

**Commonwealth Parliamentary Association  
Commonwealth Press Union  
Commonwealth Broadcasting Association  
Commonwealth Journalists Association**

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**PARLIAMENT AND THE MEDIA:  
BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIP**

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**A Conference Supported by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the World Bank Institute, the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Lok Sabha of India**

Representatives of Commonwealth Parliamentarians and journalists meeting in New Delhi have identified for the first time ways to improve the relationship between Parliament and the media.

The aim has been to determine how their complementary roles in the democratic process can be enhanced to better inform the electorate.

To perform their respective duties Parliament and the media must work together, but it was accepted that a degree of mutual suspicion will always be an essential part of the relationship.

Concern was expressed that in almost every Commonwealth country the trend towards governments making statements outside Parliament draws media attention away from Parliament and tends to detract from the role and the importance of business conducted in the House.

This in turn means that the media is informing the electorate inadequately of the work of its representatives.

Representatives of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Commonwealth Press Union, Commonwealth Broadcasting Association and Commonwealth Journalists Association suggested these possible lines of action to make Parliament the “main game” in the politics of each Commonwealth country:

### **What Parliaments and Parliamentarians Can Do:**

1. Encourage Commonwealth governments to include freedom of expression in the revision of the Harare Declaration envisaged as an outcome of the 2001 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.
2. Encourage Commonwealth governments to support right to information laws according to the principles recommended by Commonwealth Law Ministers in 1999. [See appendix]
3. Recognize the value of an independent media in contributing toward the development of a well informed society through its exposure to a wide range of well-articulated views.
4. Appreciate that the media are also responsive to the people, serving as their watchdog in reporting the actions of Parliaments and governments.
5. Develop more imaginative and attractive ways to enhance parliamentary coverage so that the people are encouraged to take greater interest in their society's principal democratic forum.
6. Develop new procedures to ensure that the vital issues of the day are discussed in Parliament promptly.
7. Accept that a lack of some privacy is a necessary price which public office holders must pay if a free media is to remain a bedrock of democracy.
8. Explain policies fully to the news media but avoid manipulating the way the story is told.
9. Urge Ministers, Shadow Ministers and Members to deliver important statements and reports in, rather than outside, Parliament.
10. Facilitate more coverage of Parliament by opening the proceedings of select and other committees to the media.
11. Take steps to raise the standard of parliamentary debate by: striving to elect high-calibre candidates, enhancing research support, encouraging a better awareness of what the media needs, and discouraging unruly behaviour, abusive language and personal attacks in the Chamber which inevitably lead to adverse media coverage.
12. Respect the media as a legitimate reflection of public opinion, public concerns and social problems and reactions to policies and programmes.
13. Provide more training opportunities and information for journalists on parliamentary practice and procedure.

14. Be accessible and honest in all dealings with the media rather than remaining aloof and secretive, or attempting to manipulate or overly influence media coverage.
15. Avoid conducting relations with the media in an adversarial manner or attempting to shield themselves, their parties or governments from media investigations which are in the public interest.
16. Provide the media with full access to basic information and documents produced by the parliamentary process, such as access to parliamentary libraries, the provision of on-line information and the distribution of parliamentary speeches promptly after delivery in the House.
17. Take full advantage of new information technology to provide authoritative information to the media and the public.
18. Preserve the independence of the journalist by encouraging newspapers to establish, support and respect a voluntary self-regulating body which is allowed to function effectively, and which suits local circumstances.
19. Some technical regulation of the broadcast media may still be required due to the limitation of available space in the television and radio signal spectrum; and broadcasters should be encouraged to set and respect their own independent and self-regulating codes of professional practice.
20. Public broadcasting should be allowed to be politically impartial.
21. Make reports of parliamentary proceedings in other Commonwealth jurisdictions much more accessible to Parliamentarians and the media, especially by use of new information technology.
22. Ensure diversity within media ownership to prevent private monopoly and state control.
23. Advocate measures to protect journalists and journalism during times of civil strife.

### **What the Media and Journalists Can Do:**

1. Gain a comprehensive knowledge of, and respect for, the role and position of Parliament and Parliamentarians.
2. Provide fair and factually accurate coverage of Parliament as the duly elected voice of the people.
3. Develop more imaginative and attractive ways to enhance parliamentary coverage so that the people are encouraged to take greater interest in their society's principal democratic forum.
4. Expose the public more to the battle of ideas by providing balanced coverage of Parliament and paying attention to views expressed by opposition and all MPs.
5. Monitor more closely the activities of parliamentary committees and analyse their reports and other documents in more detail.
6. Respect the right of public figures and their families to a degree of personal privacy consistent with a responsible definition of the public's need to know.
7. Ensure that parliamentary and political news coverage and analysis are clear, factual, objective and differentiated from opinion.
8. Put greater emphasis on inquiring more deeply and objectively into public policy issues, focusing less on trivialities and not relying solely on news releases.
9. Assign to cover Parliament the most competent journalists available to ensure that the broad range of often complex issues in Parliament is adequately covered.
10. Avoid conducting relations with Parliaments in an adversarial manner or in a way which unfairly denigrates Parliaments and their Members.
11. Provide constructive criticism and informed and fearless coverage of political issues so that an increasingly aware electorate has the information it needs to participate in the democratic process.
12. Refrain from fabricating controversies and overplaying internal differences of opinion within political parties, which may often be no more than honest disagreements over policy.
13. Avoid calls for legislation or threats of legislation to control the media by maintaining high standards of coverage of Parliament, politics and society.
14. In formulating standards, consider codes already in place elsewhere in the Commonwealth; but standards set for each country must reflect local circumstances.

## **Appendix**

### **Commonwealth Freedom of Information Principles**

Agreed by the 11<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting  
Trinidad and Tobago, May 1999

1. Member countries should be encouraged to regard Freedom of Information as a legal and enforceable right;
2. There should be a presumption in favour of disclosure and governments should promote a culture of openness;
3. The right of access to information may be subject to limited exemptions, but these should be drawn narrowly;
4. Governments should maintain and preserve records;
5. In principle, decisions to refuse access to records and information should be subject to independent review.