

STEYN COMMISSION II: HOW TO SEPARATE OUT TRUTH FROM FACT

by Keyan G Tomaselli and Ruth Tomaselli

By the time this article appears, much will have already been written about the **Steyn Commission of Inquiry into the Mass Media**. What has appeared, both in the press and journals aimed at informed readers (1), does not, unfortunately, really come to terms with the ideological implications of the **Report**. Both concerned themselves with the issue of 'press freedom' without examining the underlying values and assumptions embodied in this concept. These authors argue that the legislation proposed by the Commission continues the trend of press control which was intensified by the National Party after 1948. This desire for increasing manipulation is attributed to arrogance, oversensitivity to criticism and the National Party's "peculiar view of its own status" (2), to a concern for South Africa's national image abroad and a government need to maintain internal security through harsh and repressive measures.

It is our contention that these arguments, while valid on one level, miss the deeper politico-economic and ideological determinants which are at work in South Africa's apartheid economy. A comprehensive understanding of the Steyn Commission lies not so much in regurgitating the oft repeated history of anti-press legislation, but of situating it within the current hegemonic crisis in South Africa.

It is not the aim of this paper to provide an exhaustive critique of the Steyn Commission, for such a task would require many more pages than we have at our disposal (3). We will, however, discuss the **Report** in general and show up some of its myriad surface contradictions. These apparent discontinuities and illogicalities serve to mask a deeper ideological tendency which, although itself full of contradictions, provides the government with a convenient vehicle with which to force 'voluntary' self-regulation onto the press. More important, the Commission has provided 'evidence' of an "unholy alliance" between "powerful financial and political interests in White English-speaking South Africa . . . (and) . . . certain like external interests in the Western World aiming at a covert and indirect takeover of the whole of South Africa" (p. 764). These interests are teamed up with "radical" organizations such as the World Council of Churches, and locally with the SA Council of Churches, Black Consciousness, the Media Workers Association (MWASA) and the various mutations of Black/African/Liberationist/Feminist theology and are argued to be aiming to replace the present government with a black ruled "radical socialist or Marxist dispensation" (p. 672).

That a Commission was established at all is significant, for this mechanism can be used to defer legislation, to legitimise restrictive measures and to test public consensus. In the case of the press, they are also used to force "self-righting effects" onto the actors they are investigating. Any illusions about the role and function of this Commission should have been dispelled through a reading of the First Steyn Commission, published in 1980. Although **The Star** (21. 8.80), for example, stated that the first Steyn Commission "gave a fair hearing to all interested parties: it

reflected a balance of their views in its report" this contention is not shared by many academics, notably John Dugard who criticised the Commission's authoritarian notions of democracy (4).

In his critique of this initial Commission, Les Switzer identifies three functions which the press would have to embrace if it was to survive as a 'free' and 'independent' medium of communication:

1. The press would have to censor the activities of the state's internal and external "enemies" as defined by the state. This implies a shift in emphasis in the press's 'watchdog' role from the state to the "enemies" of the state;
2. The press would have to sustain and promote a positive image of the state's security and defence agencies; and
3. Above all, the press would have to mobilise public opinion in pursuance of the campaign for Total Strategy (5).

The present Commission expands these functions and tries to create a suitable ideological climate in which to facilitate increased state control over the media. To see how this is done it is first necessary to briefly examine the internal structure of the **Report**.

Apartheid: What the World Always Wanted

The underlying assumption of the Steyn Commission is predicated upon a rather confused conception of apartheid. Consider the following extract:—

Although isolated and largely cast out of the International Community, the Inner Core of Southern African states (i.e. the RSA, the independent states recently born of its substance, and SWA/Namibia) and its peoples present a picture of apparent paradox - that of a relatively stable community in a state of flux.

The newly independent states of Transkei, Venda and Boputhatswana, all erstwhile "apartheid Territory", have now become "non-Apartheid areas", a development urged on South Africa for so long and so vehemently by the international community but which remains distressingly unrecognised by the selfsame community (pp. 29-30).

