

# Freedom of expression information

Media Journalism

ThM

Following is the text of speech made by the Chief Secretary of Hong Kong, Madam Anson Chan, at the opening dinner of the Asian Newspaper Publishers Convention and Exposition on January 6, 1997. We hope our worthy readers shall find it interesting keeping in view our own socio-political situation.

phenomenon. Periodicals were a major force, for example, in China's "May 4th Movement" in 1919, which did so much to awaken the national consciousness of the Chinese people.

Unfortunately, gratitude is not necessarily a political virtue. The value of vigorous, hard-hitting publishers and editors was widely recognised in the final stages of the colonial era. But freedom of publication and editorial independence have not always been admired so warmly during the years that followed. Far too often, political leaders have come to regard freedom of expression and the free flow of information as a liability: at best as a source of potential embarrassment and at worst as a threat to their careers.

I must admit that it is not always easy to stay firmly and unconditionally on the side of freedom of expression. There is always a temptation to say that the freedom is being abused and has degenerated into a charter for journalists to pry and editors to pontificate — especially when you personally are the target. It seems all too legitimate to accuse the media of

in authority, whether in government or in business, should regard freedom of expression and information as a positive asset. In particular, they should recognise how the media can both improve management performance, in the public as well as the private sector, and contribute directly to economic expansion.

Let me start with the media's contribution to good management. A complex modern city like Hong Kong depends increasingly on providing high-quality services which meet the public's needs. No executive and no official can hope to monitor directly how well their staff serve their clients. If they tried to supervise in detail, services would be bogged down by hureaucracy, and administrative costs would become intolerable. As a result, when a TV documentary or a newspaper feature highlights the poor performance of a business outlet or a government department, management should welcome being put on notice that things are going wrong. Negative feedback from the media is a valu-

employment. Our GDP US\$23,500 per head is the highest in the world, and our foreign exchange reserves per head are the second highest in the world. Hong Kong is already part of the emerging global "information society". Without open unrestricted communications and full access to the global flow of information, how could we hope to retain our current standing in the world economy? We are the world's eighth largest trading economy, the tenth largest exporter of services. We have more foreign banks than any other city except New York and London. We are the world's fifth largest financial centre and the world's eighth largest stock market. We are the world's second biggest communication centre (in terms of fax lines per head).

Hong Kong no longer has a choice. Its prosperity already depends on the sophistication of its service industries and their access to the markets, not only of this region but of the world. We can only hope to maintain our prosperity and improve the living standards of our people if we can match the standards achieved by the most advanced economies. For the future, we will literally stand or fall by our skills in creating and exploiting information. Knowledge and our effective use of it will determine our future.

What is the Government's role in this process? The Hong Kong Government does not claim credit for the successful transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a major international services centre over the last decade or so. The credit for this rapid and largely painless transformation belongs to the entrepreneurs and investors who knew how to respond the changes overtaking both this region's economy and the world's service industries. And we must also give credit to the adaptability and resilience of the labour force which readily accepted the need to learn new skills and accept new jobs.

The Hong Kong Government's contribution has been more intangible. Its priority has been to ensure that we offer the best possible business environment. This has meant, of course, keeping taxes low, government small and minimising bureaucracy and red tape. It has also meant promoting competition wherever possible — notably in the telecommunications industry. It has meant upgrading the regulation of financial markets to match the best world standards — without stifling initiative and enterprise. It has meant promoting the rule of law, a corruption-free civil service and an accountable administration.

