

City Press vs ANC: Who is the adult and who is the child?



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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Who exactly, I have wondered as temperatures have risen over the past 10 days over Brett Murray's [Zuma Spear painting](#), is the adult and who is the child in this situation?

What started as a battle between the ANC, on one side, and the Goodman Gallery and *City Press* (which put the controversial *The Spear* painting up on its website), on the other, ratcheted up to alarmingly inflammatory levels - mostly, it must be said, because of the ANC's shrill accusations that the painting was racist and an attack on traditional African culture.



[click to enlarge](#)

Fascinating soul search

While the ANC secretary-general, Gwede Mantashe, and the SACP general secretary, Blade Nzimande, looked to score popularist points for President Jacob Zuma as they called for boycotts of *City Press*, the South African media set about a fascinating soul search, pondering and questioning all kinds of important issues - from freedom of speech to the balancing of SA's constitutional rights, from the quality of the Zuma presidency to the tension between traditionalists and modernising forces within the ANC, from how far we've come in race relations to questioning our very nationhood.

From Twitter to radio and TV, from websites to the opinion pages of our newspapers, it has been a long time since we have seen such a robust national conversation on important issues.

If this was a positive spin-off of the Zuma *Spear* drama, the ANC didn't appear to notice. While it leapt mightily to conclusions and threw tantrums in public places, the only adult in the room - it seemed to me sometimes - was the media.



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Ethically and responsibly

While GCIS CEO Jimmy Manyi castigated e.tv for not airing the ANC's advocate, Gcina Malindi, breaking down in court on the basis that it was being biased, [e.tv's explanation](#) showed it acted ethically and responsibly.

As the ANC and some of its partners were stepping up calls for readers and advertisers to boycott *City Press* this past weekend, editor [Ferial Haffajee](#) (@ferialhaffajee) was trying to bridge the chasm with her "[Dear Duduzile](#)" piece on Sunday.

Then on Monday, 28 May 2012, Haffajee [announced](#) she was taking the controversial image down "in the spirit of peacemaking - it is an olive branch. But the debate must not end here and we should all turn this into a learning moment, in the interest of all our freedoms."

Churlish, to say the least

The ANC's response to Haffajee's soul-searching concession was churlish, to say the least: We appreciate it, [it said](#), but you still have to say sorry.

The march to the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg today is still on while ANC spokesman Jackson Mthembu was [quoted in the media](#) this morning as saying: "At the end of the march, the alliance will make important announcements following

extensive interaction with all parties involved."

The police said it was expecting about 15 000 marchers.

Of course, this all comes amid a long-running battle between the press and ruling party, with the ANC proposing statutory control of print media and pushing the [Secrecy Bill](#) through Parliament despite widespread opposition.

Important symbolic compromise

Crucially, last month the Press Freedom Commission made an important symbolic compromise to the ANC in its [recommendations](#) that self-regulation of the press be replaced by independent co-regulation and that the press code be more rigorously applied to newsrooms.

You could say - and [I have in the past](#) - that the media is backing down where it should not. You could argue that, if you can't report on the work of a well-known artist and show that work on your pages, that this is not much of a democracy.

Haffajee is already coming under fire for her decision to take the image off her paper's website - most notably from Eusebius McKaiser ([@Eusebius](#)) in [this piece](#) penned yesterday. I also saw a lot of tweets denouncing *City Press* for lack of backbone yesterday but then many were applauding Haffajee's move.

Very smart

I think what Haffajee has done is very smart - and she has gone to great trouble to explain her thinking. There are more important [media-freedom battles](#) to fight in the future and she has made her point with *The Spear* and is moving on.

What she did took character and leadership - something painfully lacking in the higher echelons of the ANC in past 10 days.

The ANC has increasingly shown itself to be the schoolyard bully that it is.



Boggles the mind

In this spectacular collision of the worlds of art, media and politics, what really boggles the mind is seeing former ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema [speaking up for press freedom and City Press](#) this past Sunday.

Never a dull moment, as we often like to say in this country - and, interestingly, the subject of this [Murray art work of 2010](#).

For more:

- TimesLive: [Riding victimhood to power](#), 28 May 2012
- Daily Maverick: [ANC vs City Press: what lies beneath](#), 28 May 2012
- Bizcommunity: [Press Freedom Commission hearings humbling, thought-provoking](#), 25 January 2012

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