This statement, amongst other things, wilfully confuses process with appearance, and tries to suggest that apartheid is a fulfillment of international prescriptions. A second excerpt will show that these "non-Apartheid areas" are apparently needed to absorb all those blacks who cannot, because of sheer numbers, be physically repressed:

The objective reality of the South African situation is, however, that there are too many Whites for Blacks to 'chase them into the sea' and there are so many Blacks that they cannot be subjugated forcibly by the Whites (pp. 96 & 720).

The reason why whites should want to dominate blacks or vice versa is ignored, and a "no-win" situation has forced South Africa to face "reality". Inhabiting this reality is a community, a "potentially many-splendoured constellation of Peoples" (p. 99), composed of non-conforming prodigal elements who do not seem to understand that their own best interests would be served by supporting the white Nationalist fold:

The Commission is . . . of the view that the South African population, as heterogeneous and divergent in culture as it is, does constitute a community, — a distinct and vigorous one with many common interests, albeit still so sharply divided on certain cardinal issues as to move some of its members to espouse alien ideologies and other socio-political and cultural creeds and methods including treason, terror and subversion in an effort to effect rapid and drastic change in South Africa, or even to overthrow and destroy all the major facets of the present order here pertaining (pp. 29 & 182).

And so the **Report** continues, the South African reality being continuously threatened by a Total Onslaught orchestrated by Soviets, Marxists, politicised theologians, Black Consciousness, far-left academics who are still struggling with basic definitions, misguided liberals of the John Dugard ilk and radicals of the nature of Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Critic Bashing Made Easy

Where the Commission's argument is too thin to stand up to scrutiny, and since its authors are for the most part unable to understand most of the arguments put forward by critics of the first Steyn Commission and the status quo in South Africa, and unable to refute the arguments they can understand, the Commissioners have responded in the only way they are able - that is to trivialise and belittle concepts, arguments and individuals with which they know intuitively they cannot agree. The **Report** admonishes liberal authors in terms of their supposedly inadequate curriculum vitae's and lack of experience in political science and practical politics (eg. pp. 35 & 196), rather than on the basis of their arguments. More sycophantic conservatives whose support of the first Steyn Commission lent a certain credibility to that Inquiry are preferred. Indeed, it seems that much of the first volume is an effort to discredit Dugard and the liberals he stands for. He is criticised for his grammar and expression (pp. 56-7) and is obliquely accused of being an "anti-Afrikaner racist and gross denigrator of the South African judiciary" (p. 57). Academic critiques of Dugard are quoted at length to further cast doubt upon the validity of his writings. Opposing arguments are blandly accepted and held in evidence against him without the Commission itself assessing the relative merits and demerits of the debate, which is clearly much wider than the **Report** admits.

The use of one sided arguments is a hallmark of this **Report**. Apart from plagiarising large amounts of already published academic material drawn from the liberal-humanist school, it pointedly avoids the more critical studies, research and publications of many South African journalists and academics. It relies almost entirely on a very narrow spectrum of South African journals and even within these, has avoided the very material which would have caused the Commis-

sioners to reassess their point of view. The Commission furthermore tries to mobilise the terminology of the radical left against its originators, but in the process trivialises its own position by robbing such terms of their content and aetiology. The Commission then attempts to use what is merely an empty shell to pound non-existent theoretical positions.

Anything to the left of Nationalist ideology is vehemently attacked with whatever quotes, misquotes, religious sentiment or ruse proves handy at the time. The Commission's arguments, apart from being eclectic, disjointed and discontinuous, are nothing more than crude Nationalist ideology clothed in the garb of quasi socio-legalistic semantic contortions. Scattered throughout the **Report** is a plethora of jargonising guaranteed to intimidate the wary journalist and unsuspecting public. Recurring terms such as "practical statecraft" (eg. p. 34), phrases like "mind-set and the upwelling left-liberal enmity" (p. 62) and non-existent words such as "tasked" (Vol 4), "thrombosed" (1340), "Victimologies" (608) all serve to give a spurious intellectuality to the **Report**.

