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Public Responsibility and The Press: II: Dermot Moran Talks to Tim-Pat Coogan

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## Public Responsibility and The Press: II

### *Dermot Moran talks to Tim-Pat Coogan*

#### 1. Editorial Policy

Dermot Moran: Just to start can you give me a brief auto-biography?

Tim Pat Coogan: I was always scribbling as a boy — my mother was a journalist, a columnist in *The Herald*. Even when I was at school in Blackrock I used to do sports listings for *The Independent*. It was the best way to start in those days. Indeed I did sports sub-editing for a while. Then the year I left school I spoke at the only debate in Blackrock I ever participated in, and it was chaired by the late Vivion De Valera, and then when I applied for a job later that August in something which was being started called *The Evening Press*, De Valera remembered me and he started me off as a copy boy. I stayed with *The Evening Press* becoming sub-editor, features editor, assistant editor and then deputy editor. Then in 1968 I was made editor of *The Irish Press*. Along the way I've written a few books including the first history of the country from 1916 to the then present day, *Ireland Since the Rising*, which was published in 1966. I've written what they have been good enough to call the definitive history of the I.R.A., and, of course, *On the Blanket*. I've edited a book, *Ireland and the Arts*, and I'm working on a book or two at the moment. I've written for all the bigger papers — *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and so on and appeared on thousands of radio and television shows.

DM: Are you carrying on a tradition in the Irish Press?

TPC: In some ways, yes. In some ways I've broken with tradition. I think we've taken a much more independent political line now than was the case with my predecessors, and I do strongly keep up the literary tradition like all the men here, starting with Frank Gallagher. We have had outstanding literary editors — Ben Keily, M.J. McManus, and, in the Irish language, O'Dalaigh and Sean Bowman. So I try to keep that up and then of course we have an excellent news gathering apparatus. The reporters in the news-room are really the heart of *The Irish Press*

and I've tried to keep that up in good times and in bad. I think we are regarded as the best news paper in the country simpliciter, that is — news gathering and presenting it cleanly, concisely and without bias.

DM: In terms of news, Gageby says he was the first person to send someone to cover Stormont . . . .

TPC: No. He wasn't. *The Irish Press* did report it all right. What Douglas Gageby did was to cover Stormont the way the Dail was covered — systematically on a routine basis. He certainly did that. But *The Times* sees itself as — and in many respects has achieved the position of being — the Irish paper of record. So even if no one reads it on the day, it's there. So it was worth spending the money on Stormont. But Stormont as a parliament of course is a non-starter, so it was really only a promotional thing to do, almost an affectation.

DM: Did your editorial policy on Northern Ireland change since 1969 or do you think that there has been a continuous policy since 1969 which hasn't changed?

TPC: I think it hasn't changed. I must say myself that when the Civil Rights movement started I felt that was the right way to do it and I was very impressed with the early Civil Rights leaders. I'd been going to the North regularly. I think Gageby and myself were the only two interested in the North — who went there on our spare time for instance. Gageby is a Northerner; my mother's family is from the North but there was never much Northern discussion in our house. But I was interested. I remember meeting Terence O'Neill, for my first book, soon after he met Lemass, and liking him and we kept friendly ever since. I thought the Civil Rights movement was the best approach, but the reaction of the Paisleyite element — beating them off the streets into the hands of the I.R.A. — destroyed it. Remember that as a historian of the I.R.A. I knew almost to a round of ammunition what the I.R.A. were worth at the time. There was no I.R.A. The

I.R.A. were created by Paisleyite bullyboy tactics and by the British Army.

DM: If someone was to say that your editorial policy is more favourable to the I.R.A. than *The Irish Times* or *Independent* how would you react?

TPC: I'd say, let them say it! The editorials are there to be read, the condemnation of violence is explicit and continuous. But I did become convinced that there couldn't be change within the system in Northern Ireland. It must be an all Ireland solution. Britain, I now believe, must do something along the lines of Hong Kong: set a date for withdrawal. It would need to be a good long date in the future to allow the shock absorption mechanisms to be prepared — the policing, the courts, the financing and to give us time in the South to get used to it, and ultimately to make it unprofitable for the Unionists to go on saying "not an inch". The electoral lode from which advantage is mined in Northern Ireland is dementia and you cannot in conscience say that has anything to recommend it. Prior, for example, was a good man but he just got swallowed up. The RUC are as bad as when he came in — in fact worse. Even poor Garret Fitzgerald is burying his constitutional crusade and criticising the RUC in rather the same terms I would use in one of my editorials. It is different on the ground. When I hear my friends in Dublin talking about the North, what they would really like to see is a high wall built around it and them all kept up there; but when I go up there and experience it, I feel so outraged. I react like a northern nationalist rather than a southern one.

