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Ray Burke

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THE *IRISH PRESS* COVERAGE OF THE TROUBLES IN THE NORTH FROM 1968 TO 1995

Ray Burke

Introduction

THE 'IRISH PRESS' WAS THE second-highest-selling daily newspaper on the island of Ireland at the beginning of the era that became known as the Troubles. With an average daily sale of nearly 103,000 copies during the second half of 1968, it had almost double the circulation of the *Irish Times* and the *Belfast News Letter* and it was outsold only by the perennially best-selling *Irish Independent*.

The *Irish Press* had at that time a number of specific characteristics and moments in its prior history that distinguished it from the other national newspapers and that might have been expected to influence its coverage of the Troubles over the following 25 years: (a) it was the only daily newspaper to have been established in Ireland since the foundation of the State and its success assisted its founder, the anti-Treaty and anti-Partition Eamon de Valera, to attain and repeatedly to retain power; (b) it was solidly if not symbiotically linked to Fianna Fáil, which was also founded by Eamon de Valera and which had governed the State for most of the 20th century while becoming the largest political party on the island and thereby effectively overturning the result of the Civil War; (c) in the middle of the second World War, when almost every other country in Europe was either occupied by foreign armies or was being blitzed by enemy aircraft – and when six million European Jews were either in or *en route* to Nazi death camps – an *Irish Press* editorial entitled 'Rights of Minorities' declared: 'There is no kind of oppression visited on any minority in Europe which the Six County Nationalists have not also endured' (*Irish Press*, 1 April 1943); (d) two former chiefs of staff of the IRA were among the many former members of that organisation employed as journalists on the paper in its short, 36-year pre-Troubles history; (e) it had been accused in the Dáil within the previous decade of 'glorifying the gun' in the quest for Irish reunification (Dáil Éireann, 1958); (f) it banned the words 'Northern Ireland' from its pages and instead persisted in using the term 'Six Counties' decades after the government announced the official phasing out of that term in 1957 (O'Brien, 2001: 105); (g) its editor, Tim Pat Coogan, was midway through writing a book on the IRA which would become one of two standard histories of that secret army over the next 20 years.

Even more potentially-compromising was the fact that Eamon de Valera was still the head of state in the Republic, where he was seen by many people as the main instigator of the Civil War following his refusal to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which copper-fastened partition and which established Northern Ireland as a separate political entity. De Valera was also the chief creator of the Constitution, which

since 1937 had proclaimed that 'the national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland' and that the 'reintegration' of the national territory was 'pending'. (Interestingly, de Valera's two immediate successors as President of Ireland were former *Irish Press* employees, Erskine Childers and Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, both of whom were nominated for that post by Fianna Fáil.)

The *Irish Press* political correspondent from 1964 to 1984, Michael Mills, who subsequently became the Republic's first Ombudsman, has recalled that he was not allowed to work for the paper in Leinster House for seven years in the late 1950s and early 1960s because on his debut as a Dáil reporter he had corrected an obvious contradiction in a double-negative uttered by de Valera in a Dáil speech on Northern Ireland in order to make the speech comprehensible. Mills said that he was told very firmly by his bosses when they carpeted him on his return to Burgh Quay that 'Mr de Valera does not contradict himself' (Mills, 2007).

Tim Pat Coogan, who was editor of the *Irish Press* from the beginning of 1968 until August 1987, has said that he felt a 'responsibility to use the educational potential of the paper' to inform readers about events in Northern Ireland (Moran et al, 1984). He also said that when he took over the job 'Belfast scarcely showed up on Dublin's radar screen' and that in 1968 'Northern Ireland was hardly the topic *du jour*' (Coogan, 2008: 170).

Notwithstanding its inheritances, however, the *Irish Press* coverage of the Troubles in the month when they erupted, October 1968, was almost identical to that of its Dublin rivals. The newspaper was also preoccupied that month with the Fianna Fáil government's second unsuccessful attempt in less than a decade to amend the Constitution by a referendum to abolish proportional representation in the electoral system.

The month of October 1968 had four Sundays, leaving 27 days on which national dailies appeared. Northern Ireland provided the lead story on 13 of those days in the *Irish Press*, compared to 12 in the *Irish Times* and 16 days in the *Irish Independent*; it made the front page elsewhere on nine other days in the *Press*, compared to 11 in the *Irish Times* and eight other days in the *Independent*; and the North was not mentioned at all on the front page of the *Irish Press* on five days, compared to four days in the *Irish Times* and three days in the *Independent*.

