

**WELCOME ADDRESS BY MRS. JEAN MENSA, ADMINISTRATOR, THE IEA AT A  
WORKSHOP FOR POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE MEDIA AT ATIMPOKU ON SATURDAY,  
THE 29<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2008**

*“We live under a government of men- and morning newspapers” (Wendell Phillips, 1811 – 1844)*

Mr. Chairman, hardworking National Party Officers of every description, distinguished Media Practitioners, Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of The Institute of Economic Affairs, I welcome you warmly to this important workshop.

I deliberately chose the gripe above by the eminent American thinker, Wendell Phillips to begin this address. Though he was commenting on the state of affairs in 19th – Century America, Phillips’ commentary could easily describe the current situation in 21<sup>st</sup> –Century Ghana. Indeed, the role of the Ghanaian media has gone beyond merely reporting events and facts. It has become an agenda-setting one. But which or whose agenda?

We live under two rulers – an elected government of men and the unelected one of the media. But we at The IEA would have it no other way. For as the Jeffersonian ideal goes, it is better to have a media without Government than a Government without a media. Fortunately, we in Ghana have both. Indeed, in a contest of facts or ideas between any group and the media, most people would easily side with the media. That is how powerful the media has become. But it did not come easy. It was not attained on a silver platter. It took years of hard work, struggle and pain by bodies like The IEA.

Established in 1989 as Ghana’s first Public Policy Think Tank, The IEA was in the vanguard for the practice of true media freedom. We were in the frontlines of the struggle for a media- friendly country, agreeing with the French Philosopher, Voltaire, that “I disagree with what you say but I will defend with my life, your right to say it”.

Long before it became fashionable to do so, The IEA in 1993, advocated the repeal of the Criminal Libel Law, the enactment of a Freedom of Information Act and the Whistle Blowers Act. Of course, we were called names. We were called ‘opposition intellectuals’, ‘believers in unlimited freedom’, ‘reckless libertines’ and some other choice words.

Yet through our work with eminent thinkers like Justices Hayfron-Benjamin, P.D. Anin, Professor Kofi Kumado and Mr. B. J. da Rocha, The IEA made a strong case before Committees of Parliament. Through Publications, draft Bills and sensitization workshops, we created the necessary awareness for the media freedom many now take for granted. For, we believed then, as we do now, that media freedom is indivisible from all freedoms. Thankfully, the Criminal Libel Law has been repealed, the Whistle Blowers Act is now a reality and the Freedom to Information Bill is in its final stages to become Law. So you see, The IEA was in the trenches, as usual seeing way ahead of its time.

That is why it alarms us that, either oblivious or unappreciative of the huge sacrifices made some media practitioners / houses have become a law unto themselves. There is now creeping media dictatorship. Ethics and best practices seem to have flown out the window. Truth is subjectivised and opinions have now become facts. But this is not the media freedom that we fought for. Former British politician Lord Attlee may have been exaggerating when he said “the Press lives on disaster, generally speaking” but currently, sections of our media seem to take too seriously the assertion of Marquis de Luc, that “reporting facts is the refuge of journalists who have no imagination”. A few institutional examples will do here.

Like all fields of endeavour, there are many apposite theories about the practice of journalism, one of which is that the news or the journalist only brings to the fore what is going on in society. Whilst we do not disagree with the Mirror-Theory of Journalism, as it is called, we believe that our journalists have a duty to

‘test truth, contest ideas, expose wrongs and weigh visions’, per Amua-Sekyi JSC of blessed memory, in the case of NPP v. GBC. Considering our stage of development, journalism and the media should provide vision, not engage in too many parochial agendas.

So, when a not-too-well-informed politician unfairly called us a ‘neo-colonialist organisation’ we expected the reporter who knew better to, in the words of Amua-Sekyi JSC, test this truth, contest this idea and weigh this vision. But no, it was given front-page coverage with no effort made to get our side against all journalistic ethics and the laws of natural justice.

Or take the case of some of our recently – launched draft Bills on Political Parties and Public Funding of Political Parties. Whilst we do not expect universal acclaim or total agreement for them, we expected healthy, heated, robust dialogue and debate which would inform and guide Parliamentary actions thereon. From nowhere, some of our brothers and sisters in the media called it *‘a sham’ and called for their total rejection* – without even reading the draft Bills or even giving a single reason for their saying so.

For Bills that went through extensive nationwide consultations involving huge outlays of time, money and intellectual energy, it was a slap in the face. It is easier to destroy than to build and it seems to me that the Ghanaian media are becoming the proverbial ‘demolition man’ of our Fourth Republic. Reputations and institutions have been irredeemably destroyed by the stroke of a pen or by a single sentence on air. Is this the freedom we fought, got imprisoned, called names and died for? Is this the kind of society we all want to build for future generations? Do we want to build up or tear down Ghana? If we end up alienating our friends and our natural constituents, we would wake up one day to find out that we’ve burnt all our bridges and have no advocates anymore.

But it is and has not always been doom and gloom. The media has expanded the frontiers of democracy like no other segment of society. You have upheld accountability, promoted transparency, highlighted national anomalies for corrective action, crusaded against injustice and been the voice of the otherwise voiceless. The Institute is happy to have collaborated with the media on many initiatives. In this vein, we salute all of you who have acted as the gallant heroes and defenders of Ghana’s democracy.

Surely, have strong opinions, definitely, report on the society. Of course, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, a la Wole Soyinka. But, do it with truth and objectivity.

In this election year, some politicians will be all over you – with the inflammatory, divisive speech and the melodramatic behaviour. In as much as we share their convictions politicians must be circumspect in their utterances and actions. There is only Ghana.

Let us use this workshop to sharpen our perspectives, forge alliances and renew our commitment to Ghana before and after elections.

We hope not for a situation where journalists will act as agent provocateurs and provide a staging post for parochial interests, a la the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda or Nigeria (during the Biafra war)

As we prepare for the 2008 General Elections, let us all be conversant with our duties as set out in Article 162 of the 1992 Constitution which provides inter alia that the practice of journalism is “subject to laws that are reasonably required in the interest of national security, public order, public morality and for the purpose of protecting the reputations, rights and freedoms of other persons” Ghana can only be the better for it.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for your attention and wish you fruitful discussions, dialogue and debate.

Thank you