Superficially, and in ideological terms, the **Report** (or some parts of it) appears to make sense, but on a deeper analysis, it falls prey to its own criticisms of the press, individuals, and organizations it is castigating. It fails to distinguish between fact and ideology, myth and process and cause and effect. Terms like "Conflictual Matrices", "Threat Factors" and other crude categories conveniently conceal actual conditions under discussion, while journalistic conventions and styles are belittled with vigour. The Commission equates "investigative journalism" with "muck-raking", both of which are a product of "new journalism". Offsprings of this non-objective journalism are "advocacy journalism", "personal journalism" and "commitment journalism". All these approaches are united in their "anti-establishment" stance and are characterised by "involvement" (p. 155). Worst of all, they aim "to discover truth, not merely fact" which is proof of "their rejection of objectivity" (p. 142).

Clearly, the Commission abhors this trend which has been given respectability by the Watergate and the local "Info debacle" (pp. 139 & 142). Thus, professionalism (or control) is equated with "objectivity" and "freedom (with responsibility)", while propaganda is argued to be the result of non-professionalism, particularly by black journalists who see themselves as blacks first and journalists second (p. 706). Whereas committed journalism distorts the "hard, tangible and exploitable images of reality" (145), "professionalism . . . guarantees media freedom and independence" (p. 161). Other definitions offered but not developed involve grammatical juggling which has become part and parcel of Nationalist and SABC ideologues who call themselves linguists. The intensity of the Total Onslaught, for example, can be measured in terms of vertical and horizontal axes. Apparently, the "Conflictual Matrix" is related to this, but since less than six lines are offered in explanation we must assume that this formula has an ideological basis obscured by mathematics.

Metaphor: The Theological Connection

The Commission constantly reveals its politico-evangelical purpose through its heavy handed use of metaphor and simile. Biblical imagery creeps up from behind adjectives and nouns and supports the Total Strategy in almost every sentence, for example:

. . . South Africa is confronted by devilish ideologies which, figuratively speaking, plant political landmines and lay cultural and spiritual booby traps in order to overthrow the existing socio-political order (144).

Unable to indict its theological opponents in South Africa directly, the Commission resorts to smear by association and tries to unleash theological terror via metaphorical engineering. In an attempt to identify the South African Council of Churches with the WCC, the Commissioners provide sufficient imagery to script an academy-award-winning satanic horror movie:

The WCC's "Council Conduct" amounts to "Clerics of the Councils" clad in the Cloth, clutching the **Reversed Cross** and animated by the precepts of the "Theology of Liberation", entering the Arena of Mundane Politics, and employing the Cross in its "Battle-Axe" role to help them achieve their POLITICAL goals. (Emphases, capitals and quotation marks in the original) (pp. 82 & 582).

Discussing the Social Gospel under the heading of "The Fateful Seed", the Commission, nary a theologian amongst them, comments:

The movement whereby the Gospel was sought to be secularised and collectivised was the seed whence sprang the thorny, and as to certain of its branches, also poisonous growth of Political Theology, which has now started bearing the sinister and unhappy fruits of Theologised Politics (499).

The Commission's own politicised evangelism is emphasised in its choice of words like "epilogue" in place of 'conclusion' (p. 104), "brethren" (p. 48) for 'colleagues' and "excommunication" for 'sports boycotts' (p. 297), to name a few. Simultaneously, the Commission tries to hide its own zeal behind the use of quaint and romantic euphemisms such as "gentlemen of the Cloth" to describe ministers of religion who - incidentally - should be ministering to their flocks on a vertical and not a horizontal plane. These horizontal 'social gossellers' are really nothing more than Soviet proxies and liberal misfits who are (perhaps unwittingly) aiding the leftist press and black journalists in the "process of socio-political demolition . . ." (p. 125). This tenuous thread of pseudo-theological mumbo jumbo is tied together with a series of garbled headings spewed out by a jargon machine: "The Unctuous Pariah-making Politico-Theological and Journalistic "Fashion" " (p. 722), "The potentially lethal theo-political force" (88), and so on.

It seems that Bishop Desmond Tutu is held responsible for most of this.

