

Licensing of Journalists

Wesley Gibbings, ACM President

The CARICOM Secretariat is proposing that Caribbean governments agree on a model legislation that will have the effect of imposing a licensing regime on journalists and other media workers.

The move is actually part of an attempt to 'regularise' the status of professionals in a wide range of disciplines in the context of the CSME, in a move that is calculated to improve the 'marketability' of Caribbean professionals.

Apart from this being a false premise, there is the dangerous suggestion that the licensing of journalists will help lift standards, especially if minimum training and other conditions are met. The Model legislation is entitled the 'Model Professional Services Bill'. The subject was raised by a CARICOM official in a rather routine manner at a CSME workshop in St Lucia on October 12.

I immediately advised that this matter is not subject to negotiation and that it will have to be contested and withdrawn as a proposal with any impact on media workers.

It is a well-established fact that the licensing of journalists constitutes an outright threat to freedom of the press and other rights. There is also useful judicial opinion on this through the Costa Rica case of 1985 and several other matters that reached the US and other courts.

The ACM is moving quickly to nip this in the bud. We are inviting a senior CARICOM official to discuss this matter with us at the forthcoming Conference and Fifth Biennial General Meeting in Grenada on December 10-12, 2009. Hopefully, the outcome will be a very clear message to have this withdrawn as a proposal to CARICOM Member States.

This is dangerous territory and I am urging everyone use the tools at our disposal to publicise this issue and to act decisively to ensure the model Bill, especially as it relates to media workers, does not reach anywhere near our parliaments.

Reactions:

"The ABMC sees no need for the proposed regulation as it is, without any form of regulation. I think the media has been doing a pretty decent job in terms of ensuring that the society is not hurt by its work ... and it [the media] tries its best to make sure that the information that goes out to the public is credible."

- President of the Antigua & Barbuda Media Congress (ABMC), Colin James

"I am concerned about the subjective nature of the characteristics that are being assigned to this process. 'Fit and proper person' that is extremely subjective. To determine if persons have adequate



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experience that too is subjective."

- Political and Current Affairs Commentator, Arvel Grant

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- ACM President, Wesley Gibbings

"The techniques for muzzling journalists are countless, including licensing and registration. I'm against the MPS Bill for one important reason.

When journalists are regulated, truth (freedom of expression/free speech) is also the victim. We should be aware of that. Let our voices be heard!"

- Titinbo E. Aviankoi

"Licensing journalists gives the state the power to decide who gets to report what. Such proposals are always floated in an effort to promote 'responsible' journalism. 'Responsible' being the code word for 'not threatening the status quo'. There is no way to reconcile that with the historic mission of the press, which, as one sage put it, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

- Mike Henessy