

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## The State-owned Media

We reproduce elsewhere in this issue a media policy statement issued by the government. It pledges to implement the government's election promises regarding freedom of expression and also deals with measures like the status and condition of media personnel and the enhancement of their professional skills. However, its most important promise, as far as we are concerned, is that the state-owned media will be made free of political control and manipulation.

Historically, radio and television began in almost all countries as state-owned enterprises. The entry of private capital came later with improvements in technology and the spread advertising. In most third world countries, they still remain a government monopoly, as was the case here too until a few years. With the nationalization of the Associated Newspapers the government had control then of the largest newspaper group and of the radio. Since 1980, the government has also had the control of television.

Governments have shamelessly used this control to turn these parts of the mass media to first, a means of government propaganda and second, a means of political propaganda for the party in power. This was most evident in the last years of the UNP regime when these media became engrossed with the task of building Mr. Premadasa's personal image to the exclusion of almost everything else. It was also evident during the Parliamentary elections of August when they were manipulated to serve the UNP's political interests. State control of the media became party and personal control, devoted entirely to the propagation of one point of view with all dissenting opinion shut out.

The evil consequences of this state of affairs are well recognised by the PA government. They are aware that it acts to block the development of democratic values. They are also aware, as the statement makes explicit, that the image of the UNP as anti-democratic derived primarily from the way it used the state-owned media to serve its own ends. This image was reinforced by the way it tried to coerce, influence and manipulate those sections of the media that were under private ownership and management through its control of state banks and state advertising.

The new government is committed to ending this state of affairs. Its sincerity was cast into some doubt by the way it handled the media under its control during the Presidential elections. An article in our last issue discussed this situation; a statement issued by the Free Media Movement reproduced in this issue also deals with the same subject.

Subsequent developments at the Broadcasting Corporation have also caused some concern when certain programmes prepared by its Educational Service were withdrawn on the orders of the authorities.

Nevertheless, we continue to place trust in the government's promise to free the state-owned media. Discussions about censorship can and do take place in the pages of the Observer as

well as on radio and television. This itself is an indication of a new spirit of independence and freedom.

Yet the problems cannot be easily resolved. Even if the government can in the future refrain from the temptation to use its control for partisan purposes, there are still structural problems inherent in the present system.

Assuming that the ownership of Lake House will be broad-based in an acceptable way, we will look briefly at the structures of radio and television. Both these are set up by Acts of Parliament which confer on the Minister in charge very extensive powers of direction including the appointment of the Directors. The Corporations are thus subject to control by the Minister in a very direct way.

This legal subjection has bred in these institutions a climate of political and ideological subjection. The culture within these institutions operate is one of subservience; the main criterion by which any action is judged is the pleasure of the Minister. This attitude can only be changed by alterations in the basic legal and formal structures of these organizations.

## Trivia in the Media

Any honest discussion on Sri Lanka's media should not fail to take note of the degrading levels to which some English language newspapers have fallen in their political reporting. The *Sunday Leader*, which was launched in August claiming to be the 'journalists' newspaper, tops the list of low marks in political journalism. Even admitting that gossip is a legitimate form of reportage of events, one cannot but feel repelled to read some of its recent political commentary columns, which appeared in the editorial page. The entire page is sometimes full of hearsay and warped imaginations, all of which are about follies and foibles of just one individual, Chandrika Kumaratunga. Even when the poor lady suffered suffocation at a dinner party, it was treated as a matter worth reporting, with telepathic commentary. The trivia in the *Private Eye* has at least some style that can be enjoyed.

The continuously low quality of Colombo's English newspapers—including the daily and Sunday *Observer*, now headed by two of the ablest journalists in town—brings itself to the focus at a time when media freedom dominates the public debate. The whole purpose of media freedom in a democracy is to engage the public in informed discussions and debates about issues, policies as well as personalities. It is a media with a sense of responsibility for its own printed word that can illuminate the public realm. Highlighting the trivia in the mainstream as well as alternative press can only trivialize the political debate. It in turn blunts the edge of public discussion on public issues.

One negative outcome of the recent media explosion appears to be the intense competition among independent weekly newspapers to capture or sustain reader- markets, resulting in the utter disregard for quality journalism. They all compete for a limited market.

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