The Good, the Bad, the North, the South, the East, the West

In an effort to come to terms with the complexities of reality, the Commission reduces the complex processes operating in the world to a series of simplistic binary opposites, for instance, "First World-Third World dichotomy of rich versus poor or White North versus Black South" (p. 66). As with most orthodox economic theorists who postulate these dualistic theories, the Commissioners make the mistake of imposing breaks where there are, in fact, connections. They are unaware of the relations between these so-called geographical areas and seem to think that the "Rich North" attained its wealth without at the same

time denuding the "Poor South". The poverty of Third World countries is considered to be an original state resulting from the backward techniques and static social relations which characterise their indigenous inhabitants. That these conditions are conversely argued to be a result of the process of active underdevelopment by colonial and neo-colonial countries is simply not comprehended. The Commission's lack of understanding is further highlighted by its misinterpretation of at least one author (6) who argues for the causal connection between neo-colonial exploitation and the underdevelopment which characterises the world's poorest nations.

In the same way, the Commissioners are able to close their eyes to the process of apartheid which is based on cheap labour drawn from 'backward' homeland areas in South Africa. The rhetoric of 'separate development' is designed to obfuscate the physical and social inter-connections and economic inter-relations which dualist theory tries to mystify. But even the crudest dualists have nothing on the Steyn Commission which provides a litany of opposites rarely matched in dualist thought: "an irreversible anti-Black White racism, as well as an irreconcilable Afrikaner-English, Marxist-Capitalist and First World-Third World conflict as acknowledged complicating factors . . ." (p. 174). This statement indicates a complete lack of analytical rigour and the use of bi-polar opposites in this manner conjures up unscientific emotive overtones.

Extrapolating the Commission's semantic associations, it becomes clear that "Rich, White (mainly Afrikaner) and Capitalism" = good; while "Poor, Black and Marxism" = Bad.

The Black Press: The Road to Revolution

The Commission is never quite sure where it stands in relation to the captive black press. While supporting the banning of *World*, *Weekend World*, *Post* (Tvl) and *Weekend Post* (Tvl) in terms of "the principle" but not "the manner" of restriction, as necessary security measures (p. 19), it lauds the English press for "rendering a very valuable service . . . to the South African community by informing it constantly of Black opinion and aspirations" (p. 139). It accuses MWASA of operating under the banner of Black Consciousness and of "radicalising Black Journalists for the purpose of using them as political 'shock troops'" (p. 92), but at the same time claims that black radical thought should not be "ignored or suppressed" but "fairly and adequately dealt with" (p.887).

Simplistic and spurious correlations between the supposed revolutionary black press and social responses permeate the diatribe on this press: "It is significant that Soweto returned to normal after the banning of the *World* and other organizations" (pp. 121 & 1055). No discussion about other repressive measures such as the use of police who killed over 700 people during the riots is mentioned. No description of what constitutes "normal" is offered - just a bland observation which ignores all the other variables which were operating at the time. **The Steyn Report** also does its best to misinterpret the Cillie Commission (7) which absolved the press of all blame in the causation of the riots (p. 121).

The black press stands accused of contributing to "unstable conditions", of being "unsympathetic to the Government's steps for reform", of incitory actions imposed against "institutions of its own people" (such as the

government-imposed Community Councils), of having "abolished the principles of journalistic objectivity" and of aiding the English press in "socio-political demolition" (p. 125). Having discussed the 'black' press on the level of the sublime, the Commission now moves into the ridiculous. It complains that there is no "truly independent black press" in South Africa. This is despite the fact "that there is among Blacks a need for a truly independent Black press which can express the feelings and aspirations of Black opinions and perceptions, especially the moderate majority" (p. 130). Such a press is required, amongst other reasons, because "the Afrikaans press and SABC have failed to report adequately on the hopes and aspirations, suffering and frustrations of the Black community" (pp. 1286 & 128).

The constant harping by the Commission on the mythical black "moderate majority" suggests that it has totally misread the role and function of the captive black press. The arguments put forward by scholars of the left (who remain unread) that this captive press was not radical in the true sense of the word, in that it supports a continuance of capitalism and its consequent class structure, modified only by the removal of "hurtful discrimination" went unheeded (8). But then, when people like Bishop Tutu and Dr N Motlana are categorised as 'radicals', it becomes difficult to persuade the Commission that within the wider spectrum of black thought such individuals represent moderate political opinions.