The World Takes Notice

The Troubles erupted on Saturday 5 October, when RUC policemen baton-charged a Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association march in Derry that had been controversially banned by the Stormont government's Minister for Home Affairs, William Craig. The *Irish Press* on Monday morning, 7 October, devoted its entire front page and most of page 5 to the riots. Its front-page headline, 'DERRY EXPLODES AGAIN', referring to the rioting on Sunday as well as Saturday, was bigger and bolder than those of its Dublin rivals and the front page photograph was also bigger. The editorial was also devoted entirely to the events in Derry and it ran from the top to the bottom of the leader page. It noted that reports on the weekend's events would be on the desks of the prime ministers and home secretaries in London and Belfast that morning and it added: 'Tragically both reports will omit to mention that it was Irishman who clubbed Irishman.'

The editorial continued:

[William Craig's] defence of the unfortunate police who were driven into action must have rung hollow in the ears of those who had watched the televising of the scenes and who had been present. He was at a hopeless disadvantage in defending his action. The communications media have sped the story around the world ... Whether or not there was a certain amount of provocation from the Civil Rights protesters, the fact remains that Mr Craig was himself the inspiration of it. It will be little comfort to him on this Monday morning that he has done so much to bring the injustices of his regime to the notice of the world. (*Irish Press*, 7 October 1968)

The first violent deaths occurred in August 1969 following the deployment of British troops on the streets. 'SIEGE OF DERRY 1969', said the large bold headline at the top of page 1 of the *Irish Press* of 13 August over a huge photograph by Colman Doyle of a policeman with a riot shield running past a burning armoured car. The heading and picture filled more than the top half of the page and the rest of the page was filled with reports from Derry on how 91 police and 21 civilians were taken to hospital after teargas was used in 'the most serious challenge to the Stormont regime since the establishment of the 6 Counties'. What became known as the battle of the Bogside was covered on three further pages inside, including a full page of pictures, and in a lengthy editorial.

This became the template for the paper's coverage of the Troubles: a huge heading and photograph filling page one to below the fold, three or more full pages of reports and pictures inside followed by a substantial editorial, often running the full length of the leader page. The editorials invariably condemned the violence, lamented the deaths and called for the abolition of the Stormont regime and the involvement of Dublin, London and Belfast politicians in talks on a lasting settlement. The 13 August leader was typical of the style. Headlined 'Fate of the North: When will it all end?' it included the following:

Must a holocaust always precede a measure of goodwill – a measure of give and take? It is hard to countenance a predominantly Christian country allowing the sores of the North to fester any further. The politicians in London, Dublin and Belfast know full well where the root of the trouble lies. It's a problem which Belfast, Dublin and London have a vested interest in solving ... The time is *now*. Tomorrow may be too late and too bloody. (*Irish Press*, 13 August 1969)

That night Taoiseach Jack Lynch went to the RTÉ studios in Dublin to make what the following morning's *Irish Press* front page lead story called 'the most momentous TV and radio broadcast in Irish history'. This was the oft-misquoted speech in which Lynch said that the Irish government could no longer stand and watch innocent people injured. The *Irish Press* accurately reported Lynch's words: 'It is clear, also, that the Irish government can no longer stand by and see innocent people injured and, perhaps, worse.' However, its front page heading, 'LYNCH: WE CAN NO LONGER STAND ASIDE', paraphrased Lynch, as did the opening sentence below, 'The Taoiseach, Mr Lynch, last night announced that the government could no longer stand aside from the tragic events in the North' (*Irish Press*, 14 August 1969).

This perhaps contributed to the subsequent widespread rewriting of the Taoiseach's remarks to insert the word 'idly' into his sentence about the government standing by.

