

Speech by Secretary for Justice at the Pulitzer Prize
Winners Workshop

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Justice, Mr Wong Yan Lung, SC, at the Inauguration Ceremony cum Forum of Pulitzer Prize Winners Workshop today (October 17):

Professor Ng, Mr Cho, Consul-General Mr Cunningham, Mr Wong, Mr Arnett, Prof Kaplan, Mr Vitez, Ms Goldstein, Mr Stecklow, Ms Fong, Distinguished Journalists, ladies and gentlemen,

I am most delighted to be here to join the Baptist University and the Hong Kong Economic Journal in welcoming 6 Pulitzer-winning journalists to Hong Kong. First of all, may I apologize for my voice. My only excuse is that in front of all the distinguished journalists, I am simply speechless.

Protection of Press Freedom

Although Hong Kong is small geographically, we are big in terms of population, with close to 7 million people, more than the population of Ireland or Finland. I think it is also fair to say we are "big" financially, "rich" culturally, "unique" historically, and "innovative" politically, being the only place in the world where the principle of "One Country, Two Systems" is applied.

Naturally, we have a very lively media scene here in Hong Kong. More than 40 daily newspapers and 680 weekly periodicals are printed in Hong Kong. We are home to about 100 international media organisations and the regional base for Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, International Herald Tribune and Time-Warner. Bloomberg and Reuters also have major operations here. As an international centre of finance, trade and telecommunications, Hong Kong thrives on split-second and unfiltered flow of information. The free flow of news and information is one of the foundations of our success, and one of our greatest assets as Asia's World City.

Press freedom is an asset that we cherish dearly and guard jealously. Under Article 27 of the Basic Law, the constitution of Hong Kong, Hong Kong residents are guaranteed freedom of speech, of the press and of publication. It is also a core value embraced by our

society and is very much part of our everyday life in Hong Kong.

Uphold the Highest Standards

One of the most effective ways to protect freedom of the press is to demonstrate how quality journalism can help build a better society. A free, independent and reliable press plays a vital role in disseminating information and providing an "open market-place of ideas", and a forum for exchange of views and opinions on various issues. It also provides checks and balances to ensure that matters of public interest are subject to appropriate scrutiny and accountability.

However, the other side of the coin is that any decline in the standard of journalism itself poses a great threat to the maintenance of press freedom. In Hong Kong, as in other countries, journalists are faced with great changes and challenges brought about by the internet, 24-hour broadcasting, globalization and cut-throat competition. Some people have expressed concern over declining quality, prompted perhaps by some glaring instances of paparazzi operations targeting celebrities and perhaps isolated cases of inaccurate reporting.

The tasks of responsible journalists are rendered more challenging when our society also guards jealously other freedoms like the freedom and privacy of communication of individuals, privacy of homes and premises, and against anything which may jeopardise fair trial or the administration of justice. In Hong Kong, the Law Reform Commission has made proposals to reform the law on stalking and privacy protection, which have proved to be controversial, attracting heated debates among politicians and journalists alike.

I believe we all agree with what the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal said in a case called Ng Kung Siu in the context of freedom of expression:

"Freedom of expression is not an absolute. The Preamble to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognises that the individual has duties to other individuals and to the community to which he belongs... the exercise of the right to freedom of expression carries with it special duties and responsibilities."

In the context of freedom of the press, I can do no better than citing the words of wisdom of Mr Joseph

Pulitzer himself from his essay in The North American Review more than a century ago:

"An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and the courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which public government is a sham and mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mould the future of the Republic will be in the hands of journalists of future generations."

Keenly aware of the potential and influence of journalism, Mr Pulitzer has made tremendous contribution to elevate its standard and status. Throughout the years, Pulitzer prizes recognise outstanding works of enduring quality. They could be influential reports revealing truths and developments of national or international importance. They could be powerful images capturing moments of struggles and triumphs. They could be moving stories celebrating virtues and special links between people. The values these works represent bring out the noble qualities of journalism.

Conclusion

We are therefore extremely fortunate to have in Hong Kong today 6 Pulitzer-winning journalists, who have all reached the pinnacle of achievement in journalism, to share with us their experience, insights and directions. The pursuit of excellence is always inspired by learning from role models. The workshop and forum today will no doubt provide excellent learning opportunities for our journalism students and journalists alike.

I also hope that our overseas guests could also find some time to satisfy your journalistic appetite with the unique sights, sounds and characteristics of our vibrant city, in addition to the wide variety of cuisine which Hong Kong takes pride in.

On that note, I wish all participants of the Workshop fruitful exchanges and our overseas guests a memorable and enjoyable stay in Hong Kong.

Thank you very much.

Ends/Wednesday, October 17, 2007

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