

Liberal Radical

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'The government media should not be mere propaganda tools of the government. It is their task to report the facts accurately, without bringing any element of propaganda into it. The journalists in the media have been trained under a different method, one of servility, for 17 years. It is not easy to change the habits they have acquired. But I will certainly try my best to change these attitudes and make the government media more credible. This is essential for the building of a democratic media culture. I am a liberal democrat on matters regarding the media, and I am also ready to use radical means to ensure that this liberal democracy is practiced.'

These are among the views of the new Minister for Media, Mangala Samaraweera

who also holds the portfolio of Post & Telecommunications. Mr Samaraweera was interviewed for 'Business Today' by Lucien Rajakarunanayake .

You have been appointed as Media Minister at a somewhat controversial time with regard to the Government's relations with the media, especially after the Supreme Court's decision on the Broadcasting Authority Bill. Do you see yourself following the same policies as earlier with regard to the media, or do you envisage any change?

I do not think it is as controversial a situation as you say. Yes, the Supreme Court has given an important ruling, and we respect it. But, this government will not veer from its declared policy of encouraging the development of a truly, liberal and democratic media culture in this country. This is an important pledge we made at the election. It is our government, under my predecessor as minister, that was the first government in this country to issue a Cabinet statement of Media Policy. It is certainly my intention to implement these policies.

Would there be a change in style in dealing with the media and journalists, compared to the former minister, who was generally regarded as a friend of the journalists?

Well, the former minister was a journalist himself, and so was his brother. He certainly has more experience than I have, and no doubt he is a genial person. The comparison will be left to the journalists, but I have no intention of competing with my good friend, Mr Senanayake as to who is the better friend of the media. However, I will do everything possible to build the best relations with the media and journalists. I see this as a two-way process, and I shall certainly do my best to improve relations with the media and journalists, wherever and whenever necessary.

As a concrete step in this direction I have already announced that this government will repeal the Parliamentary Privileges (Special Provisions) Act of 1978, passed by the JR Jayewardene government, which was one of the first signals of how the previous government intended to deal with the media. As you know the first persons to be punished by parliament under this pernicious law, were two journalists of the 'Observer'. And that within days of the Act being passed. Several other journalists have been constantly harassed under this Act, and its subsequent amendments, which made it even more rigid. The repeal of this Act was a promise we made during the election. It is also a long standing demand of the Free Media Movement (FMM). In fact it is a demand made by the FMM from its inception in 1992, and during its campaign for media freedom which many of us in the then Opposition supported in whatever manner we could. I have already taken steps to repeal

this Act. The relevant papers are with the Legal Draftsman's Department. What we intend doing is revert to the Privileges Law that existed before 1978, when the task of finding a person guilty and punishing was left to the Supreme Court. I expect to present the new law in six weeks time.

One hears a constant complaint from the Government side that there is no proper media culture in this country, and that the media lacks responsibility. What is the nature of the media culture that the Government expects, and what is its idea of a responsible media?

You know very well that this country once had a very good democratic and liberal media culture and tradition. There were cartoonists of the calibre of Collette and political commentators of the stature of Tarzie Vitachi, Denzil Pieris, editors such as Armand de Souza, his son Tori de Souza, and Fred de Silva to name a few in the English media. There were Sinhala editors of the class of Martin Wickremasinghe, D B Dhanapala and Meemana Prematilleke. They all maintained a certain standard in their writings and in their newspapers. They were critical of governments, often very critical, but they were always conscious of the need to maintain a healthy media culture and tradition. Sadly, for more than twenty years now, this good tradition has been on the decline.

Today, some newspapers do not publish views and opinions that are critical or contrary to what they profess. Often, even a reply to an incorrect statement published in a newspaper is not carried. If it is carried, one has to make special requests to the proprietors. Even when such corrections are carried they are hidden away in an insignificant place, and not given the same prominence as the original offending piece. This is not good media culture. These are not the proper democratic traditions of a free press. They also pay scant respect to the privacy of the individual. I agree that politicians should be ready for keener observation by the media, but they are also entitled to their privacy which should be respected, unless it is a matter of public concern.