The editorial praised Lynch and again called on the Stormont government to go. It said: 'It is not a government of the people, but government by a rump, for a rump and of a rump of sectarian development.' It continued:

The events of Bogside have made this clear. History has turned a wheel and today's siege of Derry's Catholics looks like being as momentous for the future development of the North as the siege of 1690 was for their Catholic forebears. A vein of history is running out before our eyes. (*Irish Press*, 14 August 1969)

The next day's issue followed the template with its big, bold two-deck front page headline 'MANY DEAD IN BELFAST, ARMAGH SHOOTINGS' over a huge picture of petrol bombs exploding beside armoured cars. The leading article, headlined 'The North Blows Up', said that the newly-deployed British soldiers were not going to cement friendships by 'walking the streets of Derry with drawn guns'. It went on:

Even though the appearance of British troops in the Bogside area achieved a temporary lull in the overall situation, we must face the fact that they have also shown up the inability of the Stormont regime to maintain order ... what the British troops have done in real terms is not to quell an uproarious Bogside citizenry but to prevent alleged instruments of the law, to wit, the B Specials and the RUC, from falling on the people of the area with boot and baton. Unacceptable as they are in the larger context of the partition issue, the British troops have shown that British law and British justice can only be maintained in Northern Ireland by the aid of British weapons. (*Irish Press*, 15 August 1969)

The next day's front page included a picture captioned 'a group a British soldiers playing football with locals just off the Falls Road yesterday', but on an inside page the paper carried the first statement from the IRA in what the report called 'the present troubles in the 6 Counties'. The report said that

the Army Council of the illegal Irish Republican Army in a statement last night over the name of Cathal Goulding, Chief of Staff, claimed that a number of fully-equipped units were already in the 6 Counties to be used in a defensive capacity. (*Irish Press*, 16 August 1969)

The IRA split over how to react to events in the North was reported in a single column front page report on 29 December 1969. The report quoted from a Provisionals' statement which claimed that 'the basic military role of the Irish Republican Army' had been undermined in recent years by an obsession with parliamentary politics and that

the failure to provide the maximum defence possible of our own people in Belfast and other parts of the 6 Counties against the forces of British impe-

rialism last August is ample evidence of this neglect. (*Irish Press*, 29 December 1969)

The paper did not comment editorially on the IRA split, but it devoted a full leader that day to the death of Dan Breen, the IRA man who had fired the first fatal shots in the War of Independence in 1919. Much of page 7 was covered by pictures, tributes and profiles of Breen and the editorial described him as 'a legend' and 'a name which will not be, and should not be, forgotten' (*Irish Press*, 29 December 1969).

Confirmation of the IRA split made the off-lead on page 1 of the *Irish Press* on 12 January 1970. That day's editorial condemned Sinn Fein for being 'dogmatic and intolerant' as well as 'secretive and anti-democratic'. It said that Sinn Fein had been rejected by the electorate and it continued:

Strangely, however, in the welter of new social and economic commitments, the primary objective of reunification appears to have become rather submerged and, indeed, it may be that the splinter group calling itself the Provisional Army Council will take up in the North where the Goulding-led group have left off. (*Irish Press*, 12 January 1970)

Less than six months after the IRA split, the Taoiseach was the guest of honour at the launch in Dublin of Tim Pat Coogan's book on the IRA. The following morning's *Irish Press* reported that the book's English publisher had already sold out the initial print run. It described the book as a history of 'The Movement' – in inverted commas and initial capital letters. A prominent and favourable review appeared on the following Saturday's books page, under the punning heading 'Gael Force'. (*Irish Press*, 25 June 1970)

Internment

One year later, and two years on from the Battle of the Bogside, a new phase of the Troubles began with the introduction of internment without trial. 'NORTH'S NIGHT OF HORROR', said the big bold headline on the front page on 10 August 1971, under a strap that read 'Violence and terror follow internment'. The lead story said that at least 13 people had died in the worst violence since August 1969. The lengthy leader had a single word headline, 'Bungling'. It said that if internment was not a prelude to the abolition of Stormont and the start of constitutional talks, 'then it was a piece of criminal weakness intended to appease the Unionist right-wing and it will bring upon the Unionist and the British much the same judgment which followed the appeasement at Munich'. The editorial went on:

The British Army came into the North in the wake of the Bogside and Belfast rioting of 1969 to be met with cups of tea. Their behaviour subsequently, and the ineptitude of their political mentors, have turned those cups of tea into nail bombs ...

