

better to have Press freedom and risk the abuses, than not have it at all.

When newspapers are gagged, strange things begin to happen. Remember when South African troops invaded Angola? Death notices started appearing in the death columns of newspapers. But editorially — silence. South Africans were the only people in the world not allowed to know that South Africa had gone to war.

I am sorry to tell you, but there are quite a lot of things that you are not allowed to know today, things that good newspapermen come across in the course of their ordinary duties, but dare not tell you.

Of course the powers-that-be will tell you that is mostly for your own good. Don't believe them. It is just the power-drug at work.

One of Britain's most senior political writers — James Margach of the London Sunday Times — wrote in a book about his personal observations of a dozen British Prime Ministers:

*"The secrecy phobia has affected all prime ministers of all parties. They fall victim to the power-drug when they fear their authority is being challenged by the Press. The all-time greats, Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, could be as extreme and ruthless as any."*

So South Africa is not unique. But there are special circumstances here. We may have the freest Press in Africa — but we also have the least free Press in the entire Western democratic world, a community we claim part-membership of.

There is in progress at the moment an onslaught on the

editorship were effectively fought off, more discreet pressures were introduced. They were much more effective. By attacking the patriotism of the papers, by implying that they were disloyal, by harassment and by threat, they were whipped into line.

And that is how White Rhodesians came to be able to listen without scorn to Mr Ian Smith promise that there would not be black majority rule in his lifetime.

Here in South Africa we hear echoes of that cry about "unpatriotic" newspapers. The suggestion is that they ought to be more loyal, more restrained, more docile. Rubbish.

A prickly Press is the best bet for the future. If it does not provoke it is not doing its job. It cannot just pander to the sensitivities of others.

Yet it is not fully able to do that — and the fact that it is hogtied in this way tends to be forgotten. People don't miss the news they never hear.

And that is why Prof James Gerwel of the University of the Western Cape — warned journalists at their annual congress at the weekend:

*"Things are happening in the Black community that never get into the mainstream Press."*

It will intensify as the political situation grows more strained. In its brutal form, the onslaught mostly takes the form of legislation, threats, legal processes and intimidation. Crudely, it consists simply of locking up journalists, closing down newspapers and gagging newsworthy figures.

Hardly a parliamentary session goes by without new laws being passed to restrict the Press. Ninety seven laws! Police Act, Sabotage Act, Prisons Act, Defence Act, General Law Amendment Act, Suppression of Communism Act, Atomic Energy Act, Artificial Insemination of Animals Act (for heaven's sake), Internal Security Act, Publications and Entertainments Act, Terrorism Act, Unlawful Organisations Act, Hazardous Substances Act.

Hazardous substances indeed. The most hazardous substance of all is newsprint — when it has printing on it.

Add to that the Prime Minister's warning to newspapers and his instruction to the State radio services to play it cool on protest — have you noticed just how cool the television coverage has got?

And now consider how the Steyn Commission report comes in to the picture. The commission was appointed to look into relations between the Press and the Defence and Police forces. It said some worthy things about the desirability of Press freedom.

But, being a cynic, it seems to me that Press freedom is at biggest risk precisely when governments and official bodies begin to extol it most.

So may it be with the Steyn Commission. Because some of

*discomfiting to the White public if they did."*

One report has stuck in my mind as a very good example. It appeared in the Rand Daily Mail some months ago and it was headlined "15 000 cheers". Its single paragraph said:

"Chief Gatsha Buthelezi was cheered by more than 15 000 people in Soweto yesterday when he quoted from the banned writings of jailed African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela."

That was all.

Now Chief Buthelezi was committing an offence, quoting a banned man. But South African newspapers have to stay scrupulously within the law, so none quoted Mandela's words.

I don't know about you, but I think that one day it might be terribly important for all of us to understand what kind of sentiments caused 15 000 people to cheer so loudly.

But there is another kind of pressure, the most subtle of all. It is the pressure to conform.

And that, in the end, may be the most devastating onslaught of all on Press freedom.

Newspapers must guard themselves against all these threats. That is their duty. It is as defined by a well-known South African editor:

*"Not only has a govern-*

ment no right to take away freedom from the Press, but the Press itself may not give away this freedom. It is the duty of the Press towards the nation to defend itself to the bitter end."

The speaker was Dr H F Verwoerd, when he was editor of Die Transvaler and waiting to become Prime Minister.

Yet the Press cannot safeguard itself on its own. Just as it serves the people, so must it be served by them. And here, I must confess, I have a fear.

We all know what the Government would like to do, if it dared, about your right to know. But does the Government know how much — or little — you really care?

Some of the more draconian proposals in our recent history have been blocked by vigorous public protest inside and outside the country. These have been moments of triumph. Peaceful protest works!

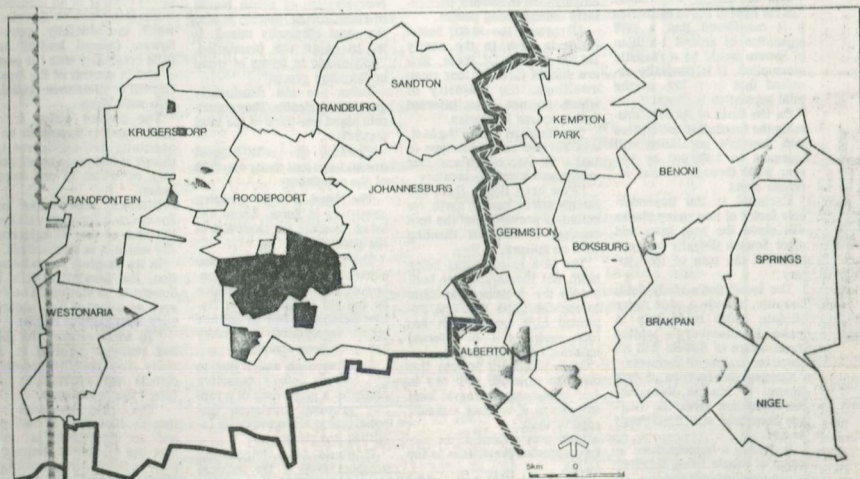
But much else has slipped into law and custom almost unheeded.

Freedom has sometimes been let go by default. And when it comes to freedom — be it freedom of the Press or any other kind — the meek shall not inherit the earth. They will have to fight for it.



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# Anatomy of a deprived city



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