

Tampering with the freedom of the media is dangerous

TODAY is the beginning of a seminar in Port Moresby which will look at media freedom and accountability, to determine whether changes need to be made to ensure that, while freedom of the press is maintained, owners, editors, and journalists of all elements of the media are accountable and that persons aggrieved by media abuses have accessible redress.

Is there a real justification for such a move? Can the people of this country be guaranteed that such a move will not deviate from its original intention? Any attempt to tamper with the freedom of the media must be viewed cautiously. Is this what the people want?

One must question whether the main players and initiators of this exercise are motivated more by personal experiences of alleged abuse by the media than the genuine concern for the majority of Papua New Guineans? The chairman of the Constitutional Review Commission, Ben Micah, was asked by this newspaper to list at three instances which justify such a move. He listed only two and both involved himself.

The PNG Media Council has said that regulating the media is not a substitute for good government. And one might add that nor was it complimentary for or a feature of a democratic nation. The Constitutional Review Commission and the Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan, argue that the basic underlying principles of the freedom of the media as it stated in the national constitution, will be upheld. But what guarantee do we have? Indeed, the media must be held accountable but not by the government of the day. Irresponsible and unethical journalism must be condemned and those practising it punished — but also not by the government. There are already organisations such as the PNG Media Council as well as the courts which can make owners, editors and journalists accountable.

The need is not to restrict or regulate the media but to strengthen existing bodies, such as the Media Council. The arguably outdated law on defamation could also be modified to suit PNG. These could be ways to move forward rather than to come up with such a broad terms of reference which could mean anything.

□ *Editorial in The Independent (PNG) on 12 January 1996.*