'The Facts': Their Ideological Derivation

The Commission, which accuses journalists of not separating 'facts' from comment, consistently claims that liberal arguments are "not borne out by the facts" (eg. pp. 24 & 52). Conversely, the Commission's point of view is always 'supported by the facts', even their slanderous strictures and emotive conclusions. These seem to refer to some set of undeniable reality which exists in its own deified plane. This hallowed reality is visible to some (like the Commissioners) but not to others. It is an independent entity. This reality has nothing to do with contexts, circumstances or interpretations.

What the Commission is really saying is that 'the facts' are pre-existent. They are built into their assumptions and world view and form the basis of 'the taken-for-granted' which informs the Commission's frame of reference. Clearly, what the Commissioners consider 'facts' are really the "values" and "ideologies" of the dominant group. 'Facts' are rooted to contexts and interpretations and their decipherment is largely influenced by an individual's ideological perceptions, his/her way of seeing the world and what he/she takes for granted in it.

The Commission most certainly takes apartheid for granted, as if it were a natural state for humankind to evolve ("a dynamically developing and expanding democracy"—pp. 126, 188ff & 245), divinely sanctioned and threatened by Western and Soviet evil.

'Facts' should not be confused with 'truth'. The Commission has no intention of allowing journalists to discover "truth". It is their job to report facts, not the truth, to reinforce prevailing ideologies and to eliminate conflicting perceptions of 'the same realities'. This "perceptual credibility gap" (p. 913) is the result of "faulty image of reality" caused by a malicious English press whose reports feed the negative external image of South Africa. If journalists cannot or will

not report they will be "professionalised" into doing so since the "presenting of more than one possibility or alternative" (see eg. p. 1278) is akin to "climate-setting" which confuses readers and casts doubt upon the credibility of newspapers.

Conclusion

The errors, contradictions and spurious suppositions in the Steyn Commission are so glaring that a critique of its **Report** is like erecting a straw man and setting him alight. If it was not for the very serious implications of this Inquiry, the foregoing analysis would have been a totally self-indulgent exercise.

Throughout the **Report** runs a basic contradiction: on the one hand the "Inner Core of South African States" is conceptualised as a single unified community, dualist analyses notwithstanding, while on the other, the Commission is at great pains to outline the irreconcilable differences which exist between the different sections of the South African population. The true community of South Africa is thus identified as being synonymous with the interests of the National Party. All else is seen outside the interests of South Africa. **The Commission intuitively realises this truth but hopes to set a climate whereby the 'facts' obscure it.**

The Commission sets a background, an understanding and interpretation of matters relating to the media which may or may not have a direct relation to reality. Nevertheless, the Commission's **Report** will be used by the government as a definitive source for future debate and legislation, not only in terms of immediate legislation the government will try to push through on the strength of the Inquiry. Just as it is now impossible to refer to any sort of labour issue unless it is done against the background of the Riekert and Wiehahn Commissions, so too the Steyn Commission will gather unto itself a sense of authenticity and authority.

It will be used as a constant threat against the press. It will become the source for definitions of reality; and future debate will concern itself not so much with actual conditions, but against the perceived background provided by the Report. Having been ascribed this stamp of authority - no matter how contradictory or inaccurate the Report - the pieces can be extracted from anywhere in the Report and quoted at dissidents with impunity.

The Report reads like a script from The Goon Show, but this should not lull us into neglecting its sinister content.

Having obscured fact and truth and endorsing a news environment in which certain criticism is permissible, provided it is not supported by 'the facts' (9), the Commission provides its **coup de grace** - the rendering impotent of Anglo-American's indirect ownership and control of the two major English press groups, SA Associated Newspapers and the Argus Company. No single shareholder will be allowed to own more than 1% of the total shares issued. Majority shareholders should be given three years to divest their holdings.

This makes possible the interpenetration of Afrikaner capital of the English press through individuals who already have holdings in Afrikaans and Nationalist media concerns.

