

The media, propaganda and the Northern Ireland peace process

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The situation in relation to freedom of expression in Northern Ireland has improved markedly as a result of the peace process. The most obvious sign of this is the lifting of the broadcasting ban on Sinn Féin and ten other organisations after the first IRA ceasefire in 1994. But there have been marked improvements elsewhere as well. One of the key limits on the freedom of expression of the British media (and in particular television) was the successful use of intimidation by successive Governments to prevent the airing of views critical of British policy in Ireland. There is a long history of such pressures which noticeably intensified in the 1980s (see Curtis, 1998; Miller, 1994, chapter 2). Following the ceasefires and the lifting of the Government broadcasting ban, the atmosphere in television, which had become freer with the peace process, moved a further step. In particular, interviews with members of the IRA were broadcast on British television for the first time since 1974 (in a programme by Ros Franey, 'Talking to the enemy': see Miller, 1995a & 1995b).

It was also noticeable that interviews with republicans became less hostile as the peace process advanced, which showed the broadcasters making at least minimal editorial changes to reflect the central role of Sinn Féin in the peace process (Lago, 1998; Miller, 1995b & 1997).

Given the changed orientations of British Government policy and the prospect of peace, there was little appetite for intimidating the media and in a way it suited the British Government that Sinn Féin should come in from the cold as part of the peace process. Furthermore, the broadcasters showed little desire to engage in previous levels of current affairs and documentary coverage. The deregulation of television has resulted in tighter budgets and less space for investigative journalism and current affairs in general. And the end of the 'war' in Northern Ireland has encouraged previously secretive activists (republicans and loyalists as well as British operatives) to start to tell their stories.

This chapter looks at developments in the coverage of the peace process and at the way in which the British Government especially has handled its information function. It begins with an account of the intensified pressures on the media in relation to secrecy and anti-terrorism legislation and moves on to examine the Northern Ireland Information Service (NIIS) and its activities.

Next it gives an account of media coverage and editorial priorities in the peace process. Finally, it raises questions about how the media and Government information services need to be reformed as part of the peace settlement.

Secrecy and anti-terrorism legislation

Despite the lack of intimidation of the media, the use of secrecy and anti-terrorism legislation against the media has intensified. There have been a fairly large number of books published since the peace process which have revealed varying details about the 'secret' or 'dirty' war in Northern Ireland. But it has been mainly those books which attempt to reveal information about abuses of the law by the intelligence services, the army and police which have found themselves on the end of court orders or attempts at suppression.

There are two important exceptions to this, both of which relate to the IRA. The killing of Eamon Collins (1997) and the shooting of Martin McGartland (1998) by republicans (if not by the IRA) may be seen as being connected with the books both men had written (and in the case of Collins, the statements they had made to the media and elsewhere). Even if these men were not targeted solely for their public statements and accounts, this was certainly related to the attacks on them.

The British Government has not generally attempted to interfere with the accounts of the activities of British informers in the republican movement (see such books as: Collins, 1997; Gilmour, 1999; McGartland, 1998 & 1999; O'Callaghan, 1999) or with accounts from former agents which have been vetted by the Ministry of Defence (such as Lewis, 1999). Instead there have been a string of cases recently which raise profound questions about freedom of expression and in particular the ability of Northern Ireland to move on and put the past behind it in a full and frank acknowledgement of the crimes of all sides in the conflict. These cases include:

- the arrest of author Tony Geraghty and one of his alleged sources in relation to his book on the troubles and the reluctance of his publisher to issue the paperback version (see Geraghty, 2000a).
- the attempt to interfere with the book written by Jack Holland (Holland and Phoenix, 1997) about the life of one of the RUC intelligence operatives killed on the Mull of Kintyre.
- the court order made against Ed Moloney (Northern Editor of the *Sunday Tribune*) in an attempt to force him to divulge his sources on collusion between the 'security services' and loyalist paramilitaries.
- the Saville inquiry's attempt to force British journalists to reveal details of sources.
- the gagging order imposed on the *Sunday Times* following its revelations about illegal burglary and arson of the Stevens inquiry premises by the

army's secret intelligence unit, the Force Research Unit (see Clarke, 1999; *Sunday Times*, 1999).

