

OPINION I

When silence is no answer

Lesley Henderson, David Miller, Jacqueline Reilly

'Northern Ireland has provided the means by which the professional broadcasters have steadily been brought to the government's heel', according to Rex Cathcart, historian of the BBC in Northern Ireland.

The British ban on broadcasting the sound of interviews with 11 Irish organisations and their supporters was introduced by the Home Secretary on 19 October 1988. Its unprecedented peacetime restrictions have further limited British media coverage of one of the most sensitive issues for successive governments.

The ban prohibits the broadcasting of any words spoken by a person who 'represents or purports to represent' or whose words 'support or solicit or invite support' for a listed organisation. Journalists' reactions were tentative and confused. Guidelines were hurriedly drawn up and then revised following a letter from the Home Office which indicated that reported speech fell outside the prohibition: it was acceptable for a journalist to quote a listed organisation or a speaker supporting a listed organisation. A further confusion was whether a member of a listed organisation could be held to represent that organisation 24 hours a day. The Home Office argued that this was too narrow an interpretation, saying that, 'a member of an organisation cannot be held to represent that organisation in all his [sic] daily activities'.

The BBC made use of this definition for the first time on 16 February 1989 when it interviewed Gerry Adams about jobs in West Belfast. Thirty seconds of sound on film was broadcast in Northern Ireland, with Adams speaking as MP for West Belfast rather than *Sinn Féin* MP for West Belfast. The Home Office showed it was keeping an eye on things when it telephoned the BBC in London for an explanation.

The technicalities of 'representing' an organisation have meant some comments being unexpectedly allowed and others, ludicrously, disallowed. The *Media Show* broadcast comments from *Sinn Féin*

This article is an extract from a new study, Speak No Evil: the British Broadcasting Ban, the Media, and the Conflict in Ireland, by researchers from the Glasgow University Media Group. The study can be ordered for £10 from Glasgow University Media Group, The University, Glasgow GL12 8LF, Scotland.

councillor Jim McAllister speaking, in his capacity as an actor, about his role in Ken Loach's film *Hidden Agenda*. In the film, McAllister plays the part of . . . a *Sinn Féin* councillor. Meanwhile, Peter Taylor's *Inside Story* showed a prison officer negotiating with the officer commanding IRA prisoners in the high-security H-Blocks of the Maze prison. Because the O/C appeared as a representative of the IRA, he was subtitled and an actor's voice related the negotiations, which were about the size of sausage rolls served in prison.

In the year after the ban, *Sinn Féin* appearances on network news dropped dramatically by 63%. In the year before the ban there were a total of 17 formal interviews with *Sinn Féin* on BBC network news out of a total of 633 interviews on Northern Ireland as a whole. By contrast, MPs and ministers from the Conservative Party were interviewed a total of 121 times. This figure includes 50 interviews with Tom King, then Northern Ireland Secretary, who was interviewed more than anyone else in the period. In the same year, there were 93 additional occasions on network news when *Sinn Féin* representatives were heard on film. Over three quarters of these were in items dealing with violence, as in new commentaries which deplored the killings in Enniskillen. There were only six appearances by *Sinn Féin* in items which dealt with their political policies. In one of these, Gerry Adams commented on developments in Anglo-Irish relations: 'I think the Republican position has been vindicated by the . . . events of the last few weeks' (BBC2 'Newsnight' 17.2.88).

In the year after the ban, *Sinn Féin* appearances on network news dropped. When they did occur, interviews with *Sinn Féin* were shorter and less informative than those prior to the ban. BBC executives have acknowledged this point in private. The confidential minutes of the BBC's Editorial Policy Meeting (EPM) record this. John Conway, the former head of News and Current Affairs Northern Ireland, admitted that when *Sinn Féin* councillor Francis McNally was interviewed as the brother of a murder victim, the interview had said 'much less than it would have prior to the ban'. (EPM 29.11.88.)

While news bulletins from South Africa have regularly been prefaced by a 'health warning' alerting the viewer that the news report has been affected by government

censorship, 'health warnings' on Ireland have only been used when *Sinn Féin* have been interviewed and they have been woven into the text rather than prefacing the report as a whole. The BBC minutes show that senior BBC executives have explicitly ruled out blanket warnings because 'it could sound propagandist' and 'it was important to avoid frivolous or point scoring references'. (EPM 15.11.88.) The intricacies of health warnings again occupied the meeting after BBC Northern Ireland subtitled an interview with *Sinn Féin's* Danny Morrison in January 1989. The BBC then banned subtitles on its new programmes because, in the words of one senior executive, 'it looked so dramatic. It looked like we were seeking to make a point'.

A key indicator of the definition of 'soliciting or inviting support' in practice is the number of people who are not members of *Sinn Féin* but who have had their views cut and subtitled or have simply been stopped from appearing. There is now a long list of people who are not members of listed organisations whose views have fallen victim to cautious broadcasters. They include Brighton Labour councillor Richard Stanton, US author Margie Bernard, Bernadette McAliskey and Errol Smalley, uncle of one of the Guildford Four.

By the same token, a Channel Four film *Trouble the Calm* had a passage excised and subtitled. A caption stated that: 'Under government broadcasting restrictions, in force since October 1988, this woman cannot explain her husband's beliefs and motivations which led to his imprisonment.' (8.5.89.) If explanations of motivations and beliefs are considered to 'invite support' for a listed organisation, then it becomes impossible for television or radio to account for the continued existence of groups like the IRA and UDA as well as to explain why over 80,000 people in Northern Ireland continue to vote for *Sinn Féin*.

