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**Ethical Standards : The Role Of Press Councils
And Journalists Union**

By

Mervyn de Silva

ETHICAL STANDARDS : The Role of Press Councils and Journalists
Union by Mervyn de Silva .

It is on this topic, the Organisers of this seminar have been kind enough to invite a brief contribution from me. My remarks will be confined to the role of the Sri Lanka Press Council largely because I know very little about the trade unions, never having been a member of any registered union an adventure, I am told by much younger colleagues, would have greatly enriched my journalistic experience if nothing else.

On Oct. 14, 1981, the Sri Lanka Press Council, by way of a Gaxette Extraordinary, introduced a CODE OF ETHICS. It was using the powers it enjoyed under the Sri Lanka Press Council Law No. 5 of 1973 passed by the National State Assembly, as our Parliament was then called.

The "Code", if strictly respected, would keep out of the pages of our newspapers, pictures of victims of sex crimes; the names of young offenders indicted for certain types of crime; discourage journalists from the practice of plagiarism and so on.

To my mind, the most noteworthy was an unabiguous, explicit appeal to publishers and editors NOT to carry reports, pictures etc., that could promote communal and religious discord or violence.

I would have thought that in a country ravaged for well over a decade by one of the most harrowing separatist armed conflicts in the world, an enlightened self-interest would suffice. But no.

For an answer, I search history; at least the history books and I stop at this passage :

"Racial violence had physically divided the two major communities in the island as they had not been divided since the end of the 18th century The contents of the bulletins broadcast by RADIO CEYLON during the disturbances showed a meanness of spirit in keeping with the depths into which the country has sunk". That was written by the former Sri Lankan professor of English, E F C Ludowyk of the anti-Tamil riots of 1958, and he was speaking of RADIO CEYLON, state owned then and now.

There was no PRESS COUNCIL in 1958. There is one now. Its own history has some useful lessons for all of us.

The Sri Lanka Press Council Bill was presented by the United Front government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike, in January 1973. The leader of the Opposition, Mr J R Jayawardene, President of the U N P, challenged the Bill before the Constitutional Court. The submissions in support of the petition were signed by Mr H W Jayawardena Q.C., the opposition Leader's brother. The petition was rejected.

The Bandaranaike administration which introduced that law was defeated in July 1977. The U N P has been in office for 16 years. It has been in no great hurry to repeal that law, nor the more historic and far-reaching law that nationalised the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., by far the largest publishing enterprise in the island. You may then choose to regard all this as authentic bi-partisanship. On the other hand, you may also be provoked to consider it in other term in terms of politics the phenomenon of power or, as President Jayawardena patiently explained to me the pursuits, the acquisition and exercise of power.

A far more striking illustration of this truly bipartisan approach to the mass media and the relentless accretion of state power was the nationalisation of the Associate News papers, better known as the Lake House press, by part the country's largest.

The opposition, personally led by Mr Jayawardena and his deputy, Mr Premadasa had campaigned in the streets on the Lake House issue.

Was the Lake House de-nationalised by the newly installed UNP administration of Mr Jayawardena in 1977 ? Of course not. The Prime Minister was soon installed as an Executive President. His administration was firmly committed to private enterprise. Privatisation was and remain a major item of the party program. Was the state owned Lake House press privatised ? Did the Press Council recommend it ? or even study it ? Did the trade unions demand a restoration of private ownership ? To all those questions - the answer is NO.

The Press Council in Britain has been dismissed as a "toothless tiger", a metaphor that is not specially appealing to Sri Lankans media personnel, some of whom have been slaughtered by armed ultra-nationalist groups, Sinhala more than Tamil.

It is in such thankless circumstances that the journalist, is expected to roll back the authoritarian trend, by mobilising his own tribe or trade union, supported by a tactical alliance with this or that political party.