At the same time today, some political commentary and analysis take the form of character assassination with a deep sense of animosity. That is why our government, even though committed to media freedom, tended to look at the media with a certain sense of despair. We began to have doubts whether these were deliberate and calculated attitudes. However, even today it is my belief that those who are responsible for this are a minority in the media. Yet, unfortunately, it is these few who seem to have gained the spotlight in the media. What this government believes as a proper media culture, is one where the media follows accepted democratic standards as the right of reply, the publication of different and contrary points of view and the absence of any animosity in the functioning of the media.

But, Mr Minister, what about the complaint about the lack of responsibility which is constantly hurled against the media. Is it your position, or that of the Government, that the media should be responsible to the Government? Should it not rather be that the media should be responsible to the public and no one else?

It is not my position, and certainly not the position of this government that the media should be responsible to the government. That is certainly not a democratic ideal. That was the accepted norm in the so called socialist countries that are fast changing their ways and embracing the liberal democratic traditions, together with a market economy. There is no doubt that the first and primary responsibility of the media should be to the public, to society. It has the responsibility to inform society. It has an informative, awareness and educational role. Therefore it is important that they should always seek the truth, and where they err, accept their errors and display responsibility by publishing what is correct.

I must emphasize that the responsibility that the government speaks of is not in any way being responsible to the government. In fact it is the duty of the media to be critical of the government, where criticism is required; to point out the faults of governments, of the proposals and programs of governments. But to say that this should be done with responsibility, is to say that this should be done with honesty, and with maximum emphasis on truth and accuracy.

I think if the media acts with such a degree of responsibility towards society, or the public, who are the readers, viewers and listeners, there can be no cause whatsoever for anyone to demand that the Press act with responsibility.

Do you expect this sense of responsibility only from the privately owned media? What about the government-owned media. There is a great lack of credibility in the government-owned media, because many say that they are mere mouthpieces or propaganda tools of the government. That their only role is to blow the government's trumpet.

To put it in a lighter vein, I believe as Bernard Shaw said, that one has to blow one's trumpet because no one else will be ready to blow it for you. That is not to say that the State-owned media should become propaganda tools of the government as you say it, or that they are meant to blow the government's trumpet. It is correct that over the years the State-owned media has declined to the position of being considered as propaganda tools. But, it is my intention to change this situation. I believe the State media can set the example of responsibility which we talk about. In Sri Lanka's peculiar situation, the State-owned media could even play a lead role in this matter.

However, considering the circumstances with regard to the media prevailing in Sri Lanka today, it becomes necessary for the government to have some media organs which would report or reflect its point of view. This need not be propaganda. It is really up to the journalists to make sure that what they report is not propaganda but news and fair comment. In fact it is my view that today, it is the government's point of view that is being subjected to censorship most. If the government does not have control of Lake House and its electronic media institutions, very often there is no media which will accurately report the government's point of view. However, it is not my intention to let the State media descend to the low levels of attacking its opponents as was done by Mahindapala or Anuruddha Thilakasiri during the former government.

In fact I can say that the State media, particularly Lake House, gives much more space to points of view different to that of the government's, than the other media gives to government points of view which differ from theirs. I am also aware that the government media should undergo certain changes that will make them more credible than today. This is certainly an uphill task, but it must be carried out. The biggest challenge that I have today is to change this attitude among the public that Lake House, Rupavahini and SLBC are mere propaganda tools of the government. This is certainly a major exercise after the training in servility that most journalists and administrators in these organizations underwent through 17 years. But the change must be done. The news media must report news, not stale communiqués or reports that only show the good side of the government. I am a liberal democrat with regard to the media, and if necessary, I am even ready to use radical means to make the media more democratic and liberal.

To go back to the Broadcasting Authority, there have been reports quoting you that a new Broadcasting Authority Bill will be submitted to a Parliamentary Select Committee. What do you expect the nature of this new bill to be?

As I said earlier, we accept the verdict of the Supreme Court on the original bill. But, one must remember that even those who opposed the original bill were of the view that there was the need for a Broadcasting

Authority. The Free Media Movement which was one of the petitioners against the Government's Bill, has even taken the trouble to submit a draft Broadcasting Authority Bill prepared by them and the Centre for Policy Alternatives. There are other points of view too. There is no doubt that this country needs a Broadcasting Authority. The radio frequencies are not unlimited, and there must be some regulation to ensure that they are distributed equitably, fairly, and in keeping with the needs of the country. We must remember that ours is a multi-ethnic, multi religious country. In such a situation, a broadcasting authority

should act with a great deal of care in the allocation of frequencies. There is also the educational role that radio and TV has to play in our countries. Then there is the expanding concept of community radio.