What is at stake in the battle over the ban is the official view of the 'Troubles' which seeks to portray its enemies in Ireland as 'terrorists', criminals and gangsters, lacking in any political motivation. Successive governments have tried to limit, preferably to eliminate, any hearing for opposition to their policies in Ireland. Mrs Thatcher posed a simple choice for journalists: 'Either one is on the side of justice in these matters or one is on

OPINION II

Victims of the European revolutions

Rajko Djuric

the side of terrorism.'

This view explains why it is not only current events or just Irish Republicans who are excluded from television. It has recently been reported that the late Sean Macbride, IRA leader in the 1930s, winner of the Nobel and Lenin Peace Prizes and founder of Amnesty International, is to be cut from a school's history programme. Broadcasting sensitivities also extend to the discussion of the British presence in Ireland, in fictional programmes, in the future. There is speculation that an edition of the popular science fiction series *Star Trek* could be axed because it includes a reference to a British withdrawal from Ireland in the next century.

There is a long history of broadcasters agreeing with the official definition of the conflict in Ireland and it is clear that this view is still strong. When the ban was introduced, David Nicholas, editor of ITN, objected to it on the grounds that ITN interviews with *Sinn Féin* were conducted 'responsibly, because we all understand what these extremist organisations stand for is abhorrent to many people. British public opinion has never been more resolute than it is now, in my opinion, in defeating terrorism and that owes a lot to the full and frank reporting that we've been able to conduct on Northern Ireland over 19 years.' (ITN 2200 19 October 1988.)

His comment assumes that news is about portraying the perceived feelings of the 'nation', rather than reporting events.

The close coincidence of the views of broadcasters and the state on 'terrorism' shows that coverage of *Sinn Féin* has not allowed them an easy platform. On the contrary, much coverage has been directed at discrediting the party as part of the campaign to defeat 'terrorism'. One of the broadcasters' objections to the ban has been that they no longer have control over their part of the battle.

The ban succeeded in silencing some voices on Ireland with which the government disagrees. These voices are marginalised both by government pressure and a broadcasting establishment which largely concurs with the government definition of the Troubles as a struggle between 'justice' and 'terrorism'. The broadcasting ban is one more weapon in that struggle. The prospect of broadcasters offering an informed account of the crisis in Ireland has become even more remote. ■

The increasingly difficult situation of the Rom and Sinti (gypsy) communities in numerous countries of the world, but in particular in Eastern Europe, is one of the most disturbing side effects to have emerged in the wake of the revolutions that swept through these countries only a year ago. After successive waves of persecution, followed by the holocaust of World War II, which caused the death of more than half a million Rom and Sinti men, women and children, and the total absence of human rights during the Communist dictatorships, approximately 15 million Roms and Sintis are now the object of the most blatant racial discrimination.

These people do not benefit from the protection of their collective liberties in any country, and despite repeated appeals by the Romani Union, the organisation of the World Romani (Gypsy) Congress, to the United Nations, the European Council and the Commission of the European Community, no action has so far been taken to secure their most basic rights. In the opinion of the Romani Union, further postponement of the defence and protection of the Roms and Sintis could have serious consequences for its people.

The dangers they presently face in Eastern Europe are numerous. In Romania, where about three million Roms live, they are subjected to indescribable social misery; they are also the target of physical violence and are terrorised by Romanian nationalist groups. Two Rom villages were recently burned down in the communes of Cosa Voda and Cogalnicean.

Many incidents, sporadically reported in the Yugoslav press, demonstrate the judicial, social, political and physical insecurity experienced by the Roms in Yugoslavia. Similar occurrences, ranging from racist propaganda and racial discrimination to physical attacks and terror, have taken place in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and other countries in Eastern Europe. Their situation in Albania is unknown.

The increasingly critical position of minorities within these countries, amongst which the Roms and the Sintis have always been the least protected, is aggravated by the rising tide of extreme nationalism and the threat of civil war. It is provoking the emigration of a growing number of Roms

and Sintis from Eastern to Western Europe in search of employment and a more secure environment.

Given this situation, the Romani Union has again launched an urgent appeal to international and European bodies to convene a conference to discuss the fate of its people throughout Europe. Given that the Council of Europe and the European Commission have already passed resolutions compatible with its aims, the Romani Union is pressing them to go further and translate their resolutions into a concrete programme of action. Stressing the gravity of the problem, the Union argues the need for an organisation comprising representatives of the European Community, the Romani Union and other specialists who can create a programme and secure Community funding for its implementation.

Representatives of the Romani Union have already secured approval for their project from the German government through its representative in the Council of Europe; promises of support have also come from the German and Swiss embassies.

One area which any programme should tackle without delay is the teaching of their mother tongue to Rom and Sinti children. The Romani Union has started to standardise the language, making it easier to teach. Literacy in their own language will, in the long term, provide a more solid base for the integration of Rom and Sinti children.

Founded in 1971, the year of its first congress in London, the Romani Union has, so far, no permanent headquarters nor funding.

At a time when the problems of the Roms and the Sintis are most severe, this remains a severe handicap to their work. If the reduction of rising national and ethnic conflicts in Europe, especially Eastern Europe, is to be achieved without the tragic consequences of delay, financial as well as moral and political support for the Romani Union, as for its people, is a matter of urgency. ■

Translated by Moris Farhi

Dr Rajko Djuric is president of the Romani Union. He lives in Belgrade.