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**Beware of
spinning
farmers**

HOW valuable is a white farmer's life compared with yours and mine? How many businesspeople's lives are equivalent to those of their peers who make a living from working the land or raising livestock?

This question might sound flippant but the answer has enormous implications for all of us. Personally, I'm tired of hearing the lies being peddled about crime on farms by the likes of Agri SA, Afriforum, the AWB, Freedom Front+...

This week Agri SA chairman André Botha spoke at length before a parliamentary committee, predicting hellfire and brimstone unless the country provides special security measures for farmers.

We've heard it all before: the country's food security is seriously under threat if (black) crime on (white) farms is left unchecked. Hard as I try, I fail to see how businesses that produce the food we eat deserve special treatment from the wholesalers and traders who bring their vegetables, meat, milk and other produce within our easy reach.

Their well-financed lobbies, such as Agri SA, have painted a phoney picture of farmers as victims of an organised, politically motivated campaign to drive them off their properties. We're all supposed to believe this, without scientific proof, because they tell us it is true.

They'd have us believe that politically sponsored criminals kill white farmers and plunder their goods with impunity because the black government doesn't care about the welfare of white people.

Even worse, they'd have us believe that the ANC government, as exemplified by the reckless Julius Malema, tacitly supports "farm attacks" because they dovetail with its policies on land redistribution, affirmative action and black economic empowerment.

That the peddlers of these lies have managed to distort perceptions about crime in the country attests to the power of their public relations machinery. Their sectarian views gain currency, thanks to their ability to manipulate the media.

Their most formidable tactics include identifying and making use of like-minded journalists to spread their propaganda.

There are similarly powerful lobbies for every aspect of our lives. They know very well that newsrooms have become understaffed and short on the necessary expertise to see

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through their spin.

Whenever public relations wins the public loses because people never get to know the truth.

This happens even when media reports are factually true. Take the Agri SA story. The reporters captured what the organisation had told the parliamentary committee. Whether what it said was true is a different matter.

That's why factual reporting under the tyranny of a deadline needs to be quickly followed by a sober examination of the claims. In the case of Agri SA that would, for example, test the accuracy of its claims about the number of "farm attacks" and the resultant casualties. We would need to determine the accuracy of the claim that farm owners lost R269 million to crime in 2007.

South African farmers must get used to the idea of conducting business in a capitalist economy. That means providing their own security and factoring that into their cost of business.

It will be interesting to see how the state responds to the demands for special treatment for the country's 40 000 commercial farmers. How many of the 190 000 police officers would be deployed to protect them, if they have their way?

Deploying them on farms in peacetime is no option. Soldiers are trained to protect us from enemies, not to fight stock thieves.

The media would do well to keep an eye on this one. The potential for misallocation of resources to protect farmers is a matter of public interest.

The same goes for the Eugène Terre'Blanche murder case. It's a golden opportunity to give the nation a glimpse into life on farms - for owners and employees.