

SCOTLAND SETS THE PACE

Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, November 2001

Civic and university initiatives heighten media's role

ABERDEEN – Capital of North Sea Oil

University vice chancellors and heads of department joined with Lord Provosts, civic leaders and sections of the Christian Socialist Movement to host a series of events on The Impact of the Media on Society, in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In each case there was a meeting on the university campuses for students and staff from the media departments. The International Communications Forum was invited to provide the speakers for these occasions and they included Martyn Lewis, former TV national news presenter, Magnus Linklater, feature writer for The Times and until recently Chairman of the Scottish Arts Council, Bernard Margueritte, Senior Correspondent in Warsaw for the French media and President of the ICF; Faustina Starrett, Media & Communications Coordinator for the North West Institute in Londonderry; and William Porter, publisher and Founder President of the ICF.

In Aberdeen there was a reception at the Civic Centre hosted by Councillor Len Ironside, Leader of the Labour Group, and a symposium at the Hilton Treetops Hotel welcomed by the Lord Provost, Dr Margaret Smith JP. The ICF visitors were received by Derek Tucker, Editor of the *Press and Journal*, Aberdeen's morning paper with the fifth largest circulation of British regional dailies. In Edinburgh a forum at Napier University's media department was followed by a public meeting organised by the Christian Socialist Movement. In Glasgow, after a media forum at Caledonian University, the Lord Provost hosted a dinner in the City Chambers. Lively discussions followed the different events, which reflected the general concern about the changed world scene, following the tragedy of 11 September and the more local issue of the resignation of Scotland's First Minister. There was no doubt among the audiences that the media had much to answer for in their effect on the behaviour of society, but that they could play a positive role by giving honest information and reporting on answers as well as problems. *The Sarajevo Commitment*, an international statement on media values published by the ICF in 2000, played a central part in the presentations. Aberdeen's Lord Provost saw it as an example of best journalistic practice. 'It defined the media's true role of public service,' she said. Each participant received a copy of the Commitment and it was signed by many involved with the media. The visit was a deep experience for those who came from other parts of the world. Bernard Margueritte, France, called for a renewal of the spirit of the 'Auld Alliance', saying that his country and Scotland should demonstrate and proclaim human, social and spiritual values to the rest of Europe. Those who came from Northern Ireland hoped that their country could find the unity and strength of Scottish civic life. This initiative from Scottish cities could provide a model for similar actions in other cities.

Dr Margaret Smith JP, the Lord Provost, opened the all-day Aberdeen Seminar on The Impact of the Media on Society, 3rd November, before a paying audience of Town and

Gown from this most prosperous city in Britain. She welcomed the visiting team from the International Communications Forum on behalf of the City Council and the people of Aberdeen. 'Today's discussion,' she said, 'is long overdue. There is no doubt as to the power of the media, but as to the merit of their performance, everyone has their own views. I remember my shock when in 1996 I asked a group of media representatives if they saw them-selves as having a leadership role and they answered no. The opposite view is shown in the ICF's Sarajevo Commitment as a statement of best practice and beyond that of service to the community.' She commended the Commitment for its honesty, humility and constructiveness and, as an English teacher, praised 'the excellence of its expression, the beauty of its language which has the power to form people's ideas.' At an evening reception in the panelled main hall of the Town House for an invited audience of Aberdeen's civic, university and business leadership, Councillor Len Ironside, political veteran and leader of the Labour Group, spoke of the talented people working in the local media. He believed that the media had become more powerful than the democratically elected leaders, who now tended to follow a media-driven agenda rather than their own true convictions. Regretfully the passion was going out of politics but nevertheless Aberdeen's Council had a good record of providing public services and of helping to create a vibrant economy, with the very low unemployment rate of 1.8 per cent. The morning sessions of the main symposium were chaired by David Capitanchik of Robert Gordon University, an expert on the Middle East, and the afternoon sessions by David Haggart, broadcaster and columnist. Syndicate groups dealt with the subjects of: The Impact of the Media on Society; Creating a Climate of Confidence in the Media; Does the Media lead or follow public opinion?; and The Sarajevo Vision. The rapporteurs were from the School of Information and Media, led by their head, Ian Johnson. Martyn Lewis's talks were well reported in the Press and Journal with the headlines, 'Media man Martyn's message makes news', and 'Media should make more of good news, top journalist tells students.' He was quoted as saying, 'The media should be more aware of how it shapes and changes the world, and should focus on the positive aspects of stories with just as much emphasis as the negative aspects. Achievements should be covered just as much as failures. Where there is conflict, there are always people trying to end it. When things go wrong, someone is always trying to put it right.'