- the arrest of a person alleged to be one of Clarke's sources under the Official Secrets Act. His house was burgled and a book manuscript taken. 'The manuscript turned up a few days later in the hands of the prosecution ... when Government lawyers obtained an injunction preventing him from publishing the book' (Norton-Taylor, 2000).
- the subsequent pursuit and arrest of Liam Clarke for writing the stories (see Mullin, 2000)
- the recall and suppression of *She Who Dared*, an account by women intelligence operatives of the highly secretive 14th Intelligence Company. This occurred 'two months after the ministry itself had "cleared" (i.e. censored) the work' (Geraghty, 2000b).

All of these cases have arisen (to a greater or lesser degree) as a result of the unravelling of the Irish conflict. They have affected the full range of media—press and television as well as publishing. This is quite different to the period of heightened intimidation of broadcasters ushered in by the Thatcher Government. These cases are worrying in that there has been an increase in the resort to legal action to suppress journalistic inquiries and also because they indicate that the British State shows little willingness to acknowledge openly its own role in the 'dirty' war in Northern Ireland. The sheer number of cases relating specifically to Northern Ireland shows the increased willingness of former intelligence and security personnel to begin to variously tell 'their side' of the story and to unburden themselves of some of the more dubious activities of the British State's dirty war. But it also shows the absolute determination of the Ministry of Defence and the security apparatus to conceal past (and present) wrong-doing, from Bloody Sunday, through the policy of selective assassination known as 'shoot-to-kill', to collusion with loyalist paramilitaries. This bodes ill for the peace process and highlights the urgent need for some form of truth-and-reconciliation forum.

Furthermore, legislative developments in the area do not suggest a lessening of attempts by the state to control information about the activities of its agents. In particular, the fact that anti-terrorist legislation has not been and shows no sign of being repealed is worrying. Moreover, recent developments in relation to anti-terrorism legislation, freedom of information legislation and the proposed Bill on the Regulation of Interception and Communication indicate that the British Government is tightening the legislative controls on journalism in relation to Ireland as well as in relation to 'British' politics.

The resources and cultural power of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) Information Division vastly outstrip those of the political parties in Northern Ireland. There are concerns about how this power is used. For example, the

strategy of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) for 'selling' the Good Friday Agreement, which was leaked to the Democratic Unionist Party, shows an extensive investment in opinion polling by the Government and a highly selective approach to the release of that information. In addition, there remain worries about religious and gender imbalances in the staffing of the Information Service.

Information Service activities

The Northern Ireland Information Service (NIIS) at Stormont has a relatively good reputation for accuracy among journalists. Nevertheless, as the emergence of the peace process has shown, it is certainly more than capable of deliberately misleading journalists and the public. One has only to refer to the debacle over the secret talks with the IRA in 1993 when the Director of Information at the NIO, Andy Wood, scoffed that reports of the talks belonged 'more properly in the fantasy of spy thrillers than in real life' (McKittrick, 1993). But truth in Northern Ireland is stranger than fiction, and the story was confirmed by Sinn Féin on 15 November 1993 and shortly thereafter by the Government itself. The NIIS continues to use the full range of political PR techniques including misleading journalists and massaging information. To the best of my knowledge the NIO itself does not engage in black propaganda, although there remain a lot of spooks about on the Northern Ireland scene who are partial to the occasional bit of fabrication derived from variously reliable and less reliable intelligence reports. The best known of these during the peace process was the incident which alleged a sexual relationship between Sinn Féin's Gerry Kelly and one of Senator George Mitchell's staff. The NIO did not come out of that with a completely blot-free copybook. Rather than killing the story, the NIO, whether intentionally or not, gave it legs by issuing a half-hearted holding statement saying that 'who members of Mr Mitchell's staff met was a matter for the senator and not the NIO' (cited in O'Toole, 1997). This was seen by US Government sources and by a number of journalists as giving 'a nod and a wink' that there was some substance to the story, which there was not.

