

# Freedom of the Press

## **An address by Sir Peter Barter, Minister for Inter-Government Relations on World Press Freedom Day**

### ***Who are given freedom?***

Who are the press that they should be given freedom to shape the way the nation thinks and feels about issues?

Are the press the journalists who choose some stories and not others, who choose to praise some people and condemn others, who choose certain issues as important and let others rest ignored?

Is the press the editors who assess what stories are important, which stories are to be printed, and where newspaper funding goes for more in-depth stories?

Is the press the owners of the newspapers? In the case of our two daily newspapers, should we be giving freedom to the owners. These include Rupert Murdoch, an Australian turned American with aspiration to global control of the media, and a lean towards right wing politics. This includes a Malaysian-owned which is closely associated with the sometimes controversial operations of the principal logging company in this country. Are these the people that should be given freedom to shape a Melanesian society?

Is the press to a considerable degree the leagues of overseas correspondents, almost always Australasian, European or North American in precedence who represent the world to us – and us to the world? Can we trust the first world to represent our interests? Can we trust the first world to represent us to others?

Recently, our Prime Minister with some justification spoke strongly in our National House of Parliament by the way we had been misrepresented by the Australian press. The story had its origins in the work of the Institute of National Affairs which has been of considerable service to the nation over many years through painstaking analyses of our development.

However, the Reports in the Australian press – in what I would think was almost neo-colonial contempt – wrote the story as if we were heading towards the precipice, and ignored our many achievements over the last thirty years.

All of us, myself, each of yourselves can be made to look like walking disasters – if the person describing us chooses only the negative. The Australian press fed its prejudices, in order to create a sellable story – which perhaps too much reinforce a negative image of Papua New Guinea which they had helped create previously. Among the newspapers which gave us the negative publicity were ones owned by the same American as owns one of our national newspapers.

Are the motives of the owners the maximum benefit of the country or the maximum profit of the company?

Within the responses to these questions, I would also ask is there a degree to which the press is us. We read the newspapers, we buy the newspapers, and we write letters to the newspaper.

I have always had a personal relationship with the newspapers – one of mutual benefit. I write stories and produce papers which publicise favourably my achievements – and I hope and trust with all humility that these achievements are not for the greater glory of Peter Barter, but the betterment of our country.

Divine Word University also realises that to some extent the newspapers and the press are us. Their student and professional journalists as practice and also as a way of describing or advocating matters that they consider important. Almost all people who work with Divine Word University believe in the Mission of the university. They believe sincerely in their duty – as well as self-interest – to advertise it.

There are others who control the content of the newspapers, through the power of advertising. I have noticed – with some unease – the number of pages devoted each week to night clubs whose principal draw card is persuading women to wear minimal underwear or beach wear or wet t-shirts.

### ***Our achievement***

Nonetheless, I believe our achievement (and I use ‘our’ as ‘yumi’ and not ‘mipela’) has been outstanding. The press in Papua New Guinea does the following:

- It informs the people and debates core issues in the political, economic, social and cultural development of the nation;
- It is generally independent of the favours of the government of the day, but neither dogmatically for or against any government. It goes by the issues and the performance so far as it can;
- Its choice of headlines – as with all newspapers anywhere tends to reflect conflict and problems – but nonetheless it gives proper attention to the positive achievements of parts of our society;
- It provides general information – for example, in the excellent health supplements; and
- Each newspaper makes a concerted effort to present the news from provincial centres.

### ***Globalisation and Information Technology***

Issues in the freedom of information will change radically in the next few years. It is typical of the forthcoming change that to prepare the present speech, I have used the internet to obtain information on global issues in the Freedom of Speech. I have in half an hour called down:

- a speech from Mr Kofi Annan for the United Nations Organisation perspective on Freedom of Speech and prepared for this Freedom of Speech Day;

- an analysis from a think tank in Canada (the North-South Institute);
- a debate on the freedom of the press conducted in the newspapers of Israel, Palestine and Jordan; and
- just so that I should not allow myself to be prejudiced
- reports from an international organisation called itself 'Reporters sans Frontieres' – and dedicated as professiona