

**Address by the Commonwealth Secretary-General,  
Rt Hon Don McKinnon,  
to the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association  
Taj Palace Hotel, New Delhi, India, 15 February 2006**

Mr Minister,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be with you here today. My congratulations to the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association and its partners for putting on what promises to be an exciting and successful event. Thank you, Elizabeth Smith, for inviting me to speak.

It is very appropriate that this conference is taking place in India. This country is really on the move. You can feel the buzz and excitement everywhere. Things are really happening.

The vitality, reach and influence of the Indian media has been one of the strong features of this, the world's largest democracy.

This country provides an excellent example of what a free press means to a democratic society. Indian television has gone international on a large scale – with NDTV, Star TV, Zee TV and Doordarshan among those telecasting now to a worldwide

constituency. They compete against the biggest everywhere.

As you know, the theme of this conference is *Making A Difference in a Multi-Platform World*. And you will all know only too well how technological advances have changed how you work and how we view the world.

The Internet has made our global village even smaller. Information moves thousands of miles around the world in a matter of seconds. The explosion of mobile phones and the development of 3G now means that you can walk, talk and read the news all at the same time. For those in the business of broadcasting, the outcome is instant dissemination of news, as it happens, wherever it happens.

And if there is no electricity or cheap batteries, there is the wind-up radio.

Bill Gates, the Chairman of Microsoft, recently said that most of us now live in an 'information democracy'. That is an interesting concept, one which has real resonance.

However, I would make two caveats – first, that of content, and second, accessibility.

The Commonwealth has always been a strong advocate of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, underscored by our

leaders in successive declarations. This commitment permeates every strand of our work. And it forms the basis of the value system to which 53 member countries belong and cherish.

We believe that strong democracies are generally able to better ensure the achievement of the full potential of their citizens. For that reason, the Commonwealth also believes that democracy and development are organically interlinked and mutually reinforcing. Broadcasters, as indeed other sections of the media, have a crucial role to play in democracy. They feed the people with information to enable them to make choices and develop ideas. They hold governments and oppositions to account. They expose corruption and act as the custodians of integrity in public office.

But only broadcasters are truly able to 'tell it like it is'. I am referring here to 'freedom of expression'. Commonwealth leaders have recognised the value of freedom of expression and have sought to protect it. In 2002, in Australia, as well as at the last CHOGM in Malta in 2005, leaders reaffirmed their commitment to freedom of expression.

After all, if you are intent on creating a just and democratic society, you must be serious about protecting the freedom of speech that makes such a society possible.

At the same time, events of the last few weeks have naturally heightened our consciousness about the need to be sensitive.

True democracies encourage an atmosphere of choice and diversity. New technology has meant that television has been liberated from the living room floor, and the advent of the satellite dish means a hundred TV channels can be accessed onto those portable screens. But they are not much use if they are all broadcasting the same message.

At Malta, Commonwealth leaders recognised that the growing digital divide within the Commonwealth -- the gap between those communities that have access to computers and the Internet and those who don't -- needs to be bridged. The Commonwealth Action Plan on the Digital Divide will, over the coming months and years will work to reduce this gap. I would like to thank the Government of India for its generous pledge of a million Euros to the Special Commonwealth Fund on the Digital Divide.

I should add that the CBA will be invited to join the Steering Committee on the Digital Divide.

Of course in some of our member countries, press freedom is still fettered. Information is restricted, journalists are harassed, intimidated and in some cases imprisoned. It highlights the difficulties

of putting these high ideals into practice. In these countries there is clearly a deficiency of 'information democracy' because the choice is limited.

The media, familiarly referred to as the 'fourth estate', is a powerful institution. But with any power also comes responsibility. By upholding values and denouncing corruption, both in the public and private sectors, broadcasters can contribute to the development of good governance practices.

But equally, partisan agendas, cultural insensitivity and deliberate distortions in media reporting can do untold damage to the fabric of a nation and indeed have unfortunate international repercussions. The press, broadcasters included, will always have to exercise their enormous power over listeners' ears, eyes and minds with common sense and sensitivity.

The Commonwealth has sought to play its part to assist the fourth estate through the Commonwealth Media Development Fund, of which the CBA has been a beneficiary. This is why we invited over 20 journalists to the CHOGM in Malta to report on the outcome of the Meeting and all the ancillary events which took place in the margins. And, of course, we had no influence on what they wrote or said. It is also why we held workshops for journalists, so that they could develop a better understanding of the Millennium Development

Goals.

In fact some 700 journalists have been supported by the CMDF over the last five years. Without access to information, the dissemination of information is restricted. And without diversity of opinions and angles, our view of the world is blinkered.

Finally, let me remind you that the Commonwealth is a huge resource of excellent stories to tell the world about. I would urge you to visit our website and discover those stories, new stories every day, for yourselves.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association is an old and prestigious institution. It embodies both the importance which the Commonwealth attaches to civil society, as well as that the significance of the broadcast media in our societies. I am happy, on behalf of the official Commonwealth, to reaffirm my support to the CBA and to the media in general.

I wish your deliberations success.

Thank you