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Media gets blame as comrades debate guilt


**INSIDE
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Donwald Pressly

TREVOR Manuel's comments on apartheid had produced "a paroxysm of excitement" in the commercial media. "Several newspapers splashed out with banner headlines," SACP deputy leader Jeremy Cronin remarked.

He argued that the general slant of the front-page stories gave the impression that Comrade Trevor was exonerating apartheid and that – like the Freedom Front Plus – the minister of national planning had declared the segregationist system long dead.

While apparently being lionised "with all this flattering attention, Comrade Trevor was actually being set up by shoddy journalism and crude ideologues".

He noted that Manuel had actually said: "Without a strong and effective government, we will not be able to reverse the effects of apartheid on the opportunities available to all South Africans but, in particular, to the historically disadvantaged.

"Markets on their own will not reverse the centuries of subjugation and oppression."

It seems, however, that President Jacob Zuma himself thought that Comrade Trevor was going too far.

He said: "To suggest we cannot blame apartheid for what is happening in our country now, I think is a mistake, to say the least. We don't need to indicate what it is apartheid did.

"The fact that the country is two in one – you go to any city, there is a beautiful part and squatters on the other side – this is not the making of democracy and we can't stop blaming those who caused it."

One newspaper reported Manuel as saying at a public service leadership summit: "We cannot plead ignorance or inexperience. For almost two decades, the public has been patient in the face of mediocre services. The time for ruthless focus on implementation has come."

He was also alleged to have said: "We [the government] should no longer say it's apartheid's fault," referring to the need for the government to take responsibility for its actions.

Cronin said that Comrade Trevor had said: "We cannot continue to blame apartheid for our failings as a state."

That was where Cronin said he started "to differ" a little with Comrade Trevor.

"I think the use of the word 'blame' is unhelpful... Is he implying that fellow government ministers, and senior public servants might be doing just that?"

He noted that his boss, SACP general secretary Blade Nzimande, told a newspaper: "I have yet to see any of our leaders and cadres sit down and not do any work and blame apartheid."

It seems that Nzimande hasn't visited many schools in the country lately.

Former president FW de Klerk's view was that when Zuma said "we cannot stop blaming those who caused it", he was playing the very dangerous game of making whites the racial scapegoats for the manifest failures of his own government.

Even Cronin questioned Nzimande's view: "Whether there are actually ministers or civil servants who use apartheid as a scapegoat for their own failings or laziness can be debated, but what Comrade Trevor and Comrade Blade in their different ways are both implying is that it is not a question of blaming... instead, we have to take active and collective responsibility for transforming our country, but in order to do that we also need to understand the continued, systemic impact of a colonial, semi-colonial and apartheid past upon the government."

Then he went on to praise the National Development Plan – so much hated by many ANC-aligned trade unionists. Cronin said the chapter on building a capable state involved a public service capable of driving the political mandate of a democratically elected government while at the same time remaining fully professional and providing "a public service" to all citizens.

This week Cronin, who is also deputy minister of public works, drove the debate on the new Expropriation Bill, explaining that it was not a mechanism to drive out white commercial farmers or to steal "granny's savings".

He was pressed on whether his colleagues lacked the political will to carry out the transformation mandate of a battery of existing expropriation laws.

Cronin, perhaps wisely, said he would not like to comment on the presence "or absence" of political will of colleagues.

Otherwise, if there is doubt, it could be put down to being the media's fault.