

# The Fiji experience

'The Fiji Media Council is modelled very much on the Australian lines and we frequently draw on Australia for support and expertise. We are outspoken on media independence and freedom of expression yet we seek to work with Government.'

By DARYL TARTE

THE PEOPLE of Fiji are fortunate in that they had an informative and responsible newspaper even before the islands were ceded to Great Britain in 1874. *The Fiji Times* started in 1869, the same year that my own ancestors arrived in the islands. *The Times* remained the sole disseminator of news until 1935 when the first radio station was started. It wasn't until 1991 that television was introduced.

We now have three daily papers which publish in English, plus Hindi and Fijian editions. Two radio stations which also broadcast in the three languages. A TV station which carries transmissions in all languages, and a large number of magazines.

There is no question that the people of the islands are well informed on local and international events. If anything there maybe too many media organisations for the size of the market.

Generally, the media has remained free of any Government restraint or control by regulatory bodies, but there has been legislation such as the *Newspaper Registration Act*, the *Broadcasting Act*, the *Press Correction Act*, the *Commission of Inquiry Act*, the *Fair Trading Decree*. However, few of the provisions of these acts have ever been evoked.

The blackest time in the history of the media in Fiji was 1987 following the military coups when all media organisations were closed down and later allowed to open under strict supervision. However, as conditions returned to normal in

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the country so the media freedoms were fully restored.

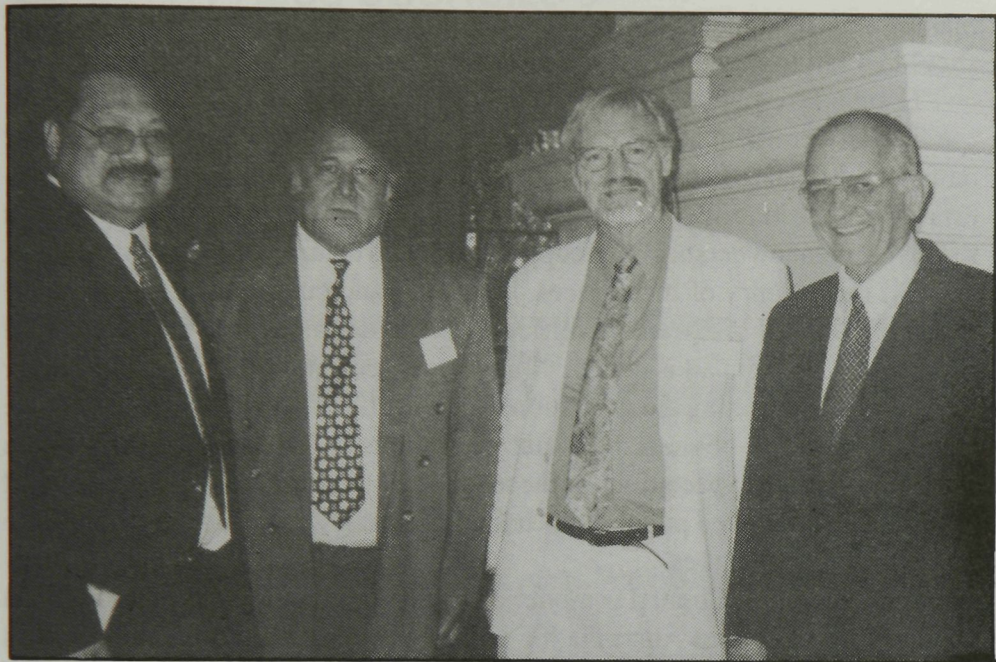
In 1996 following concern that Government was thinking about imposing controls over the media, the owners decided to set up a voluntary News Council to:

- Promote high journalistic standards
- Enhance the media's image
- Safeguard its independence
- Uphold freedom of speech and expression
- Uphold the public's right to be informed accurately and fairly
- Establish an effective complaints committee
- Promote a code of practice

Later that year the Government commissioned a study by the Thomson Foundation to "examine current legislation and practice as they effect the media and to make recommendations for future legal and regulatory structure". The team consulted widely in Fiji and came up with a set of recommendations that supported sensible legislative changes and strongly endorsed the role of the News Council as it was then called. Government is yet to act on these recommendations.

In the meantime, the Council pursued its self-appointed role and I am pleased to say, has won the respect and confidence of Government and the public. In 1997, the council decided to appoint seven public members to its ranks to equal the number of industry members. It also engaged a Thomson Foundation consultant to draw up a code of ethics covering press, TV, radio, advertising and programme content. These comprehensive codes have now been ratified by the Council which has now been renamed the Media Council and will be widely distributed throughout the community.

Fiji has a population of about 800,000 and a very high literacy level. Newspapers and magazines are widely read (*The Fiji Times* prints up to 45,000 copies daily). Most people have radios and many have TV. The media is therefore under constant scrutiny by the public and the Government. The letters to the editor column is constantly used. There are accordingly many complaints to the media organisations and to the Council. Fortunately most of these are resolved by the organisations agreeing to make corrections, or by the secretary to the Council through conciliation. Only seven complaints out of seventy five have gone to the Complaints Committee which is made up of myself and two



**The Oceania delegation in Brisbane: (from left) Kalafi Moala, Savea Sano Malifa, David Robie and Daryl Tarte. Luke Sela (PNG) also participated.**

other independent people. The committee's decisions have been published by the organisation concerned. Henceforth, the complaints will be judged against the new codes.

In 1998, a new Constitution came into effect in Fiji. This enshrines all media freedoms and the public's right to freedom of expression. It is under this constitution that we recently had general elections. Naturally candidates sought to use the media as much as they could to get their message across. There was enormous scope for the media to be accused of bias or misrepresentation. It therefore gives me great pride to report in a conference such as this that the media in Fiji emerged unscathed from the rough and tumble of the election campaign. The reporting was generally fair and balanced and we have received no formal complaint from any candidate or party.

This is not to say that there is no criticism of the media in Fiji. *The Fiji Times*, which has the largest distribution and wields the greatest influence, is owned by News Corp and is often accused of being unsympathetic to local traditions and

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culture. But in their report to Government, the Thomson Foundation resisted making any recommendations on foreign ownership. They said the matter should be left to market forces. My council agrees.

There is no cross ownership at this stage nor do we intend to encourage any.

The Government has recently bought a majority share interest in the other daily but has stated that it will divest itself of these shares once it has re-established the viability of the paper. The Council has expressed its opposition to Government ownership but it supports the need to have a strong second paper.

Fiji is a country of many races, languages and cultures and satisfying the needs of them all is extremely difficult. There are more than 300 islands and transmitting to them all is costly. Many never see a newspaper and may never have a TV set. Meeting the aspirations of them all is a very complex task for the media within the obvious financial constraints. The population is also a maturing one. Its expectations of the media are constantly changing. It is a well educated and travelled population. It knows what it wants. Because of this, the media is kept on its toes.

The Fiji Media Council is modelled very much on the Australian lines and we frequently draw on Australia for support and expertise. It is never refused and we are most grateful.

We are engaged in activities such as public forums, workshops, essay competitions. We are outspoken on media independence and freedom of expression yet we seek to work with Government. We support training through the Fiji Journalism Institute and have joined the Pacific Island News Association which deals with regional media matters. Finally, we are pleased to be attending this meeting of the WAPC as a full member. My Council looks forward to participating fully in the affairs of this body in the future.

□ *Daryl Tarte is the independent chair of the self-regulatory Fiji Media Council.*