washington), warned that if there was "abuse" of the freedom of the Press, the Press would have to be "*directed into more responsible channels.*"

§ Other Nationalists took up the refrain so vociferously that in 1949 the South African Society of Journalists asked Dr. Malan for a public reassurance that there would be no tampering with the freedom of the Press. Dr. Malan replied that the Nationalist Government had no intention of interfering with "the Press in general." At the Society's request, a Labour M.P. warned Parliament that the words "in general" had sinister connotations. Dr. Malan then replied that there would be no interference with "the Press."

§ At that precise moment, the Government was banning *The Guardian*, an independent, left-wing newspaper, from railway bookstalls. In Parliament, the Minister of Transport defended his action as "Government policy." (In March, 1957, AFRICA SOUTH was banned from railway bookstalls. The Minister of Transport said he had glanced through it and had found it an "obnoxious publication.")

§ In October, 1949, five months after he had stated that there would be no interference with the freedom of the Press, Dr. Malan devoted 40 minutes at a Nationalist Party congress in the Free State to attacking the English-language Press in

South Africa as "the most undisciplined in the world." He said that journalists should be registered, like doctors, and "struck off the roll" for unethical conduct.

§ But the most blatant hint of Press censorship came, a month later, from the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, Mr. Frans Erasmus, who told a Nationalist Party rally: "*As Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, I want to say to those people who send reports overseas slandering South Africa that they must not expect of me that all their reports will reach their destination. It is time the Government put its foot down, and it is doing so.*" Mr. Erasmus's statement evoked world-wide criticism, and even a Nationalist newspaper, *Die Burger*, suggested that the Minister's statement should be viewed more as an outburst of righteous indignation than as a declaration of Government policy. Mr. Erasmus then modified his remarks slightly. He said it was the Government's duty, wherever it had a legal right, to prevent such reports being sent abroad, and he added: "*If it appears that the Post Office Act is not sufficiently strict to prevent the transmission of material of this nature abroad, the Government will not hesitate to consider an amendment of the Act.*" The matter was taken no further.

Nationalist Press Joins In

A distressing aspect of the campaign against the English-language Press in South Africa is that the Nationalist newspapers, bound by no ties of camaraderie or respect for the principle of Press freedom, run behind the politicians in the hue and cry. A curb on the English-language Press, strictly speaking, would apply equally to them, but it would be superfluous: the Nationalist Press has never yet challenged its masters on fundamental issues.

The Nationalists make no attempt to disguise the fact that they regard their newspaper editors as part and parcel of the party machine. Individualism is not encouraged; and for the editor who proves himself, the rewards are good. Dr. Malan was summoned from the pulpit 40 years ago to launch *Die Burger*. Dr. A. L. Geyer, for many years editor of *Die Burger*, used to attend meetings regularly of the Nationalist Party Parliamentary caucus. Later, he went to London as South Africa's High Commissioner. Dr. H. F. Verwoerd was promoted from the editorship of *Die Transvaler* to the Cabinet, where he took over the all-important portfolio of Native Affairs. Dr. A. J. R. van Rhijn, former editor of *Die Volksblad*, became Minister of Economic Affairs. Dr. Otto du Plessis, a former editor of

Die Oosterlig, became Director of State Information and later an M.P. And so on.

"Lies, Distortions, Calumnies"

Assiduously, over the years, Nationalist politicians and newspapers have tried to undermine public confidence in the English Press, its reporters and editors. Yet, ethically, the English Press has never gone "yellow," and politically, it has been remarkably moderate in its attacks. It is never sure of how far it *wants* to go, and its erratic assaults (with newspapers like the Port Elizabeth *Evening Post* and the *Cape Times* honourable exceptions) lack consistency. If the English newspaper editors were politically as experienced and dedicated as their Afrikaner counterparts, one might have a different story to tell of South Africa to-day. Nor would this mean turning their newspapers into party-political microphones, because their "dedication" should be to the whole cause of democracy.

On the whole, then, the English Press has been a sober and cautious one. It has never warranted the interminable ferocious Nationalist attacks, on the charge that it is conducting a "campaign" of misrepresentation, distortion, slander and deliberate "incitement" of the non-White. Essentially, the question is: Who is to blame for "inciting" the non-Whites and "blackening" South Africa's name overseas—the English Press for reporting the sins of the Nationalist Government, or the Nationalist Government for committing those sins?

Another accusation against the English Press is that it is "uninformed." Yet Cabinet Ministers and Public Servants conspire to place as many obstacles as possible in the path of any English newspaper reporter who searches for the facts of the "other side." They are persistently refused information freely available to Nationalist reporters.