DM: Do you see yourself as having to browbeat an unwilling public into taking notice of northern Ireland?

TPC: Well, I'm not sure about "brow-beat" but there is no circulation in it, I can assure you. Circulation people say, not so much Northern Ireland on page 1, but I think I have some responsibility — along with the responsibility to try not to be the last editor of the Irish Press — the responsibility to use the educational potential of the paper in some form.

## 2. Press Accountability

DM: Is the press in Ireland accountable enough to

the public?

TPC: Well, the public do have the defence of intense competition more than elsewhere in Europe because of the flooding of our market by the British papers and this incredible, penal attitude of the Government on V.A.T.

I feel myself there are two things needed in Ireland to provide accountability (1) a Freedom of Information Act and (2) a Press Council.

(1) You need a Freedom of Information Act because the public doesn't know what's going on, We have this huge corpus of laws — the Offences Against the State Act, Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, Contempt of Court laws, Libel Laws, the Official Secrets Act — an enormous corpus of laws which serve to make the newspaper editor or proprietor self-censoring. We need a freedom of information act to cut through all that thicket.

(2) You need a Press Council to cut through the thicket of the defences newspapers have. All the newspaper editors came together a few years ago — we meet an odd time to discuss issues like ethics and standards, training of young journalists and so on — and we brought over Ben Bradley, the great editor of *The Washington Post*, and we discussed the idea of a Press Council. But neither the proprietors nor the unions were very enthusiastic at the time. They didn't want another regulatory body hanging round their necks. I regret that — I think we should have a Press Council.

DM: You mentioned the Libel Laws. Do you think they are too strict here and that they actually inhibit investigative journalism?

TPC: Yes. I believe that. The laws are ludicrous here. It's all very well saying that the courts are open to everyone. I say the law is like the Ritz Hotel. It's open to everyone but it's very, very expensive. If you get disgruntled people of malicious intent who simply are on the make, it's far cheaper to settle out of court than go into court and fight it and maybe lose it on the day because you are not necessarily in a court of justice, though you are unquestionably in a court of law. So the libel laws certainly inhibit the press — but all these laws conspire together, they need to be tackled as a whole.

They have a self-censoring effect. Look at RTE. I am always surprised how lamblike and meekly my colleagues in RTE take Section 31. It's not enough to say that it's the law of the land. Laws can be changed. Can you think of any demonstration of note by RTE journalists to get shut of Section 31. And yet I got the section dropped by the Coalition Government of 73-77 when they wanted to extend it to newspapers, by sheer campaigning.

The libel laws of this country are not the laws of this country, they are the laws of England. They don't suit this country. We're a gossipy, frivolous race. Of course, there are a lot of secondrate scurrilous journalists who are just not worth suing or taking seriously. They take the fact of their own mediocrity as a protection and write what they like, and that's a bad thing too.

DM: Do you think that a Press Council will get off the ground?

TPC: It will probably come but it will take a while. Journalists I spoke to recently — union-minded chaps — were more in my line of thinking about it than a few years ago, but given the recession, they are more concerned with bread and butter issues than with a Press Council. But I hope it will come.

### 3. Political Interference

DM: What about political interference in the newspapers and the way the lobby system is manipulated?

TPC: I really think there should be a certain adversary relationship between the politician and the journalist, like two football teams, they contest on the field but are friendly in the pavilion. Overall we must have regard for democracy. Some political parties — Fine Gael more than others — have shown great finesse in news management and have taken it to tremendous heights. It is really government by a cadre of very skilled media advisors that we have seen up to now. The whole question of media briefing, "informed sources say", "government spokesmen" . . . who are these people? It should be "John Smith said . . ." Unfortunately with the rush of events and the cost, we are subject to the tyranny of the handout. The proper place for the handout is in the wastepaper basket.

DM: I notice that beside your desk you have the biggest wastebasket I've ever seen.

TPC: Yes. A handcut should not be taken and regurgitated and put in the paper, unless of course its a solid statement, but not these laudatory handouts.

DM: When politicians say they are in favour of a free press, that it is essential to democracy and they are protecting a free press, do you think that they are actually doing anything other than trying to control and manipulate the press, as in the attempted extension of Section 31 for example?

