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**AUTONOMY: KEY TO THE SURVIVAL OF PUBLIC
SERVICE BROADCASTING**

By

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ISMAIL PATEL

I thank the organizers for inviting me to speak at this conference. I must say they are smart people. By inviting me, they have in fact invited both a broadcaster and a bureaucrat and yet paid the expenses for only one! Until recently, I was also Chairman of both the Radio and Television Corporations of Pakistan and now I am the Secretary of my country's Ministry of Information. So I have had the opportunity to see and face the problem under discussion today from both the receiving and giving ends. As Chairman of PBC and PTV, I had spent some restless nights pondering over what should I ask for from the government to enable my two PSB organisations to thrive in the diverse broadcasting environment of today. And as Information Secretary, the anxiety that engages my attention the most is: what can I give to my successor to help him successfully meet the challenges my two erstwhile babies are confronted with? And in both capacities, the answer has been the same: autonomy!

But I will come to that later. Let me first briefly describe what I see as the most serious challenge to Public Service Broadcasting.

Every one sitting in this hall knows how tremendously has the invention of cable television, video cassette recorders, direct satellite broadcasting, interactive systems and internet changed the media ecology to the erosion of PSB. Every one also realises the negative impact on PSB of the wave of privatisation. The demands and the resultant effects of an all-embrasive free market economy are also well known to all. And we all agree that all these inventions, developments and changes have had so detrimental an impact on the basic assumptions and spirit of PSB that detractors now claim that the

market driven revolution is the inescapable destiny of PSB. Even some proponents of PSB tend to take a fatalist view of the inevitable obliteration .

The new technological and economic factors have thus posed tough new challenges to PSB's survival. They should, no doubt, be a cause for grave concern to all of us. But what worries me even more is a negative change of attitude at the intellectuals' level which is being slowly, but increasingly, echoed in political and government circles. The point needs elaboration.

The New Right has been critical of the very idea of public culture; and the New Left has been accusing public broadcasters of 'elitism' and 'statism'. It has been called an unaccountable drain on the public exchequer, feeding an exclusive club whose members have monopolised public taste and public interest. They consider broadcasting as a commercial enterprise and not as a cultural one, which it in fact is. The most telling example of this attitude was provided by a British media expert Michael Green, Chairman of Carlton Communications, when he said: " I think of television as a manufacturing process. (After all) what is the difference between a television programme and this lighter? " Mark Fowler, a former Chairman of US Federal Communication Commission, made a similar observation by asking for the regulation of broadcasting to be made 'better grounded on regulatory economics'. And on the issue of public interest, his oft quoted remark was: "From here onward, the public's interest must determine the public interest".

An official inquiry into British broadcasting under Thatcher reached the conclusion: "British broadcasting should move towards a sophisticated market system based on consumer sovereignty. That is a system which recognises that viewers and listeners are the best ultimate judges of their own interests". This view is an attempt to dethrone the philosopher king and crown the consumer king!

In reaching this conclusion, the inquiry commission obviously disregarded the advice of the first Chairman of BBC that " Give the public what they need and not what they want." The commission conveniently forgot that what the public might be interested in is not necessarily in public interest.

This widespread assault on the importance, even legitimacy, of public service broadcasting represents a highly negative development. We would have disregarded it as an expression of intellectual indigestion of a few or could have perhaps lived with it - though with some discomfort - had it remained merely as an academic exercise. But the problem is that it has gained currency among politicians and policy makers and started to influence their thought processes and decisions regarding PSB. They now consider it as an abstract nothing to be discussed at academic conferences, to be made a subject of cultural studies and to be chatted about at coffee parties. As a result, enthusiasm for PSB at the political level has been diminishing rapidly and the holders of the state purse are increasingly questioning the justification for financial allocations. They now regard PSB as a state funded system which has all the ills of a state owned commercial enterprise. They draw unfair comparisons between public and commercial broadcasting and refuse to see the basic difference between the two. They argue that neither the State nor any agency of the State has the right to determine what the citizens should be watching or listening to, just as it has no business telling the people what newspaper and magazine should they read. Political support for PSB is thus dwindling . And that to me is the most serious challenge PSB is facing. If the parents disown the child, where would he go?

But the parents must not be allowed to disown the child. They must be convinced that it is their legitimate child, that it is their duty to nurture him; look after him; help him grow; and that he is important for them. We must make the political leadership realise that, like education, public service broadcasting is a cultural enterprise and, like public health, it is necessary for collective public good. General well-being of society is a duty of the State, and it should take strategic decisions and implement them through various state agencies.

But even if we are able to convince governments of PSB's importance and are able to muster sustained political support, will that in itself guarantee PSB's survival? Frankly, the answer is no. Here I can't resist the temptation of borrowing a media analyst's words: "Public service broadcasting faces not only the danger of slow assassination by the thugs of cable and satellite, fiscal restraint, and shifting ideological moods, but the threat of suicide. To survive, public service broadcasters must peer not to the horizon to see if the enemy has arrived, but into their souls".