But peace has demanded a suspension of some of the wilder antics of the spooks. There is no more lying about killings as in the Gibraltar or Stalker 'shoot to kill' cases (although the case of Diarmuid O'Neill, shot by the Metropolitan Police in London in September 1996, is worrying). This is partly because the State has stopped killing people in special-forces' ambushes. Incidentally, did anyone notice that these killings stopped shortly after the British Government started the secret talks with the republican movement in the early 1990s?

This is not to say that the British Government, and in particular the Ministry of Defence and the intelligence agencies, no longer pump out misinformation.

They clearly do and much of it seems designed to undermine the peace process. This suggests that there are interests in the British State—even now—who are trying to undermine the prospect of a lasting peace deal. It is possible that on occasions such stories come from pro-unionist sources in the NIO or the Government. However, the use of British newspapers to plant stories with 'not a scintilla of truth' (in the words of Dr Martin Mansergh, special adviser to the taoiseach, cited in Cullen, 2000, in his report on the Eighth Cleraun Media Conference) does suggest the involvement of the Army, Ministry of Defence and/or MI5.

Instead, we have a much greater role for the full range of modern spin techniques. Many of these are also practised by other British Government departments and increasingly (as Seán Duignan makes clear in his book (1995) and in his address to the Seventh Cleraun Media Conference which is reproduced in Kiberd (1999)), though not to nearly the same extent, by the Irish Government.

Take the example of the referendum over the Good Friday Agreement. Northern Ireland Office (NIO) sources stated that they were neutral in the referendum. The campaign advertising produced by the NIO included the strapline 'It's *Your* Decision'. The Information Service line was:

This is what has been hammered out by your politicians around the table. This is their view of the way forward. This represents their best attempt to arrive at Government for the foreseeable future of Northern Ireland which is based on consensus and inclusion. It is really down to the people to make up their minds. (Interview with Colin Ross, NIIS, cited in Kirby, 1999: 39)

And yet, in a leaked memo, a different picture emerged of their actual strategy. As the Director of Communications, Tom Kelly, wrote:

We are embarking on what will be the most crucial election campaign in Northern Ireland's history. During the next ten weeks we need to convince the Northern Ireland public both of the importance of what is at stake, and also convince them that not only is agreement possible, but they have a vital role to play in endorsing it.

One key way in which the NIO tried to boost the campaign was by means of focus and opinion research:

A key requirement in developing our communications strategy will be a continuing flow of information about public attitudes and response. On some occasions this will be helpful to our cause and on others not so. It will be important therefore to ensure that not all of the results of opin-

ion polling, etc., will be in the public domain.

It would be open to us to encourage some degree of public opinion polling by, for example, newspapers and current affairs programmes, where we believe the results are likely to be supportive. Some of this can be encouraged during meetings and briefings of senior media people. (Kelly, 1998)

These opinion polls are still not in the public domain and Tom Kelly has refused to release them as recently as January 2000. A second example utilises a long-standing technique with a pedigree of at least thirty years—that of encouraging third-party endorsements:

We should, where possible, be enlisting the help of those people to champion our cause, e.g., Robin Eames and other church leaders, the heads of community organisations and trade unions, and other members of the G7. While any overt manipulation could be counterproductive, a carefully co-ordinated timetable of statements from these people will be helpful in giving our message credibility with those they represent. It has the added benefit of providing a fresh face for that message, and ensuring that it is not only Government which is seen to be selling the process.

While information service can do our part, it is essential that other divisions and departments use all their available contacts not only to identify suitable people, but also advise on how best to cultivate their support. Tony McCusker's office is co-ordinating a database of key movers and shakers from all sections of the community. (Kelly, 1998)

We can also note the use of the photograph on the front cover of the agreement booklet sent to every home in Northern Ireland. It showed a family on a beach bathed in a brilliant sunset. Some enterprising photographer noticed that Northern Ireland doesn't have any beaches where such a scene might have been shot and it was eventually acknowledged that the photo was taken in South Africa.