TPC: I think politicians have a compulsion to conceal and journalists to reveal. There is an obvious conflict there. All governments and all politicians try to manage the news. The journalist and politician have this much in common, they are both on the hustings as it were. The papers have to sell daily or weekly, the politicians have to get votes and what is said in the papers has a lot of effect on that. In the information society we live in it doesn't matter where the message is placed, it gets picked up. If you write your message on a bottle top it will still be taken up, if you make a speech in Bohola and it's in the local paper, all the papers will take it up. I don't agree with Marshall McLuhan that the medium is the message, the message is the message.

DM: Do you think the government should be doing more to protect the papers — not only by lifting V.A.T. but also by preventing the flooding of the market by the British papers?

TPC: Well I initiated a meeting with Garret Fitzgerald. Gageby, Vincent Doyle, the representative of the provincial papers, W.P. O'Hanlon, and a member of the Crosby family and we went to Garrett about V.A.T. He said he wouldn't take it off.<sup>1</sup> At the same time he conceded that what he got in the way of returns for bringing English journalists over here on junkets was almost nothing when the press clippings came in. V.A.T. is not only a tax on knowledge but is a positive incentive for the foreigner to dump on us. We told him that instead of taking tax off us, he would be paying us redundancies. He conceded we had a point. I think personally he would lift the V.A.T. I'd go so far as to say that he's tried to do it,

but the hard-faced monetarists — the Secretary of the Department of Finance and some of his colleagues — partially out of monetarist reasons and partially out of antipathy towards the press, want to keep us in line. Frankly, I see it as an attempt to censor the press, and to be fair to Charlie Haughey I'd say that when he gets back he'll do something to lift it — in the spirit of his tax concessions to artists and writers. He sees the broad thing in a strategic way, unlike a lot of other people.

DM: And yet he has suffered at the hands of the press himself?

TPC: No politician in my lifetime has suffered anything approaching what Charlie has. Partially it is his own personality, he leaves himself open for it. But secondly a group of Fine Gael people got together and decided that the way to take out Fianna Fail was to take out Charlie Haughey and they made that settled policy. Nothing was bad enough to say about him, or to let drop through the lobby system, and of course they were aided in this by splits in the Fianna Fail party itself. The enemies within conspired with the enemies without.

DM: Well, it was widely suggested that your own paper had already prepared and printed a political obituary of Haughey. Were you misled?

TPC: We were certainly misled by "the national handlers" but we were also misled by our own judgement. Collectively, the papers got it wrong. We felt he was about to depart and as a matter of respect for the man — rather than as an obituary — his career was put together. That's where the lobby system broke down, we should have looked beyond, outside of Dublin to the country. It became clear that the political correspondents weren't so much political as lobby correspondents. They were walking around the lobbies. They weren't in the country. What saved Haughey were the countrymen. They held onto Haughey for one thing and one thing only: they thought he would stand up to Maggie Thatcher in a way that Garrett wouldn't and I think there were proved right in that.

We were misled by an urban bias. But you also must give Charlie some credit. His durability, his courage — which Hemingway de-

finied as grace under stress — the tenacity with which he fought, no one expected that. Certainly it was not a glorious moment in the history of Irish reportage.

#### 4. Pressure Groups

DM: You mentioned urban bias. Irish newspapers are frequently criticised for this — for their Dublin 4 mentality as its been called. I would have thought that *The Irish Press* would suffer from it less because it appeals to quite a large rural leadership. The bishops have criticised this "urban" liberal element. What is your reaction?

TPC: The bishops too are certainly an interest group. My own view of Ireland is that we have two forms of colonialism here (1) an overt form we see working itself out in the North and (2) the other is the more spiritual, mental colonialism we see in the Roman Catholic church. Naturally there is a vested interest there and the bishops would like a certain status quo and a certain mentality which is more compatible with them, which is largely the country view. For example, divorce. I'd imagine you could get a divorce referendum carried in Dublin and I'm certain it would fall in the country and the bishops know that. They know what side their episcopal bread is buttered on, and they're anti-divorce and the country is their bailiwick, so they play to that audience. But it's a matter of "how can you keep them down on the farm once they've seen Paris". Indeed most of the journalists are originally country boys and girls.

DM: Do you have someone on your staff who is in touch with the country, like John Healy in *The Irish Times*?

TPC: Yes. Me!. Well, we have several people — for example MacConnell in the West who has a comical and maniacal view of the West, which sometimes, late at night after a few drinks, I concur with.

DM: Do you feel you should be more in touch with rural Ireland? Or do you feel you need to educate them — on the divorce question for example?