And when we look into our souls, what do we see? Compulsions to play tunes called by those who pay the piper, leaving little room for creativity and innovations. Bureaucratic controls that stifle initiative. Restrictions on editorial judgement and professional independence undermining credibility and authenticity. The key to freedom from these 'compulsions', 'controls' and 'restrictions' lies in autonomy - financial, administrative and professional. And that brings me to the main thrust of my presentation.

Autonomy in public broadcasting has been defined as 'the ability of the organisation to conduct its internal affairs and discharge its professional obligations without direct or indirect interference or pressure from private, official, political and financial sources of power'. The organisation must be independent from the influence of government of the day, of political parties, of influential social groups and of big enterprises.

In the day to day performance of its chartered obligations, professional or editorial and administrative autonomy are more important and relevant, but in the ultimate analysis, it is financial health and independence which enables public service broadcasters to stick to their course without fear or favour. Gone are the days when airwaves were state monopoly and broadcasting was accepted without mental reservations as a state responsibility. Perceptions have since changed and politicians now insist on asking what is in PSB for them. We now have to make them recognise that social, moral and national

values, articulated among others by public service broadcasting, cannot be subjected to economic interests or measured in tangible terms. These values have evolved over centuries and constitute an integral part of individual and collective identities. If we surrender to the dictates of economic considerations and leave PSB at the mercy of market forces, it will no longer be in a position to articulate and promote these values. And that will be a real national loss.

It is therefore important to ensure that PSB has a permanent source of guaranteed income. But this guaranteed income must come under structural regulations which guarantee against influence through financing.

There are various ways of securing finances for public broadcasters. More common among them include grant in the annual national budget, licence fee, royalty, and sale proceeds. In many cases, these sources are supplemented by advertising, sponsorships and co-productions.

Licence fee as a system is the safest and more reliable source of income which also does not interfere with autonomy. Public broadcasting organisations should therefore be granted the right to collect licence fee regularly; and such collection should remain their exclusive domain. No government revenue collection agency should be involved and the collected amount should not be deposited with the government so as to ensure that public broadcasters do not have to make rounds of government offices for its release.

In addition, the government should also make a reasonable amount of budgetary allocation for PSB in each financial year. But this must be done with the clear understanding that it is the state's responsibility to keep PSB going. It is no different in principle to the state's obligation in providing roads, water, education and health services. If provision of funds for civic amenities does not entitle the government to make extra claims on the citizens, why should it be any different when it comes to PSB?

Public service broadcasters should also be authorized to charge government departments for programmes produced and telecast on their behest. Social sector projects invariably have a fund component reserved for 'awareness and motivation'. As broadcasting serves as the most effective tool in creating awareness and motivation, it is only fair that it should be paid for its services out of funds meant for these very purposes.

Now the question of commercial advertising. The ideal situation for public service broadcasting is that there should be no commercial advertising on it. But there may be situations where it becomes necessary to accept commercials. If the state fails to provide enough budgetary grant or the licence fee base is too narrow or the fee collection system is defective, where else would the required funds come from and how else would broadcasters be able to meet the short fall?

Those who oppose the inclusion of commercials on PSB argue that acceptance of commercials would open the service to the influence of advertisers. It is also said that the time consumed by commercials is at the expense of the rights of the viewers. But I think the apprehension that the use of commercials would make PSB subservient to the interests of the advertisers is not very strong for three reasons. One, their undue influence can be parried with state funds and license fee income. Two, in those cases where state television is the only television, which is the case in many developing countries, bargaining position of the advertisers cannot be strong enough to dictate terms. Three, advertisement can also be part of public education and, in some cases, of entertainment. It is unfair to assume that advertisement is bad and always has unhealthy influence. In each society there exists a code of advertisement ethics which is devised in public interest and is followed to ward off unhealthy influences of commercial interests. With a watchful monitoring system in place, it should not be difficult to check unacceptable influences from creeping in under the disguise of "what the consumer wants".

And now I turn to administrative autonomy. As I said in the beginning, until recently the positions of Chairman Radio and Television Corporations and Secretary

Information in Pakistan were combined in one person. The Secretary was the ex-officio Chairman also. But a few months back, the Government decided to appoint a full-time Chairman. Although it meant taking away a chunk – a big chunk – of my own authority, I supported the decision. In fact, I played an active role in making that decision because I was convinced that bifurcation of authority was necessary to ensure administrative autonomy of the two corporations.

