



Forum for Peace and Reconciliation

Sinn Féin Submission to the Forum on Broadcasting — Response to presentation from RTE, BBC and UTV

2 June 1995

Sinn Féin welcomes this opportunity to hear representatives of RTE, UTV and the BBC in relation to how they should respond to the ongoing peace process. Public service broadcasters have a special responsibility, enshrined in legislation, to be fair, impartial and objective in the reporting of all matters of public concern in news and current affairs programmes. We hope that the difficulties which broadcasters have endured in the form of government censorship and the associated self-censorship will not be seen in Ireland again.

Legacy of Censorship

By fostering public ignorance censorship helped to prolong the Anglo- Irish conflict. It stifled discussion and debate and spread fear of raising issues related to the conflict. This has been especially true of the 26 Counties where Section 31 restrictions were in force for over 20 years. This has left a huge gap in the historical archives of RTE. It cut off Irish people in this state from the experience of fellow Irish people in the Six Counties and attempted to silence the voice of republican dissent in this state. In this new era part of the role of RTE must be to compensate by making documentary, educational and discussion programmes which focus especially on those aspects of events in the last 25 years which were censored.

Lifting Censorship

Since January 1994 in the South, 8 months prior to the IRA cessation, and since October 1994 in the North and in Britain, the general public has been

allowed to hear all sides to the current conflict. The Irish government, through the action of the Minister for Arts, Culture and Gaeltacht, had the foresight to lift the censorship ban eight months prior to the IRA cessation announcement of August 31, 1994. The British government, trailing behind, lifted their ban in October 1994. Since that time Sinn Féin spokespersons have been seen to articulate the needs and demands of the thousands of Irish people whose concerns we represent.

Broadcasters still come under pressure from some quarters, merely for asking us our opinion on issues relating to the ongoing peace process. In general these demands appear to be resisted. The one area where broadcasters sometimes fall down is in relation to capitulating to the censorship demands of unionist parties. When unionist parties demand that Sinn Féin be excluded from political panel discussions some broadcasters agree to this unethical demand. If the unionists choose to censor themselves in relation to not appearing with Sinn Féin, that is their decision. Broadcasters must not allow unionist parties to dictate the shape of discussion on how to resolve the conflict.

Irish language provision

Public service broadcasters have a special responsibility to represent the interests and concerns of the whole community. In the context of the North of Ireland there is a severe imbalance in relation to the treatment of Irish language speakers by broadcasters. This imbalance is evident in relation to the 4 hours (per year that is!) of Irish

language programmes on the BBC in the North, with about an hour on UTV. The BBC provision in the North pales in comparison to the amount of programming in Scottish Gaelic in Scotland and in Welsh in Wales. The BBC in Scotland spends over 12m per year on programming in Scottish Gaelic. The UTV recognition of the needs of Irish language viewers is even more minimal with about an hour of programming per year. It is clear that neither of these broadcasters is producing a proper service to Irish language speakers. One way of showing signs of improvement would be to give a positive response to a proposal to provide programme and transmission facilities for Telefís Na Gaeilge when it comes on stream next year. Such a gesture would demonstrate a willingness to seriously consider the needs of Irish language speakers who, according to the 1991 Census, consist of 143,000 people in the North.

Sports Coverage

BBC and UTV coverage of Gaelic games has improved tremendously over the past number of years. Northern broadcasters are to be congratulated for recognising the needs of followers of the GAA. An area of concern, however, relates to the extent to which the popularity of Gaelic games could initiate a "bidding war" with broadcasters trying to get exclusive access to particular games or competitions. We have already seen some of the effects of this in relation to the dispute between RTE, UTV and the GAA over coverage of Ulster championship games. In the end such squabbling can only be detrimental to the interests of viewers and therefore to the public interest. It is conceivable that a cable or satellite provider could step in to buy up the rights and restrict coverage to premium service subscribers. In our opinion broadcasters in Ireland should come to an agreement over sports coverage in Ireland and there should be legislation to protect television and radio access to Gaelic games for the whole community.

The Future Challenge

Of course this is a challenge that all public service broadcasters are facing and which is addressed in the current Green Paper on Broadcasting from the Minister for Arts Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D Higgins. We would suggest that UTV, BBC and RTE, who effectively broadcast to the whole island,

address the problems of competition from multinational satellite and cable providers (who have no public service obligation) by responding in a coordinated manner to the Green Paper. There are many positive aspects of public service broadcasting, particularly as represented by the RTE and BBC models, which Sinn Féin supports. The remit to include the needs of the whole community, to provide fair and objective news and current affairs coverage and the financing of coverage through a levy on the whole community means that the public have a direct public and political relationship to their broadcasters which would not be possible in a purely market driven broadcasting environment. Indeed it is unlikely that a television service could survive in the small Irish market without public provision.

Also purely private enterprise broadcasting would quickly begin to demonstrate the same openly right-wing bias of the printed media. The only role the state should have in relation to broadcasting is to protect and preserve the openness and independence of the broadcasting service. State control of broadcasting, such as expressed by Section 31 of the Broadcasting act or section 13 of the BBC's license agreement, are anathema to the free and open expression of ideas and comment.

These are challenges faced by the print media also. The twin effects of multinational media conglomerates seeking monopoly control of media markets and changes in technology are putting immense pressure on the media sovereignty of different societies. The proposed Irish Press redundancy plan, which we hope will be averted, and the increased control over the market of Independent Newspapers, is one consequence in Ireland. The other major pressure stems from increased competition from News International in the form of the Times and the Sun and from Sky Television.

There is obviously a role for the Irish government in developing a media policy, not simply a broadcasting policy, for the whole island.

Public service broadcasters face many challenges locally and internationally in the months and years ahead. These challenges will be both political and technological. Broadcasters will have the full support of Sinn Féin in the protection of a free, open and fair broadcasting environment.