The 1997 internal review of the Northern Ireland Information Service reads very like the similar reviews carried out since Labour came to power: more co-ordination, 24-hour operation, increased strategic thinking, extensive trailing and rapid-rebuttal (NIO, 1997). However, one point to note in the current context of suspicion about the direction of British policy¹ is the way in which David Trimble has tried to use the Information Service in the cause of a

¹ As Gerry Adams put it, 'Spin-doctoring for Glengall Street (Ulster Unionist HQ) is not in Peter Mandelson's remit': "'Disgraceful Mandelson Undermined Me" Says Adams', PA, 4 February 2000.

kind of Blairite presidentialism. According to sources in the Northern Ireland Office:

When Trimble first came in, before the rest of the offices were set up, he seems to have had Government press officers writing political speeches for him and doing press releases, and that sort of set a precedent and when the other [UUP] guys came in they were looking to do the same. (Interview with the author, February 2000)

This does suggest that there may be problems ahead for the Executive, and arguments about who the Information Service is there to serve.

Patterns of employment at the NIO

Religious affiliation remains an issue in employment patterns in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. A Fair Employment Agency report concluded in 1983 that the numbers and proportions of Catholics at senior level are 'very small' (p. 13). There have been a number of controversies about religious imbalances in the Civil Service. The most recent Equal Opportunities figures reportedly show that 'Protestants still occupy four times more senior Civil Service posts than Catholics in Northern Ireland' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2000). It is clear that the recruitment pattern parallels the mindset of many NIO officials. On occasion, this can be expressed openly in what are thought to be secure conditions. Liz Drummond was Chief Press Officer at the Northern Ireland Office in London in 1982–3. She later became Director of Information at the Scottish Office, serving until the arrival of the Labour Government in 1997. She reports her first meeting with a senior member of the press office, Billy Millar, now retired. Over lunch in Belfast the conversation turned to football:

I told him my father was a professional footballer and he said 'Oh, who did he play for?' and I said 'Scotland and Glasgow Rangers', which of course meant that I was perfectly alright—I was a bluenose. He then took me back to Stormont to look at the press office and as we were approaching it he turned to me and said 'Of course, we've got two of them working here.' I said 'Two of what, Billy?', and he said 'Catholics!' and he said it with such venom I was shocked—I was appalled. I had never seen such blind prejudice. I could not believe that this man in a senior position in a responsible Civil Service job could hold that kind of view. I was a Protestant, I was a patriot, but I was so appalled ... That was a bad start, and I just hated it. There were just so many little incidents of bigotry, prejudice, ignorance, I thought I want out of it. (Interview with the author, February 1998, cited in Miller, 1998)

She lasted a year in the NIO. In the first year of the new Labour administration, three Catholics were appointed to Senior Information Officer posts. Meanwhile Andy Wood, the English-born Director of Information, was replaced by Tom Kelly, a northern Protestant. Kelly had been a former news editor at the BBC in Belfast where he was involved in a long-running dispute. According to newspaper reports, the BBC Northern Ireland NUJ chapel unanimously passed a resolution condemning Kelly's behaviour in December 1994. Five employees pursued a formal collective complaint against him, backed by the union. The BBC head of programmes did not uphold the complaint but acknowledged that employees' concerns 'highlighted problems relating to management structures and the need for proper staff appraisal' (see Walker, 1995; *Belfast Telegraph*, 1995).

