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At the editor's desk – risks and responsibilities

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Ladies and Gentlemen, friends and fellow speakers.

I'd first like to thank Paul Harman for the invitation to speak here today. Paul is a very well organised and determined individual, who does not take no for an answer. In another life, I could easily have seen him in an executive role on a daily paper. I hope he takes that as a compliment, although I know that some people would rather be compared to an armed robber or a drug baron or some other reasonably respectable profession rather than a journalist.

Today, I hope to take a look at the world of Irish newspapers from my own perspective, to admit from the outset that when it comes to the subject of the Irish News I am not entirely neutral and to examine, as the theme of this talk indicates, how we balance risks against responsibilities.

To start on a slightly personal note, Paul in his efficient way emailed me an advance copy of the programme for this event, which included a map for those who might not have absolutely certain how to find their way across south Dublin to Foster Avenue.

However, the directions were not totally necessary for me, because, as it happens, my aunt and uncle have lived three doors away from this venue for more than 40 years.

I would have been a pretty regular visitor to this street down the years, staying with my cousins when I was younger and climbing over the old metal gates just across the road to explore the grounds of UCD and possibly even exploring a quiet corner of the students' union bar at one stage.

I only mention that connection among other family links in this city to illustrate that south Dublin is not as far removed in any sense from south Down, where I come from and south Belfast, where I now live, as some might suppose.

At the same time, I have to acknowledge that there are many deep differences between the north and south of Ireland and those differences are reflected at least as strongly in our choice of newspapers as anywhere else.

I have the privilege of editing the Irish News, which I would like to think in Belfast terms is a prominent newspaper but in many Dublin eyes would be a fairly obscure title.

If I address a gathering of any description in the north, I know they will be fairly evenly divided between those who are completely committed to buying the Irish News every day in life and those who are equally committed to not buying the Irish News every day in life.

Here in Dublin, it is inevitable that there will be quite a few people who may have heard of the Irish News but have little real knowledge of the paper.

It might be appropriate if I therefore briefly offer some background details about a title which was founded through circumstances reflecting some of the most basic and enduring elements in Irish life – that is to say, religion, politics and adultery.

I should make it clear immediately that these are historical rather than contemporary references and that elected representatives today are, for the most part, a duller bunch than many of their predecessors.

Charles Stewart Parnell could never be accused of being dull during the period when he dominated 19th century Irish nationalism and he had no more dedicated supporter than the Belfast Morning News.

It had been founded in 1855, and quickly came to dominate the northern morning market, but the celebrated scandal involving Parnell and Mrs Kitty O’Shea, which ended up in the divorce courts, brought a particular crisis for the Belfast Morning News.

It stood firmly by Parnell, but the northern Catholic bishops did not, and in 1891 together with some leading business figures they helped to launch the Irish News in direct opposition to the Belfast Morning News.

A pretty intense but fairly brief struggle followed, and within a year the Irish News had first swallowed up and then amalgamated with its rival.

Before then, the editor of the Belfast Morning News, one William McDowell, a member of a prominent northern family, felt so strongly about what was happening that he decided to move to Dublin.

His great grandson, Michael McDowell, of whom some of you may have heard, was last month elected as Tanaiste, so God moves in mysterious ways.

Michael has very deep northern roots, as his grandfather was Eoin McNeill, from Glenarm, Co Antrim, who was a founder of both the Gaelic League and the Irish Volunteers, and Michael is a cousin of one of the greatest writers Belfast has ever produced, the late Brian Moore.

Michael’s brother Moore McDowell, the economist, was named after Brian Moore, whose family home, now sadly demolished but which used to face Clifton Street Orange Hall, was within sight of the offices of the Irish News.

Those same offices hosted a visit from Minister McDowell last year, so I would like to think he has forgiven us for all the tribulations of his great grandfather.

Anyway, for reasons which Michael McDowell will understand, to this day, above our editorial column, our full name is officially listed as the Irish News and Belfast Morning News.