The Steyn Commission and the possibilities of ownership and control which result from its recommendations will result in an immeasurable ideological return for the tax payer's money. Why waste R12 million on a government-sponsored newspaper when you can capture the entire opposition press for the cost of a Commission of Enquiry (R201 000)? □

Notes and References

1. See, eg., **SA Outlook**, 1982 (forthcoming); **SA International** (forthcoming) 1982. See also **The Journalist**, February 1982 pp. 6 - 7.
2. Stewart, G. 1982: in **SA Outlook op. cit.**
3. The Steyn Commission Report is to be the subject of a special issue in a forthcoming issue of **Critical Arts: A Journal for Media Studies** (July 1982, Vol 2 No. 3).
4. The two references listed are Dugard, J. 1978: **Human Rights and the South African Legal Order**, University of Princeton Press, Princeton. and Dugard et al, 1979: "**The South African Press Council: A Critical Review**", Univ. of Witwatersrand. The latter reference given by the Steyn Commission does not exist. It should, in fact, be Adelman, S. Howard, J., Stuart, K and van Eeden, A. 1979: "The South African Press Council
5. Switzer, L. 1980: "Steyn Commission 1: The Press and Total Strategy", **Critical Arts**, Vol 1 No 4, pp. 41-44. The reference to the Commission is: Republic of South Africa. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Reporting of Security Matters Regarding the South African Defence Force and the South African Police Force. RP 52/1980.
6. See, eg., Higgins, R. 1980: **The Seventh Enemy – The Human Factor in the Global Crisis**, Pan Books.
7. Republic of South Africa. Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Riots at Soweto and Elsewhere from June 16 to February 28. Cape Town, 1980.
8. See, e.g., Switzer, L. and Switzer, D. 1979: **The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho: A Bibliographical Guide to Newspapers, Newsletters and Magazines, 1936-1976**. GK Hall, Boston; Whitehead, M. 1976: "The Black Gatekeepers". B.A. (Hons) Thesis, Dept. of Journalism, Rhodes University, Grahamstown. This Department also has a wealth of other research data which refute the Commission's interpretations.
9. Stewart, G. 1980: "Serving the Governors", **SA Outlook**, June, p. 4. – A Critical Review", Centre for Applied Legal Studies, Univ. of Witwatersrand. Dugard is the Director of the Centre and contributed only an "Explanatory Forward" to the publication.

THE URBAN FOUNDATION : ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

By Robin Lee

Introduction

In April 1982 The Urban Foundation will have been operative for a full five years. It is thus appropriate that an attempt should be made to review its activities and assess its position in the South African scene. Peter Wilkinson's article in the last issue of **Reality** addresses itself to this task with considerable perception and some sympathy. There are, however, certain emphases that the present writer – and I think many members of the Foundation – would dispute. I hope that these points of difference will emerge from the account offered, and do not seek to offer a point-by-point critique of the article.

Two points do however require comment at once as these determine the general tone of the article which, in a way, probably reflects Wilkinson's frustration with an organization like the Foundation. I refer to the markedly apocalyptic tone ('... the Foundation stands poised at the moment of its crisis...') and the strong "either... or" nature of the analysis presented. Most of us associated with the Foundation would not find either acceptable: and this in turn is indicative of the pragmatic and gradualist approach that characterises the organization and its activities.

A positive view

Those themes are perhaps the best starting points for a

positive view of the Foundation. The organization started life in 1977 with a marked project-orientation; however it has, over time, shown signs that it is capable of adapting to changing circumstances. The original emphasis upon a multiplicity of physical projects (1) is being modified into an integrated approach designed to bring about "structural change" in South African society. In other words the emphasis is now placed upon improving the quality of life by aiming at fundamental causes, rather than treating consequences.

This change of emphasis has not been an easy process. It has involved extensive internal discussion and negotiation; commissioning and interpretation of considerable research; and the introduction into the organization of a structured planning process. The first indications of this process emerged in the Executive Director's speech at the Annual General meeting in June 1980 when he said:

"This organization believes in a process of peaceful change... Change is not brought about by a single thrust. Indeed it is our belief that the cumulative effect of our efforts and others who actively promote peaceful change can make a positive contribution to a more just dispensation". (2)

Linked with this increased focus on structural change are two other important developments within the Foundation. First, it is placing a much stronger emphasis upon the