By mid-1998 the proportion of Catholics at senior positions remained low, with a third of Senior Information Officers being Catholic and only one amongst the most senior eleven posts (Principal Information Officer and above). By February 2000 a new wave of promotion boards had increased the Catholics in the NIIS to three among the top eleven posts (one of whom is English), which is still an under-representation. The Information Service is required to advertise all vacancies in the press. The appointment of the Executive led to the formation of an Executive Information Service which was due to become formally separate from the NIO at the end of March 2000 (but the Executive was suspended before it happened). Each minister in the Executive has a number of press officers. In fact, almost all of the staff serving the nationalist parties were Protestant. I am not suggesting that this was either deliberate or sinister, but it is noteworthy that, according to my information, neither the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) nor Sinn Féin raised the issue of the religious composition of either their press office or Civil Service staff while the Executive was in operation up to February 2000. Also, the internal management review of the Information Service conducted in late 1997 contains nothing whatsoever about the 'representativeness' of press office staff or about how the Information Service might reshape itself in the new political environment (NIO, 1997). After the Executive was suspended in February 2000, the SDLP did raise the issue of the continued religious imbalance in the Civil Service as a whole (see *Belfast Telegraph*, 2000).

Furthermore, it is also apparent that the Information Service had to confront issues relating to gender. Indeed, one serving member of the service has written publicly about the matter. Maggie Stanfield is the editor of the NIO's glossy magazine *Omnibus*. Writing in *Fortnight*, she noted the experience of working in the Information Service under its former head, Andy Wood:

The day after I joined the Northern Ireland Office in 1989, my new boss cadged a lift from me. He loathed driving and would do anything

to avoid it. As he got into the car, I moved Roger Hargreaves' 'Mr. Happy' and a four-inch long Ferrari Testarossa off the seat. 'Got a youngster, have you?' It might have been an entirely innocent enquiry, but it sounded faintly accusing. 'Er, yes, just the one,' I responded apologetically. 'You're not married, are you?' I began to feel angry and embarrassed in roughly equal proportions. (Stanfield, 1999)

She decided to study the proportion of women in senior positions in the entire Civil Service:

By the time I arrived at the NIO, I knew that there was a certain predisposition about women on the front line. There were some 20 press officers employed at my grade and the grade above. There were no women at the upper grade and just four of us on the lower one ... More than half the people who joined the NICS (Northern Ireland Civil Service) in 1997 were women (56% of the 650 appointments to the general service grades), yet only 13.6% of those at Grade 7 and above are women. Dr Henrietta Campbell, the Chief Medical Officer, obviously a specialist, is the most senior female civil servant in Northern Ireland. At Assistant Secretary and above, women make up just 9.3%. When it comes to the Big-Money Posts advertised by the Civil Service Commission; heads of agencies like construction or engineering; head of something like the IDB (Industrial Development Board) or the Housing Executive; head of the Northern Ireland Information Service: of the 20 appointments made last year, not one was a woman. We have yet to see a female Permanent Secretary or Head of the NI Civil Service.²

In Stanfield's view, gender under-representation is a consequence of deep-rooted attitudes:

The problem is not in the structures. The problem is in the internalised attitudes of men bred upon the Ulster theology: women exist to service the needs of their men-folk. If they insist on trying to compete against men in the job market, then they must accept that they start at a congenital disadvantage. Men do not cast themselves as knights in shining armour out to improve the lot of women. They are conspicuously unchauvinistic at that level. What men are doing is sustaining the disadvantage.

² The first woman Permanent Secretary has now been appointed.

The issue of continued imbalance in the religious makeup of the Information Service and the Civil Service as a whole clearly needs acknowledgement and remedy for there to be a just and lasting peace. If 'Northern Ireland' is to move away from the 'big boys' rules' of the past, there is also a serious need to tackle gender imbalance in the Civil Service.

Self-censorship and media bias

Concerns about media self-censorship have subsided somewhat since the lifting of the broadcasting ban and the decline of Government intimidation. Furthermore, the broadcasting institutions in Northern Ireland and in Britain have reoriented their coverage of Northern Ireland as a result of the progress of the peace process. In particular, there has been a less hostile approach to interviewing Sinn Féin (Lago, 1998). However, the broadcasting institutions still find it difficult to deal with republican representatives and views. In particular, there has been very little public debate or evidence of internal debate on how the broadcasters might facilitate peace by changing both their reporting guidelines and practice and their recruitment procedures.

