

## Trouble for SABC chair even before she started

The SABC cannot be everything to everyone; it is time to be pragmatic and businesslike, get the organisation back into profitability and allow it to rebuild itself - and only then look at what may be possible.

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#) 8 Jun 2009

When now-deposed SABC chair, Kanyi Mkonza was appointed by President Mbeki just after Polokwane, I asked her if she knew what a "hospital pass" was.

She had never heard of the expression, which essentially comes from the game of rugby when a team-mate passes the ball to you split seconds before you get crash-tackled into oblivion by the opposition defender.

I reckon Kanyi Mkonza now knows first hand exactly what a hospital pass is all about.

Think about it. Mbeki had just lost out at Polokwane and between then and when he was forced to step down as president, he tossed in a few last-minute presidential decisions, one of which was to appoint Mkonza as SABC chair of a new board he had approved after recommendations from the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communications.

Within weeks that same portfolio committee publicly announced it had lost confidence in the very board it had selected only a few months earlier.

### Double trouble

Then started a chain of events that would have made a riveting soap opera for TV except for the fact that even the most creative and imaginative script writer could have dreamed up such a convoluted story-line that was so filled with double-dealing, double-speak and double-cross.

Frankly, I can't imagine any other Mbeki appointee doing any better. It was an insane situation.

Hopefully, now that parliament is back in action after a long and SABC-damaging election layoff, a new parliamentary portfolio committee will get down to work and use its newly found powers to make radical changes to the board.

I live in hope that some day a communications portfolio committee will look at creating a board with their point of departure being creating a body that will give the SABC the best chance of fulfilling its public mandate and not just from the point of view of political one-upmanship.

The SABC board desperately needs to have some pragmatic business acumen on board and to balance this with people who actually understand what makes broadcasting profitable.

### High expectations

Given a pragmatic, businesslike board, it is my bet that the first thing the portfolio committee would be told probably that the political expectation of what the SABC should achieve is, right now, is far higher than it is able to do with current resources.

Government will have to decide what it wants. And my guess that its wish-list for SABC as it stands right now will mean that massive public funding will have to take place. In short, the ideal national broadcaster will by sheer necessity be one that is subsidised year in and year out.

Up till now the SABC hasn't even come close to fulfilling its mandate. Not even close since 1994.

On the other hand, if the SABC is supposed to try to be self-sustainable then even a standard four school kid with a calculator would be able to prove quite conclusively that there will never ever be enough licence fee, sponsorship or advertising revenue to be able to pay for it all. Because government is wanting a Rolls Royce and right now the best the SABC can produce is a somewhat underpowered combi taxi.

Over the past 40 years that I have been commenting on SABC affairs, I have heard a succession of CEO's tell me that they want to run the SABC as a business because "that is the only way."

Some of them got close to doing so only to be tripped up by political pressure and quite ludicrous delivery demands.

## **Leadership is vital**

History has proven without doubt that every business lives or dies by its leader. And if that leader does not have the backing of both staff and shareholders, he or she might as well quit.

The portfolio committee desperately needs to understand what even the most ideal SABC is capable of.

The country is in a recession, so it is time to be businesslike and pragmatic. The days of wishful thinking about the SABC being absolutely all things to all people are gone, at least for the moment.

Government needs to let the SABC rebuild itself on business principles and once it is back in profit to then see just how that money can go towards reaching what has always been "the impossible dream."

## **ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK**

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on [moerdykc@gmail.com](mailto:moerdykc@gmail.com) and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).  
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