



SA *today*



A WEEKLY NEWSLETTER FROM HELEN ZILLE

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Welcome to the latest edition of **SA Today**, the weekly newsletter from the Leader of the Democratic Alliance, Helen Zille.

**SA Today**  
**Helen Zille, DA Leader**

## We will never surrender our right to know the truth

When Winston Churchill lost the general election in the same year he led the allies to victory in World War II, he said: "They have a perfect right to kick me out. That is democracy."

Although a casualty of the democracy he had fought a World War to protect, Churchill accepted his election defeat with good grace. Like most true democrats, he was loyal to democracy above all else.

Two years later, from the opposition benches in the House of Commons, Churchill gave his now famous dictum on democracy. By his standards, it was high praise. He said it was "the worst form of government, except for all those others that have been tried from time to time."

In our context, some 60 years later, we too should acknowledge the limits of democracy. We know, for example, that it does not guarantee the eradication or even the alleviation of poverty. And we know that people can make poor choices when they elect leaders.

But – whatever its faults – the great advantage of democracy is that it puts power in the hands of the people. This is what makes democracy preferable to every other form of government. It is what the struggle against apartheid was all about. Only in a democracy are politicians afraid of the people instead of the other way around. Only in a democracy can the people kick the government out.

Central to the success of a democracy are the principles of openness and transparency. Without a free flow of information, chiefly through the free media, power abuse goes unexposed, unchecked and

unpunished. The truth gets covered up. The result is that people cannot make informed decisions, and they cannot hold their leaders to account at the ballot box. This means that democracy withers and dies.

This is not to suggest that the media always get it right. Far from it. When there is evidence of untrue or malicious reporting, there should be remedies. That is why the media in most democracies recognize credible, independent mechanisms to "watch the watch dogs". But no government must ever have anything to do with this function. This is inevitably a recipe for a closed, authoritarian society.

This is why every democracy strives for maximum openness.

Nelson Mandela recognised the importance of this back in 1994. Speaking to the International Press Institute Congress he said:

*"No single person, no body of opinion, no political or religious doctrine, no political party or government can claim to have a monopoly on truth... It has therefore always been our contention that laws, mores, practices and prejudices that place constraints on freedom of expression are a disservice to society."*

In the same speech he said:

*"I have often said that the media are a mirror through which we can see ourselves as others perceive us, warts, blemishes and all. The African National Congress has nothing to fear from criticism. I can promise you, we will not wilt under close scrutiny. It is our considered view that such criticism can only help us to grow, by calling attention to those of our actions and omissions which do not measure up to our people's expectations and the democratic values to which we subscribe."*

Two weeks ago, on Mandela Day, I wrote of the irony that the more the ANC diverges from Nelson Mandela's vision, the more it seeks to own his legacy. Nowhere is the current ANC leadership's departure from Nelson Mandela more apparent than its stance on press freedom.

In an ANC discussion document on the media released a few days ago, the party put forward the case for a parliamentary media tribunal to hold the press to account. It expressed concern that "some factions of the media continue to adopt an anti-transformation, anti-development and anti-ANC stance."

What happened to Mandela's belief that constraints on freedom of expression are a disservice to society. And what happened to the ANC that once proudly claimed to have nothing to fear from criticism?

That ANC is long gone. The ANC of today wants to shut down criticism and present its version of reality as "the only truth".

The ANC wants to control the independent media through a parliamentary media tribunal (stacked with ANC MPs). The inevitable result will be a compliant media, seeking to appease this jury of politicians with a keen interest in keeping the media in check. The inevitable result is that all our news will begin to resemble what we regularly see on SABC TV -- a party broadcaster rather than a public broadcaster.

Even worse, the ANC's assault on press freedom seeks to criminalise investigative journalism. The Protection of Information Bill which, if passed, will criminalise investigative journalism. It will do so by making it a punishable offence (up to 25 years in jail) to possess classified state information. Any government information will be classifiable if (in the judgment of a politician) its disclosure is deemed harmful to the "national interest" – defined as all matters "relating to the advancement of the public good", "the pursuit of justice, democracy, economic growth, free trade, a stable monetary system and sound international relations", as well as "all things owned or maintained for the public by the state."

In other words, virtually all state information will be off limits to journalists and anyone with an interest in the truth. Just like under apartheid, the government will invoke the "national interest" to cover up every abuse of power. For example, every document that contains any evidence of corruption will immediately be classified -- probably by the guilty party in government!

The "national interest" should never be confused with the public interest. As media analyst Tawana Kupe has noted, the national interest is "the interests and values appropriated by particular groups in their attempts to achieve hegemonic domination in a society". The public interest, on the other hand, is "broader than the national interest in that it speaks to and reflects the values that no single social organization or individual or entity can claim sole ownership of."

As is evident from his speech quoted above, Nelson Mandela understood this distinction. He knew that the interests of the party ("national interest") and the interests of the people ("public interest") were not the same thing. The ANC of Jacob Zuma, on the other hand, thinks they are. This is clear from the ANC's discussion document on the media.

The document claims that the ANC resolutions reached at its Polokwane conference "express the views of the people" and that these ideas are "not the stuff that sell newspapers and make news, but they are what the people want." It adds: "We must take charge to ensure that they dominate the national discourse and that our voice is heard clearly above the rest."

This is a red danger zone for our democracy. Every totalitarian regime – from Hitler to Stalin to Mao – has claimed that The Party embodies the will of the people and used it to justify closing down the democratic space including the curtailing of media freedom, the

banning of political parties and eventually the crushing of dissent.

It is time that more people realised that these tendencies are alive and well in the ANC of Jacob Zuma. ANC spokesperson Jackson Mthembu said it all when he attempted to justify the proposed media tribunal to a journalist:

*"If you have to go to prison, let it be. If you have to pay millions for defamation, let it be. If journalists have to be fired because they don't contribute to the South Africa we want, let it be."*

We will use every means at our disposal to defend our country and democracy from the ANC's assault. We will take the fight all the way to the Constitutional Court if necessary. But, whatever happens, we will not allow an authoritarian law to prevent us from exposing power abuse whenever and wherever it occurs. We would rather go to prison in pursuit of the truth than be complicit in the death of democracy. We will never surrender our right to know.



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