

CITATION FOR JOE THLOLOE

Honorary Graduand, Rhodes University, 9 April 2011

By Professor Paul Maylam

In these times of intense, often heated debate surrounding such issues as press freedom, media tribunals, freedom of information, government regulation of the media, we can be thankful that a central figure in these debates is the current South African Press Ombudsman, Joe Thloloe. In these contestations his stance has been independent, balanced, ethical and judicious. While he has upheld some complaints directed against the press, he has also been critical of the government's efforts to exercise greater control over the media. Furthermore he is a key player in facilitating dialogue among the main protagonists in this debate, bringing together media representatives, politicians, academics and analysts to discuss the issues.

Any other person who suffered the oppression, humiliation and repression of apartheid, as did Joe Thloloe, might not be so even-handed and fair-minded. Joe is renowned for his graciousness and lack of bitterness.

Growing up in Soweto he experienced all the harshness of township life – living in a two-room matchbox dwelling with his family, dependent on the loathsome bucket system; being mugged by tsotsis who hacked his face with an axe, leading to months of reconstructive surgery. But there are also positive memories of Orlando High School where he was taught by dedicated teachers who were paid little but taught for the love of their work – that was until many of them were fired for protesting against the introduction of Bantu education in the 1950s.

Joe himself became an activist from a young age – when still only seventeen joining the PAC’s anti-pass campaign at the time of Sharpeville, and sentenced to a prison term or 300-pound fine – only released nine months later when his father was able to pay the fine. Not deterred he became a committed anti-apartheid activist – leading to more prison terms in 1976, ’77, from ’82 to ’84, as well as a three-year banning order.

To the position of Press ombudsman he brings years of experience as a journalist – starting out as a reporter in the 1960s, working on such papers as the *World*, *Rand Daily Mail*, *Golden City Post*; then writing for *Drum* magazine in the early 1970s; from 1977 to 1994 taking on writing and editorial responsibilities with the *World* once more, and later with the *Post Transvaal* and *Sowetan*; heading SABC TV news from 1994 to ’97, and taking on the same role with e-tv from 2001 to 2005. There have been other roles outside the newsroom: the presidency of both the Union of Black Journalists and the Media Workers Association of South Africa; chairing the South African National Editors’ Forum, a body he helped establish; also sitting on the Human Rights Commission panel investigating racism in the media. Not to forget his ongoing connection with the Rhodes Journalism Department, where he has attended conferences, lectured students, and published in the department’s journal.

Such was his expertise and experience that Joe was the prime candidate for the position of Press Ombudsman in 2007 – a role that requires him to oversee the self-regulation of the press - his main task to hear complaints against the press – there being about 200 of these a year, coming from all sectors of society. In the first nine months of last year 64% of such complaints were upheld by the Ombudsman, showing him to have no one-sided partiality towards the profession in which he had worked for so long.

While willing to find against the press for particular failings and inaccuracies, our Ombudsman adheres firmly to the belief that media freedom is a fundamental cornerstone of democracy – a freedom enshrined in the constitution, a freedom that imposes on the media a responsibility to serve society. Believing that the press should be free from external control, he opposes the government's proposed media tribunal. "Any system imposed from outside the press", he says, "will be...in violation of the Constitution". He prefers the self-regulatory mechanism "which maintains freedom of expression".

These are the views of a media practitioner who places a supreme value on ethical practice, believing that information imparted to the public must be based on ethics and integrity, and that journalists must live this code, constantly reflecting on their own ethics. Among other concerns is his fear that South Africa might become a society where patronage and corruption are commonplace – and the belief that it is the responsibility of the media to ensure this does not happen.

This fine journalist has been accorded due recognition and accolades: the Louis Lyons Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism in 1986; a prestigious Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University in 1989; enlisted by UNESCO to serve on the judging panel for its World Press Freedom Prize; the Allan Soga lifetime achiever award in 2009.

And today an honorary doctorate, awarded with pride by Rhodes University. Awarded to Joe Thloloe, also known as 'Nong', a word meaning bird or buzzard – but as one of his colleagues once remarked, Joe has been "the very opposite of a menacing, carrion-loving scavenger". We are honouring a long-standing anti-apartheid activist who endured much tribulation for his involvement in the cause; a public intellectual for whom ethical concerns are uppermost. He has been described as the "pre-eminent elder statesman of South African journalism", and as "a professional with an unparalleled wealth

of courage, compassion and commitment that dates back almost 50 years in the media”.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Joe Thloloe the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.