



The Commonwealth

Commonwealth Journalists Association

Triennial Conference, London

Remarks by Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC Secretary-General of the Commonwealth of Nations

11 April 2016

Good morning everyone;

I must begin by congratulating your President on her stellar work in organising this forum.

Rita, you are a huge Commonwealth asset, tremendously hardworking and enthusiastic, and - I hear - a very effective persuader and twister of arms.

I know too that you are one of the most active members of the Commonwealth family, making a whole range of contributions, including though your valued inputs to the Committee of the Whole in preparation for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

The fact that this conference is taking place, with such a full programme and wide participation, is thanks to your hard work and dedication.

It is a real pleasure to be able to join you in the opening days of my term as Secretary-General.

I shared a stage with Louise Martin from the Commonwealth Games Federation on Wednesday night, and I am struck by how many women in leadership positions we have in Commonwealth organisations. What a great Commonwealth strength that is.

As I take up the responsibilities entrusted to me by the Heads of Government, I want you to know that I am determined to put the Commonwealth back at centre stage as we act collectively to uphold democracy, advance development, and celebrate diversity.

In order to do that, Freedom of Expression is an absolutely fundamental prerequisite, and it is one of the articles of our Commonwealth Charter, which states - and I quote:

We are committed to peaceful, open dialogue and the free flow of information, including through a free and responsible media, and to enhancing democratic traditions and strengthening democratic processes.

And so as the Commonwealth accredited organisation for journalists, the Commonwealth Journalists Association holds a special place in the Commonwealth family.

For you are the voice of our citizens. Your eyes are their eyes, and your ears are theirs. You see

their needs, you tell their news, you understand their hopes and dreams, speak for them and make their story known.

Vibrant and responsible media are vital to advancing our Commonwealth goals of democracy, development, rule of law and respect for diversity.

Journalists have a special power of holding governments to account in between elections, and putting public figures - both people and numbers - under the microscope so we can understand better how our countries work – or don't.

Good reporting educates and empowers Commonwealth citizens to be effective participants in political discourse and make informed decisions about the future of their own country.

Bad journalism on the other hand doesn't just let down those who are on the receiving end of poor reporting in that area. With the global reach of media today the loose and the sloppy in another part of the world can be cited by undemocratic governments or regimes as simply what they are trying to stop locally when in reality they're launching something far more sinister.

Balanced public debates are a liberty that everyone should enjoy, and many countries, even in the one we are in right now, struggle to have these balanced debates.

Many reporters around the world must still tragically put their lives at risk to publish their stories.

The International Federation of Journalists reports that 24 journalists and media staff have been killed this year already — and we are only in April.

UNESCO tells us that 90% of reported crimes against journalists remain unresolved. This is unacceptable, and especially hard for the families seeking closure.

So we pay tribute to those who have paid the ultimate price in defence of freedom of speech—the Commonwealth stands in solidarity with their cause.

We remain committed to promoting and safeguarding the rights for all people to have a voice, whether they be young, old, rich, poor, work in the media, or work in a classroom.

The immediacy of the digital age enables social media users to filter their own news, and interact far more directly at all levels, including with public institutions.

Such accessibility should encourage greater transparency and accountability, and yet trust in public institutions is declining.

I know too that the accessibility and immediacy of social media can seem to threaten or endanger the future of your profession – as the theme of this conference perhaps suggest.

And yet quality journalism is more important than ever to ensuring the public is equipped with factual and accurate information.

Our understanding of the world around us should be shaped by shared values and truth, not by political agendas or greed.

And so we need reliable sources, not the weird or sensationalist approaches that mislead and misinform.

You know, only too well, that the media must constantly and continuously challenge itself as to how it can better educate and inform us.

Last week, in my first day in the office, I spoke about trade and investment being vital arteries of Commonwealth connection between our 53 member countries.

We also need to trade in ideas and expertise, and we need investment in promoting shared values and upholding rights.

I am sure there is much more that can be done in a corporate context to link media professionals for training and mentoring.

Let's make corporate social responsibility Commonwealth social responsibility.

By developing strong intra-Commonwealth relationships in the media, at both corporate and professional level, we can support journalists across the Commonwealth to report on stories from areas where information may be hard to access.

I am proud that the Secretariat supports the next generation of journalists through the Commonwealth Correspondents' Youth Network.

Last year one of them — Femi Asu from Nigeria — won the CNN African Journalist of the Year Award for Economics and Business.

I hope that at the Commonwealth Secretariat we might be able to reactivate our media training programme.

Among the possibilities and options we can examine are:

- Training journalists in free, fair and transparent reporting of elections;
- Helping Electoral Management Bodies in setting standards for journalism during election campaigns and effectively monitoring media;
- Helping national broadcasters adopt impartial public broadcasting standards.

With so many distinguished journalists and other media professionals taking part in this conference, you will have other suggestions of what the Commonwealth might offer, or should be doing.

As Secretary-General I assure you I am listening.

Tell me how you need us to support you.

Tell me what you want to do in partnership with us.

Give me ideas of how you want to become more closely involved, and how we can broaden opportunities for you as journalists and the media in the Commonwealth.

2016 is the year of 'An Inclusive Commonwealth', and I want all of you to be included in it, more included than you are already. And I want many more members of your profession to be included too.

That is what will enable all of us, working together, to put the Commonwealth back where it belongs, leading the world and defending the rights and liberties of citizens in every one of our member states.

As we were reminded at the Commonwealth Women's Forum in Malta last November: Alone we are invisible, together we are invincible.

Thank you.