

My individual

It must have been with a mixture of mild surprise and puzzlement that Archbishop Desmond Tutu received a bunch of statements from 127 Afrikaans journalists in late September saying sorry for their role in upholding apartheid.

It was already past the deadline for submission and most of the serious business concerning hearings on the role of the media during apartheid had already been dealt with when the pack of statements arrived.

They were all from journalists in the *Nasionale Pers* group of newspapers and magazines: *Beeld*, *Die Burger*, *Volksblad*, *Huisgenoot*, *Fair Lady*, *Insig* and even *Rapport*, jointly owned by *Naspers* and *Perskor*.

All of the statements were copies of one document – a short, rather vague and timid few paragraphs both praising *Nasionale Pers* for its past efforts in bringing about change and condemning it for its intimate relationship with the National Party.

But in submitting this docile document, the group defied an earlier public declaration by the management of *Nasionale Pers* that the company would not make a public submission to the TRC – implying that neither would individual members of the group.

Naspers group chairman Ton Vosloo was quite dismayed at the 127 journalists' act of insubordination, calling it a sour note in his long career in the company.

Archbishop Tutu, on the other hand, immediately and enthusiastically expressed his joy at the gesture, saying nice things such as how powerful it was and how significant a contribution.

But the Archbishop's joy may have been a little over the top.

Considering the serious task of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, namely to unearth the real truth about human rights violations during South Africa's apartheid past, the 127 statements are of minor significance and will have no impact on history.

Even the media hearings confirmed it. There the debate on the role of the press during apartheid lay elsewhere – between black journalists and the English print media and around former police spies in the media, also predominantly English.

The Afrikaans press, it seemed, did not really feature. Because it was considered to be part of the body politic of the 70s and 80s. Its role was almost clearly defined as an extension of the former government – give or take a few nuances between "verkramptes" and verligtes". Not much worth debating, see?

But not so in the minds of the 127 and a few others who independently made submissions to the TRC – of whom I was one.

Among us, a soul-searching debate opened up once the full extent of the truth around human rights abuses started emerging before the TRC. We seriously started questioning the paradigm in which we worked during those years.

With the knowledge of hindsight, one wouldn't have reasoned in the same way today. But back then we were working in a framework of "lojale verset" – loyal criticism – from within the verligte wing of the Afrikaner ruling establishment. By staying inside, we believed, we could be more effective in pressing for change than by criticising from outside.

But, as the panorama of suffering unfolded before the TRC, so did the extent of our naivety dawn upon us.

Our "lojale verset" had indeed been tame, it had failed to probe deeply enough into a political system that created a climate in which evil and suffering thrived.

As in the case of the group of dominees in the NG Kerk who felt they had failed in their essential duty of moral guidance to their flock and had to say it out loud, there was a growing urge among us to do the same.

For some, the prime motivation was the unwillingness of the major Afrikaans press groups to go to the TRC. They were concerned that once again Afrikaans-speaking organisa-

tions, like the NP, would be reluctant to make a meaningful gesture of humility towards reconciliation. But for most it was maybe a more personal wish for absolution.

Why?

We recalled our own experiences of the extent to which the NP and the Afrikaans press were intertwined; how an allegiance to the National cause was in some instances part of the service contract of some political reporters; how often some of us were embarrassed by being thanked publicly for our patriotic reporting at NP congresses and meetings; etc. Some even recalled being called upon to speak at NP meetings! Some of our editors contended that we could not be proper political reporters if we did not belong to the *Broederbond*.

We were always trusted more and taken into the confidence of cabinet ministers more easily because we represented the "friendly press"! It was only through hard lessons that were learnt how this confidence muzzled us.

But more than that, as the TRC hearings unfolded, we realised:

- That ordinary, white South Africans had no real clue about the past. We did not try hard enough to inform them, even to alert them about the injustices of apartheid and the suffering caused by it. If they had known would they still have voted the way they did? Some of our editors got fired for trying to do just that, while others constantly pushed the limits of their "lojale verset".
- Come election time, "lojale verset" would fly out of the window. Afrikaans newspapers would be turned into propaganda machines with election coverage that was heavily weighted in favour of the NP.
- We realised how gullible we were, how easily the authority of cabinet ministers or senior officials would be accepted on crucial issues such as torture, terrorism, the total onslaught, etc.
- And we wondered whether we contributed to the demonising of liberation movements – thus creating a climate for the perpetuation and condoning of gross human rights violations. And, just as serious, whether we provided justification, and a spark, for some of the violent actions from the right wing.

We never thought then that we were failing in the essence of what true journalism stands for. We honestly thought that from time to time we were breaking new ground – working for verligte editors who would challenge the limits of "lojale verset".

Today we are wiser for the experience. "Lojale verset" means being loyal in the first place.

And that is no place for a journalist.

KARIN BRYNARD, a freelancer who was a political reporter during the 1980s, talks about the soul-searching debate that led to the submission made by 127 Afrikaans journalists to the TRC.

The declaration

The English translation of the full text of the Afrikaans submission reads:

"I, a journalist at *Nasionale Pers*, wish to make the following submission in my individual capacity and not on behalf of *Nasionale Pers* or any of its publications. I believe:

1. Reconciliation between, and the just treatment of, the different groups of people in South Africa are essential to nation-building in our country, and that disclosure of our past is an essential part thereof;
2. Though the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is not perfect, it creates a much-needed process to deal with our divisive, unjust past as part of the transition to a fully-fledged democracy based on justice, respect for human rights and the supremacy of the law;
3. Since early this century a close relationship developed between *Nasionale Pers* and the National Party, with our newspapers acting as NP mouthpieces;
4. *Nasionale Pers*' newspapers formed an integral part of the power structure which implemented and maintained the system of apartheid through, for instance, the support these influential newspapers gave the National

Party running up to elections and referendums;

5. The efforts *Nasionale Pers* made to change and oppose apartheid should also be acknowledged, as should the efforts to prepare whites for, and persuade them to, change and reform. This, however, does not diminish or neutralise the efforts to support apartheid;
6. Although I was not personally or directly involved in gross human rights abuses I regard myself as morally co-responsible for what happened in the name of apartheid because I helped maintain a system within which these abuses could occur;

7. I, like many others, was blind and deaf to the political aspirations, anger and suffering of my fellow South Africans;

8. I, like many others, and given the context in which I worked, did not properly inform readers of the injustices of apartheid, did not oppose these injustices vigorously enough and, where I had knowledge of these injustices, too readily accepted the National Party government's denials and reassurances;

To all those who suffered as a result of this, I offer my sincerest apology and fully commit myself to prevent the past from being repeated."