

Seeds of accountability

The most serious threat to PNG society is none other than ourselves, not some monsters from outer space or Australia! ... The deepest fear of many of us today is not that our leaders are inadequate but that they are becoming powerful beyond measure.



By SIMON PENTANU

THE SEEDS for involving the media in a seminar such as this was planted in my mind when I was invited to address the relaunching of PNG Journalists Association in November 1996. (By the way, I hope it hasn't sunk again.) The cartoon on the inside back cover of the seminar program appeared in *The National* shortly after the launch. It says a great deal about how the core business of the Ombudsman Commission and the press would be very similar in bringing to bear accountability and ensuring there is transparency among public office holders.

Of course, those seeds did not need much watering, caressing or tendering, because they found very fertile ground in the minds of like-minded individuals across the nation.

At the time, when the Constitutional Review Commission's media legislation was being tossed about between the top floor of the Westpac Building along Waigani Road, the top floor of Morauta House and the top floor of Parliament House, we saw some excellent reporting and analysis on the pitfalls of the legislation on media restrictions. If all of the debate on the media legislation at the time can be summed up in one sentence it might be: a democratic society cannot allow the government of the day to determine who should be a journalist or who should not be a journalist, through a licensing scheme.

My own observation is that the last 12 months or so have provided the Ombudsman Commission and the media with challenges, opportunities and, if I may, difficult decisions to make in how to report, when to report and even why

SIMON PENTANU

report political misdemeanours, political decisions, political issues and many matters of public policy and interests that continually sprout on the PNG landscape. If we do not expose some of the pertinent issues it may take a landmine to expose them from the landscape.

It is transparently clear to me as it must be to all of the thinkers among us that the most serious threat to PNG society is none other than ourselves, not some monsters from outer space or Australia! They don't have to fall from outer space, the monsters are already here. And the monsters are us. They include some of our leaders who have shown that they have the capacity and the ability to destroy PNG. The deepest fear of many of us today is not that our leaders are inadequate but that they are becoming powerful beyond measure.

Accountability and transparency are very important allies as we attempt to deal with our many human failings.

Let me give two examples of accountability and transparency where the Ombudsman Commission and the media have complemented each other.

In the Water Report, the Ombudsman Commission, arguably took the leading role in uncovering malpractices and so on. But when the report was released the media did a very admirable job in disseminating the findings. *The Independent* until very recently continued to publish sections of the report.

With Sandline, the media went in first, writing, rewriting, printing and reprinting a story that was unfolding in a new way everyday. The reporting of



Source: OMBUDSMAN COMMISSION LEADERSHIP MANUAL

recriminations between those involved was another story in itself. Perhaps the Ombudsman Commission will find that, to do its job under the law, it will have quite a bit more to report on Sandline.

All of the papers and EM TV moved up another gear in the quality of their reporting during the Sandline crisis. Some of the stories and editorials, particularly in *The National*, were really staff coming from the heart; simple but powerful. An admirable piece of thought provoking journalism on the front of *The National* on March 27 summed up, in my view, what we should perhaps have in mind when we talk about accountability and also transparency today.

'Look into the eyes of a child and what do you see?', it asked. To me it simply says it all. The way we act, the way we do things, why we do things; we must feel we owe it to our children and our children's children to do the right thing.

Yes, do the right thing.

This seminar will serve many purposes, from informing ourselves, learning a thing or two from the speakers, to interacting, maybe even meeting soul mates in person rather than on the Internet or simply through the pages of the newspapers.

The more important purpose of having the commission and the media doing this together is perhaps to also make a statement that, we are all in this together. There is common ground and common definition in the services we provide in informing people through the accountability process. I believe we have common strengths in using the power of the written and spoken word and we cherish common values of justice, fair play and doing good for the benefit of humanity.

□ *Simon G. Pentanu is Chief Ombudsman of Papua New Guinea. These were part of his opening remarks at the Ombudsman Commission and the 'Media: Transparency and Accountability' seminar in Port Moresby, 14 May 1997.*