

# PNG's rocky route to self-regulation

**'Although we are not properly constituted, the Government does listen to us. We have actually issued our first edict — telling the advertising agencies what to do and when to say it. It is rather an interesting concept.'**

**By LUKE SELA**

PAPUA NEW GUINEA has a very free press. We have had our problems. I will first start with the press. Among the group here, I can see my colleagues from Australia, Barry Wheeler from Australian Associated Press, and Ian Hicks from the Fairfax group who, like in my country, can attest to the freedom of information or flow of information in Papua New Guinea. Sometimes it is easier to be a foreign correspondent and get information from the Government than it is to be a PNG journalist.

And I can vouch for that.

After having said that, it doesn't mean that we have not had our problems before independence, or after. We certainly have had our problems, but our thanks for the freedom of information and free press in Papua New Guinea goes to a number of institutions in Australia — the Herald and Weekly Times group in Melbourne the previous owners of the *Post-Courier*, for which I work, and the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which is now the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. They were also very strong in Papua New Guinea before and after Independence. They have left, among many other legacies, a free press which we are now striving to uphold. And certainly this has not been easy. While there has not been on a day-to-day basis problems associated with the free flow of information, there have been attempts by the government of the day to stem the flow of information and a free press in PNG.

The most notable was in 1987, the Media Tribunal Bill, to which my

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colleague David Robie has alluded to in his presentation. The basis of the Bill, which I might add was helped along by an Australian lawyer, Stuart Littlemore, was to basically licence the providers of the organisation and journalists. At the time, there was no proper established organisation as there is today, like the Media Council, to fight the Government on the proposed legislation. In fact, it was left to individual journalists, individual owners of organisations to make approaches to members of Parliament, both in Government and in opposition, and to appeal to their commonsense — and please throw out this stupid legislation. I must say, thank you very much, it was withdrawn and it was thrown out.

But that did not stop there. In between there have been a number of instances where the Government tried to control the media in Papua New Guinea. Before my time of joining the *South Pacific Post* (which became the *Post-Courier*) it was banned from reporting from Parliament for about a week.

There are other instances. I have personally been called to the bar of Parliament and apologised from the floor of Parliament. I have been called numerous times to the Parliamentary Privileges Committee again to explain the reasons why we had a particular article in the paper. There are other instances that I could go through, but suffice to say those were not the issues the Government worried about so much. There was a thinking all along that there was an “orchestrated move by the media”, and of course always headed by the foreign-owned *Post-Courier*, to get rid of the Government of the day. We have had, when I was editor, a journalist on the staff who was actually slapped by a then Prime Minister. Again over a story. Little things like this which simply tell us that although we believe we have a free press in Papua New Guinea, there is always somebody out there, and particularly the Government, wanting to control, wanting to do something that is contrary to what we believe is our right.

The situation continued until again the Media Bill was brought to Parliament once more, this time in 1995-96, with a Constitutional Review Committee. Thank God, by that time we had an organisation like the Media Council which was able to fight the proposed legislation. In fact, we went better than that.

I will explain the situation about the Media Council a little bit later, but, although we were not registered and we are not a properly incorporated body, the Government actually does listen to us. As a result, we had three representatives on that — two of them Media Council and one from the PNG Journalists' Association. It was headed by the general secretary of the Trade Union Congress which is a mother organisation of all unions in Papua New Guinea.

Once again, common sense prevailed, with a lot of pressure from our own union, from our own organisation, to ensure that this legislation was once again thrown out.

With the situation of the media in Papua New Guinea - the history is a bit blurry, but I have been asked often to perhaps put down the history of the *Post-Courier* or *South Pacific Post*, but it is lost somewhere in time and it is a bit difficult. But, from the present *South Pacific Post*, the parent company and the *Post-Courier*, the beginning was in about 1930 during the gold rush in Papua New Guinea. The gold miners on the other side of the country started *Guinea Gold* which existed up until the Second World War. We have still got copies declaring the end of the war in the Pacific.

The forerunner of the *South Pacific Post* started in the early 1950s, again the history is a bit clouded there — excuse me if I concentrate on the *Post-Courier* because it was the only one at that time — and after about 1950 the various publications of the time came together and formed what is now called the *South Pacific Post*, originally owned by the Herald and Weekly Times and in 1986 was bought out by Rupert Murdoch.

At the same time, radio came into play and that was during the Second World War. The Australian Army had the right to control it and eventually the Australian Broadcasting Corporation took that over. With the two organisations of the time, freedom of the press was paramount.

Always paramount. The Government, the Australian Administration, through its own doing, about 1963, started its own broadcasting service. This was in response to the threat on the other side of the country with the Dutch leaving what is now part of Indonesia, Irian Jaya. It started the Government Broadcasting Service which I became involved in later on.

### **Progress on the PNG media council**

Coming back to trying to uphold the freedom of the press in Papua New Guinea, the Media Council, as it is known today, and we are still not properly constituted as yet. Before coming to this conference, I instructed our secretary and the treasurer to get the information which consisted of legislation and articles of our association for Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, UK, India, Sri Lanka — I think just about every Commonwealth country that has a Media Council, or a Press Council, we've got copies of them. We are looking at a constitutional lawyer to try and put this together for us.

Despite that, I think this is where the situation is quite funny in that although

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we are not properly constituted, the government does listen to us. We have actually issued our first edict. It is an edict on advertising. Basically advertising policy — telling the advertising agencies what to do and when to say it. It is rather an interesting concept. We will see how that works.

□ *Luke Sela retired in December 1999 after nearly 38 years in Papua New Guinea's media industry. He spent 23 years with the Post-Courier, first as chief-of-staff and then as the paper's first PNG editor. For the past seven years he was the administration manager. He gave this address at the World Association of Press Councils' Oceania regional conference in Brisbane on 21-23 June 1999 as chairman of the PNG Media Council.*



## PACIFIC MEDIA WATCH

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