We have always been based on Donegall Street, which can be regarded as Belfast's answer to Fleet Street, as it was for many decades home to no less than four daily papers.

As well as the Irish News, the Belfast Telegraph is still practically our next door neighbour, the News Letter transferred out to the suburbs in the 1990s, and is about to move again, while the Northern Whig folded in the 1960s, and, maintaining the always strong link between journalism and alcohol, its former office is now a trendy bar.

The Irish News, I'm pleased to say, is an all Ireland paper, available in every part of the island on the morning of publication, and we flatter ourselves that, in percentage terms, we have a larger audience in the Republic than the likes of the Irish Times and the Irish Independent do in the north.

Essentially though, we are and we always have been the voice of constitutional northern nationalism. We regard ourselves as being politically independent, we do not tell our readers who they should vote for, and, as we are older than any Irish political party, north or south, we by tradition avoid endorsing any individual group, while reserving the right to highlight particular issues and to have our say in the course of any referendum.

What we do promote is the cause of peace and reconciliation. We do not believe that progress can be achieved either through coercion in any form or by asking unionists to be less unionist or nationalists to be less nationalist. We basically want to extend the hand of friendship in all directions and move forward in an inclusive way.

That may sound fairly straightforward to some, but it did lead to a remarkable scenario where both main nationalist parties in the north were simultaneously accusing us of being biased in favour of their opponents in a way which dragged us briefly into the full heat of an Irish presidential election.

This all boiled over in 1997, when, after a period when Sinn Fein was suggesting that we were strongly following an SDLP agenda, we then had some SDLP figures claiming that we were involved in what was described as a conspiracy with Mary McAleese and the priests at Clonard Monastery in Belfast in an attempt to develop a new alliance which would do down the SDLP.

In any rate, that was the story, based on a Department of Foreign Affairs briefing document, which I read on the front page of two Dublin Sunday newspapers as the 1997 presidential election campaign reached a climax.

The only hard evidence to back all this up was a specific allegation that an opinion article which the SDLP's Co Tyrone representative Joe Byrne had apparently submitted to the Irish News had been tampered with at our end in a way which favoured Sinn Fein.

I had quite a combative day refuting these claims on the airwaves, and also defending the right of Mary McAleese to encourage republicans towards the path of peace, but events finally took a decisive twist when Joe Byrne, who had been away on business, intervened to state categorically that he had not written any article for the Irish News and that he was bemused by the allegations of censorship and intrigue.

John Hume also exerted a positive influence, the case against the Irish News faded away, and Mary McAleese was duly elected as president, as would probably have happened anyway.

I would have to say that the little spat we faced in 1997 was very minor when compared to the pressures the Irish News was under in the early days of the troubles when our entire society was falling apart all around us.

When the conflict was at its height in 1972, we had over 500 people murdered in the space of a single year, thousands more were injured or left homeless and further thousands were either imprisoned or interned without trial.

The big achievement for the Irish News was to produce a newspaper every night in the heart of Belfast with all this mayhem taking place, but, incredibly enough, the paper, together with the other titles in the city, also broke all existing circulation records at the same time.

This was because the broadcasting structures of the day were not exactly sophisticated and people in all parts of the north needed their newspapers to provide even the most basic information about what going on

As the troubles wore on, the full impact of the relentless expansion of radio and television services began to be felt, the level of violence decreased and people did not want to read about it in the same depth in any case.

The result was a sharp decline for all the papers, which in the case of the Irish News, which had suffered from a long-term lack of investment, could easily have proved terminal.

The Irish Press group at one stage produced the biggest selling morning, evening and Sunday papers on the island, but still managed to go under in the mid-1990s, and the Irish News nearly went the same way a decade earlier.

It was rescued mainly by the arrival of Jim Fitzpatrick as a visionary and committed new proprietor in the early 1980s, but there were still quite a few commentators who predicted that, when the ceasefires were introduced in 1994, the Irish News, which relied heavily on coverage of violence and the consequences of violence, would struggle to cope.