There is evidence that British television reporting has been overly reliant on Governmental statements and briefings in the peace process (Miller and McLaughlin, 1996). Television journalists found it exceptionally hard to acknowledge that they had been misled by the Government over the denial of secret talks with the republicans in 1993. Even after Sir Patrick Mayhew acknowledged the contacts, TV news continued to report Government statements as truthful. For example, the BBC reported that while some of the oral messages exchanged 'may be open to question ... we must accept the Government version' (*Newsnight*, 29 November 1993). In fact, the Government version was false and they were forced to change crucial passages in their own documentation to correct 'typographical errors'. As even the *Sunday Telegraph* acknowledged: 'Perhaps the strangest consequence of the process has been that the IRA have now become more believable than the Government' (5 December 1993).

Even then, the Government still maintained a high level of credibility for TV news, and official briefings continued to structure news bulletins. One example is Sinn Féin's request for clarification of the Downing Street declaration. For five months, Ministers repeatedly refused clarification. When they eventually gave it, they referred to "commentary", "elucidation" or "explanation", and British officials tried to play down the response by suggesting that only one of Sinn Féin's questions warranted explanation. BBC news dutifully played along with this line, reporting 'the Northern Ireland Secretary had clarified one point only' (2100 19 May 1994). In fact the Government response ran to 21 pages and included several new departures.

In addition the BBC has come under some criticism for its reporting of the

Orange Order disturbances at Drumcree and elsewhere. In particular, there is a tendency to treat Orange parades as matters of either cultural expression or as the focus of disputes, rather than as expressions of dominance. The key problem is that the view of Orangeism as fundamentally sectarian is extremely rarely reported and explained—far less endorsed—by British broadcasters, while the other views are.

This is especially clear during the marching season in the three-way confrontations between local nationalists, the Orange Order and the RUC. The examples below are from coverage of the marches in 1995.

Television news showed a tendency to contextualise the demonstrations as quaint, somehow absurd traditions to which there could be no serious objection, except, perhaps, from people with strong (nationalist) political views. Thus the BBC endorsed the Orange argument by reporting that they were 'insisting on their right to march a traditional route' (BBC1 2100 10 July 1995). However, as David Sharrock of the *Guardian* put it: 'It is no longer enough to assert that a march should pass through a certain area simply because it has done so for the last 188 years and disregard the views of a local population which has changed radically over that period' (12 July 1995).

ITN were anxious to point out that the 'Orangemen' on the Ormeau Road were 'marching with their wives and families' (ITN 2200 12 July 1995). In such a scenario, it is very difficult to understand why ordinary nationalists might object to, or be afraid of, a carnival-like family procession passing through their streets. ITN made no mention of the sectarian killing of five Catholics at an Ormeau Road betting shop which have made the Orange marches there so sensitive.

As Pamela Clayton shows in her meticulous *Enemies and Passing Friends: Settler ideologies in twentieth century Ulster* (1996), the 'settler' ideologies of Ulster Loyalism, suffused with sectarianism and even racism, have altered little in the course of the twentieth century. Yet such perspectives continue to be marginalised by television news. The closest the BBC got was a reference to the potential of Orange marches to turn into a 'symbol of dominance' (10 July 1995).

The impulse to explain Orange demonstrations as 'tradition' contrasts with a reticence to describe nationalist objections in a similar way. However, when it comes to a clash between the Orange Order and the RUC, there is little contest. Apart from minority news programmes, television news journalists are with the police. An extraordinary example of this occurred during the Portadown stand-off in the run up to the 12th of July parades. As the police and demonstrators squared up to one another for a second night, the RUC fired plastic bullets at the crowd. At the scene, the BBC's reporter opined that the

confrontation must be serious because 'the RUC fire plastic bullets only when things are getting quite serious' (BBC1 2100 10 July 1995). Such a view is consistent with the view of the RUC press office but scarcely tells the entire story. Plastic and rubber bullets fired by the police and army have killed 16 people in the past 30 years. In many of these cases, eyewitness accounts suggest either that no confrontation existed or that the victim was not involved (Curtis, 1982).