EDINBURGH – Hub of Scottish Politics

The classical buildings and park surroundings of Edinburgh's Napier University were the setting for a Media Forum chaired by Dr Sheila Lodge, Head of the School of Communication Arts. She referred to the support of Professor John Mavor, the Vice Chancellor. The speakers were William Porter, Bernard Marguerite, Magnus Linklater and Faustina Starrett. Faustina Starrett gripped the audience of lecturers and students with her analysis of 'Journalism in a Conflict Situation'. She thanked those of the media who stayed for over 30 years during 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland and who worked for conflict resolution, even when there was no good news to report. The local and regional press had simplified the scene into 'Two Tribes at War in a World of Ancestral Hatreds'. She quoted the writer, Polly Toynbee: 'Bad politics, not bad religion, produces terrorism.' 'Religion,' Faustina said, 'is often used to disguise very human ambitions for power. I think that the best media strives for honest and values-motivated journalism.'

And that kind of representation needs the courage and integrity to withstand criticism, especially at this time, about being unpatriotic.’ Journalism – an honourable profession Magnus Linklater, one of Scotland’s foremost journalists, said, ‘I am lucky enough to have worked for newspapers when it was a matter of pride to call oneself a journalist. Pride in being able to say that I was rarely ashamed by what I had written. Pride in working for newspapers that believed in uncovering the truth about what matters. Pride in knowing that one’s principal motivation was the value of the story, rather than the prejudices of the proprietor. But all too often today it is the tabloid press that forms the impression that many people have of journalists. The tabloids are often motivated as much by trivia and intrusion as by genuine investigation. Their combination of distortion and sensationalism has meant that the reputation of journalists has been steadily undermined. ‘That does not mean that news and entertainment are incompatible. On the contrary, unless you engage the interest and enjoyment of your audience, you will never hold it. But, in the long run, readers have to believe that what is printed in their newspapers is reliable. If that belief is steadily eroded over the years, then, when it really matters – in times of war for instance – they will look elsewhere for news they can trust. And a newspaper without readers cannot survive.’ An evening meeting at St Columba’s by the Castle was chaired by Finlay Moir, committee member of the Edinburgh Christian Socialist Movement, and attended by a representative audience of some 70 citizens.

GLASGOW – City of Culture and Commerce

On the modern campus of Glasgow Caledonian University a Media Forum was jointly hosted by the Rt Hon the Lord Provost of Glasgow, Alex Mosson, and the Vice Chancellor of the University, Dr Ian Johnston. The Lord Provost in his opening remarks said, ‘I am honoured that your forum, with its keen interest in the integrity of modern journalism, should choose Glasgow as the setting for today’s discussion. By encouraging the responsible supply of news and information, you ensure that the public can have confidence in what they read, hear and view. With the current climate of spin and counter spin, and in a world of immediate access to events, your role is of the utmost importance.’ He was backed up by Dr Ian Johnston, who chaired the forum and stayed with events through-out the day. Following the ICF speakers, the University’s spokesman was Dr David Hutchison, Senior Lecturer in the Division of Media, Language and Leisure Management. He emphasised the positive side of the media’s impact: ‘We are informed through our newspapers, magazines and current affairs broad-casts; we are educated through the news itself, natural history, science and other documentaries; and we are enriched and entertained through the arts, drama, films and music. My list of anxieties would include: the threat to pluralism of media ownership posed by concentration in a few hands; the trivialisation in parts of broadcasting and journalism; and some use of sensation and violence. But my life and that of everybody in society is immeasurably richer than it would be without the media.’ Audience at Caledonian University Dr Ian Johnston with Archie Mackenzie, former British diplomat Glasgow Caledonian University Muslim leader calls for media objectivity Earlier in the day, the visiting ICF team were received by Councillor Bashir Maan, President of the National Association of British Pakistanis, in his offices as Chair of the Strathclyde Joint Police Board. He was deeply concerned that the present war situation in Afghanistan would not

lead to a misunderstanding and even isolation of Britain's Muslim population. He affirmed that 'Islam means peace; and we British Muslims want to live in peace and harmony with our neighbours. It would be considerably more constructive for an objective media to target – and listen to – the majority, rather than to those extremists who e m b a r r a s s Muslims by their unethical extremism. The over-whelming majority of our Muslims are British. Their children are British; their allegiance is to Britain. And they will continue, proudly, to be British Muslims.' Councillor Maan was among the City's leaders who had invited the ICF speakers to Glasgow.