



Castro: 'My only wish is to fight on as a soldier in the battle of ideas'

if the intelligence of a human being in a revolutionary society is to prevail over instinct.

"My elemental duty is not to cling to positions, much less to stand in the way of younger persons, but rather to contribute my own experience and ideas whose modest value comes from the exceptional era that I had the privilege of living in.

"Like Niemeyer, I believe that one has to be consistent right up to the end."

Letter from January 8, 2008:

"...I am a firm supporter of the united vote (a principle that preserves the unknown merits), which allowed us to avoid the tendency to copy what came to us from countries of the former socialist bloc, including the portrait of the one candidate, as singular as his solidarity towards

Cuba. I deeply respect that first attempt at building socialism, thanks to which we were able to continue along the path we had chosen."

And I reiterated in that letter that "...I never forget that 'all of the world's glory fits in a kernel of corn.'"

Therefore, it would be a betrayal to my conscience to accept a responsibility requiring more mobility and dedication than I am physically able to offer. This I

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Comrade Fidel at 80, shortly before he formally stepped down

say devoid of all drama.

Fortunately, our Revolution can still count on cadres from the old guard and others who were very young in the early stages of the process. Some were very young, almost children, when they joined the fight on the mountains and later they have given glory to the country with their heroic performance and their internationalist missions. They have the authority and the experience to guarantee the replacement. There is also the intermediate generation which learned together with us the basics of the complex and almost unattainable art of organizing and leading a revolution.

The path will always be difficult and require from everyone's intelligent effort. I distrust the seemingly easy path of apologetics or its antithesis the self-flagellation. We should always be prepared for the worst variable. The principle of being as prudent in success as steady in adversity cannot be forgotten. The adversary to be defeated is extremely strong; however, we have been able to keep it at bay for half a century.

This is not my farewell to you. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of 'Reflections by comrade Fidel.' It will be just another weapon you can count on. Perhaps my voice will be heard. I shall be careful.

Thanks.

●
Fidel Castro Ruz
February 18, 2008
5:30 p.m.

LETTER

Transforming SABC: Start with Snuki

The Editor,

The initiative to transform the SABC Board from its current make-up as a pure representation of the 1996 Class Project is to be welcomed.

But we need to ask: is the initiative to remove Gloria Serobe, Christine Qunta and their ilk and replace them with individuals representing different class interests sufficient?

Will it be sufficient to end the admiring coverage of the President and the barely concealed hostility towards the current ANC leadership by Snuki Zikalala and the 1996 Class Project apologists with whom he has surrounded himself in senior radio and television news management?

In assessing our current actions, it is useful to assess the last progressive initiative to transform the SABC, and to end control of another administration whose time had passed – that of FW de Klerk.

The SABC is a massively powerful instrument that served apartheid both as a blunt propaganda instrument; and, through its programming, as a more nuanced cultural intervention to promote, social and racial segregation.

A pre-emptive initiative by an Alliance-directed coalition in 1992 succeeded in partly blocking use by the FW de Klerk regime of the SABC – then as now, the country's most powerful medium and primary source of formal news for the overwhelming majority of South Africa – as an election propaganda weapon.

The Campaign for Open Media (COM) had as a key objective the replacement of the apartheid-appointed Board with a Board representative of all South Africans, appointed through an open, democratic process.

But it also recognised that achieving a representative Board was, on its own, insufficient to achieve the objective of transforming an institution which had served as the voice of apartheid into one that could speak both for and to all South Africans.

COM therefore undertook a parallel initiative, to neutralise the apartheid political commissars who controlled the news agenda.

The initiative was partly successful: intervention by De Klerk prevented the appointment of a fully representative Board, but by 1993 (well ahead of South Africa's first election), a Board with a narrow majority of democratic and independent members was in place.

Of more immediate importance, the heads of news had been constrained by an influx of news professionals, both democrats from other countries and South Africans who, in the apartheid years, had gained experience in foreign broadcast media and the domestic alternative media, undertaking training of SABC personnel and narrowing the space previously enjoyed by the apartheid-appointed news managers to skew and distort news bulletins.

The short-term outcome was not perfect: SABC news coverage of South Africa's first election was not entirely objective. But it was infinitely better than it would have been if left to the new Board on its own.

The SABC is a massive institution and the Board's control over it is limited – mainly to setting policy and appointing a handful of senior personnel.

Board members are part-timers, meeting a few times a year. Even in setting policy, its influence is restricted by the information and reports fed to it by senior management. In practice, what this has meant in the past is that the Board appoints a CEO and hopes he (there's never been a she) does a decent job.

Almost without exception, post-democracy SABC CEOs have been graduates of the 1996 Class Project – most recently Peter Matlare (who left to head of the notorious price-fixer Tiger Brands) and the incumbent Dali Mpofu.

Both spent much of their time at SABC refining a 'corporatisation' process initiated under the last apartheid CEO, Wynand Harmse. 'Corporatisation' in-

involved transforming SABC structures, systems and imperatives into those in use in the private sector. The SABC became, in short, a capitalist enterprise (although, under Mpofu a very bad one), with its performance assessed on the basis of its commercial success. The SABC's annual reports to parliament continue to reflect this, dominated as they are by financial performance charts.

Any long-term transformation of the SABC must involve a change to its core objectives – from financial performance (where buying cheap US TV programmes will always improve the commercial bottom line more than making local content programming) – to the public broadcaster objective to 'inform, educate and entertain'.

Changing a few Board members alone will not achieve this: it requires a concerted and comprehensive initiative in which Board members are appointed with a clear transformatory mandate, and hold or are removed from their jobs on the basis of their success or failure in fulfilling their mandates.

It also require a thorough-going restructuring of the SABC, so that people and structures must account for the extent to which they provide programming that meets audience needs and reflects the world from a South African perspective.

This is a long-term project and success depends on the trajectory of the broader national transformatory project – the NDR.

In 1993 COM paralleled their Board initiative with one to replace apartheid's news commissars in the SABC. In 2008 we must remove the commissars of the 1996 Class Project – SABC head of news Snuki Zikalala, Amrit Manga, Sophie Mokoena and others around him – and replace them with competent professionals able to give us news that is accurate and which enables us to take informed decisions.

So: let's start with Snuki!

●
Joe Steelman