

PRESS RELEASE

31st March 2006

The IMC wishes to condemn the article titled “Beware Bernadette” published in *For di People* newspaper of March 30, 2006, as it smacks of blatant contempt and disrespect not only for the leadership of the Commission, but for the Commission as a whole.

Constant reference to the Chairperson as “Bernadette” as if she is an obscure individual or a little girl is most unacceptable. It exposes the Office of the Chairmanship of the IMC to ridicule and erodes it of the respect and deference that it deserves.

The Editor of *For Di People* is apparently perturbed at the outcome of the nationwide consultation on the repeal of the defamation and seditious libel laws. Unfortunately, his diatribe has not helped the situation as it has angered a good many people including those journalists that are making strenuous effort to bring sanity to the profession which might help to change the negative image of the media.

One expects that the Editor of *For Di People* would contribute to the debate on the issue by developing intelligible, well researched and high quality articles full of convincing reasons on why the laws should be changed.

Instead, he chose to attack the personality of the Chairperson of the IMC, her husband and the Commissioners through insults, false statements and inaccuracies, some of which are clearly libellous.

In the first place, the nationwide consultation tour on the repeal of the defamation and seditious libel laws described by the Editor of *For Di People* as “Mrs. Cole’s tour” is a figment of his imagination. The tour was undertaken not by Mrs. Cole but by SLAJ, of which the Editor of *For Di People* is a member and the IMC after the two parties had carefully reviewed the whole concept and implications of the repeal at a special joint IMC/SLAJ Repeal Committee set up by the IMC to enable both parties work jointly on this issue.

The insinuation of the Editor that the law was twisted in Mrs. Cole’s favour so that she can “chop in two places at the University and the IMC” is not only contemptuous of Parliament but of also libellous. Parliament comprises of honourable men and women who make laws and amend them according to the prevailing circumstances. The truth of the matter is that other laws setting up boards and commissions make provision for a “Chairman”. Unfortunately, the drafters of the IMC Act 2000 inadvertently added the words “full time” to the status of the Chairman, which caused a lot of confusion within the IMC during its teething years. To correct this anomaly, Parliament having reviewed the prevailing circumstances decided in its wisdom to amend the law, not to suit an individual, but for anyone who takes on the Chairmanship.

It may interest the Editor to learn that Mrs. Bernadette Cole took on the Chairperson of the IMC on the nomination of SLAJ and appointment by the President not “to chop in two places” but to assist with media development in this country. Since she took up office in February 2005, she has refused to take all allowances and other fringe benefits due her as Head of the Commission. Even when she fell ill and was admitted at Netland hospital last year, and the Board of the IMC offered to assist her with her medical bills, she refused to accept the gesture.

Mrs. Cole makes extensive mobile phone calls to consult now and again with the Commissioners and to get things done for the Commission without ever asking for a single top up card, not to talk of the use of her personal vehicle for IMC business as there was no official vehicle at the Commission when she took up office. She does all these things including giving quality leadership and direction to the work of the IMC which effort has changed the image of the Commission, because of her patriotism and commitment to media development. It is well known that certain people take up positions to chop money. Mrs. Cole, however comes from a decent and respectable gene which has never been out to “chop”.

There are several Sierra Leoneans of impeccable record who would like to serve, but keep back because of the pull him/her down nature of some sections of the media and lack of deference as soon as one assumes high office.

The IMC notes with regret that *For Di People* does not seem to understand the mandate and role of the Independent Media Commission.

The Commission was set up not only to safeguard the interest of journalists, but also to protect the rights and privileges of the citizenry against undue abuse by the media. Any laws therefore that impinge on the rights of journalists as well as the citizens themselves must be openly debated with a view to arriving at a consensus. This is what democracy is all about. Consultation and consensus are key to the maintenance of an open society and good governance. As the President of SLAJ has said “we must respect the will of the people”.

The leadership of SLAJ and the IMC have been doing all they can to bring sanity and decorum to the profession by taking up the challenges of press freedom with all its ramifications. What the media is expected to do now is to provide a platform for further debate on this very important issue of repeal of the defamation and seditious libel laws to get the public on their side to have the laws repealed. This cannot be achieved by throwing invectives and insults at the IMC and its leadership or at the leadership of SLAJ.

The IMC wishes to inform the Editor of *For di People* newspaper that its doors are open to him for consultation at any time for information on any issue pertaining to the work of the IMC and its Commissioners. It operates an administration that is very open and the records are there to be examined by any journalist who desires to seek any information he may need. It will however not tolerate the publication of aspersions and derogatory

articles calculated to defame the character of the leadership and Commissioners. The Editor will do well to concentrate on “issues”. He has been warned.

Commissioner Bernadette P. Cole	-	Chairperson
Commissioner Ade P. Bell	-	Member
Commissioner Anthony Brewah	-	Member
Commissioner Cassandra Davies	-	Member
Commissioner Francis L. Davies	-	Member
Commissioner Christo Johnson	-	Member
Commissioner Dr. Abu Bakarr Kargbo	-	Member
Commissioner Patricia Macauley	-	Member