



anthony
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state of the nation

THE decision this week by Parliament's top watchdog committee chairman to quit is a sign of a much broader malaise that is threatening the very core of our new democracy.

For what is at issue here is a failure of many of our politicians to understand, or a cynical disregard for, the fundamental guiding principles of the highest law of the land, the Constitution. It is of special significance when the people's elected representatives are party to undermining the provisions of the founding document of our new nation.

Mr Gavin Woods, an IFP MP, felt the responsibilities he had as the leader of the public accounts committee most

keenly. After all, it is this committee which perhaps best exemplifies what the Constitution means when it requires that public representatives in the legislative arm of Government hold those in the executive arm of Government to account.

The clear intention of the Constitution is that Parliamentary structures serve as guardians of the interests of the people so that our taxes are not wasted or misused. Woods was eventually drummed out of his

job because he could not stand seeing the position of public trust, which the committee should enjoy, being undermined by the executive with the active collusion by the majority party in the legislature.

What was meant to be a single-minded, ruthless and fearless watchdog in the service of the people had come to be reduced to an ineffectual and misguided lapdog with an acute identity crisis.

The Constitution requires that the Cabinet and the Government should be fully accountable to Parliament.

The emasculation of Parliament and its oversight role is by no means a new phenomenon. When Parliament and its structures are afforded an opportunity to assert their authority or show a steely resolve on matters of principle, all too frequently the course of least resistance wins the day. So we find the Parliamentary Ethics Committee is happy to abrogate its responsibility and surrender its watchdog function by turning down a recommendation by the registrar of members interests for an official investigation into former chief whip Mr Tony Yengeni's 4x4 fetish.

And, what becomes of the special Parliamentary Committee established to decide what should be done about a Government Minister (Penuel Maduna) slugging off the Auditor-General,

misleading Parliament and wasting millions? The problem of ministers viewing themselves as the masters, rather than the servants, of the voting public has been particularly evident in their cavalier attitude towards question time in the Parliament's second house, the National Council of Provinces (NCOP).

One of the reasons the NCOP has come to be regarded as something of an expensive joke is precisely because it has failed to take its Constitutional responsibilities as guardian of provincial interests seriously. Because the governing party enforces rigid party discipline and the links between the legislature and the executive are so close, members of the majority party in Parliament are increasingly unwilling to subject Government to rigorous scrutiny.

Lines between party and State become blurred and the need for a distinction poorly understood. Parliament is progressively becoming a side-show. The really important decisions are made elsewhere - in the national working committee and the national executive committee of the ruling party, in Cabinet committees and by an inner circle of Presidential confidantes and advisers. Once Parliament becomes more ceremony than substance, constitutional democracy becomes a misnomer.

Ashwin Desai is taking a few weeks' break.

Playhouse problems

enough to make you cry

AFTER a long break, I went to the theatre this week. Not a foot-stomping musical or a forgettable supper show, but the serious stuff that makes you squirm in your seat. *Keely & Du* focuses on the harrowing subjects of rape, abortion, wife battery and religious fundamentalism. It was brilliant in its honesty and I left the Intimate Square Space Theatre at the University on the Hill with tears in my eyes.

Those tears, although of a very different

nature, threatened again later in the week as I listened to the deep anguish of artists who have been displaced by all that has happened at our Playhouse Company. As a large portion of the remaining staff – mainly those in the creative and marketing departments – are now threatened with retrenchment, I recalled those dreadful days when the performing artists were given their marching orders. Then there were the ugly racist remarks which forced the acting managing director Gita Pather to resign. Following an

investigation, Arts and Culture Minister Ben Ngubane sacked the governing board, and from November last year Rodney Mthethwa was appointed as the interim administrator, while Professor Caesar Ndlovu continued in his role as the new managing director.

Today we report that Ndlovu is now under investigation. He started off just over a year ago in such an optimistic and promising manner, inviting the province's artists to put forward their ideas on the future of the arts and the Playhouse. How sad that so much of

his talk of "a bright future and great hope" simply faded. Over the December season the Playhouse – still billed as "KwaZulu-Natal's home of live theatre" – should have been sparkling with festive productions. Instead, the Opera Theatre remained ominously dark.

I fear that if the Playhouse continues to be badly managed and is turned into just "another venue", too expensive for our local artists to use, it will remain dark, because it will lose its soul. And that would really make me cry – reynolds@nni.independent.co.za



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jaundiced eye

A LESSER-known extreme sport is the willingness to charge in where angels fear to tread on matters of race. And, while few South Africans broach such issues outside the safe confines of family and like-minded friends, we all have theories regarding the behaviour of our fellow citizens of differing race, tribe, colour and creed to explain why – compared to ourselves – they are such decidedly odd bods.

Lamenting the reluctance of the ANC Government to condemn Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, a colleague suggested glumly that part of the problem is that European cultural values – as largely held by light-skinned South Africans – are considerably different from the traditional cultural values of most dark-skinned South Africans.

The positive is African values such as *ubuntu* versus crass European materialism. The negative is an apparent African tolerance of despotism and corruption, sycophancy and an intolerance of individualistic thinking and dissent.

This view is certain to be dismissed by the politically correct as thinly veiled racism. Yet there is truth in the argument that cultural variations inform political

structures and attitudes.

Where the theory starts tottering is on the shaky ground of generalisation, since it ignores the subtleties within all groups. For example, many traits perceived as undesirable and "African" are similar to Afrikaner group values during the National Party years. Equally, think of the past century of genocide and pogroms in culturally "advanced" Europe.

Perhaps South Africans should just enjoy the idiosyncrasies and absurdities of their cultural differences.