So, I think it is best that the next draft bill be submitted to a Parliamentary Select Committee which will be able to consider it from the point of view of the various political parties in parliament, as well as give due consideration to other political parties, social groups, civic organizations and even individuals before preparing a final draft, which will propose the type of broadcasting authority that we need. It should certainly not be an authority which will seek to promote the aims of any political party or group but one which would be able to go beyond the narrow limitations of politics and other forces.

There has been some criticism that in the changes you have made to the Boards of the various media institutions of the Government, you have appointed those who favor the devolution package, and that this points to the State media being used extensively to promote the devolution package. Is this correct?

Firstly, it is a tradition that when a new minister is appointed to a ministry, those who have been appointed under the previous minister submit their resignations. I have made certain changes, not because I am deviating from the previous minister's policies, but because I would prefer to work with people whose capabilities I know. I have in fact retained some of the more experienced persons who served under the former minister. As for appointing persons who support the devolution package, I can assure that that was not a consideration, but I certainly can't see how one could expect me, being a keen supporter of the Government's devolution proposals, to appoint anyone who is totally opposed to these proposals to guide the media institutions of the Government.

I must add here, that there has been no political or constitutional proposal made by any government, which has been widely discussed by the public for almost two years, so that the public will have maximum awareness of the changes being proposed. In fact, the State media organizations have always given space and time to those who oppose these proposals, quite unlike some sections of the private media that have found it fit to shut out all opinion in favor of the proposals. The State media institutions will continue to report on the devolution proposals, and also present any divergent views. It is inevitable that the debate will get hotter very soon, because the Government intends presenting the proposals to Parliament before the Budget. The new directors I have appointed are persons of experience and competence, and not people who believe that any debate should be one sided.

Now that we have moved on to the subject of devolution, can you tell what progress

if any, the Sudu Nelum Movement of which you are the convener, has made? There have been some observations that this movement is the base for the building of another political party. What have you to say?

I think it important to first dispel these misconceptions about the Sudu Nelum Movement. It is by no means the base for any new political party. It was the idea of Her Excellency the President that such a movement was needed for several reasons. The first, was to make the public aware of the need for a wider, a more meaningful devolution process to solve our ethnic crisis, and thereby remove the root cause of the war, and hopefully help bring it to an end. The other was the need for a grass roots organization for the purpose of helping the families and the dependents of those who had been killed or disabled in this war. It was both an organization to create the necessary public awareness of the need for a political solution, and one which would reach out to the families affected by the war and show them that they have not been abandoned by the government or the people.

We have been engaged in these twin tasks as well as some ancillary work related to these main tasks. I can quite confidently say that the Sudu Nelum Movement has fulfilled a great part of its mandate, quite substantially. There have been several hundred seminars and open public discussions held to make the public, trade unions, political organizers and students aware of the real meaning of the devolution proposals and dispel the fears of the people. Fears caused to a large extent by sections of the media. We have obtained the support of important

sections of the Buddhist clergy for the devolution. proposals, thereby dispelling the false image that the entire Buddhist clergy was against these proposals. The seminars and educational programs we have held among teachers and students have been most useful in their understanding the need for a political solution. At the same time we have taken the initiative to place more emphasis on peace education in the school curriculum. As a result of the work that the Sudu Nelum Movement has done, I believe there is a great deal of public opinion today in favor of a political solution and an end to this war.

On the other hand, we have done considerable work in helping the families and dependents of soldiers. Our help went to the families of those killed or disabled, as well as, those fighting in the front. There is a great deal of work we have been doing in this area, which may not be known. We have provided housing schemes for families of soldiers, scholarships have been arranged for the children of soldiers killed or disabled, we have helped in finding employment for the children of families who have been left helpless by the war. We have also done considerable work among the people of the villages in what are called the border areas the people who are most vulnerable and exposed to attack by the Tigers. For many

years people were only talking of these 'border villages'. We have provided them with facilities, such as roads, protective fences, and housing too.