But I feel that is not enough. I believe that in order to safeguard autonomy of a PSB organisation, there should also be a written charter clearly defining its role, objectives, obligations, and powers. The charter should be given by the highest legislative authority of the state. It should be justiciable, and not revocable without due process of law. Procedures for the selection, appointment, and terms and conditions for the appointment of the members of the Board of Directors, or Board of Governors, should be laid down in a statutory law. The procedures for the appointment and removal of the board members and the chairperson should ensure their independence as is done in case of the judges of the superior courts.

The board members should preferably be selected by the Parliament and appointed by the head of the state. Their remuneration and allowances should be fixed by the board itself, subject to review by the Parliament when it feels it necessary.

Accountability of the Board should also not be in the hands of the government. The board being appointed by a public process should be accountable to the public at large. A proper procedure should be evolved to this effect. By law, the board should be obliged to hold four quarterly report-back meetings to the public every year, whose minutes should be released publicly. The Parliament should review the performance of the organisation in the light of the reports and assessments prepared by the Board of Governors and also keeping in view the comments and criticism offered by the media, special interest groups and opinion leaders etc. The Chairman and the members should

appear before the concerned Select Committee of the Parliament and explain their position.

The working and policies of the board should be open and transparent. In principle, the idea of public petitions should be incorporated in the relevant laws as an important democratic device. The mass media as a whole should also be encouraged to comment and criticise the policies and working of the public broadcasting organisation. This openness can be restricted in cases of investigative news reporting, the sources of news, administrative enquiries while in process, and trade and commercial secrets whose disclosure could expose the corporation to unfair advantage by its commercial opponents.

While discussing the financial and administrative dimensions of autonomy, I must hasten to add that it would be too narrow a view to consider public service broadcasting only from the point of view of the transformation of state monopolies into financially autonomous and administratively independent bodies. The essential characteristic of public service broadcasting is the strong and clear mandate to serve the public interest and to contribute to democratic processes. And to be able to effectively discharge this responsibility, it is necessary that PSB establishes and maintains a high degree of credibility as well as quality. I don't have to labour the point that both are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve without professional autonomy. Public broadcasters must have editorial independence and this independence must express itself in the accuracy and impartiality of news presentations, in the freedom to project diversity of opinion and in being more imaginative and innovative in programme content and form.

Presentation of independent news and views is sine qua non for a democratic society. However, in many developing countries, the problem of impartiality and objectivity in news poses serious problems, both for the broadcasters and policy makers. With direct satellite broadcasts and the increasing strength of democratic institutions, the scope of editorial independence has increased. Public broadcasters should cash on it and try to create greater awareness among the policy makers that in order to have credibility

they should learn to live with professionally independent editors. The threshold of their tolerance must go up a few notches.

Similarly, there is the need to correct the common fallacy that public interest demands that news and views should be presented from national perspective. True that in the presence of the nation state, national perspective of values and information remains predominant. But too much insistence on national perspective entails the risk of its being used as an excuse to black out other perspectives. And it cannot be in the public interest to keep the public in the dark about what others feel, think and say which, in any case, is not even possible in this age of information explosion.

PSB is, by definition, obliged to cater to the cultural, educational and informational requirements of all sections and minorities of the society. It should, therefore, serve as an instrument of general popular empowerment rather than as an instrument of government policy, which is most of the time reflective of the aspirations and needs of the majority. Public broadcasters should have the freedom to cater for the special interests of those marginalised groups in economy, ethnicity and geography who are not likely to practically figure in the majority government's thinking and priorities despite pious political claims.

The check on the professional autonomy of public broadcasters should be only that of the people it serves - their needs, their perceptions, their reactions. That is why I suggested earlier the incorporation of the idea of public petitions. In addition, there could also be a broadcasting advisory body, the functions of which could be to advise the board in regard to all matters relevant to the demands, views and cultural values of the audience. The advisory body may consist of opinion leaders, leading intellectuals, literary figures, and other persons who have distinguished themselves in particular fields of life. Special interest groups, the local, provincial and central governments and representative organisations should also have a right to make non-binding suggestions to identify particular issues which need to be addressed.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that certain cherished values of human society are sufficiently likely to be at risk in today's commercialised, competitive, multi-channel conditions. These values deserve institutional protection. It can be argued that these values do not represent a universal agenda. There is considerable variation between countries over the relative importance of particular values. The explanation for these national variations is to be found less in any differential impact of the new commercialism than in the diversity of normative expectations and sensitivities rooted in the peculiarities of national cultures. These values - national, ethnic, commercial, religious - need to be protected. To protect and promote them, we need to protect and promote public service broadcasting which has financial, professional and administrative autonomy. These values represent the ideals and the soul of the human society. If they are lost once in the commercial deluge, they cannot be retrieved easily. Hence the need for the state, the broadcasters and all concerned segments of society to awaken to the situation with a sense of urgency.

I thank you all for bearing with me for so long.