



'Balanced Media Vital for Healthy National Debate': Address to RAMSI Media lunch 2010

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It is great to see such a wealth of journalistic and diplomatic talent here today. I would like to acknowledge the presence of the Australian, New Zealand and British High Commissioners as well as all the distinguished representatives from the media and from RAMSI.

A warm welcome to you all for what we hope will be an enjoyable and mostly informal get-together at what is now, I guess, our annual RAMSI Media Lunch, having held the event for the first time last year. Today's lunch is designed not only to mark World Press Freedom Day but also to acknowledge all of you and the important role you are playing in upholding democracy in Solomon Islands.

It has been interesting for me to have had the chance now, over the past sixteen months, to observe the Solomon Islands media in action. I have to say it has been a heartening, informative and at times surprising experience.

Heartening because it is evident that this nation possesses a very robust media. I have watched with interest as some of you have not only broken news of one controversial issue or another but have also burrowed away with great persistence on issues of national importance. An example of this that comes to mind is the *Solomon Star's* Gina Maka'a's regular 'Street Talk' surveys on the public's view of Honiara's mobile phone network. I've no doubt Gina's constant exposure of the level of the public's dissatisfaction played a role in the improvements in this service we are now starting to enjoy.

Reading, listening or watching your reports has also been a very instructive and informative experience for me because what you report and how you report has told me much about what this nation thinks about itself, its priorities, its preoccupations, even its perceptions of the rest of the world. As in any healthy democracy, you the media are really the means by which the nation can have a dialogue with itself. And it has been good to detect a growing confidence about what it is the people of Solomon Islands believe they should be able to demand of their leaders. There are many examples of this from the coverage and commentary over the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission's now rescinded award to the ongoing debate over constituency funding in which all of you have participated so robustly. The editorials in the *Solomon Star*, the *National Express* and *Islands Sun* have often been frank and fearless.

But at times I have also found it a little surprising what is not included in some of your reports. There have been occasions when I have read or heard a report that covers only one side of an issue. Sure I might pick up the other side in media reports made in the next few days and weeks but the original report has left more questions than answers in my mind.

Instead of your readers and audiences being left with these questions, it would be better if you, the journalists, were asking those questions yourselves and doing your very best in the time available to find the answers. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage all of you to reflect carefully on your responsibility to provide balanced reporting and to make sure, while preparing your reports that you are actively looking for what might be missing, for what else people might want to know about the particular issue you are covering. Then, through cross-checking with other sources and seeking alternate view points and information, you can ensure you are informing yourself as fully as possible on the issue, so that you, in turn, can inform the people of Solomon Islands to the best of your ability.

There is no doubt that, currently, Solomon Islands enjoys the benefits of a vibrant and free media but with this goes a level of responsibility that cannot be underestimated. For if the media is the conduit for the national debate, you are also the custodians of the information that informs this debate; this nation essentially only knows what you tell it. The decisions in the highest office right down to the ballot box can and will be shaped by the quality and timeliness of your work and the faithfulness of your commitment to getting it right and making sure your reports are accurate and balanced.

This responsibility is never more obvious than in an election year. So again I take this opportunity to commend your efforts but also to encourage all of you to ensure you deliver to your fellow countrymen and women the highest quality information available not just about intending candidates but also about the issues that are important to this nation. It is crucial that you, as individuals and as media professionals, do your personal best to report fairly, responsibly and independently of your own political views.

I am very proud to be able to take this opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of RAMSI's media strengthening program, SOLMAS, which, in partnership with the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission and RAMSI's Electoral Strengthening Program, has been providing training in preparation for the 2010 election. I congratulate the large number of you who have been taking advantage of this training and the high level of cooperation and coordination you are currently putting in place to strengthen your capacity to cover the national elections effectively.

I am certainly very pleased with the extremely positive feedback that I have received from many of you on the good work of our SOLMAS team led by Corallie Ferguson and their efforts to build an effective partnership with the media in Solomon Islands. It is exciting to see such developments as the *Island Sun's* smart new website and to know that RAMSI has played a part in making this happen.

We are committed in our partnership with the Solomon Islands Government to continue to develop this country's capacity to govern itself effectively and accountably, including through working with the media and assisting your own efforts to develop and strengthen your contribution to the life of this nation.

I know too that the British High Commissioner, Tim Smart, has been working with some of you here today to explore how best to strengthen the support for the media in this country through the development of a Communications Policy. And in conjunction with this, to explore ways more specifically to strengthen Government Communications which not only has the responsibility for telling everyone what the government is doing but also to help the various arms of government understand how the media can partner them in their work of developing the nation.

And now for my favourite part of the proceedings which is the presentation of RAMSI's Media Encouragement Award. This is an award we established last year to recognise the key role the media plays in all aspects of national life. The goal of the award is to provide recognition and encouragement to an individual or media organisation that has demonstrated consistent effort, imagination and commitment to improving and excelling professionally.

Before I announce this year's winner, could I say that I have very much enjoyed working with all of the media here in Solomon Islands since taking up my role as Special Coordinator in January last year. There have been many serious issues to deal with but also some memorable moments like the time usual Honiara technical glitches at the SIBC meant we had to record a quite lengthy interview three times before we were sure it had made it into the SIBC computer system. I also remember attending the Paoa FM 10th anniversary reception at the Honiara Hotel to congratulate them on that fine achievement and finding myself finishing off the evening on the dance floor surrounded by the many beautiful contestants from the Miss Solomon Islands competition!

Last year, you will recall, the inaugural Media Encouragement Award was given to newspaper photographer, Charles Kadamana, for the striking images he regularly produced and for the imagination and commitment he displayed in capturing the mood of key national events. It is good to see Charles at the lunch here today.

I have to say that this year it was again a very difficult choice as we had several strong contenders, and it took some time to identify a single very innovative and outstanding example of the sort of contribution the media can make to the rebuilding of this nation.

It is my great pleasure to announce today that the winner of the **2010 RAMSI Media Encouragement Award** is One Television's excellent new current affairs program, *Footprints*.

I have been watching *Footprints* as often as possible since its very first program which focused on the issue of under-age drinking, revealing the high level of alcohol and kwaso consumption among the town's youth and examining the problems that flowed from this, ranging from domestic violence to teenage pregnancies. Since then it has dealt with issues as diverse as the proposed new electoral boundaries to the plight of the mentally ill.

Thoughtful and innovative, *Footprints* has taken its viewers out into the streets of Honiara and further afield to the villages of the nation, bringing them thought-provoking programs that explore the very real issues confronting Solomon Islands today.

Congratulations to *Footprints* presenter, Jonathan Auna and the rest of the *Footprints* team. Without naming names of the various editors, camera operators, sound recordists and graphic artists, could I also acknowledge and congratulate the different crews that have helped put *Footprints* to air.

In particular, however, I would like to commend *Footprints* reporters Koroi Hawkins and Fred Osifelo who I know must work very hard to present such fine reports each week and who, in this sense, are breaking new ground in Solomon Islands journalism. Could I ask Koroi and Fred to come forward to receive their digital recorders that are the prize for this year's Encouragement Award?

Now this process would not be complete without a very special acknowledgment of the driving force behind One Television and the person who I know is responsible not only for the *Footprints* concept but also for making sure her team gets a current affairs program to air each week and this person needs no further introduction, that is Dorothy Wickham. Could I ask Dorothy, Jonathan and the whole *Footprints* team to join Koroi and Fred here with me.

Thank you.