

**THE OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION OF THE
25TH ANNIVERSARY OF PUNCH NEWSPAPER**

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**ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY PRESIDENT OLUSEGUN OBASANJO
DELIVERED AT LAGOS ON THE OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION
OF THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF PUNCH NEWSPAPER
ON THE 10TH DAY OF NOVEMBER, 1999**

I rejoice with you on this occasion of the celebration of the 25th Anniversary of your renowned Newspaper. I congratulate you on your remarkable achievements under extremely difficult circumstances. The courage, determination and zeal which have attended your struggles are a source of inspiration to the nation. I urge not only other newspapers but also all Nigerians to follow your example. I pay tribute to all those journalists who sacrificed their liberty and their lives in order that we could live free. With the emergence of a democratic government we can be consoled that their sacrifices were not in vain. We must, however, be vigilant to protect the freedom that we have won at so high a price. We should never forget that dictatorship and corruption, when it took root in our country, did not reside in one person alone but in various individuals and departments. These forces are still very much at work to undermine and destabilize the nation. We cannot therefore afford to relax or be complacent. Greater sacrifices are called for today than ever before. We must begin to think less and less in terms of what the nation can do for us and more and more in terms of what we can do for the nation. The transformation of our country requires the joint efforts of us all. It does not depend upon the leadership alone. It does not depend upon any one community or organisation. It must be the work of every Nigerian. No nation can achieve any significant growth without the sacrifices of generations of its citizens. Elsewhere in the world men and women are daily laying down their lives for their countries. We are not called upon to lay down our lives for our country. All that we are required to do is to give up greed, to give up corruption, to live and let live.

I am committed to the restoration of rights. I am determined that the machinery of the state should no longer be used as an instrument of oppression. I shall prosecute all those who violate the rights of others. I have already begun to do so. I appeal to all those who have acquired a culture of dictatorship to give it up. We have entered a new era : the era of the rule of law. Henceforth the nation shall be ruled by law and by law alone. Executive action shall not contravene the law and no one shall be exempted from the duty of obedience of the law. I should also point out that the Federal Government shall not hesitate to declare a state of emergency in any part of the country where there is a break down of law and order and the lives of citizens are threatened.

It is a tragedy that in spite of our great human resources we have been unable to achieve greatness. Instead we set for the rest of Africa a bad example. We used our great intelligence not to build but to destroy.

I call upon every newspaper to join the crusade against corruption. For many years your energies were directed at opposing the forces that threatened to destroy our country. Now that those forces have been overcome, you must direct your energies at reconstruction and rehabilitation. I need hardly remind you that this is your government. Together we paid the price for our freedom. Together we must rebuild the nation. On your part, you cannot do so unless you practise honest and responsible journalism. You have a duty to educate and enlighten yourself. Your duty is not just to gather and disseminate news but to educate the public. Do not therefore set for the nation a bad example by disseminating falsehoods, rumours and slanders.

I expect you to call to order those members of your profession who do not abide by the ethics of your profession. The Nigerian press must re-examine itself. Elsewhere in the world the press is agitating for freedom. Here the complaint is that you are too free. The role of the African Newspaper must necessarily be different from that of its European counterpart. You must avoid those vulgar and cheap publications which tend to deculturize our people. You must avoid publications which tend to brutalize the people and habituate them to violence. Your motive must be above, profit making.

I commend the initiative which you have taken to discuss the constitution. I assure you that I will not stand in your way. On the contrary I will do everything to aid and facilitate your work. Steps shall be taken to implement your recommendation if they meet the needs of the nation. The government's commitment to the review of the Constitution was recently demonstrated by my setting up a Technical Committee of the three political parties to make proposals for a review of the Constitution.

The 1999 Constitution, defective though it may seem, must be our starting point. The 1999 Constitution is a valid existing law and we must give effect to it until we can amend it to suit our needs. Whatever we decide to do we must follow the procedure prescribed in section 9 for its amendment. Unless we use it as the basis of our attempt at inculcating a democratic culture, the exercise will become chaotic and futile.

Many reasonable people have wondered whether in the present state of the nation it can give itself a credible and lasting Constitution. We are at the point

where corruption has become a part of the culture of the people. We can never achieve our fullest potential as long as we are corrupt. Our vision has become blurred by corruption. We are in no position to look into the remote future and make laws that will not only bind this generation but also generations to come. If we let ourselves be influenced by petty ethnic or parochial considerations, and if we bring that influence to bear on the making of our Constitution, then it cannot last. The only attitude which is valid and helpful at this time is that which recognizes our brotherhood with one another. We must proceed on the basis that we are citizens of one country, children of one God and reconcile ourselves to that destiny by which we were cast together under one roof. The Constitution must be acceptable not just to one tribe or another but to the nation as a whole. It must recognize our geo-political diversities but only for the purpose of forging a strong united nation.

There have been agitations throughout the country, in the North as well as in the South, for a review of the Constitution. That is in the spirit of democracy. We are entitled to give ourselves a Constitution of our own choice—a Constitution which is a reflection of our culture and experience. Even as we do so we must not forget that there is in existence a Constitution. We must not conduct our affairs on the basis of what we think the Constitution ought to be. We must conduct it on the basis of what it is. We must avoid any conduct or utterances which are intended to undermine the peace and stability of the nation. One thing we shall not compromise—the corporate existence of the nation. To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done.

The fault is not in the Constitution but in ourselves. It lies in our refusal to respect the rights and interests of other citizens. It lies in our unwillingness to obey the law. We have to give the government a chance. I appeal for patience and understanding. We cannot solve overnight, problems which have been with the nation for over thirty years. With determination, courage and honesty, we shall succeed.

Once more, I congratulate you.