On the twelfth of July itself, *Channel Four News*, alone on British TV, reported the RUC as arriving on the Ormeau Road at 6am and 'beating residents into the side streets then sealing them off. Several people said they were injured by policemen ... at least four went to hospital.' In stark contrast, both BBC and ITN reports blamed nationalists for outbreaks of violence and neglected to report the RUC violence. The BBC said that 'bottles were thrown' by Catholics but that 'generally the day passed off peacefully' (2100 12 July 1995). Meanwhile, ITN had the police 'trying to keep the sides apart' (1740 12 July 1995).

Such problems with reporting have not gone away in the past five years. In 1998, the *Irish News* published an impassioned front page editorial criticising the BBC coverage of the issue, together with complaints when the BBC broadcast the Orange Order marches live on the twelfth of July (see 'Our leaders have failed us', *Irish News*, 9 July 1998; Liz Trainor and Seamus McKinney, 'Fury over parades coverage by BBC', *Irish News*, 14 July 1998). The BBC justified the broadcast, arguing that 'there is considerable interest in Northern Ireland in live coverage of this event as demonstrated by the high audience figures each year'. This does show a remarkable lack of understanding about the impact of the marches on Catholics in Northern Ireland, and very little rethinking in the BBC on how editorial policy might change with the peace process.

There has been an extensive debate in Northern Ireland about the reforms needed to make the RUC acceptable to all of the community. Yet, strangely, there has been no similar debate about how the BBC and other broadcasters need to change. Is it necessary for the BBC, for example, to change its name to become the Northern Ireland Broadcasting Corporation? Certainly there is a need for the BBC, UTV, ITN and other broadcasters to take stock of how their reporting may be damaging the movement towards peace by acting as if they were still in a war situation. During the war, broadcasters stated unambiguously that they were on the side of the State. But now, in the new circumstances of peace, there has been no repudiation of such institutionalised bias. As a result, some editorial judgements reveal a reflex hostility towards Irish nationalism and republicanism. Thus the complaint by Coiste na n-Iarchimí about the refusal of BBC Northern Ireland to broadcast interviews with their members who are former prisoners. Despite their being released under the Good Friday Agreement and being interviewed as part of the launch of Coiste na n-Iarchimí

(which aims to reintegrate republican ex-prisoners), the interviews were pulled. The BBC argued that since one of the interviewees had been convicted of murder and the BBC had no time to contact the family of the victim, the interview could not be shown. The BBC cited a section of their producers' guidelines on interviewing criminals as authority for this, thus neglecting the differences recognised in the Good Friday Agreement between ordinary criminals and political prisoners (see Ritchie, 2000).

Furthermore, the BBC has not taken similar precautions when it has interviewed British Army 'criminals'. For example, the BBC did interview Private Lee Clegg (a British soldier convicted of the murder of an Irish civilian) on his release from prison. The interview was broadcast on the BBC network news (2100 27 February 1998) and on the regional news in the northeast of England (*Look North*, early evening, 27 February 1998). My understanding is that the BBC did not specifically contact the family of Clegg's victim, Karen Reilly, to let them know about this. The BBC in Northern Ireland have stated (letter to the author from Andrew Coleman, Head of News and Current Affairs, 13 September 1999) that Clegg was not interviewed on BBC Northern Ireland and that 'it was, in any event, our practice to contact the relatives of Karen Reilly to seek their reaction to developments in the case'. But contacting the family to comment on the case is quite different to contacting the family to warn them of the interview. It does seem that there is the potential for a double standard operating here.

What should happen next?

