

Orwellian trend emerges



LOUD AND CLEAR: A Black Sash member carries a poster during a protest against apartheid laws in front of Parliament in 1965. Laws that seek to muzzle the media have no place in a modern secular society because they pose a threat to free thought and speech, says the writer. In democracies, as in ancient Greece, anyone who did not take part in public debates was not regarded 'as a man minding his own business, but rather, as good for nothing'.

Freedom of speech is much bigger than the ANC, or even the media. It's about people's right to express their thoughts, writes

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IHAVE no doubt that even the most biased of journalists will concur that the ANC has some justification in feeling aggrieved over the periodic subjectivity with which certain sections of the mainstream media have treated the party and its leadership.

This is one point which is not difficult at all to illustrate. Reams of recent copy, which has been churned out in negation of the mooted media tribunal, is more telling in both subterfuge and nuance.

Examples of the ANC's gripes with the media coverage of the party's agenda and the country's transformation are well documented and, dare I say, valid. But that's where my empathy stops.

For, in essence, issues of freedom of speech go way beyond the ANC's annoyance and anger with the editorial posture and direction of the mainstream media.

Similarly, the current crop of ANC leadership ought to appreciate that the value of free speech cannot be compromised on the altar of expediency.

I cannot engage on the issue of the mooted media appeals tribunal and its dreaded sidekick, the Protection of Information Bill, without going back in history.

Famed American columnist IF Stone, who also authored the best-selling book *The Trial of Socrates*, once conducted a study of the "freedom of thought" in human history. "Not freedom in general," he says, "which has too many ambiguities and may even be identified with the freedom of the strong to exploit the weak, but freedom to think and speak."

The reason people have, throughout history, fought for their right to free speech is clear: that freedom was under threat.

The Trial of Socrates is based on Stone's belief that "No society is good, whatever its intentions, whatever its utopian and liberationist claims, if the men and women who live in it are not free to speak their minds."

Thus one of the main objectives of highlighting *The Trial of Socrates* in ancient Greece,

where the origins of democracy and Western civilisation can be traced, is to ring alarm bells at the constant dangers to free thought and speech.

If these freedoms are not protected and defended wherever they exist, such as in South Africa – for they are always under threat from motives good as well as bad – all the ideals the ANC stood for since it was founded in 1912 would come to naught. This includes the gains of the past 16 years of our democracy.

The trial of Socrates remains a black mark for freedom of expression worldwide, for how could the philosopher be charged and condemned to death for expressing his dissenting views in a supposedly free society?

Retreat

As I indicated earlier, I think that to debate the looming media appeals tribunal and Protection of Information Bill on the basis of the validity – or lack thereof – of the ANC's grievance is entirely pointless. The issue, I reiterate, is way too big and complex.

After what we have been through as a country – 350 years of subjugation – our rulers should be taking a leaf out of the book of ancient Greece and other democratised societies.

Our rulers should be encouraging more citizens to participate in the national discourse, rather than retreat into the quietude of their spaces.

In democracies, as in ancient Greece, anyone who did not take part in public debates was not regarded "as a man minding his own business, but rather, as good for nothing".

This belief was borne out of the presumption that all men should be part of a *polis* – a community. Aristotle argued that a cityless man – *apolis* – is like a solitary piece in checkers.

He says "a solitary checkers piece standing alone has no function. It has meaning only when associated with other pieces in a game."

This metaphor implies that people find fulfilment in association with others. Para-

phrased, no man is an island.

Once any government begins to control what individuals can say, or think, and media are muzzled through diabolical pieces of legislation with no place in modern secular society, we all become like solitary pieces in checkers.

The state might at best allow us the right only to think, but never to express those thoughts. As the watchdog of society, an independent media need only be assisted to get in line with the national fundamentals, and not play a *de facto* official opposition role to the ruling party.

When the ANC goes overboard in tackling a critical building block in a democracy such as the media, historians and social commentators might pause and observe an Orwellian trend where the persecuted have now turned into the persecutors.

As Socrates lamented: "And he who is now taking away our freedom of speech is also destroying the customs of democracy as surely as if he were gouging the eyes out of the body or cutting out the tongue."

In any meaningful democracy, the media and all other exponents of free speech need to be treated like what Stone calls "civic treasures – guides to a better way of life – instead of a menace".

Freedom of speech is based on the assumption that every person's opinion is of value, and that the many are better guides than the few.

Indeed, the South African media could be asking the government: how can you boast of your free speech if you suppress mine?

In a constitutional democracy such as ours, the ruling party with a noble history such as the ANC would be expected to demonstrate a more mature and rational response to any negative press it receives.

The knee-jerk reaction, laced with subtle threats to jail errant journalists, destroys instead of building what the ANC has fought for over nearly 100 years.

The state and the media need each other, even if our relationship is like that between a dog and a lamppost.