An illustration is the tussle over who should be honoured with public memorials. At the instigation of African nationalists – but to the quiet delight, no doubt, of Afrikaner nationalists – Durban authorities are pondering the removal of various English icons, including the statue of Queen Victoria outside the City Hall.

Critics of these "remnants of colonialism" want to erect – overlooking the harbour entrance – a Statue of Liberty-sized depiction of the Zulu chief, Shaka.

Last year blacks and English-speaking whites were briefly united in glee when a bust of Afrikaner hero, JG Strijdom, plunged from its plinth and smashed into the parking garage below the Pretoria public square where it had been erected 30 years earlier.

There was much discussion around whether JG should, like Humpty Dumpty, be put back together again. This week the

authorities stated cryptically that JG had been removed from the bowels of where he had come to rest and taken "to a place of safety" to "prevent theft or damage".

One wonders who would have the inclination or means to pinch a 100-ton broken statue but, of course, in South Africa anything not nailed down is at risk.

Meanwhile, a monument to the might of the Zulu nation is getting its finishing touches before being transported to the eMakhosini Valley. The huge bronze monument is designed "to symbolise the return of the spirit of the Zulu nation".

How a gigantic bronze Zulu beer pot surrounded by seven aluminium tusks is meant to symbolise this is not clear. Answers on a postcard and remember what happened to the last lot who offended the Zulu nation.

And, keep in mind the cultural subtleties that caused ANC provincial leader Mr S'bu Ndebele this week to condemn the arrival of King Goodwill Zwelithini at the opening of the provincial parliament in an '80s model Mercedes 500SE. Previously the ANC extracted much mileage out of attacks on Zwelithini for wasting public funds. Now Ndebele intimates that it was an insult to the entire Zulu nation that the king had to drive "a jalopy".

The poor King. Here he was trying to be frugal and, instead, he gave his own people a *klap* in the face. What hope for the rest of us to make sense of one another?

Mosque row goes on

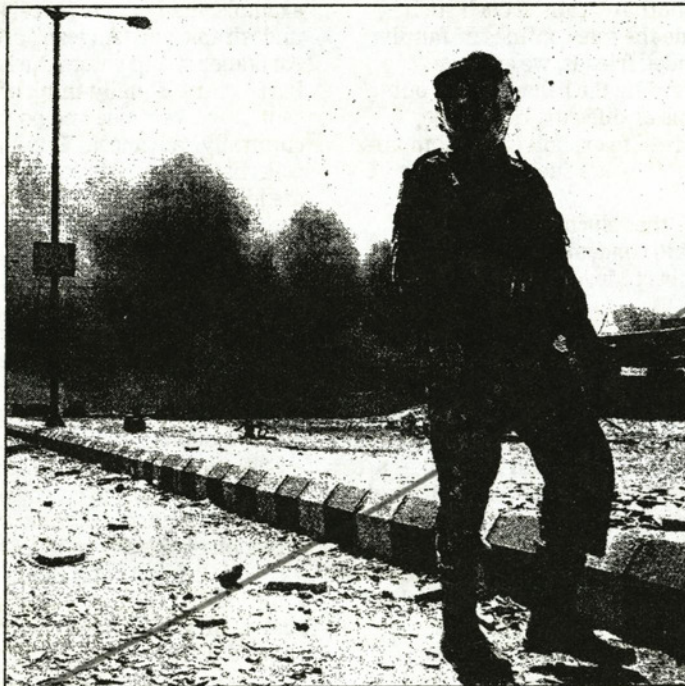
BUILT in the 16th century by a Moghul emperor, the razed Babri mosque has been a source of dispute between Indian Hindus and Muslims since 1788, when a Jesuit priest suggested the site was the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram.

The row over the brick and limestone shrine only really heated up in 1949 when a Ram statue appeared inside the mosque, which Hindus called a miracle and Muslims dubbed an act of sectarian mischief.

A year later, the state government of Uttar Pradesh, where the disputed site is located, acquired Babri mosque and locked its doors to both communities.

But in February 1986 a local court allowed Hindus to worship the deity in the three-domed structure.

The Hindu revivalist BJP party and its hardline ally, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), laid a foundation stone for a grand Ram temple on a disputed site adjoining the Babri mosque and on November 11 1986 they launched a nationwide campaign to garner Hindu support for their construction programme.



AFTERMATH: A policeman stands guard in a deserted street in Ahmedabad, India, where religious violence has killed 190 people in the past two days
Picture: REUTERS

On October 7 1991, the BJP government of Uttar Pradesh acquired the 1.1-hectare adjacent site, also claimed by Muslims, and started constructing a temple, but a year later New Delhi stopped the work to cool rising sectarian tensions.

But the same year, the BJP and its leader, Lal Krishna Advani, the current home

minister, asserted that the temple construction would continue irrespective of a verdict of the Supreme Court, which had been asked to resolve the dispute.

The temple-building drive gained momentum across India and on December 6 1992, some 300 000 Hindus arrived in the pilgrimage town of Ayodhya and tore down the disputed structure, hurriedly establishing a makeshift Ram temple on the smouldering rubble.

The act triggered post-independence India's worst bout of sectarian violence in which 2 000 were killed, most of them Muslims.

The ruin was then barricaded and ownership of the site is once again in the hands of the courts.

Since the BJP party came to power in India at the head of a multi-party coalition government, it has sought to distance itself from the Ayodhya issue for fear of antagonising its more secular-minded allies.

However, the VHP has pledged to go ahead with its temple construction plans, even if it means a confrontation with the heavy security forces permanently posted at the site. — AP