**What is the Government's role in this process? The Hong Kong Government does not claim credit for the successful transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a major international services centre over the last decade or so. The credit for this rapid and largely painless transformation belongs to the entrepreneurs and investors who knew how to respond the changes overtaking both this region's economy and the world's service industries. And we must also give credit to the adaptability and resilience of the labour force which readily accepted the need to learn new skills and accept new jobs. The Hong Kong Government's contribution has been more intangible. Its priority has been to ensure that we offer the best possible business environment. This has meant, of course, keeping taxes low, government small and minimising bureaucracy and red tape. It has also meant promoting competition wherever possible — notably in the telecommunications industry. It has meant upgrading the regulation of our financial markets to match the best world standards — without stifling initiative and enterprise.**

being irresponsible when facts are wrong, quotes are mangled and stories are grossly personalised.

able management tool. Here in Hong Kong, the media give me

I AM grateful to the Asian Newspaper Publishers Convention and Exposition for inviting me to speak to you this evening for two reasons. First, Hong Kong has a date with history this year, and it is very appropriate that you should have picked Hong Kong as your venue for your 1997 Expo. Secondly, Hong Kong's free and flourishing news media have played their part in our progress from a low-cost manufacturing economy to a sophisticated and cosmopolitan community, which has become a major international business and financial centre.

My theme this evening will be freedom, freedom of expression and the free flow of information — and how these contribute to the well-being of a modern community. There is a good thing, but we often feel uncomfortable about the consequences. Winston Churchill put it very well. "Everyone is in favour of free speech," he said, "But some people's idea of it is that they are free to say what they like but that if anyone also says something bad, that is an outrage." In other words, we all want to see the news published, objectively, impartially — and from our own point of view! Churchill had a further comment on freedom of expression which puts it firmly in its place: "The right to be heard," he said, "does not automatically include the right to be taken seriously."

My starting point this evening is the change of sovereignty which Hong Kong will undergo this year, an event which will be recorded by a media army numbering thousands. The first of July will mark a new era for Hong Kong as we become a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. The uncertainties of the past will be put behind us, and we shall move into the next century with a new status, a new role and new opportunities. We will do so with full confidence in our ability to contribute still more effectively to the astonishing story of China's modernisation. At the same time, we believe, we will remain Asia's premier business location.

While this is a year for Hong Kong to look forward to the future, 1997 is a year for this region to look to the past, for it marks several important anniversaries in

Asian history. This is the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan. It is the for-

13: "I  
its  
of  
he  
in a  
to  
ort  
ity  
the  
es  
c  
str  
he  
pe  
d.  
e:  
sio  
o)  
l  
c  
t  
l  
c  
c  
n  
i  
n  
e  
7  
p  
b  
cc  
m  
ce  
a  
sp  
"I  
th  
bu  
las  
23  
als  
s.  
c-strict  
Roosev  
barely  
Hong Ke  
here are  
s as to wh  
the Joint  
ic Law on  
honoured  
a positive  
cum.

but we often feel uncomfortable about the consequences. Winston Churchill put it very well. "Everyone is in favour of free speech," he said, "But some people's idea of it is that they are free to say what they like but that if anyone also says something bad, that is an outrage." In other words, we all want to see the news published, objectively, impartially — and from our own point of view! Churchill had a further comment on freedom of expression which puts it firmly in its place: "The right to be heard," he said, "does not automatically include the right to be taken seriously."

My starting point this evening is the change of sovereignty which Hong Kong will undergo this year, an event which will be recorded by a media army numbering thousands. The first of July will mark a new era for Hong Kong as we become a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. The uncertainties of the past will be put behind us, and we shall move into the next century with a new status, a new role and new opportunities. We will do so with full confidence in our ability to contribute still more effectively to the astonishing story of China's modernisation. At the same time, we believe, we will remain Asia's premier business location.

While this is a year for Hong Kong to look forward to the future, 1997 is a year for this region to look to the past, for it marks several important anniversaries in

Asian history. This is the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan. It is the fortieth anniversary of Malayan Independence. And it is also the fiftieth anniversary of Japan's constitution. As we look back at the post-war history of our region, it is striking how important has been the contribution of the media — newspapers in particular — to Asia's political development. The media played a major part in helping colonial societies to shape their own political cultures and develop their national identities.

