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I am delighted to be here this morning at the start of this very important Conference. As you have heard, I am Chairman of the Commonwealth Press Union Media Trust – and my fellow Trustees, including Patsy Robertson who is here today, and I are very pleased to be able to support this initiative.

Many of you will know about the CPU. For very nearly a century, from its formation as the Empire Press Union in 1908, the CPU – like so many other Commonwealth institutions – played an important global role, fighting for press freedom. Because of the enormous commercial pressures on the media – with which you will all be familiar – we ceased to operate as a full time organisation in 2008; but the CPU Media Trust took over the reins as best it could, and today we operate as a virtual entity, with no full time staff or organisation, keeping alive the flame of the never-ending battle to protect and enhance media freedom throughout the Commonwealth.

I'd like to congratulate the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, the CJA and SOAS on putting this Conference together. I know what hard work it is to produce an event such as this, and how few are the tireless shoulders on which the burden falls. But it is vital that events like this do continue to take place so that we can keep the spotlight on the crucial issues of free and independent media that are absolutely central to the future development and prosperity of all Commonwealth countries.

It is, of course, one of the great ironies of our times here in the UK that while the Commonwealth was largely ignored for many years both by politicians and most people in the media, it is now hailed as central to our destiny and economic success in the post-Brexit world. How I wish that many of those who suddenly see our salvation in trade with the Commonwealth had paid the slightest bit of attention to it before!

The truth is that we have a lot of ground to make up, and a lot of fences to mend. For years, the Commonwealth was – in my view – seen largely as an inconvenience at

best, an irrelevance at worst. Crucial relationships were neglected, funding for Commonwealth institutions and organisations – the CPU included – dried up, education about the Commonwealth became non-existent, and in effect we turned our back on vital global alliances.

And in turn, if we are honest, Commonwealth countries – sensing that – moved away from Britain, seeking new trading partners and allies, and often finding that in a new economic power – China. Of course, there have been some important initiatives to try to tackle this issue head on such as the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council, which is doing vital work. But those who think we can make up for years of neglect and indifference simply with platitudes and wishful thinking may find they have a rude awakening.

Of course, as we now – some may say history is repeating itself - turn our backs on our European partners, just as we did with the Commonwealth, there will be a surge of interest in new global trade deals with countries and cultures we've ignored in the past.

And there is something else we've brushed under the carpet in the past, and can do so on longer, which is that the Commonwealth faces incredibly tough challenges – in terms of leadership, of economic development, of the fundamental principles of good governance, of basic human rights and of living up to the noble terms of the Commonwealth Charter.

If we are serious about our long term trading prospects with the Commonwealth, then we have to get serious about these issues, too – and today's issue, media freedom, is one that lies at the very heart of it all.

A few years ago, the UK Government launched its "Building Stability Overseas Strategy." It had a great deal of importance to say about "helping to build strong, legitimate institutions and robust societies ... that are capable of managing tensions and shocks so there is a lower likelihood of instability and conflict." The strategy identified what it called a "web of institutions" that provide the basis of trust and confidence in society – the police, legal and judicial systems, banks, religious and civil society groups – which are needed for a country to prosper. It noted how corruption and bad governance needed to be rooted out – not least because that was a precursor to economic growth.

Central to the achievement of all those goals, in my view, is recognising the role in a stable society of a free and independent media – and that’s one of the points I want to highlight today. Free media is not just a desirable end in itself – it’s not just a totemic thing – it’s an instrument of development and economic progress.

A report from UNESCO in 2008 – *Press Freedom and Development* – highlighted in a very cogent way the correlation between media freedom and economic and social progress. It noted, for instance, how no country has both a free press and a very large percentage of its population living below the poverty line, how life expectancy improves as governance does and how media freedom makes it more likely that effective public health policies – in areas such as HIV/AIDS, for example – will be introduced. It points to the way in which increased media freedom and economic progress have gone hand in hand in Ghana, where the independent media now has its freedoms enshrined in the constitution, and Kenya where the free media has played a crucial role in improving environmental conservation and women’s rights.

And the reason for that is that a media that is free and robust – such as in India, Botswana, Kenya and the Caribbean island states – effectively calls Government to account. A free press never coexists with the corruption and bad governance which hampers economic development, undermines political institutions and fuels the grievances of an impoverished population. At its bluntest and crudest level, you will never find famine in a country with independent media, a point made famously by the Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen, back in 1994.

State-run media, with criminal sanctions and statutory controls on content, with journalists often cowed by the threat of jail, always end up doing a Government’s bidding. In much of sub Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia and Eritrea, where economic and social progress has been slowest, that means in practice the propagation of misinformation campaigns through which the population is often actively misled about subjects of major importance. There could be no better or more tragic example of this than the failed state of Zimbabwe - where the Government holds a vice-like grip on all information, with grave consequences for public health - which means that life expectancy is now less than 35 years (about the same level it was here in the UK in 1815). Press freedom is about more than good governance, it can also be a matter of life and death.

That is one of the reasons why I am continually frustrated that media freedom and the positive role that free independent media in print, on radio and broadcast, is not given a greater priority in the formation of policy – because it should be the foundation stone on which all other progress, from women’s rights to environmental protection, from improving infant mortality to tackling HIV/AIDS, is based. It barely gets a look into the Millennium Development Goals. The *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* I mentioned earlier ignores it completely other than (quite rightly) highlighting the work of the BBC World Service; and there is of course a commitment, more honoured in the breach than the observance, to “open dialogue and the free flow of information, including through a free and responsible media” in the Commonwealth Charter.

