

Address by GECOM Chairman, Dr. S. Surujbally
on the Occasion of the Official Signing
of the Guyana Media Code of Conduct –
January 7, 2006 at the Le Meriden Pegasus

Commissioners
CEO
Commonwealth Consultant to GECOM, Mr. Neale
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Honoured guest, Sir Shirdath Ramphal
Representatives of Political Parties
Media Practitioners

Specially invited guests
Ladies and gentlemen

I have become convinced and I will argue that the process which culminates in the national elections is the single most important tile in the fundament on which Democracy is built. If we believe this premise, then it follows that any element which might constrain or disrupt the smooth functioning and implementation of the electoral process must be addressed and removed.

That is why we are gathered here tonight: to make another step forward in attempting to ensure that which you media practitioners and media managers have together painstakingly developed and compiled, no man, no media house owner, no politician, no demagogue, no rumour should be allowed to break asunder.

That, of course, is not as simple as it sounds. You and I know that the daily practice of your profession is fraught with multiple pressures, enticements, impediments and sundry stressors. But your dignity cannot be purchaseable. Your dignity may be assaulted, vandalized cruelly mocked, but it can not be taken away unless it is surrendered. And, in this pressurized environment, you must know that you have an ally in GECOM, not lastly because, as I have guaranteed before, the Commission harbours no conspiracy of secrecy and silence – we will share any relevant information you desire. Perhaps, even more importantly, GECOM promises to help you, in any way possible to expose those who would wish to coerce you into deviating from that straight and narrow path of ethical journalism.

Having said that, we must also now bring the element of responsibility into the equation. Bearing in mind that just as the journalistic word or pen can elevate the less educated, so too can it poison their opinions. This cherished freedom of speech cannot be seen in vacuo. There must be, concomitantly, some level of legal, moral and social accountability for what you say and write. It is expected that you reflect carefully before speaking or writing, that you check your facts, that you try at all times to avoid giving unnecessary offence. Yet, even as I say this, I am reminded of a Stabroek News editorial, not so long ago, which shocked us by positing that these expectations do not reflect the norm. The Editor-in-Chief quoted thinkers like Mill who have pointed out that a large part of that which is daily portrayed in public discourse, in perfectly good faith, is partial, biased, tendentious and erroneous.

The editorial further lamented that this cherished free speech can, in Guyana, often resemble a Tower of Babel, where many voices and opinions on the same subject conflict with each other, are off key

and are discordant. What is especially frightening is the fact that in even the most lunatic of expressions, there is often some beguiling germ of apparent truth which in turn seems to address the fears and anxieties of specially receptive audiences. We know about this only too well. Within this context then, may I beg you to collectively etch and embed in your professional being and memory names like Ferdinand Nahimana, Jean Bosco Barayagwiza and Hassan Ngeze and Milles Colines – names that will live forever in the infamy associated with the Hutu genocide in Rwanda.

That superb editorial (to which I referred) went on to remind us that free speech is essential, but the price Society, as a whole, pays for it is considerable. Moreover, where the legal and other sanctions (that exist in civilized societies) collapse or are not enforced or are non-existent, then free speech can become a vehicle for spreading racial/ethnic hostility and for promoting disorder and full fledged anarchy.

So, this brings us to the million dollar question: Why are you signing this document tonight when there is no specific legislation which can be used to give punitive teeth to that substantial document with its rules, mores and codes which you, as men and women of goodwill, of vision, as serious professionals, have distilled and crafted from lengthy deliberations?

In an attempt to answer this conundrum, I would like to reinforce what Tim Neale has said about this Code as a starting point, a work in progress. We could take a pessimistic view and say “well it wasn’t as successful as it should have been last time around, so why should it be any better this time? Why should we sign without any legal backing, without any existing penalties being there to enforce compliance?” But we don’t take that view.

I would like to say to any of you that might harbour reservations, that those who prepared this Code were clearly aware of the elements of common decency, of fairness and of morality as important focal points to keep in mind in a vital project such as this – a project which is key to the interests of the people of this country.

At GECOM we are confident that we can safely entrust the monitoring of the media to the professionalism of the team now being recruited. We look forward too to the establishment of an independent Refereeing Panel. We are impressed by the quality of the standards that you voluntarily have drawn up for yourselves. The fact that these guidelines have evolved in the presence of representatives of Political Parties and Civil Society is a further sign of your openness and your own innate desire to be unburdened by prejudice.

Finally, partners, I implore you to understand that while free speech is a huge blessing, untrammelled and malicious speech can lead to great pain and suffering, to understand that your very existence, like the Commission’s, is to serve all the people of this beloved country we call home, and to provide balanced and accurate information to help me and my team deliver the most successful elections this country will ever have experienced.

Some years ago in an earlier life, a happier life, I gave in this very room the precursor presentation before the feature address to the Caribbean Veterinary Convention which Guyana hosted was given by Sir Shirdath. I find myself performing a similar function this evening. And even though the importance of the Veterinarians to the animal agriculture sub-sector is not in dispute, it is immensely in value by the electoral process which arguably provides the fundament for every societal and developmental activity, and which is likely the most meaningful tile in the mosaic of democracy.