



**'Media in a post-conflict society':  
Address to Media Association of Solomon Islands**

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Honiara, Solomon Islands  
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E nga mana, e nga reo, e nga iwi, e nga haue wha. Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa. To the people of the four winds, greetings.

President of the Media Association of Solomon Islands, John Lamani, members of the media association of Solomon Islands, invited guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure and a privilege this evening to be invited to speak on the important role the media has to play in a post-conflict society.

As a diplomat, I am used to my work being regularly critiqued and analysed by journalists. To turn the tables is a challenge I approach with trepidation. No doubt you will have some fun critiquing and analyzing these efforts too.

I become more nervous when I look at the literature describing journalists. I've come across the so-called "*Three Rules of Journalism: make it juicy, make it brief, and make it up.*" And American writer Mark Twain, as ever sharp and cutting, provided the following advice to would-be journalists: "*Get your facts first, and then you can distort 'em as much as you please.*"

Thankfully, there's a much more serious side to the media's role. As a starting point, I'd like to go back 25 centuries, to the book of Proverbs, chapter 2; verse 11-15:  
*Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you. Wisdom will save you from the way of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, who leave the straight paths, to walk in dark ways, who delight in doing wrong, and rejoice in the perverseness of evil, whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways.*

In any society, the media is a key accountability institution – the witness to events; the force that explains those events and puts them in context; and the Wisdom that saves from the way of "*men whose words are perverse...*"

A vibrant media is as important as any other accountability institution – the Parliament; the Auditor General's office; the Ombudsman; or the Leadership Code Commission.

Thomas Carlyle recognized this long ago. In 1841, quoting Edmund Burke, he said *“that there were three Estates in Parliament, but in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a fourth Estate more important than they all.”*

An active and free media provides scrutiny of leaders, governments, institutions, individuals and businesses. RAMSI is no exception – our work is scrutinised by the media, and properly so. Scrutiny keeps us all honest. Scrutiny and balanced criticism helps us to improve the work we do. Scrutiny also exposes shady behaviour. It makes it difficult for people to operate outside established norms and legal frameworks. It makes them accountable.

More recently United States' former Secretary of State Colin Powell affirmed this, arguing that *“the most effective means of ensuring the government's accountability to the people is an aggressive, free, challenging, untrusting press.”*

In a post-conflict society institutions of government are often weakened or broken down. The accountability role of the media comes into sharper focus when that happens. In post-conflict societies the media has a special, more sharply defined role, and an obligation to defend the public interest. The media moves to the forefront of efforts to expose bad behaviour and illegal practices. It plays a major role in combating corruption, where institutions of the state are not able to do so.

In post-conflict societies the media will come under increased pressure – both because of the work it does, but also because the institutions in place to defend the freedom of the press may not be functioning properly. That happened here during the tensions. A number of the people in this very room made courageous decisions during that time. They published and broadcast material that made some people very unhappy. They chose to face down threats and pressures. Sometimes they did so at great personal cost.

If there is one thing that people who threaten responsible journalists and media outlets have in common, it is that they have something to hide. But threats and pressure are counterproductive – they make journalists curious. If they don't, they should.

In recent weeks stories circulating in Honiara have suggested the media here has come under pressure again. That people who are not part of the editorial team have been visiting newsrooms. And that some editors have been told what not to publish and, just as worrying, what they must publish. If there is any substance to these claims, they should be a matter of deep concern for all Solomon Islanders.

It's natural that some people will be unhappy with the work you do – it comes with the job. As soccer coach and media commentator Tommy Docherty said of the media *“I've always said there's a place for the press but they haven't dug it yet.”* But that's quite different from attempting to influence the media inappropriately.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. Where it is suppressed, liberty and accountability depart with it. Freedom of expression needs to be protected and cherished. As journalist William Small put it “...*free speech surrendered is rarely recovered.*”

That right does not translate to having one’s opinion as the only opinion that’s heard. The media has a special responsibility here – to ask the questions, and ensure all sides of an argument are put. I’ve seen the effects where this right is not fully upheld, in countries where all media had to go through central propaganda or editorial units. The effects were harmful. Accountability was eroded. Only one point of view was expressed. And above all, the content was stifling, and let’s face it, boring.

Courageous journalists sometimes got their messages through despite these constraints. But the point is that they shouldn’t have had to. It has been said that “*a free press is one that prints a dictator’s speech but doesn’t have to.*”

That’s one reason RAMSI has supported the media here. A strong and vibrant media aids good governance and is good for Solomon Islands. Since 2003, RAMSI has provided support for the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, the Solomon Star and the Government Communications Unit. We currently have only two media advisers here – in SIBC.

This support was provided without any RAMSI role in editorial content. We structured the assistance to ensure complete editorial freedom. We would not have had it any other way.

We’ve recently reviewed our media strengthening program. I’m pleased to announce that we are planning major changes to improve our support. We’re looking to assist with spectrum management. We are adding to the training and support we provide to SIBC.

And we are discussing with the Media Association of Solomon Islands ways to support and deepen the pool of media expertise in Solomon Islands through providing a roving training and mentoring adviser. The adviser’s services would be available to any media outlets that wanted assistance.

The media freedoms I have described come with responsibilities. It is important that journalists and editors are well-informed, objective, inquisitive, curious and suspicious of authority in whatever form. Guardians of the truth have a duty to ask, ask, and ask again. And, if not satisfied, ask someone else.

Given their ability to shape public opinion, media organizations have an obligation to be socially responsible. With influence comes a need for discernment – measurement, judgment, balance. It’s not simply enough to print one side of the story without seeking alternative views. If someone sends the media a press release – and that means us in RAMSI too – don’t just print it. Ask questions. Inform your readers.

If you do, you will be living up to your duty to your fellow Solomon Islanders. In our travels around this beautiful land, we meet many smart, thoughtful people who are thirsting for news. From Malu’u to Lata, Taro to Tinggoa, people want to know what’s happening. Even in Honiara, where RAMSI has

a Community Outreach Program and there is a choice of radio and print media, the questions are often the same.

People ask about accountability issues. People want to know what is happening in the fight against corruption. They want to see a light shone into the darkest corners of governance in this land. They want this because they want the best for Solomon Islands.

RAMSI also wants the very best for Solomon Islanders. We're committed to working with Solomon Islanders and their government to support and strengthen this country, and we will stay as long as we are welcome. We're not going to walk away from our task. Neither should you. You have a calling, a duty and, in this post-conflict society, a very special role in building a better future.

Everything I have seen here in Solomon Islands gives me cause for optimism about the future of the media. The journalists and editors of Solomon Islands have done an excellent job with very limited resources. They have proved resourceful and innovative in making do through troubled times. They are also passionate about their work, and articulate supporters of good governance.

As you reflect on your role, looking back through the events of recent years and ahead to the future, there are some key questions of relevance to journalists from Solomon Islands and overseas alike:

- Have I done enough to scrutinize?
- Have I asked all of the questions?
- What more can I do to explain to the country what is going on?
- Have I really got to the bottom of things?
- Is there more the public needs to know?

As you follow up on these questions, you should not be afraid or concerned, or feel the sort of trepidation I did at the prospect of giving this speech. The pen truly is mightier than the sword, or as the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte once said, *"I fear three newspapers more than a hundred thousand bayonets."*

To return to the quotation from Proverbs at the beginning of this toktok it is Wisdom – just like the media - that exposes things that others would like kept in the shadows. For the journalist called to that task, "discretion will protect you and understanding will guard you."

Thank you very much.