Another restraint on the Press is the Suppression of Communism Act, with its wide and peculiar definition of "Communism." The Act makes it an offence for newspapers to do anything to "further the aims" of what lawyers call "statutory Communism,"—because it bears no resemblance to Communism as the rest of the world knows it (except, perhaps, as the late Joe McCarthy knew it).

The Guardian was banned summarily under the Suppression of Communism Act, there being no recourse to the Courts (the rest of the English Press left *The Guardian* to fight its own battles), but immediately afterwards a newspaper, *Advance*,

of the same type appeared, and when this was banned, immediately another newspaper, also of the same type, appeared.

The question arises: Why has the Government allowed this to happen without passing a law to stop it? The answer is that when the final Press law comes, it will give the Government power of life and death over not only *New Age*, but over all other newspapers.

The Press and the Defiance Campaign

The first positive steps against the Press were taken in 1952, when a unique resistance campaign was launched against apartheid—and the Press, exercising its democratic right to report the campaign, became the target for fresh Nationalist attacks.

In that year, the African National Congress, the S.A. Indian Congress and others, launched a nation-wide “Defiance of Unjust Laws” campaign, in which nearly 10,000 volunteers of all races went to gaol for deliberately defying six selected racially discriminatory laws. It was the biggest political demonstration ever seen in South Africa. At first, the English Press tried to “play down” the campaign, but as the demonstration developed, more news space was devoted to its daily progress, and editorials discussed the trend in White rule which had given inevitable rise to it. This last naturally led to criticism of the way the Nationalist Government was handling the country’s race problems. The Nationalists were swift to take the chance offered them.

§ In May, 1952, Mr. Strijdom, then still Pretender to the Premiership, criticized the role of the English Press and warned it that newspaper editors had been flogged once in South Africa.

§ Mr. Ben Schoeman, then Minister of Labour, and now Minister of Transport, followed up with the blunt allegation that the English newspaper editors were supporting the Defiance Campaign. This, he said, was “the greatest criminal folly.” (“Supporting” in Mr. Schoeman’s view, is synonymous with “giving space to reports of.”)

§ Next, Mr. Erasmus, Minister of Defence, hinted that Government action against newspapers which published “irresponsible reports” was becoming necessary. *He said it would be unwise, however, to take steps until the Press Commission had reported.*

§ In September, 1952, Mr. Strijdom gave the first warning of the Criminal Laws Amendment Bill. If the Defiance Campaign continued, he said, the Government would be forced to take steps, not only against those who defied the law, but also against

those who encouraged them to do so. The Government might follow the example of Kenya, he said, where the British Government had considered taking "extraordinary powers, including power to control the Press."

§ In October, Mr. Strijdom repeated the warning, and then in November he declared that the Government's patience was nearly exhausted. An alteration in the law would be made, he said, to enable the Government to take the necessary steps to put an end to the Defiance Campaign. Again, his threats were directed at "hostile non-Whites, the United Party Press, and the United Party leaders."

Then, late in 1952, there was serious rioting in three Cape Province towns, where the Defiance Campaign had been particularly successful—Port Elizabeth, East London and Kimberley. White South Africa was shocked when the rioters murdered several White persons, among them a nun. The Nationalists swept to the attack. Before making even an elementary investigation into the causes of the riots, Cabinet Ministers stumped the country, apportioning the blame for the riots on the defiers, on White liberals who had sympathized with them, and on the Press.

Strijdom Keeps His Threat

As a direct consequence of the Defiance Campaign, the Nationalist Government introduced, at the short Parliamentary session in January, 1953, the "Terrible Twins": the Public Safety Act and the Criminal Laws Amendment Act. With a General Election pending, the United Party thought it politically expedient to agree to the passage of these two laws. Opposition in Parliament came only from the small Labour group and the three Native's Representatives.

The Public Safety Act gave the Government power to declare a state of emergency in the event of even minor unrest and virtually to proclaim martial law. The Criminal Laws Amendment Act prohibited "the use of language or the doing of anything likely to cause anyone to commit an offence by way of protest against any law." It prohibited also the soliciting, receiving or giving of money, or the encouragement in any way of a campaign of unlawful acts designed to induce the repeal of any law. It forbade, in fact, public expressions of sympathy with a defiance campaign.

Legal opinion obtained by the newspapers was to the effect that there could be fine shades of interpretation of this law,

and that a serious responsibility rested on editors to scrutinize all reports and editorials with the greatest care. The lawyers declared that it would be unlawful even to report a speech by a person advocating unlawful action (an unlawful strike, for example), and that the Courts also might hold it to be an offence for a newspaper to report, say, that there had been a favourable response to an appeal for funds for a defiance campaign. Fortunately (for the newspapers), the Defiance Campaign came to an end with the passing of the two Acts. But, even after that, in post mortems on the campaign, editors continued to play safe. The intimidatory effect of the Criminal Laws Amendment Act, therefore, exceeded the actual legal restraint.

