

MEDIA RELEASE

GECOM's Chairman Address at Media Code of Conduct Workshop

2005-12-13

GUYANA ELECTIONS COMMISSION (GECOM)



MEDIA CODE OF CONDUCT

OPENING ADDRESS
BY
DR. STEVE SURUJBALLY
CHAIRMAN, GECOM

Cara Lodge
December 10, 2005

Mr. Chairman,
Commissioners of GECOM,
Mr. Boodoo, CEO and colleagues at GECOM,
Mr. Neale, Commonwealth Media Advisor to GECOM,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Political Party representatives,
Specially Invited Guests

Workshop Participants
Members of the Media

As we move into the metaphoric homestretch relative to the preparations for the Regional and General Elections, it is most opportune that a Workshop such as this be organized and implemented.

I, for one, and I suppose all of you here today recognize the function of the Fourth Estate as guardians of Democracy and defenders of public interest, that force which should objectively check and counterbalance the State powers of the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary.

Of course, you practitioners in the media – electronic and print – do also turn your attention to those who can use their own coercive powers, because of their extensive ownership of and control over resources especially capital, entrepreneurship, land, and the urban and rural proletariat, to confront or support the State. Under this rubric would fall businessmen, the clergy, and specific groups of the élite.

It must be extremely difficult for a media practitioner to continue, especially in difficult economic circumstances to keep a balanced, objective and watchful eye and report on the evil-doings on those who wield great influence in a society.

Where GECOM is concerned, Commissioners and Secretariat alike are convinced that, to a large degree, the success or failure of our efforts are closely interlinked with the publicity given to meaningful issues and the positions taken by you journalists.

You know that the media have an enormous role to play in ensuring societal stability before, during and after elections. It is not my intention to lecture you, but it would be remiss of me not to keep reminding you that you have immense power in your hands. Badly used, this power is a tyranny; well and carefully practised it is a fundamental requirement without which no society can survive and prosper. We in the Commission need your help, and we in turn will support your task of probing, interrogating and exposing; but we cannot countenance the manufacture of lies and an emphasis on meaningless superficialities. Simply put, you will be doing the Commission, and by extension the nation, a great disfavor, if your individual or collective activity stimulates and excites the masses with despicable innuendo and blatant calumny. Your job should be to promote public dialogue about meaningful issues that affect people's lives and the character of the nation, instead of directing efforts towards sensationalist entertainment, a mass production of distraction.

Thank you for taking the time during your weekend to attend this very important event. The fact that so many of you have come is a clear indication that you share our view that the contribution of the media to the coming elections will be a significant factor in deciding their success or failure. You, the media, can significantly influence the environment, the atmosphere in which the campaign takes place. Your role is to encourage participation in the democratic process, to help explain the system so that all – especially those voting for the first time – know exactly what they need to do to cast their vote. Yours is the platform from which the parties can all explain their manifestoes. You, the journalists, have the role of asking probing questions on behalf of the voters so that your readership and audiences have a clear understanding of the issues and so can make informed decisions on polling day.

In 2001 you produced the sound basis for a Media Code of Conduct. Now is the time to revisit that document, revise it, up-date it, strengthen it and at the end of the day, sign up to it.

If you are wondering why other people outside the media are here today – that is simple. The whole nation is concerned that the campaign should be conducted completely fairly and calmly. That it the concern of GECOM, it is the concern of the political parties, of civil society organisations represented here today and the international community. We have therefore invited a cross-section of society to join you here so that, led by you the media, your professional code can be developed into a national Media Code of which the Country can be proud.

I wish you every success. I can only remind you how vital it is that you join together in this task in the interests of every single Guyanese citizen.

It is with pleasure that I declare this workshop open.