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Media operatives and other stakeholders at yesterday's workshop

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Trotman commits to future engagement to improve access to Assembly

SPEAKER of the National Assembly, Mr. Raphael Trotman, yesterday committed to hosting an engagement for media owners, managers, editors and Board Chairs as a follow-up to what was a successful exchange between reporters and Members of Parliament (MPs).

The one-day workshop, held at the Georgetown Club, was funded by the Commonwealth Parliament Association (CPA) and saw discussions around the theme 'Parliament, the Media and the People'. It was attended by representatives from several media houses, as well as staff from the Parliament Office.

WATCHWORDS

During the opening session, the Speaker underscored the importance of "trust, respect and legitimacy" as watchwords for the day's session.

"If there is no trust, then there is no respect, and if there is no respect, there is no legitimacy. If there is no legitimacy in our state institutions, that includes the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, then we will have a creeping position and then a sprint towards anarchy," he said.

According to him, the reports in the news and the gridlock that characterises the Parliament, among other factors, indicate that Guyana is moving from its "creeping position" and moving in the direction of a dangerous sprint.

Trotman said, "We are now standing upright and I hope we are not heading towards a sprint, as it is frightening, to say the least.

He cited a recent report from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), which listed Guyana as averaging 34 per cent in terms of public trust and respect.

The Speaker of the House added that the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) recently addressed the relationship of Parliament with the people of Guyana.

He referred to a June 26, 2014, statement, which said: "Politicians will need to overcome the lack of trust in them and embrace a more inclusive approach to politics if democracy is to thrive as it should in the future.

"...democracy is always facing new challenges. Public disengagement and disillusionment with traditional politics today is leading to increased marginalisation of groups within society and is undermining peace and democracy

"...parliamentarians, representing the will of the people, have to change both mind-sets and behaviour and reconnect with the people through a less conflictual and more inclusive way of doing politics."

ROLE OF MEDIA

It was against this backdrop that he underscored the role and responsibilities of the media in supporting the National Assembly's engagement with the Guyanese people.

"We need your help and we need to build a relationship based on trust and mutual respect. We need, however, to establish that we cannot allow manipulation of views...we need to know that the press corps is imbued with a sense of responsibility....let us try to do better," Trotman said.

The Speaker's latter comments were in line with the five themes that were discussed yesterday. Among the themes were:

* 'Watchdog' Fourth Estate Coverage of the House,' presented by Director of the Communications Department at the University of Guyana, Ms. Carolyn Walcott;

* 'Procedures of the National Assembly from motions or bills to laws and standing orders,' presented by Deputy Clerk (ag.), Ms. Hermina Gilgeous;

* 'Problems Parliamentarians face – Media Coverage and issues surrounding their own mandate, responsibility and access to the press and public,' which was presented by Alliance For Change (AFC) MP, Mrs. Cathy Hughes.

Former Speaker of the House, Mr. Ralph Ramkarran, also made a presentation, which addressed a review of the 'Past relationships between the National Assembly and the media and recommendations for improvement.'

CONCERNS

Leader of the Opposition, Brigadier (rtd.), David Granger also delivered an address during the opening session and commented on sentiments that were reiterated during the day's engagement.

He expressed several areas of concern, including the fact that the Head of State holds the portfolio of Minister of Information, since, according to the Constitution, portfolios unassigned resides with the President's office.

"Why would the President want to concern himself with Information...why does the State hold onto media (outlets)," Granger questioned.

He charged that State media are being used in an "abusive" manner.

Granger said. "One would have expected that over this period (220 years) we would have matured, we would have learnt some lessons, and the media corps should have reached a certain standard of development.

"...over those 220 years, there has been a war between the state and the free press and we are still at war. We are at war because the State has always sought to control the free press, to control the information released to the public, and the free press has always tried, not only to embarrass the State, but to provide information and opinions, which the State found unfavourable....the battle continues."

According to him, the freedom of expression is a Constitutional right that must not be hindered.

"These freedoms point to the necessity for the responsible administration of news outlets," he said.

On this note, the Opposition Leader added that responsible administration is underpinned by a strong sense of professionalism.

"Should we, as a population, be written about and written to by quacks...every profession, whatever it calls itself must be based on education and a long period of training....it must be based also on a sense of social responsibility," he said.

Granger noted too that a professional organisation of journalists must be members of a community that is self-regulatory, which will advance sanctions where there are breaches.

"If you do not adhere to these tenets, you are a quack, you do not belong in the field of journalism," he said.

To this end, the Opposition Leader welcomed the workshop.

"This seminar is very important because the State does not have an option...it has an obligation to the population to provide information so that the public can make informed choices. Parliament is the key, because it is the pinnacle where the views of hundreds of thousands of people are addressed," Granger said.

Also, representative of the Guyana Press Association (GPA), Mr. Neil Marks, made remarks on the National Assembly's engagement with the media and stressed the importance of yesterday's engagement.

"This 10th Parliament has been very vibrant...sometimes the rules and the procedures of the National Assembly get by us easily...it is important that we understand the processes of Parliament to improve our coverage," he said.

Also in attendance were A Partnership for National Unity (APNU) MPs Dr. Karen Cummings, Ms. Africo Selman and Ms. Annette Ferguson. Mr. Allan Fenty, veteran columnist and representatives from the diplomatic corps and civil society were also present.

Government MPs were not present at the workshop. However, Government Chief Whip, Gail Teixeira, told the Guyana Chronicle that Government MPs were unavoidably absent, as they were attending to other urgent matters.

Additionally, several other initiatives to improve engagement with the Guyanese people are ongoing and include school outreaches. Upcoming initiatives are the launch of the National Assembly's website, to be done in two weeks, and live streaming of sittings.

(By Vanessa Narine)