As for Ethical standard, I fear, that will remain a remote ideal, to at least a private commitment only, unless put natural ally ... reader, listener and viewer is mobilised. How that is to be done is the problem and the challenge. A vast, faceless mass audience must be convinced that there is a community (a growing community, hopefully) of practitioners, committed to ethical standards; a community no different from doctor or lawyer.

The vocation, by its very nature, has an inherent strength as well as a weakness. The strength is in the nature of the vocation which allows access to a vast audience. The drawback is that the audience is also faceless, which is not a problem that a lawyer or doctor confronts.

That could explain why the journalist, especially those working through organised bodies, progressional or trade union, finds it easier to state his case by using the readily available channels of communication. But does that mean the campaign is politicised? Is there nothing intrinsically wrong in that? The journalist may have to identify himself with a particular program, a tactical alliance?

But can one trust the polititions or the trade unionists most of whom are politicians engaged in the larger power-game?

There is hardly an editor, leader-writer or columnist that has not cited Thomas Jefferson, at least when he or she is stuck for an inspiring 'quote' to adorn the day's sermon to the populace:

" Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or news papers without government, I would not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter ..."

20 years later the same Mr Jefferson, in the seventh year as president and the target of some journalistic snipers ... wrote:

" I deplore the putrid state into which our newspapers have passed, and the malignity, the vulgarity, and the mendacious spirit of those who write them ... "

However, his final judgement (that all-important last para which both leader-writer and reader, value so highly), President Jefferson did conclude that the press was an evil for which there was no remedy. Our liberty depends upon freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost".

Put not your trust in princes ... that is the lesson from our own recent experience, and not merely from the debate on press councils or on the nationalisation of Lake House. The Business Acquisition Act of the United Front regime was branded the Red Devil's work by the opposition. One of the first steps taken by the newly elected UNP administration was to use that Law .. the Business Acquisition Act ... to seize the privately owned TIMES OF CEYLON privately owned, meaning owned by a private individual with the wrong political opinions.

Given such a history, one remains surprised at the absence of active mobilised groups with direct, issue-oriented interventionist programs. Yes, that is quite high-sounding, but what do I mean?

In about a year's time, we will all be in the middle of an election campaign. The major parties will be drafting the polls manifestos. Why cannot a group of concerned citizens meet the leaders or their policy and insist that a clear, categorical pledge / on the media be included? I do not refer to the usual pious promises.

I mean something along these lines " within three months of the party assuming office, we shall fill in the blanks, with the Business Acquisition Act, the Lanka House take-over Law, if you wish the Press council Law and so on.

In short, the people may get the politicians and the press they deserve, which Sri Lankan or Sri Lanka NGO has complained to the Press Council that this or that report violates the Press Council Law in that the report or editorial or letter could create ill-will, threaten communal harmony etc ?

The truth is that even the liberal, and enlightened play tricks; the famous three-card trick. ... English, Singhala and Tamil. English is the channel of communication of the liberal to the liberal, local or foreign. Singhala and Tamil offer greater reach ... mass audiences. And there, the political parties, the press, all agents of communication send different messages or messages so nuanced as to please the target audience or at least not to alienate or offend. An independent judge, certainly an outsider, has therefore to obtain two translations (the singhala and Tamil 'messages') to see what's really going on.

The lesson there is simple enough the interment complexity of a multi lingual society/communications system.

In short, if you are seriously interested in the messages being transmitted by this or that political party or newspaper organisation or NGO, you really have to get the Singhala and Tamil messages translated.

Identity conflicts have become a major post-cold war phenomenon. Language, religion, race, caste etc., are the fault-lines. Control over the communications system is an increasingly important dimension of global power. It makes nonsense of national sovereignty just when unity and territorial integrity are under threat as 'nation' challenges 'state'. It is easy (and a temptation) to see the communications system as the instrument of a diabolical force hell-bent on global domination, if not conquest. We have abandoned the old flags, the tattered banners the NEW ECONOMIC ORDER, the NEW INFORMATION ORDER and so on that may prove too hasty a judgement too hurried a reflex action. We have to re-examine those ideas but without the old ideological hang-ups.