India's road to independence, for example, could have been far more difficult if The Statesman and The Hindustan Times had not been newspapers of distinction and influence. Similarly, the Straits Times played a distinguished role in the emergence of both Malaysia and Singapore. Nihon Keizai Shimbun has symbolised the emergence of Japan as a dominant economic power. But the contribution of the press to change and modernisation in this region is not only a post-war

**What is the Government's role in this process? The Hong Kong Government does not claim credit for the successful transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a major international services centre over the last decade or so. The credit for this rapid and largely painless transformation belongs to the entrepreneurs and investors who knew how to respond to the changes overtaking both this region's economy and the world's service industries. And we must also give credit to the adaptability and resilience of the labour force which readily accepted the need to learn new skills and accept new jobs. The Hong Kong Government's contribution has been more intangible. Its priority has been to ensure that we offer the best possible business environment. This has meant, of course, keeping taxes low, government small and minimising bureaucracy and red tape. It has also meant promoting competition wherever possible — notably in the telecommunications industry. It has meant upgrading the regulation of our financial markets to match the best world standards — without stifling initiative and enterprise.**

being irresponsible when facts are wrong, quotes are mangled and stories are grossly personalised. There is no shortage of excuses for urging curbs on press freedom.

**S**O WHAT is the case for freedom of expression and the right to information? This freedom, this right is a question of principle, of the fundamental right to know. As George Bernard Shaw argued: "The right to know is like the right to live. It is fundamental and unconditional in its assumption that knowledge, like life, is a desirable thing." The right to know certainly goes hand in hand with the right to lead lives of freedom and dignity. Very plainly, Asia would be far less free today if the media had not been so vigorous and outspoken in the past. However, all this is no more than arguing a case in favour of toleration for freedom of expression and the free flow of information. But this is a negative attitude, which does not suit the current economic and social needs of this region. Instead, those

able management tool. Here in Hong Kong, the media give me as Chief Secretary an important reassurance. If some part of the administration is performing less well, the TV, radio and press will draw my attention, promptly and forcefully, to our omissions. This gives the Government an opportunity to put things right, before they develop into a serious scandal or a major crisis.

But the media and their role in monitoring management are only one part of the story. The supply of information, its analysis and distribution are an increasing economic asset in their own right, especially for Hong Kong. A recent OECD report estimated that in advanced economies, more than half of their total GDP is "knowledge-based." Knowledge-intensive services provide their fastest source of growth, and "knowledge-workers" are their largest source of new jobs.

Hong Kong has already joined the ranks of the world's successful service economies. Service industries account for 83% of our total GDP and for 73% of total

the most advanced economies. For the future, we will literally stand or fall by our skills in creating and exploiting information. Knowledge and our effective use of it will determine our future.

What is the Government's role in this process? The Hong Kong Government does not claim credit for the successful transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a major international services centre over the last decade or so. The credit for this rapid and largely painless transformation belongs to the entrepreneurs and investors who knew how to respond to the changes overtaking both this region's economy and the world's service industries. And we must also give credit to the adaptability and resilience of the labour force which readily accepted the need to learn new skills and accept new jobs.

The Hong Kong Government's contribution has been more intangible. Its priority has been to ensure that we offer the best possible business environment. This has meant, of course, keeping taxes low, government small and minimising bureaucracy and red tape. It has also meant promoting competition wherever possible — notably in the telecommunications industry. It has meant upgrading the regulation of our financial markets to match the best world standards — without stifling initiative and enterprise. It has meant promoting the rule of law, a corruption-free civil service and an accountable administration.

**A**T THE same time, our commitment to an open economy has been matched by a commitment to the free flow of information. I am convinced that there is a direct link between the speed with which Hong Kong could switch to a service economy and the flourishing state of its mass media. It cannot be a coincidence that Asia's oldest English-language regional magazine and the first English-language regional business newspaper both started in Hong Kong. Nor is it just another coincidence that Asian satellite TV started here. Nor is it another coincidence that the liveliest Chinese-language business publications are produced in Hong Kong.

Let me emphasise that I do not praise the activities of Hong Kong's print and electronic media because they support the Government and its policies. On the contrary, they are consistently critical of what we do, and we are no less critical of much of what they have to say. Wasn't it Nel-