The fundamental truth is that peaceful political systems, where differences are managed, where change is accommodated and which develop economically and socially, are *accountable*, and everyone has a voice. Only an independent media free of state controls can provide the cement that holds these bonds together and fuel the engine of accountability.

Yet in too many parts of the world, including the Commonwealth, press freedom is under greater pressure than ever. Less than 15% of the world’s population enjoys the benefits of a free press – where coverage of political news is robust, the safety of journalists is protected, state intrusion is minimal, self regulation is the norm, and the press is not subject to special and onerous regimes. According to *Reporters Sans Frontieres*, press freedom in 2015 was at its lowest point in twelve years as a result of a growing climate of fear and Government crackdowns on newsrooms and independent journalism.

Yes, there are some bright spots in the Commonwealth – with real progress in places like Sri Lanka, thanks to the courageous and steadfast campaign the press there has fought, Fiji, where the media has robustly asserted its independence, Samoa, where the Media Council law adopted only a couple of years ago decriminalised defamation, and Tonga. But in many other places – from Singapore to Rwanda – the press is tamed and bullied and the safety of journalists, including in countries across south Asia such as Bangladesh, is constantly in jeopardy.

I have spent most of my career fighting for press freedom – in the UK, in the Commonwealth and at a European level – and I know there is no magic wand that can be waved to transform this situation.

But there are things that can be done if the leadership of the Commonwealth embraces a real agenda for change – and I would identify four.

First, at a practical level, we must invest more in the training of journalists working with established in-country training institutions with experienced media organisations at an international level lending their advice and expertise. Training is crucial if media freedom is to take root.

Second, again at a practical level, I believe we should be encouraging women to play a more active role in the media across the Commonwealth. All the evidence points to the key role of women in achieving stability in societies – the precursor to growth and trade – and there could be no better way to enhance that than to make sure they have an active voice in independent media.

Third, and this is a much more difficult long-term goal, we must ensure the removal of barriers to the development of free media from licensing systems, statutory controls, sedition laws, anti-terrorist legislation and criminal penalties as well as building access to information through freedom of information laws. Criminal defamation is still by far the biggest chilling factor for independent journalism. Yes, there has been progress over the last fifteen years – with Ghana showing the way, then Sri Lanka and Samoa, and just recently Kenya's High Court, in a very welcome intervention, declared criminal defamation as "unconstitutional." But there is a long way to go before this blight on the Commonwealth's media – a horrible hangover from the colonial period, like a number of other odious laws – is completely eradicated.

Fourth, and again this is a difficult question which requires real leadership, we must do much more to ensure the safety of journalists in many Commonwealth countries. You can only have a free media if journalists can go about their work free from the fear of intimidation, harassment, physical assault and sometimes murder. The problems of safety in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in particular are still very acute and harassment and intimidation are too much a part of daily life for journalists there. Much more needs to be done to crack down on those who perpetrate these crimes – which are not just crimes against individuals but against democracy itself.

So there are four areas where I believe we must make progress if we are to protect and enhance the independent media throughout the Commonwealth, and indeed in the rest of the developing world.

But, ladies and gentlemen, I am aware that there is a very large elephant sitting in this room. Because it's all very well for me to stand here and talk about the importance of press freedom and its vital role in a democratic, stable, pluralistic society – when we are currently facing in the UK one of the most serious Government assaults on a free press that has been seen anywhere in the free world. Indeed, this attack on independent journalism – known by the Orwellian sounding name of “Section 40” – would make many a dictator blush.

“Section 40” – for those of you who are not aware of it – is a law that was rushed onto the statute book, in the days after the disastrous Leveson Inquiry, in a manner which makes a mockery of Parliamentary scrutiny. There was no debate about it, no consultation, no scrutiny of the impact – politicians of all parties were simply falling over themselves in a blood lust to punish the press.

Under this law, newspapers and magazines which do not submit to a state-controlled system of regulation – something which is completely alien to any concept of a free press – will have to pay the entire costs of a legal action for defamation, privacy or harassment even if the person taking the action is proven to be a liar and the newspaper is vindicated. That means a newspaper may sometimes face a bill running into many hundreds of thousands of pounds simply for telling the truth. That is the punishment that is being meted out to us for refusing to submit to state controls.

I hardly need tell you the disastrous consequences of that for an industry facing the harshest of commercial environments: lost jobs, lost investment, less public interest reporting and fewer investigations. In some cases, I am sure that titles will close, and probably some publishers. It is an appalling prospect – and it is happening right here in the country where the free press was born.

At the moment, the Government is consulting on whether or not to go ahead with this draconian legislation – and a decision is not expected later this year. But it seems to me that one of the things that the Government must take into account – a point put to them forcibly by the CPU and many other international organisations – is what the impact of Section 40 would be beyond our own shores.

There are many Governments – and we have seen the chilling echoes of it already in a number of countries, including Sri Lanka – who would be happy to copy what has happened here knowing that we would be powerless to do anything about it. That is a deeply alarming prospect when we should be taking the issues of free expression and fundamental human rights in the Commonwealth far more seriously than we have ever done before - because now our economic and commercial future, and our prosperity, will depend on it.

If people are serious about making Brexit a success, then they have to be serious about the future of the Commonwealth. And that in turn means being serious about the foundations for prosperity and trade of which free media is the essential prerequisite. On that, the UK and the Commonwealth need to show real leadership – but that seems impossible to me while our own house does not stand in order.

So while I set out today a number of things which clearly need to happen if we are to achieve free media and good governance in the Commonwealth, my message is also to my own Government – that this must start at home. If we are to take a lead – as I believe we should – in bringing about a real and lasting expansion in freedom of expression throughout the Commonwealth, we have to start here. And start now.