TPC: Well we have an ancillary duty to educate and to try to bring to light things that people should know, that's one of the things

laid down in our first editorial. But our first duty is to report the news. One thing I'd like to say strongly: too much editorialising has crept into journalism, often its very difficult to tell which is the editorialising and which is the straight story. *The Irish Press* by and large doesn't do that.

As to the coming referendum, I wonder will there be a referendum? My impression is that both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael know that it won't go through, so why do it? My own view is that, certainly in the city areas there are problems, the break-up in marriages, the problem caused by the fact that the child of a second marriage can be regarded as illegitimate, the question of a new beginning, the property issues and so on, its not a simple thing, but I honestly think it looms larger in the minds of some commentators than the question of finding a job, or the awful trouble in the North. Take the problem of murder. When I was 19 or 20 in *The Evening Press* a murder was literally a nine day wonder, now it does not merit more than a paragraph on an inside page. That is a real decline in morality. I think issues like that have to be addressed before the society addresses the divorce question. But it will come. I would imagine it's inevitable.

DM: Given that a referendum might be lost, would you be in favour of scrapping the whole constitution and drafting a new one?

TPC: I don't think that divorce has any place in a constitution, and I don't know what the point of the abortion referendum was. When all is said and done, did any one person not go to London for an abortion because of that? And it gives the whited-sepulchre Unionists another chance to say we are priest-ridden. A failed divorce referendum — that is what the Pro-Life people would love to see us embark on now, now that they have their tails up. They know now is the time to strike if they can provoke less astute politicians and the Divorce Action to press for one. Whereas if it's left to 10 years in the future it will almost certainly carry. As far as changing the constitution is concerned, when I was wide-eyed and believed in the Civil Rights movement I thought it would have a beneficial effect, but I have come to the conclusion that the way the north has gone and the way the RUC are and the Unionists, I don't think it would make the

blindest bit of difference to change the constitution even though I was one of the prime advocates of it at one stage. Even if you set fire to the constitution, Paisley would still find some reason.

When all is said and done, even criticising our short-comings, we are not the malign and cancerous society that Northern Ireland is. We do not have a judiciary which publicly condones people shooting IRA suspects. We don't have county councillors advocating burning Catholics or Protestants. We don't have that charade of democracy. There is no doubt that if people in England had their say they would be shut of the North overnight.

DM: I was reading Jane Ewart Bigg's memoirs in *The Sunday Press* recently and one of the things which struck me was an excerpt from her late husband's diary in which he noted that he should take the Irish press more seriously than his predecessors had. Do you think that the British Government takes Irish editorials seriously?

TPC: No. Not at all. The Irish seem to require an extra dimension in justification in England. They laugh at us. I go every year to the British-Irish Association meetings — Oxford or Cambridge — and there you get under one roof almost everyone who is involved in the Anglo-Irish dialogue. I was talking to a top Tory lawyer who was responsible for investigating the workings of the Prevention of Terrorism Act in Britain, which, incidentally, he found quite all right even though its absolutely screwing the rights of people. I thought we were having a civilised, sane conversation, both dressed in pin-stripe suits, both drinking gin and tonics, and he suddenly says, "the very first thing these countries do as soon as they gain independence is to abolish jury trials and go for one party government". He was talking about the Irish Special Criminal Court. I was goggling at him, spluttering words like "Diplock courts" and "supergrass" and "special powers act" but he laughed that off saying that with the IRA one has to do that sort of thing. In other words, it was o.k. for them to do it but not for us. So there is a huge educational job to be done.

##### 5. The Irish News Agency

DM: What were your views on the Irish News

Agency? Would you like to see something like that set up again to counter the ignorance in Britain and elsewhere?

TPC: I'm a fervent advocate of that. I think it's crazy that we don't have one. During the time of the Republican H-Block hunger-strike the budget of the information section of the British Consulate in the U.S.A. was tripled.

DM: How could we counter that?

TPC: We should set out to restore the old Irish-American links. There are some groups like Jim Delaney's Irish American Unity Conference who have a weekly newsletter and keep in touch with Ireland. The Irish are the largest, and most successful and the best educated ethnic group in America but where is their influence — in contrast to the Jewish lobby for example? There you see the vacuum that exists which could be filled by an Irish News Agency. We must do everything we can to get over this extra justification dimension, to get through to the people — even in England where there is evident goodwill among the people in contrast to the politicians — to put pressure on their politicians to solve the problem.

