

**INDIAN OCEAN RIM CONFERENCE ON
“PARLIAMENT AND THE MEDIA:
SECURING AN EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIP”
Cape Town, South Africa,
14 – 18 April 2002**

**Cape Town Principles for an
Informed Democracy**

A set of principles to guide societies in developing fully informed democracies have been proposed by Commonwealth Parliamentarians and media professionals meeting in April in Cape Town, South Africa.

The principles carry forward the Programmes of Action, developed by a similar meeting in 2000 in New Delhi, which Parliaments and the media could take to build an effective relationship. Both the New Delhi and Cape Town meetings were organized by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Commonwealth Press Union, the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association and the Commonwealth Journalists Association in conjunction with the World Bank Institute.

The Cape Town meeting brought together more than 70 Parliamentarians and media professionals from Indian Ocean rim Commonwealth countries in a conference on “Parliament and the Media: Securing an Effective Relationship”. It was hosted by the Parliament of South Africa from 14 to 18 April 2002.

The principles, including further proposals for specific actions by Parliaments and the media, covered crucial information issues facing Commonwealth and other global societies.

The Advancement of Society

Parliament and the media in a well-established civil society share a responsibility to contribute to political, economic and social development in ways consistent with democratic principles. Both must be aware that economic development in particular is best achieved and sustained in societies that are democratic and well informed.

While respecting the right of individual societies to determine how best to apply democratic principles, Parliament should involve the media, and through them the public, in forming public policy. Parliament should empower civil society by opening up decision-making to enable the media to report on and participate in the debate over policy.

Political leaders must not seek to stifle the airing of opposing views and must pay attention to diverse opinions as expressed through the media.

The media should provide balanced coverage of public policy debates without trivialising or denigrating the parliamentary and governmental decision-making processes. Journalists should be free to criticise policies, policy makers and the effectiveness of the democratic process.

Respecting Social Roles

Parliament and the media should respect the other's role in serving their community so that people in turn respect both institutions as providers of accurate information and informed opinion.

Parliamentarians should recognize the value of fair and accurate reporting as a channel for public feedback to assist them to legislate, formulate policy and scrutinise government performance.

Journalists need to understand the issues crucial to all segments of the population and play their full part in informing the public about the challenges facing their society.

Professional and Public Capacity-Building

Journalists and Parliamentarians should be given greater access to professional development programmes to prepare them to participate more effectively in the democratic process.

Of particular benefit are orientation courses for Members and journalists on parliamentary practices and procedures, and adequate research support for Members.

Governments should in turn ensure that education systems encourage the development of citizens who can understand and assess for themselves the policy issues debated in Parliament and in the media.

Encouraging a Multiplicity of Information Sources

Parliamentarians, journalists and the public should have access to a variety of print, broadcast and Internet-based media to end reliance on government information or party-run information sources.

Investment in all forms of independent media should be encouraged. The media should pool their often-limited resources to improve the coverage of Parliament and other institutions.

Professional Behaviour

Parliamentarians should conduct debate in a respectful and well-informed manner.

The media should establish self-regulatory codes of professional conduct and should pursue fact-based, fully substantiated reporting.

Societies must accept that periodic abuses by individual Parliamentarians and journalists of their rights and freedoms, and of their special positions in society, must not be used as reasons to curb the legitimate performance of their roles. The freedoms accorded to Parliamentarians and the media reflect the supremacy of the ultimate right of the public to be informed.

Making Parliament Newsworthy

To advance a more participatory democracy, Parliament should open all their processes to media coverage, including the work of parliamentary committees.

Parliaments should provide schedules of committee meetings to the media and journalists should in turn cover this important parliamentary process.

Media coverage of committees will better involve the public in the formulation of public policy and prevent collusion in cases where committees are investigating wrongdoing.

Broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings and greater media coverage will raise the quality of debate.

Vital issues should be addressed in a timely fashion in Parliament, and ministerial announcements should whenever possible be made first in Parliament rather than in the media.

Raising Media Standards

Media organisations should retain more experienced reporters and should assign such reporters to cover Parliament.

The media's responsibility is to inform the electorate of the conduct and performance of the representatives they have elected.

Journalists should be encouraged to report on public policy issues that are relevant to everyone and not just the economic elite.

Providing a Legislative Framework

To enable Parliament, MPs and journalists to play a full role in disseminating information to the people and from the people to the government, Commonwealth Heads of Government should secure a supportive environment for the free flow of information. In pursuing this goal, governments and Parliaments should:

- Pass freedom of information legislation.
- Resist privacy legislation that could be used to suppress freedom of speech and freedom of the media.
- Apply parliamentary privilege fully to all fair and accurate reports of parliamentary proceedings, including committees.
- Reject or repeal legislation to licence media, journalists and presses.
- Repeal criminal defamation laws so that the media is no longer subjected to punitive controls that curb freedom of expression.
- Exercise caution in the passage of anti-terrorism legislation which may limit society's freedoms or make the state less accountable.
- Reject or repeal laws that empower the state to censure or punish political opponents and the media for partisan reasons.

Follow up

Sponsor organisations are prepared to consider further collaborative and individual programmes to advance the goals embraced by the two "Parliament and the Media" conferences which reinforce the Coolom Declaration's Commonwealth commitment to "democracy, the rule of law, good governance, freedom of expression and the protection of human rights".