The road ahead is not going to be an easy one, but a useful starting point is the report of the UN Special Rapporteur, Abid Hussain (2000), on freedom of expression. His report, which seems not to have been noticed by many in the British or Irish media, makes sweeping recommendations about reforming current legislation and practice. The report breaks new ground in calling for the repeal of emergency legislation on the grounds that it infringes freedom of expression. Also, for the first time, it calls for broadcasters to improve their coverage of Northern Ireland. In a wide-ranging report, the Special Rapporteur calls for the:

- repeal of all emergency laws not in accordance with international treaties and 'in particular ... the Prevention of Terrorism Act which has a chilling effect' on freedom of expression and opinion
- reform of the Official Secrets Act to allow a public interest defence
- narrowing of the scope of the Regulation of Interception and Communication Bill
- review of the Freedom of Information Bill to limit the scope of class exemptions and enhance the powers of the Information Commissioner.

The report calls for the Government to 'disclose information to the victims of the conflict ... to a maximum extent', including publishing the Stalker/Sampson and Stevens inquiries on 'shoot-to-kill' and security force collusion. The report notes the strong reasons for setting up a South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission (as suggested by others, including Rolston, 1996). We noted above the apparent campaign by the Ministry of Defence to obscure its misdeeds in the conflict. It is difficult to think of any other means by which such information can be brought to light other than by a formal inquiry or commission with full powers of disclosure.

If Northern Ireland is to move to an open and inclusive system of Government, and if peace is to be entrenched, there will be a need to reform the information function of the NIO. In particular, there needs to be an open and free debate on the extent to which Whitehall spin is justifiable, especially in the context of a fragile peace, and there needs to be serious reform of the staffing of the NIIS to deal with sectarianism and gender imbalance.

In an unusual move, the UN Special Rapporteur criticised the BBC and other broadcasters for their reporting of the peace process: 'Further efforts should be made to improve the media tone and attitude towards Northern Ireland ... the BBC and other broadcasters [should] re-evaluate their guidelines'. The report cites the refusal of the BBC to broadcast interviews it conducted with members of the republican ex-prisoners group discussed above. The BBC's reliance on its guidelines on interviews with criminals as a justification was dismissed by the UN Special Rapporteur as 'creating a confusion between political prisoners and ordinary criminals'.

The BBC, and for that matter UTV, should be considering ways in which they can make sure that sectarian imbalances in staffing are corrected. Such rethinking should also include finding ways to contribute to the reintegration into public life of the participants in the conflict, including ex-prisoners. Furthermore, the broadcasters should take steps to ensure that ex-combatants and former prisoners are not discriminated against in applying for jobs in media organisations.

There is some evidence that some minor changes have occurred at the BBC, but not at UTV or the Independent Television Commission. These can be found in the most recent versions of their producers' guidelines and in the BBC report, *The Changing UK* (1999). Here, for the first time, the BBC notes that 'while interviewees may refer to Northern Ireland as Ulster, our journalists should not use Ulster as a synonym. (Ulster is one of the four provinces of Ireland. It consists of nine counties—the six in Northern Ireland and three in the Republic of Ireland)' (BBC, 1998, chapter 19). Previously, the 1993 *Style Guide* had allowed the use of the term: 'It is acceptable to call it "Ulster" (though not in the first instance) but never "the six counties"' (BBC 1993). A further shift in emphasis is the move from saying that people in Northern Ireland are 'entitled'

(BBC, 1993) to regard themselves as British to a more neutral description: that while some people 'regard themselves as British others regard themselves as Irish' (BBC, 1999: 14). Overall, this is a shift of emphasis which is very much in line with Government thinking on the topic, treating both 'sides' equally and neglecting the role of Britain in the conflict.

But there has been no acknowledgement of past errors, nor have the guidelines governing coverage changed adequately to reflect the peace process. In addition, the BBC's structural unionism (it is the British Broadcasting Corporation) also hampers the development of adequate news coverage.

Finally, there is a need for openness and debate on the future. Otherwise no serious reform will occur, and the profoundly undemocratic politics and decision-making of the past thirty years may well transfer themselves to the new institutions.

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