

World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2001

By Sir John Jeffries,

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The World Association of Newspapers has denoted May 3, 2001 as World Press Freedom Day and called on all newspapers of the world to overcome their reluctance to talk about themselves and the problems of the journalists' profession, and concentrate on the theme that without freedom of expression, no people can be truly free.

In preparation for this day leaders of the world were asked to contribute their personal views on what press freedom meant to them. I mention two. First from our Prime Minister, Helen Clark: "The US Supreme Court once said that without an informed and free Press, there cannot be an enlightened people. Press freedom is an intrinsic part of a healthy democracy. It should not only be respected, but also nurtured and protected." And the Chancellor of Germany, Gerhard Schroder, said: "Democracy is impossible without freedom of the Press."

Without question New Zealand has attained over the 200-odd years of its existence the very highest degree of freedom of expression. The establishment of freedom was concomitant with universal literacy and development of democratic governance. From these followed inevitably the mass forms of communication beginning with the newspapers that, notwithstanding recent stiff competition from the electronic media, have retained their pre-eminence as the most reliable and accountable form of mass communication. Accountability and democracy are true handmaidens.

Realistically, there is no present threat to our basic freedoms. Naturally, thinking New Zealanders are concerned that around the world 52 journalists were killed in the year 2000 and 81 were imprisoned for no other reason than that they practised their profession. In most countries where these atrocities took place the overall level of freedom is nearly always suppressed by a totalitarian regime accompanied often by dire economic conditions for the masses.

Does it mean therefore that in a democratically governed society, with a high standard of living, that there are no challenges left to express our regard for a free Press? I would argue that there are still goals for us to attain, not in the provision of those basic freedoms but in their use.

Press freedom may benefit commercially a very small group in a private enterprise economy but that should not obscure in the slightest degree the fundamental point that a free Press is the freedom of the people to receive and exchange information, opinion and factual data. In New Zealand there is absolutely no censorship of the Press and journalists are safe to express their honestly held opinions subject to a few constraints such as the laws of defamation.

For New Zealand the problems mostly arise about the publication of opinion pieces (a prominent feature of modern newspaper journalism in by-lined opinion columns) and Letters to the Editor on controversial issues. New Zealanders have a highly developed sense of fairness but some encounter difficulties with the publication of

full blown views that might range from the mildly offensive to a deeply shocking attack on some treasured doctrines current in our society.

Two recent decisions of the Press Council illustrate this point. The *New Zealand Herald* in October last year printed some Letters to the Editor that controversially advanced a view on the differences between Judaism and Zionism. A complaint was made to the Press Council, but not upheld, by the Auckland Jewish Council about the publication of these views. The decision of the Council contained these words:

"It is...part of the free and unfettered exchange of opinion in an open society that offensive expression will find a place, even where distortions or extreme views are integral to such expressions."

In another decision, the Council did not uphold a complaint by the Monarchist League of New Zealand against an opinion column that contained this sentence:

"There she stands, a still-healthy pensioner who is personally wealthy, has managed to spend 100 years collecting non-means-tested benefits and clearly has no immediate plans to do her nation a favour by dropping dead."

For the correction of strong or wrong opinions, a free country relies on competition of ideas, not on censure of any kind. Nevertheless it cannot be avoided, or denied, that freedom of expression in a pluralistic society is a powerful diet and can sometimes challenge the peacefulness of that society. Many of us vividly recall the tensions and violence that accompanied the Springbok rugby tour of 1981. Recently, industrial protest resulted in a tragic death.

A free Press must allow full meaning to the term "free expression". A free Press cannot itself impose levels, or degrees of freedom in the supposed interests of taste, responsibility or political correctness. If this occurred our personal lives would be hugely diminished. However, that also means we must be prepared to countenance publication of ethnic, sectarian, gender, sexual orientation and, political views, all of which might run in the face of the opinions held by a majority of us, and this is to be done in the name of a free Press.