Fortunately, we were able to broaden our appeal by overhauling our approach to areas like health, education, business, the environment and particularly sport and we also became involved in some political initiatives as well – including joint editorial campaigns with our colleagues in the Ulster News Letter to oppose confrontation on all sides and to encourage a new consensus over contentious parades

We also completely redesigned our paper along the way, switching first from the traditional broadsheet to become the first UK or Irish daily to introduce the Berliner or Euro format in 2000, some five years before the Guardian followed suit across the water, and then last year putting in an entirely new printing plant and coming down to the equivalent of a tabloid which for a number of reasons we prefer to call a compact.

I think it is a great tribute to all our staff that we managed all those changes with remarkably few hitches, although there were one or two technical problems along the way and I can say that, regardless of the shape or the printing structures concerned, newspapers will always be prone to the odd internal error.

All editors occasionally have to provide explanations for embarrassing misprints, and I'm no exception.

Picture editors must regularly come up with photographs which reflect changing weather conditions. With some papers, that means girls on a beach somewhere. The Irish News takes a different approach, and, shortly after my appointment as editor, we rang a picture of a nun sporting a large and striking pair of sunglasses as she walked through the centre of Newry on a very warm day.

The caption should have said; 'A nun hides from the sun in Newry.' In fact, what appeared in the paper was; 'A nun hides from the sin in Newry.'

That was one apology which had to be particularly carefully worded.

Now, in the past, the Irish News had something of a reputation, fairly or unfairly, as a somewhat old-fashioned paper, which contained little else other than obituary notices, greyhound racing results and lengthy and high-minded editorials, or, as one observer memorably put it, deaths, dogs and dogma.

I'm not at all sure if that was ever accurate, although it's a good line, but it's definitely outdated in one key respect as, although, all the greyhound tracks in the greater Belfast area are either in suspension or have actually closed, the Irish News is still up and running.

Our death notices are indeed just as essential as a reader service as ever, but I think that the only dogmatic aspect of our political stance is opposition to violence from any quarter and support for progress through constitutional means.

There was never much doubt that we would be backing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, although the News Letter faced many dilemmas before urging a yes vote in the referendum.

The other side of the coin followed shortly afterward with the publication of the Patten report in September 1999 with its proposals for new policing structures.

Policing is the issue which absolutely goes to the heart of the matter in the north and there is never going to be a proper, fair and lasting settlement until it is resolved once and for all.

The nationalist relationship with the police force in the north, from the foundation of the state and due to a number of factors, some compelling and others quite debatable, ranged from the decidedly cool to the openly hostile.

Chris Patten's report, with its carefully considered system of innovations, checks and balances, had the clear potential to change all that, although the initial response from within the broad Catholic and nationalist tradition, including the church, the political parties and, I suppose, the Irish News, was fairly cautious.

Certainly, while there was general approval of the Patten report, there was not exactly a rush to take seats on the new policing boards.

It is always easier to react to someone else's decision than to declare your own position, but, as the months went by, and no one else seemed to be breaking the deadlock, we felt that the Irish News should take a stand.

In January of 2001, we ran an editorial which urged all parties to pursue an inclusive and forward-looking attitude and take their seats on the new policing boards.

That may all sound fairly basic today but it stirred up quite a fuss six years ago and dominated the news agenda for some days.

There was an assumption in some quarters, particularly on the BBC, that the Irish News was somehow working in conjunction with the SDLP and the Catholic Church on the issue.

I had the fairly strange experience of listening on the radio to a BBC journalist, whom I knew quite well, speculating on how this link-up came about and how it might progress over the coming days. If he had asked me, as he might reasonably have done, I would have been quite happy to explain that there was no agreed sequence and that the Irish News was acting as an independent voice.

That all became quite clear over the next 48 hours as firstly the SDLP said they were not ready to move on policing and then the Catholic hierarchy said something very similar.

This was, I suppose, a difficult enough period, as some SDLP people let it be known that they believed we had undermined their negotiating position while the Sinn Fein view of the Irish News was perhaps a little more outspoken.