Since the Sudu Nelum Movement believes in the rights of the minorities too, we have not ignored the Tamil people in our work. We have, as much as our resources and organizational ability could help, given assistance to Tamils in refugee camps in Vavuniya. Unfortunately, our first organizer in Jaffna, was killed in the bomb attack which killed the town commandant of Jaffna and injured minister Nimal Siripala de Silva. But we still do maintain an office in Jaffna and carry out some of the work of awareness building and helping people who have become the victims of war. Also, one of the major programs of the Sudu Nelum

Movement is the rebuilding of the Jaffna Library, which I think is a very important step in our move towards national reconciliation.



Before re-building the Jaffna Public Library, would it not have been better and given more credibility if this government had taken steps to punish those who

torched the library in 1981?

Well, that is what the previous government should have done. Now it is 16 years past, and I think it will be extremely difficult to get at the actual culprits who carried out that terrible act of destruction. If we find any of those responsible, we will certainly take steps to punish them. But, what happened at that time is now a part of history. It is a blame that all of us should share, even though those who did it were a group of people misled and misdirected by the previous government's anti-Tamil policies. What is important now is to think in terms of building bridges to the North, and we believe that the Jaffna Library Project is one of the most important steps in this bridge-building process.

Will it end up being a government-funded project or a library built mainly with foreign aid?

It will certainly be neither. What we most certainly want to avoid is making this appear a government gift to the people of Jaffna. What we are trying to do is to make this a project in which there will be the most widespread public participation, both in the North and the South, certainly more in the South. We look at this as a restoration of a national treasure house of knowledge. We think it is something in which all our people can, and most certainly will participate, because of the importance that is attached to learning in our cultural traditions.

We are carrying out this campaign with the very simple symbol of A Book and a Brick.' The imagery is easy to understand. The book, which is the store of knowledge and the brick which is the building block of this storehouse. A widespread program will be launched this month, to get almost every village involved in the project. We are not suggesting that each one donates a book or a brick, but instead donates money for the books and bricks, which will go into the reconstruction and restoration of this national treasure. There have been methods suggested of having a permanent record of the names of all persons and organizations that contribute to this project. I am glad to note that several valuable libraries and collections have already been donated to the Jaffna Library.

Is it possible to reconstruct on the same site, and what kind of library do you have in mind?

There is a special Jaffna Library Reconstruction Committee, which has members from many disciplines. The engineers and architects have done the structural studies and confirm that the library could be rebuilt at the same place. The new plan includes the addition of two new wings too. Also, it is not the intention to make this a storehouse of books for borrowing

and reference, which has been the traditional pattern of a library. What we intend is to make this a fully modern library, with interactive computer facilities for retrieval of information, and all the aspects of a truly modern library to suit the 21st Century.

What is the estimated cost of this library, and can the funds be raised in Sri Lanka?

The estimated cost at the moment is in the region of Rs 700 million. I do not think all this money could be raised from the villages, schools and various other voluntary organizations in the various districts. We are certainly looking forward to foreign assistance, from universities, libraries and other centers of learning. Several foreign embassies have already agreed to help in the reconstruction of the library in many ways, through funds, books, equipment, expertise etc. I think this is also one area where the private sector in Sri Lanka could and should play a major role. What the private sector keeps looking for is well-educated persons for employment. So, it is important that they contribute generously for a good symbol of learning and education. Similarly, there is also a great deal that could be done by the Sri Lankan expatriate communities abroad.

What I must emphasize about the Jaffna Library Project is that it should be considered as a major symbol of national reconciliation. It must be a means of condemning what was done by those misled politically motivated vandals in 1981. This is not a project which is being done on any political party basis. It is open to persons of all persuasions to contribute to this because, it is a step by which we can demonstrate that we are all genuinely sorry about the destruction of that much-valued possession of the Tamil people.

You are also the Minister for Post and Telecommunications. It was expected that the privatization of part of Sri Lanka Telecom would have taken place earlier this year. What is the cause for the delay, and what is the exact situation?

I can tell you that this year is one where major changes can be expected in the Department of Post and Telecommunications and Sri Lanka Telecom. The privatization has indeed been delayed, but it has not run off the rails. You will know very soon what the developments are, and they will certainly be beneficial to this country.



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