Editor's issue

I usually don't get too concerned when man-child Julius Malema opens his chubby mouth and spews forth another of his pearls of wisdom. But when he smugly declared there is no need for debate around the proposed media tribunal because "we have already decided", I got scared. Really scared.

This time Juju's outbursts can't be dismissed as the follies of "youth" because he's simply gloating about the fact that the ANC's top brass has already made up their mind. This much has been made clear by the party's chief spin-doctor, Jackson Mthembu, who dismissed editors' concerns over the tribunal by telling them it's just the thing us hapless hacks need to control unruly journalists who are hell-bent on muckraking instead of reporting the truth.

The president himself made it crystal clear where the party stands when he said journalists need to be governed by a tribunal because "at times they go over-board on the rights". And, just in case there was still any doubt about where this is all heading, Zuma summed it up succinctly by letting us know government considers itself — and not the media — to be "the watchdog of the people" because "they (the media) were never elected".

To say these are worrying statements is a gargantuan understatement. But what I find most offensive about all this is how Mthembu and his colleagues have repeatedly argued that "ordinary people" have been calling on government to clamp down on us pesky press.

Don't believe it for a second; this is spin-doctoring at it's worst. The issue that Mthembu and co are trying to manipulate to their self-serving benefit is complaints over sub-standard journalism practices. I'll be the first to admit there are pockets of journalists whose shoddy reporting shames the profession, and no one in the media is really trying to deny that — check out the interview with Jonny Steinberg on page 10. But a draconian style tribunal won't solve this, only more and better training will. If government is truly concerned about the standard of journalism, how about some no-strings attached funding for media training courses and internship programmes?

The ANC's also been lobbying for the tribunal under the pretence that we need it to deal with corrupt journalists who are abusing their "power" (I won't even go into the obvious irony here).

Sure, there are some rotten apples — like there are in any industry — but they're few and far between and are rooted out pretty quickly. Just ask former *Cape Argus* journalist Ashley Smith, who admitted to accepting bribes to write favourably about former Western Cape premier Ebrahim Rasool. Smith was swiftly ostracised by the industry and his former employer, the Argus, led the reporting on his downfall, even though it was a painfully embarrassing affair for the paper.

Besides, there are existing structures in place to regulate errant journalists, and these structures do work. For example, at roughly the same time as *Sunday Times* journalist Mzilikazi wa Afrika was being frogmarched to a squad of police cars and detained on bogus charges, the press ombudsman ruled that *City Press* must apologise to ANC treasurer general Mathews Phosa for not giving him sufficient time to respond to allegations.

The fact is government isn't fooling many with the pack of weak excuses they're using to justify the need for a media tribunal and the equally worrying Protection of Information Bill. I mean, come on, is anyone really gullible enough to think this is anything but a ballsy attempt to muzzle the watchdog so it doesn't bark while the house (of parliament) is being looted and vadalised?

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- To produce a high-quality magazine as a vehicle for this goal.
- To be an independent media platform that promotes an ethos of social

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