



JOE MULHOLLAND AND CENSORSHIP

FAWNING COMMENTARY on the death of former RTÉ current affairs and news head Joe Mulholland ignored his real notability. It illustrated how RTÉ policed coverage of the conflict in the north from the 1970s to 1994 and beyond.

In Ray Mac Mánaís's *The Road from Ardoyne*, former president Mary McAleese detailed aggressive bullying in the broadcaster's show, *Today Tonight*, under Mulholland and how he prevented objective coverage of the 1980-81



Joe Mulholland

IRA hunger strikes. After being shot and nearly killed alongside her husband in January 1981, hunger-strike campaigner Bernadette McAliskey was interviewed on RTÉ by McAleese. The latter was forced, under protest, to interview McAliskey with a representative of the organisation that had tried to kill her, Glen Barr of the UDA. That was despite the fact that the state-assisted sectarian killers of the UDA were banned from RTÉ under Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act.

McAleese also revealed that *Today Tonight* intended to ignore hunger-striker Bobby Sands's victory in the 1981 Fermanagh South Tyrone by-election. Mulholland and his coterie were convinced that Sands would be defeated and a non-story but instead it became a worldwide media sensation.

A 1990 *Irish Times* profile of Mulholland reported that, while he never joined the Workers' Party, he became identified with the "Stickie [Workers' Party] camp in RTÉ". The neo-unionist grouping dominated the

broadcaster's current affairs programming under Mulholland.

Mulholland later distinguished himself as head of news by telling trade unionist Larry O'Toole he was banned from RTÉ because he was a member of Sinn Féin. In 1992 the High Court found that to be illegal self-censorship, since the Section 31 law banned only those representing the party. The Supreme Court quashed RTÉ's subsequent appeal to be censored.

Mulholland moaned about the "difficulty" this posed and promised new "guidelines". They emerged six months later and banned an interview with any SF member on a subject on which the party had a policy. It was a recipe for continued self-censorship, a legacy RTÉ struggled with when Section 31 was lifted by Michael D Higgins in January 1994, eight months before the seminal IRA ceasefire.

HOW INSCRUTABLE the *Sunday Times's Irish edition* and its *Whitehall masters* can sometimes be.

Not so long ago the ST's Aawrish edition published the latest of numerous alarming articles in recent years warning of "one of the most serious cases of foreign interference uncovered in the [Irish] state". This was a report into the activities in Ireland of the "shadowy" United Front, a Chinese intel gathering vehicle.

The ST warned that the "full scale of the damage done to Irish interests may be far greater than the government can imagine" (see The Phoenix 17/10/25).

Reflecting Whitehall's foreign policy concerns, the Irish ST has been warning of the yellow peril's malevolent intentions in Ireland for many years.

But it looks as though geopolitical convulsions are creating new alliances and British PM Keir Starmer's recent state visit to China was described as ushering in a new era of trade and investment. Others in London – Tory party voices especially – warned of Chinese trickery.

In the same week as Starmer's eastern mission, the ST ran a special investigation into the "more than 200 links between China and Irish universities", which "could pose a risk to academic freedom and open up research for military purposes".

Clearly, the Irish ST did not get the latest memo about friends and enemies.

Not to worry. Last week's ST included a leading column from former taoiseach Leo Varadkar, who argued that the new world order meant that Ireland should "focus on China and India, not US, UK and the EU".

Another revision at Murdoch's Irish Sunday platform is its latest line on the triple lock, which a recent editorial warned will weaken democratic oversight at home by allowing the deployment of 50 troops abroad without a Dáil vote.

'EAGLE-EYED' IRISH TIMES

IN KEEPING with the compelling mystique and tradition surrounding the *Irish Times*, not to mention its journalists' self-regarding sense of the Old Crone of Tara Street, editor Ruadhán Mac Cormaic recently delivered an important message to readers about the latest update to the newspaper's stylebook.

This exclusive is one of the few breaking stories in recent years that has been deemed important enough for the editor to append his byline to but readers will have appreciated its significance when learning that, from the following edition, a series of changes to the stylebook would take effect.

Mac Cormaic explained that the stylebook is an in-house bible that codifies style, grammar and spelling and that it is a "living document reflecting changes in how people communicate".

The editor also refers to the real heroes of this legendary tale of Irish public life, namely the paper's "Editing and Publishing team – the eagle-eyed copy editors who correct our mistakes and finesse our prose".

These eagle-eyed – and over-worked – word surgeons must have been at the end of a very long shift when sub-editing this particular edition of the *IT*. On the front page of the same edition that carried Mac Cormaic's scoop, those eagle-eyed copy editors failed to correct a mistake in the spelling of former president Mary McAleese. Instead, in a story headlined "Celebrate bishops will not update 'rancid' church teachings" she was referred to as "McAlesse" in the headline.

Perhaps the entire editorial staff was overcome with euphoria about a story bashing Catholic bishops.

The real, untold story behind such errors, replete throughout most daily newspapers in recent years, is the axing of eagle-eyed sub-editing staff in all of them. Still, better to report the fairy tale fiction about tradition in the newspaper, as exemplified by the 'living document' of its stylebook.

The same sub-editors, who are expected to correct more than just spelling mistakes, also failed to spot a confusing statement recently by political editor Pat Leahy, who analysed the paper's poll findings about neutrality, the triple lock and so on. Pat referred to the public's "nuanced view on neutrality and on relations with Donald Trump". The poll stats were 71% in favour of adding neutrality to the constitution, with 18% against and 11% undecided.

Nuanced? Ask the eagle-eyed ones.



Mary McAleese





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