

Where, oh where, have all the intellectuals gone?

As we commemorate ten years of democracy, intellectuals, particularly those who find themselves in academia or the media, are called upon to play an independent, critical role in defending our democratic freedoms, and pushing back the frontiers of authoritarianism.

Devan Pillay asks what this means in practice.

When, a few years ago, President Thabo Mbeki asked: 'Where are the intellectuals?' he seemed to be inviting black intellectuals to participate more vigorously in a public discourse that continued to be dominated by white intellectuals. However, when black intellectuals did speak out, but criticised government, they were suspected of being the stooges of whites in the background. Where that label could not work, they tended to be dismissed as 'black consciousness' or 'ultra-left'.

A cynic would conclude what our president really meant was: 'Where are the black intellectuals who can speak out in favour of government policy?'

For some on the Left, on the other hand, the question has a different meaning: 'Where are the Left intellectuals who were so vociferous against apartheid capitalism, but who are now so quiet despite persisting inequality and social injustice under post-apartheid capitalism?'

The accusation is that many intellectuals have been 'bought', as well-paid consultants, by either government or international agencies such as the World Bank. For fear of losing future contracts, they allegedly confine what critical voice they still have to the safety of dinner parties.

While this observation may hold true for certain individuals, the danger is that any intellectual who defends or praises government may be suspected of being an 'intellectual mercenary'.

It is, indeed, difficult being an independent intellectual, especially if you come from a radical anti-apartheid tradition. Even if you decide to use your intellectual abilities to continue the struggle for social justice, you are asked to make a choice – either for the ANC-alliance in government,

or for the Left outside government and the alliance.

Constitutional Court judge Albie Sachs, in the Foreword to a new book, *Voices of the Transition: The Politics, Poetics and Practices of Social Change in South Africa*, edited by Frank Meintjies and Edgar Pieterse, captures the dilemmas facing critical intellectuals very well.

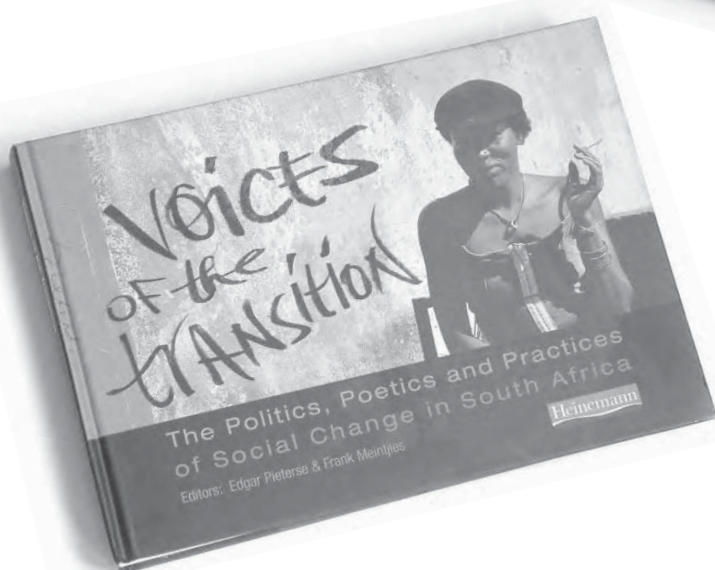
He says that they face the 'the twin anxieties that at times undermine critical intellectual discourse these days: fear of being considered anti-government and unpatriotic and fear of being regarded as pro-government and sycophantic'.

These thoughts swirled through my mind as I listened to a fascinating talk by the historian Terence Ranger, renowned for championing the cause of black peasants under colonial rule in Rhodesia. Ranger was lamenting the fact that Mugabe's regime has been distorting nationalist history – much of it written by Ranger himself – to fit into Zanu-PF's own, convenient version of 'patriotic history' that justifies its current policies.

To do that, of course, requires former academics like Jonathan Moyo, now Zimbabwean Minister of Information, to bury their critical independence, and give credibility to the ruling party's version of the truth.

Ranger went on to describe how the University of Zimbabwe, until recently a top-class tertiary institution, has effectively shut its doors as it came under increased attack from the Zimbabwean government. A Wits University professor chairing the meeting wondered why there has not been a whimper of protest from South African academics in support of their Zimbabwean colleagues.

Another academic at Ranger's talk



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offered an explanation: South African universities are also coming under attack from our own government, and we have been cowed into silence. Fear, he suggested, reigned on our campuses.

Huh? Does he know something I do not know? I wondered. For fear of being labelled a government lackey, I kept quiet, even though I knew that he was exuding an excessive sense of paranoia.

Yes, universities are being deprived of public funding, forcing them to 'corporatise' – which means a lack of new books in our libraries, increased student numbers but fewer lecturers, more teaching, more marking and less time for research.

Low pay obliges many lecturers to seek consultancy work to supplement their income, which both compromises their independence and further reduces research time. Others, particularly newly developed

black academics, simply leave for higher paying jobs elsewhere.

All of this increases the danger of universities becoming glorified high schools, rather than centres of excellence in research and teaching – which inevitably impacts on an academic's ability to participate vigorously and meaningfully in public discourse.

But is this part of a sinister plot by government to undermine a possible source of intellectual opposition? I doubt it. It looks more like short-sightedness.

For all the shortcomings of ten years of democracy, we can take pride in the fact that we have a vibrant intellectual climate characterised by free speech and diversity of opinion. We need only listen to SAfm, our public broadcaster's flagship radio station, to appreciate the health of our public discourse.

Of course, intellectuals can be intimidated into silence in various ways – but this takes many different forms, and can come from a variety of sources, not only government. We have enough protections built into our Constitution and our daily practice that should encourage intellectuals to keep alive their independent, critical faculties.

As Judge Sachs goes on to say in his Foreword, there are an increasing number of intellectuals 'who inhabit the huge and fascinating terrain in-between, and who are not afraid whom they might please and whom they might offend.'

This is the challenge all of us face, as we build onto the next ten years of our democracy.

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