



Gerry Adams—less work for actors?

Lip service

David Miller

Just as the republic's government appears about to jettison the censorship powers in section 31 of its Broadcasting Act, the British government has instituted a review to see if its version—largely borrowed from section 31—needs tightening up.

After interviews with the Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams, on the BBC and Channel Four, the Tory MP Jill Knight last month asked the prime minister, John Major, whether the guidelines "should perhaps be revised". Mr Major replied: "I think many people felt that the [interviews] did stretch the present guidelines to the limit and perhaps beyond."

Downing Street said the prime minister had not been expecting the question and had reacted instinctively. His words appear to have come as a surprise to the Department of National Heritage: the BBC reported some Whitehall sources "dismissing them as part of the Shankill backlash".

The criticism of the interviews was that the lip synchronisation of the Sinn Féin leader's voice with the actor speaking his words was so close as to give the impression Mr Adams himself was speaking. Yet a Home Office letter to the BBC immediately after the 1988 restrictions were introduced—a letter which has no legal status but has been slavishly followed by all broadcasting organisations—said: "The Notice permits the showing of a film or still picture of the initiator

speaking the words together with a voice-over account of them, whether in paraphrase or verbatim ... Programmes involving the reconstruction of actual events, where actors use verbatim words which had been spoken in actuality, are similarly permitted."

The interviews with Mr Adams were distinctive, however, in their length and in allowing something of an exchange to develop. While routine for other politicians in Britain, such interviews have not been granted to Sinn Féin figures for the past five years. But in the context of Mr Adams' initiative with the SDLP leader, John Hume, the basics of political reporting required a glimpse of his perspective.

Even if the 'review' of the restrictions is a sham to placate Tory backbenchers, recent events are a reminder that censorship is but one weapon in the government's information management armoury. The review was accompanied by a strong British public relations offensive in the US, which appeared to bring President Clinton's public rebuke for Mr Adams and the refusal to allow him to visit the States.

This came after the exclusion order served on Mr Adams by the home secretary, Michael Howard, following an invitation from Tony Benn for him to speak in Britain. The order was disclosed at the end of October, after the Shankill bombing, but it had been served four days before it.

In the republic, the minister for the arts, Michael D Higgins, who, in opposition had supported the campaign against section 31, has indicated he is unlikely to renew it next month—spurred on by a ruling from the United Nations Human Rights Committee that the section infringes article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (*Fortnight* 320).

The lifting of section 31 would not necessarily open the door to free and fair reporting of Northern Ireland, however. RTE has submitted proposals to the minister for a tight system of 'reference upwards' to senior management for SF interviews. This is the practice which so disabled British news coverage of Northern Ireland before the broadcasting restrictions.

RTE has never had even the modest room for manoeuvre of British broadcasters. Even without section 31, little investigative broadcasting—in the style of *Death on the Rock* or the other British documentaries which helped to free the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four—is likely. ♦

Select tale

Des McCartan

The new parliamentary session at Westminster heralds the expectation, if not the firm promise, of a partial remedy for the 'democratic deficit' in Northern Ireland affairs.

Alone within the government machine, the Northern Ireland Office largely escapes backbench scrutiny in the select committees which 'shadow' departments.

The absence of a Northern Ireland select committee has become a symbolic totem. It marks unionist distaste for the 'colonial' nature of direct rule—and nationalist suspicion of an integrationist agenda.

The Northern Ireland secretary, Sir Patrick Mayhew, has used a well-tryed formula to deflect the charges by the Social Democratic and Labour party and Dublin that it is an unacceptable price for Ulster Unionist support in the vital Maastricht vote. The government, he has explained, had no principled objections to the creation of such a committee.

Until the summer, however, it was also argued that the time was not right for a move which, in any case, would require wide consent from the parties. Since, Labour and the SDLP sniff signs that the government's opposition is no longer expressed so positively. The Commons leader, Tony Newton, says the matter is under review.

Speculation about the 'understanding' between the prime minister, John Major, and the UUP leader, James Molyneaux, has reinforced a belief that the government would not stand out against a committee. But unionists insist it should not be a bargaining chip, claiming it is a justifiable right to enjoy no lesser standard of democracy than elsewhere in the UK.

Sir Patrick recently argued that the creation of a committee—a matter for the House—would not mean a constitutional earthquake. He has also pointed out that the remit of six existing select committees—agriculture, health, social security, trade and industry, defence and environment—includes the work of Stormont departments.

But, says Mr Molyneaux, there remains a significant gap in the precise accountability of the Northern Ireland Office for such issues as the

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