The Pattern Repeats Itself

Boycott!

THE next General Election in South Africa is due towards the middle of 1958. And the pattern of Nationalist attacks on the English Press is ominously familiar.

This time it is not a Defiance Campaign for which the English-language Press is blamed, but a boycott campaign: the spectacularly successful bus boycott on the Rand and in Pretoria. The boycott is over now, and the boycotters (Africans and other non-Whites) have won the day. But examine the record of the campaign as it affected the Press:

§ Again, it is Mr. Strijdom, now Prime Minister, who fires the first shots. Speaking in Parliament, at the start of the 1957 session, he accused the English-language newspapers of playing "a venomous game of inciting the Natives, not only against the Government, but against the White man."

§ Again, it is Mr. Schoeman who follows on. The Johannesburg English-language newspapers, he said, were *deliberately encouraging the bus boycotters as part of their campaign of incitement.*

§ Mr. Swart, Minister of Justice, next accused the English-language newspapers of publishing pictures of policemen beating up Africans—"in a deliberate attempt to stir up the non-Whites against the police."

§ And the Nationalist rank-and-file took up the refrain. In the House of Assembly, a Government backbencher, Mr. J. C. Greyling, declared:

"No Press in South Africa has ever acted more recklessly and irresponsibly . . . There are two evil spirits in South Africa and I name them: These princes of the church, these so-called churchmen, who have become nothing else but political agitators

who openly preach rebellion. . . . The second evil spirit is the contemptible English Press which stops at nothing, whether it is murder or crime or manslaughter or sabotage. Everything is grasped at with only one object, and that is to break this party which is the only bulwark in the whole continent of Africa. . . . Supposing we could get the English Press to keep silent for four months in South Africa, we would have a different South Africa."

§ A Government front bencher suggested a year's shut-down, instead of four months.

§ A Government Senator, Mr. P. E. Rossouw, urged the Minister of Justice not to delay the necessary legislation to prevent the English-language Press in South Africa from "*abusing its freedom.*" "*We know there will be a tremendous outcry, but do not let us worry about the shouting, because we know what is best for them,*" he said.

Throughout the Parliamentary session, as tension mounted over the boycott, threats by the Minister of Transport took on a sharper edge.

§ "*If subversive Native organizations are to be allowed successfully to use this boycott weapon, we in this country are heading for chaos,*" he said. "*Personally, one of these days, I am going to recommend very strongly that all those meetings where Natives are being incited by agitators, White and Black, should be prohibited.*" Later he added: "*If any trouble which leads to disturbances occurs on the Witwatersrand as a result of this boycott, I am going to place the responsibility squarely, in the first instance, on the shoulders of the newspapers. . . .*"

The threat of a repetition of the 1953 anti-Press manoeuvre could not have been plainer.

THE PRESS COMMISSION

MEANWHILE, the Press Commission—whose report is expected in time for the short pre-General Election Parliamentary session in January, 1958—by its sheer existence, has inhibited the Press. It has sat for seven years, amassing evidence about the Press.

It has explored the labyrinths of newspaper control; compiled dossiers on every journalist, local or foreign, working in South Africa; issued lengthy questionnaires asking, for example, whether editors considered it necessary to handle news in a special way because of the different racial groups who would read it; and interrogated editors, reporters and foreign correspondents behind closed doors.

The oral evidence given to the Commission was heard *in camera*. One journalist, Brian Bunting (representing *New Age*), objected to being heard in secret and refused the Commission's request to appear before it. Although the Commission, enjoying the status of a Provincial Division of the Supreme Court, could exercise the powers of subpoena, it took no action against Mr. Bunting. Journalists who appeared before the Commission were seated in front of a recording machine and interrogated. One journalist insisted on taking his legal representative into the Commission's chambers. The Commission heard argument by the advocate on why he should be allowed to represent his client, and then it told him to leave and proceeded with the interrogation of the journalist. Many a sharp passage at arms occurred behind those closed doors.

The terms of reference of the Commission were:

1. The measure of concentration of control, financial and technical, of the Press in South Africa, and its effect on editorial opinion and comment and presentation of news.

2. Accuracy in the presentation of news in the Press in S.A., as well as beyond the border of S.A., by correspondents in the Union, having particular regard to (a) selection of news; (b) mixing fact and comment; (c) use of unverified facts or rumours as news, or as basis for comment; and (d) reckless statements, distortions of fact, of fabrication, and the use of any of these as news, and as basis for comment.

