



LETTER

FROM

EPHESUS

*Nelson's Column*

Have you ever written to a friend in a state of gloom, rage - or euphoria - describing whatever has made you that way? And have you then received a reply or even anxious phone call in response, days later, when the mood of that moment is long gone and you can't quite remember why you wanted to dance on the rooftops or, alternatively, slit your wrists?

That long-distance friendships survive this kind of dislocation is a constant wonder. Could it be something to do with the private world of the correspondence itself? It has its own timescale and codes of behaviour and is, perhaps, the last bastion of introspection and reflection in the fibre-optic, instant facsimile-transmitted world.

Imagine the difference there might have been in the quality of the relationship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West if they had faxed or phoned one another every day, instead of writing ... imagine having the time and inclination to do that anyway. Or is this a delusion too - that we have no time to write letters? No time to do anything but put one foot in front of the other, catch the bus there and back and simply get through from Weetbix to bedtime. There are still

24 hours in a day - apparently - but what do we do with them?

We get bullied a lot, for one thing. We get bullied into accepting that certain things matter, are urgent, world-shaking and demanding of our immediate attention, when they are not. This occurred to me some years ago when I'd been tucked away in a remote part of the world for a few weeks - without television, radio, phone or newspapers. During that time President Reagan had been shot and not killed. It had obviously mattered a great deal to him, Nancy and their astrologer. It had also mattered to television news programs which had secured fabulous ratings with the footage, and to newspapers who'd sold lots of extra copies on the back of the dramatic pictures. But to me, and anyone else out of the range of hysterical and story-hungry news media, it mattered little.

That was just about when news of great events used to filter through before instant electronic communication capability crashed into advertising dollars and TV ratings to create 'news shows'. These awful parasitical things have reached the absolute pits on our commercial channels - pick any one, any day of the week.

For instance, what the PM ummed and aaah-ed about, what the Leader of the Opposition moue-ed and smirked about, day after day, is not important. Indeed, placing microphones in front of their faces only encourages them to come up with even more platitudes and untruths. The release of Nelson Mandela is a case in point.

To refresh your information-bombarded memories, Nelson Mandela is released, what does Bob do? He sits down in his office and writes a letter (great photo opportunity this - very statesmanlike) telling Mandela how much he admires his courage and fortitude and how Australia will continue to do whatever it can to ensure the end of apartheid in South Africa. Now this is very commendable and, from Bob as a simple human being, a heartfelt truth: Bob Hawke is not a horrible

man, in fact he is an emotional and caring man. Trouble is he's also a politician and he can see no irony in sending such a letter when the black population of this country suffers much the same indignities and deprivation that he deplores in South Africa. I believe him when he says he admires Mandela's courage and fortitude - what a pity that politics does not allow him to express materially his admiration for the courage and fortitude of Australia's Aborigines.

As for Andrew Peacock ... "tiraloo, tiralay, o happy day, we must lift sanctions immediately," he chirrups. Is this man for real? (Don't all snort at once, this is a rhetorical question.)

But perhaps the here-today-gone-tomorrow media reality of Nelson Mandela's release was best, if inadvertently, illustrated by Senator Gareth Evans. Not that you'd have seen it if your evening 'news' is seen through the lenses of the commercial channels. Only SBS rolled the tape from its piquant beginnings as the Senator was ambushed between his car and Parliament House: "Slow news day is it?" he inquired almost inaudibly of the camera crews, bored and cynical amusement all over his voice and face. At this point a minder must have had hysterics. Cut to the Senator's newly-arranged expression of Foreign Ministerial gravitas (which is where the commercial channels picked him up) as he delivers his news grab. It went along the lines of how deeply pleased he was that Mr Mandela is out of leg irons and how lifting sanctions will be considered in due time - but not right now.

After 27 years in jail it must be depressing to know that you are going to have to be polite and play the game with people like these - to know that an invitation from George Bush to visit the White House is in the diplomatic bag - along with further instructions to CIA operatives in Pretoria to be sure to keep real tight tabs on the black bastard.

Nkosi sikelele - God bless Africa.

*Diana Simmonds*