

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

SUNDAY TIMES

Dear Sir,

Please be so kind as to publish the following letter in response to Ken Owen's attack on me last week, 8 February 1986.

Yours sincerely,

DR F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

I envy the confidence and ease with which Ken Owen expresses moral judgements on my actions in resigning from Parliament. Although I also find him singularly unqualified to do so in this case. He has never cared a fig for my role, the PFP or Parliamentary politics in general. His professed concern for those who put their trust in me and whom I "have betrayed" is not touching, it is simply hypocritical. It is extraordinary how relevant the PFP and Parliamentary Opposition suddenly became for the Sunday Times once I had resigned. In fact this hypocrisy is aptly illustrated by Ken Owen's second article in the same edition of the Sunday Times which he ends by stating that if one wanted to understand the future developments in South Africa one had to look elsewhere than to Parliament. This confirms the trend of the conversation he had with me in my office during the week before his article was written. He saw no hope of avoiding escalating violence and a bloody confrontation in South Africa precisely because at present the Government was controlling the pace and direction of reform and had no intention of abandoning Apartheid structures.

But in the delight he took in savaging me this analysis is conveniently suspended. In fact, there is no political analysis whatsoever in the attack, not about the role of the leader of an opposition, Parliament or political change at all.

He simply thrilled himself with a personal hatchet job on me for which he had apparently been waiting for some time, given the vehemence of his emotions. For 12 years, 6 of them as Leader, I was simply a self-indulgent dilettante, indifferent to the feelings of others, untrustworthy, unpredictable, a political lightweight simply waiting for the moment he could shrug his shoulders and walk off leaving a devastated party behind. Perhaps he had even been planning this all along so that he could walk out in a blaze of self-indulgent sensationalism.

I simply refuse to accept that my colleagues or supporters experienced me as such a person over the last 12 years. That they may be angry, feel betrayed and even hurt, I can understand and this was part of the agony involved in my decision. That they are entitled to an explanation is absolutely correct. I have tried and will continue through my subsequent actions to provide one.

There is an argument that once I accepted the role of Leader of the Opposition, I accepted a life sentence, irrespective of what the Government did or what happened in the country. Because I was not prepared to accept such a position doubts were expressed about my stamina, endurance and commitment, which according to those who held such doubts have been substantiated. I have no answer to this except to make it quite clear that I never regarded my acceptance as a life sentence and I made this clear repeatedly. There is enough evidence in countless speeches I made and articles I wrote that if I honestly came to the conclusion that I no longer felt I could make a contribution as Leader of the Opposition, I would resign.

What was the contribution I was interested in making ? To get rid of Apartheid. Not just protest about or oppose it, although this remains necessary within Parliament, but to get rid of it.

There is only one question Ken Owen must address himself seriously to that is of political consequence in his mauling of my integrity.

What else remains to be done that I have neglected in trying to get rid of Apartheid ? He must answer this question specifically with regard to the position I occupied.

Together with my colleagues we built the support of the PFP up to 21% of the white electorate in the 1981 general election. The fickleness of that support was demonstrated in the 1983 referendum when it dwindled to 16,5% in favour of the new constitution.

I was against going into that constitution and wanted to pull out. Senior colleagues and supporters of the party know this. I was persuaded to carry on. I said we must then go in boots and all and that I would re-assess after a year. It is now going on for the third year. Last year, together with my colleagues I set goals for the party to co-incide with a fundraising drive. These were - to explore participation in the other two Houses as a party. This made no headway because of the disrepute in which the tri-cameral system is held. To form an extra-parliamentary coalition of anti-Apartheid organisations in the form of a Convention Alliance - this failed because of Inkatha/ANC rivalry and hostility. To engage government in negotiations with a view to getting rid of Apartheid - after numerous interviews, submissions and written evidence by myself I am convinced the government is not prepared to do so. The fundraising campaign based on my name, against my wishes, was largely successful because many people thought I and the PFP would succeed in achieving these goals. At the end of last year I took stock of myself in relation to the government, the party and the country. I concluded I was not making any headway as Leader of the Opposition in getting rid of Apartheid.

I defined one last strategy which I believed the Party could explore as part of power politics - to resign our seats, stand again and ask a mandate not to go back unless the government was prepared to scrap the Population Registration Act and restore freedom of choice on racial and ethnic grounds. This could make the tri-cameral Parliament constitutionally relevant to non-racial politics in some way. I discussed this with senior members of the Party and for plausible reasons it was decided against this strategy.

I then made it clear 4 weeks before my resignation to a number of key people in the party that unless the State President came up with a dramatic shift on freedom of choice on racial or ethnic grounds this was my last session and I was out. Why? Because I no longer could see how, as Leader of the Official Opposition, I could make a contribution to getting rid of Apartheid. This was the political substance of my decision and since my resignation I have heard no answer to it but many complaints, with justification, to my execution of it. Ken Owen preferred to ignore the political substance of my decision because quite frankly he could not care two hoots about it.

As to the manner of my resignation? Of course it can be criticized and would have been whatever the manner of its execution. The arguments revolve around the pro's and con's of political euthanasia. Does one die quickly or slowly? Do I give notice of it three months in advance and continue with a second leg of a fundraising campaign in my name? Do I let the party twist in the wind whilst our opponents ridicule and destroy it? I preferred to do it quickly whilst Parliament was in session and the PFP could carry on its work. Because it has to carry on. Apartheid has to be opposed and exposed for what it is in Parliament as well. I have always said so and say so now.

Did I betray the hopes of people by resigning? Of course I did and I deeply regret having done so. But to keep some of those hopes alive by continuing would have been to delude those who cherished those hopes. To simply sit there gathering full pension and being exhibit A for the government's sense of democracy would have been a supreme act of self-indulgence.

Yes, Mr Owen, I stand accused. But not by you. By the challenges which face our country and by my inability to respond to them adequately as Leader of the Official Opposition in the House of Assembly of our tri-cameral Parliament.

With my very best wishes, go and do better yourself.

DR F VAN ZYL SLABBERT