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# A-G raises idea of press council

By LINDY COURSE

The idea of setting up a press council as a self-monitoring watchdog for the press in Hongkong was mooted by the Attorney-General, Mr Michael Thomas, yesterday.

Speaking at a lunch meeting at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, he said there had recently been reports in the press which he knew to be false.

He outlined the role of the Press Council in Britain and wondered if such a body would be set up in Hongkong to hear complaints from the public about press reports.

Speaking after the meeting, Mr Thomas said he did not think abuse by the press was as bad in Hongkong as in Britain, nor was it as prevalent, so he was not surprised there was no press council here yet.

There was no law against publishing inaccurate reports here or in Britain, but Mr Thomas told the FCC that in other parts of the world there were: in Nigeria a reporter could be jailed for two years for writing a false story.

Mr Thomas said this was a response we would all deplore, but he said there was a problem because the press had a responsibility to check out stories and not to alarm people.

"It is for the press to safeguard their freedom by trying to ensure they enjoy it honourably," he said.

He pointed out that lawyers could be disciplined by



Mr Thomas

their professional bodies and he said the Bar Association considered complaints against its members and enforced its own standards of etiquette.

He stressed that the press council should not be imposed on the press, but would be used by the industry to discipline its members.

When it comes to self-restraint and self-regulation of the press, the law has a very limited role.

He said with rival papers vying for circulation, there were temptations to publish sensational details and things that invaded people's privacy, print rumours and speculative stories.

In Britain, Mr Thomas said, chequebook journalism had offended many members of the public, particularly when large sums of money were paid to the families of murderers, while the victims'

families received nothing.

He said there were also cases of so-called exclusive interviews being made up. An England cricketer was awarded damages for libel recently because there had never been an interview.

Mr Thomas said there was no law against publishing false stories, and self-restraint by the press was the only control.

The British Press Council comprises representatives from newspapers, with an independent chairman. It receives public complaints and rules whether there are grounds for complaint and whether professional standards have been breached.

It also published guidelines on what it thought was and what was not ethical.

If a press council were set up here, Mr Thomas thought it would mean standards across the board for all newspapers.

On contempt of court, Mr Thomas said the two cases brought before the courts so far had attracted a lot of comment simply because they were the first ones to be heard for many years.

He said he was not trying to wield a big stick but the right of an individual to have a fair trial was more important than the freedom of the press.

He said trial by newspaper was to be deplored and an individual had the right to a fair trial without interference from the press.

He said he hoped the press would realise the need for restraint when it came to reporting facts which might affect a trial.