DM: Would it not be possible to get out — among the papers together a monthly journal of Irish news and comment for America. Surely it could make money as well as get the Irish viewpoint across?

TPC: Yes. It's quite possible, I think it could be done.

DM: Who would run an Irish News Agency? The Government or the Press?

TPC: Government funding with all help from the newspapers and the NUJ.

DM: To change the subject a little, but keeping with the question of funding, how is the economic situation affecting your ability to function as a newspaper?

TPC: We are getting in the new technology now. Our unions have been pretty enlightened. They have taken cuts, but there is a determination to make it work. We are a firm with great institutional force. I'm sitting at De Valera's desk which he sat in 1924. Who-

ever is editing the paper, there will always be the need for an informed, lively and free press. The bulk of the average person's information — whether it be on tax or politics or whatever — comes from the papers. On T.V. you see the images but it is the papers that do the detailed reporting. In fact it tends to be the papers that do the first investigative reporting. When I go to RTE I am gratified to see on their desks clippings from the newspapers, and more often than not, from *The Irish Press*

DM: Is there more of a threat to a free press in a bad economic climate?

TPC: Yes. There is an interlocking network of business people, a kind of coterie, who don't like things being said about them and in an economically recessionary time they can put pressure on. I remember being attacked for something that was written in the paper about a prominent business man, his attitude was, how can you expect to get advertisements from one of his companies if you write that kind of thing? Not a word about the morality of it.

DM: John Horgan in his article in this issue of *Crane Bag* cites instances of the government of the day withholding advertising from papers if they don't like their political slant. Have you seen that?

TPC: Oh, they could do that.

DM: Do you bend to that pressure?

TPC: Not noticeably. The stomach may be a bit round but the shoulders are still broad.

DM: Still on the economic theme, how do the arts fare in your paper in these hard times?

TPC: It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the arts for Ireland, particularly in a time of . . . no hope. That tendency we've seen recently of young people to commit suicide, three or four within a few days of each other, out of depression, obviously the arts are for them. We need to offer some form of hope. Also for the North. It must be the longest period of struggle in Irish history with so little of artistic merit to come out of it. We have no O'Casey. There isn't any new literary form.

DM: What about Brian Friel?

TPC: Brian Friel is the exception. Of course there are many but they've all left the North — Heaney is here, Brian Moore has left, Montague lives down here. There is nothing like the Gaelic revival going on up there. Of course there are other media — painting seems to be developing, all these new galleries opening must be a good sign. Ballads too I like, they are an art form, Christy Moore for example. Its an Irish thing — the portable arts. A nation on the run cannot be involved in sculpture, although we do have some fine sculptors — like Delany.

DM: How can a newspaper help to develop the arts?

TPC: We can give it space. Like the short story. Of course that lends itself to the newspaper, we can't print paintings or even ballads. But we can encourage it, create a constituency for it. We have a new features editor now, John Spain and I'll be looking for him for ideas.

DM: Just to round up, are you happy with the balance on your staff? Are you satisfied with the number of women on your staff?

TPC: I launched women's journalism here with Mary Kenny. I also appointed the first woman sub-editor, and the first woman photographer. However I find it hard to promote women to the level of their capacity because of some intruding factors — their biological inclination to have children. They don't seem to have that long thirty year uninterrupted span that men have for their careers. But I don't think they have their full share yet. There is a fair spread in the newsroom and in the sub-editors but some areas — sports for example — is still a male enclave.

DM: As a final question are you happy with your editing?

TPC: Of course not. The day I am is the day to get out. A man's reach has to exceed his grasp. We need more pages, more sections, better layout. A lot of which I hope will come with the new technology. I hope to make a bigger impact on urban areas.

DM: So the days when *The Irish Press* was regarded simply as a Fianna Fail paper are over?

TPC: Why don't you ask some prominent Fianna Fail people about that? No. I think that the goals for which Fianna Fail were set up are still valid goals for *The Irish Press*. I would regard us as a friend of the Fianna Fail party. But a friend is not a lackey, a friend will tell you where you are going wrong. I reserve the right to do that.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. In the Government's national plan, Building on Reality 1985-1987, published on 3rd October 1984 there is a commitment to reduce VAT on newspapers from 23% to 18% from March '85 "in order to bring the Irish VAT rate more into line with rates in the EEC generally to the extent that this is possible". The highest rate in the EEC is 7% in West Germany. In the UK, Denmark and Italy it is 0% and in France 2.1%. See Renagh Holohan, *The Irish Times* 3.10.84 (p.11).