3. Tendencies towards monopoly or the concentration of control in regard to (a) collection of news for internal and external dissemination, and (b) the distribution of newspapers and periodicals; and generally the extent to which the publication and distribution of newspapers are inter-linked.

4. Existing restraints on the establishment of new newspapers in South Africa and the desirability or otherwise thereof.

5. The adequacy or otherwise of existing means of self-control and discipline by the Press over (a) editors, journalists and correspondents serving local newspapers and periodicals; (b) correspondents of overseas newspapers and periodicals; and (c) free-lance journalists serving the local or overseas Press.

6. The incidence of sensationalism and triviality in the make-up of newspapers.

7. The extent to which any findings under the above heads militate for or against a free Press in South Africa and the formation of an informed public opinion on political issues.

Overseas Opinion

The Press Commission arose out of a private motion introduced in the House of Assembly in 1950 by Dr. A. J. R. van Rhijn, now Minister of Economic Affairs. Dr. van Rhijn asked

that the Commission should, among other things, make recommendations on "*the internal and external reporting and the general handling of news by the various newspapers, and the advisability or otherwise of the control of such reporting.*"

Dr. van Rhijn remarked that, during the war, it was felt that the Press had needed a certain measure of self-discipline. "*It will now probably be said that the war is over, that we are no longer at war. I would like to ask you, however, whether we are enjoying peace to-day?*" Discussing reports sent out of the country, Dr. van Rhijn declared: "*I want to ask Members how we can make friends overseas if this Press campaign to incite overseas public opinion against us continues, and if we permit its continuation? I have often heard people say that we should not introduce measures of control. But I want to ask you what hope the Information Office has against such an army of foreign correspondents? To create a Press Information bureau on the one hand and to permit these reports to be sent out without any control on the other hand, is like pouring water into a barrel and leaving the tap open.*"

In the Name of White Supremacy

WHATEVER the recommendations of the Press Commission, its report will be the turning point in the Nationalist campaign against the English Press.

Is a nine-year campaign of abuse and threats, led first by Malan and then by Strijdom, to be dismissed as so much hot air?

Is Mr. Erasmus, Minister of Defence and the Nationalist Party's leading tactician in the Cape, to be discounted when he says that Government action should follow the Press Commission's report?

Is it logical for a government deliberately to arouse the political blood-lust of its followers if it has no intention of gratifying that lust? Are the enraged Rossouws and Greylings to be left unappeased?

Intimidation has reached the end of its efficacy. What does Strijdom do? Leave it at that?

Mr Harry Oppenheimer, shrewd mining financier and United Party Member of Parliament, is under no illusions about the Nationalists' intentions. After years of presenting him to its readers as the sinister "big money" influence behind the anti-Nationalist forces, the Nationalist Press recently suggested that Mr. Oppenheimer was angling for control of the powerful Argus group of English-language newspapers.

Denying this, Mr. Oppenheimer warned: "This is only part of a long and sinister campaign which the Nationalist Party has been conducting to create an atmosphere in which it can carry through its plans to muzzle the free Press in South Africa."

We believe the muzzle may come sooner than even Mr. Oppenheimer probably estimates.

Simple censorship of the Press is not likely to be the Nationalists' method. Control will come—but in the sacred name of White supremacy.

Whatever move the Government makes will be related to the non-White emancipation struggle.

In 1953 the Criminal Laws Amendment Act made it an offence to incite someone to break a law. How simple now to make it an offence just to—incite.

Incitement to racial hostility already is an offence which can be dealt with in the Courts—but Mr. Strijdom is not thinking of the Courts.

He needs an excuse to evade the Courts—and he nearly had it in the racial tension caused by the recent bus boycott in Johannesburg.

Now a new boycott has started—an economic boycott of Nationalist-controlled businesses. And so the process continues. Non-White frustration will never cease to erupt in different forms while there is a Nationalist Government in power, and the Press will never cease to be involved. It will be drawn into the struggle, even if only as a commentator on the sidelines; and, as the Defiance Campaign showed, this will be sufficient to incur the Nationalist Government's wrath.

Sooner or later must come the ultimatum: Be silent—or be silenced!

Will the English-language Press surrender its freedom? Until now, it has regarded Nationalist attacks with more distaste than alarm. It will have to be more militant in its own defence if it wants to inspire others to stand firm on the principle of Press freedom. Will the Parliamentary Opposition be able to resist the strong political medicine of the word "incitement"? It has done little to resist the smear campaign against the Press.

Time and again, complacent South Africans have said: "The Nationalists will not dare!" Yet, the Nationalists dare, and dare again, and now this same complacency manifests itself in regard to the freedom of the Press. "A Press Council to control the Press? They would not dare!"