Effectively this meant that for probably the first time in the history of our paper we were at least temporarily on the opposite side of a key argument to the Catholic

bishops, the political leaders of northern nationalism and in all probability the majority of our readers as well.

We responded by ensuring that we reflected all aspects of the debate through our news pages, and offered regular opinion articles to those who were both for and against the policing reforms, while sticking to our own editorial line that the new structures had clear merit and should be given the chance to prove themselves.

However, the greatest difficulty we faced over policing came not from any political party but through our relationship with an organisation for which is very special to me as an individual and to the Irish News as a paper, namely the GAA.

From partition onwards, the GAA had an official sanction, known as rule 21, which prevented any of its members from joining either the British army or the northern police force.

It was widely regarded as an anachronism, but, although there were a considerable number of people in the GAA who wanted to get rid of it, there were some others for whom the time never seemed to be quite right for movement.

We had been openly pressing for change since the early 1990s, because we felt that rule 21 was completely wrong and that, as long as it remained in place, the impact of policing reforms like the Patten report would always be very limited.

The reasoning behind this was fairly simple to anyone like myself who comes from a GAA background and knows the central role which the association has always played in everyday life in many rural areas and increasingly in urban districts as well.

If policing reforms were to succeed, and the new dispensation to take a firm hold, young Catholics had to be confident and convinced about joining the police service.

However, if they were forced to make an unfair choice between Gaelic games and a career in the police, many quite understandably were likely to stick with football and hurling and the embrace of all which they held dear.

As a comparison, it might be worth asking how many Garda officers are past or present GAA members. I suspect the answer would be well over 50 per cent and quite possibly a far higher figure.

It may also be helpful if I explain just how much the GAA and the Irish News rely on each other in Ulster.

The GAA needs the Irish News to promote its games, publicise its fixtures and generally provide the kind of comprehensive and informed coverage which it traditionally did not receive from other sections of the northern media.

The Irish News needs the GAA because our readers have an enormous and practically unlimited appetite for Gaelic games. The biggest sales of our paper in the last 20 years have coincided not with acts of violence or major political developments but with Ulster teams winning big matches at Croke Park.

This is quite a personal issue for me, as I am immersed in the Irish News and I have also been absorbed from my earliest days up to the present by the GAA.

When the Irish News first began to campaign against rule 21, some GAA people quietly but strongly encouraged us and others largely ignored us.

When it started to look as though change might just happen, heavy pressure presented itself in a number of different ways, culminating in suggestions from a small number of reasonably senior GAA figures that, in attempting to report on the rule 21 debate, we were putting lives at risk, and there was also talk of boycotts of our paper and even the launch of a rival title.

As it happened, a new paper did eventually arrive, although it didn't last, but that was all some years after the rule 21 issue was resolved.

The GAA, to its great credit, sat down in the Autumn of 2001, and considered the matter in a mature way, with more than two out of every three delegates voting in favour of dropping the ban.

It would be completely wrong to over-estimate the influence of the Irish News, as a majority of the northern counties supported the retention of rule 21.

However, the fact that County Down felt able to join almost all the southern delegates in backing the deletion of the ban probably carried the day.

I'm glad that the SDLP and the Catholic Church also endorsed the new policing structures at around the same time as the GAA dropped rule 21, and I would be increasingly optimistic that Sinn Fein is moving irrevocably in the same direction.

Basically, I believe that the Irish News must stand up for the rights of our readers but also, when it is necessary, must challenge some of the perceptions within our audience, and ultimately others can judge our record in both regards..

The Co Down born comedian Patrick Kielty observed after the paramilitary ceasefires that suddenly the news, and here I paraphrase slightly, had become very boring.

I know what he meant, but I do think that there will be fascinating aspects to what is going to unfold and I hope that, along the way, the Irish News will do its level best to reflect and confront the risks and responsibilities which present themselves.

Thank you very much.

Ends.