In the wake of 1969 the IRA split because it had become so enmeshed in silly, eyes-elsewhere, socialist policies, that it was unable to defend the Catholics of Belfast when the Orange mobs struck. (*Irish Press*, 10 August 1971)

The editorial said that the Provisional IRA had taken on the role of protector of the Catholic population, partly because of its own 'ruthless daring and efficiency' and partly because the British Army had from the start conferred upon the Provisional IRA a bogeyman status, and a strength which it did not possess. It added:

High, lower and middle class today place as much credence almost in the Provisional IRA as did the population of this island in their predecessors during the Tan war. (*Irish Press*, 10 August 1971)

The escalation in violence during 1971 resulted in 174 deaths, a seven-fold increase on the previous year's 25. The *Irish Press* began 1972 with a New Year's Day editorial that was extraordinary even by the standards of its own frequent, lengthy leaders on the Troubles, or 'lengthy musings' as Tim Pat Coogan (2008: 187) would himself later describe them. Spread across four columns, instead of the customary two, and running almost the entire length of the page, it carried a two-deck headline 'Civil War: Prospect and Retrospect' and began by marking the 50th anniversary of the Civil War and adding: 'We know its consequences. Let us hope that from them we can learn how to prevent the Northern issue engulfing us all again in the same way' (*Irish Press*, 1 January 1972).

Noting that the post-Civil War generations in the Republic had known only peace while hoping that 'the Border issue' had died away while they remained in ignorance of 'the daily misery of a statelet which had law but not justice for its minority', it went on:

We are no longer in a peace-time situation. This tiny island is now one of the world's trouble spots. We are portrayed, not in terms of tourism, the scenery and economic growth, but through the eyes of the world's war correspondents who now rate Belfast a more war-torn city than Saigon.

It added: 'Attempting a settlement without dealing with the IRA would be like America ending the Vietnam war without reference to the Viet Cong' (*Irish Press*, 1 January 1972).

That leader, Tim Pat Coogan recalled nearly 40 years later, 'summed up my attitude over the whole period of conflict' (2008: 187). On the same day as that editorial the *Irish Press* carried on page 3 a report on the tributes that were being paid to a member of the IRA GHQ staff who had been killed in an explosion in his own workshop in Dublin two days previously. His funeral was covered on the following Monday with a front page picture of four men firing a volley of shots at his graveside and a three column report on page 4 (*Irish Press*, 3 January 1972).

Bloody 1972

The year 1972 would turn out to be the bloodiest single year of the Troubles, with the number of people killed almost trebling from the previous year to 470. The worst days were when the British army killed 13 people in Derry in January and when the Provisionals killed 11 people in Belfast in July. Reaction to Bloody Sunday in Derry dominated the *Irish Press* front page and editorial page for weeks. It produced the front page lead and a leading article on all but four of the 24 publication days that

followed it and on two of those four days it was the Fianna Fáil Árd Fheis that supplanted it as front page lead. 'DERRY MASSACRE' was the front page headline on the morning after the killings, under a strap that said '13 killed, 17 wounded in city of terror' (*Irish Press*, 31 January 1972). The large front-page picture, destined to become an iconic image of the day, was of future bishop Edward Daly waving a blood-stained handkerchief as he tried to lead a group carrying a wounded man to an ambulance. A full page of photographs inside was headlined 'The Rape of Derry'.

The leading article, headlined 'Another Bloody Sunday' branded the Unionist government as 'war criminals' for encouraging the British army to suppress the insurrection in Derry ruthlessly. It said:

Innocent Irish blood has been recklessly spilt in the cause of a Unionist stability which does not exist, never existed and never will exist ... they (the Unionists) have had more blood, they will want more blood, but the last thing they will ever do is to crush Derry.

If there was an able-bodied man with Republican sympathies within the Derry area who was not in the IRA before yesterday's butchery, there will be none tonight. If the wildest Republican sat up for a week to devise ways and means of recruiting the entire Northern minority and a good few in the South, he could not have come up with a more effective scheme than the one which the British implemented yesterday. (*Irish Press*, 31 January 1972)

The editorials over the following days were equally emotive, reflecting the mood in the Republic where tens of thousands of people left their workplaces and colleges to march on the streets. The February 1 leader, headlined 'United in Mourning', ran the full length of the page and it observed that 'never has the Northern minority's cause received such widespread support in the South'. Adding that 'all the world now knows that the Paratroopers' maroon beret is not a symbol of a peacekeeping force, but an emblem of brutality and violence', the leader called for a united effort 'at every level, constitutional and otherwise' to end the Stormont regime and get British troops withdrawn (*Irish Press*, 1 February 1972).

The following day's leader was even more emotive and its references to the Northern minority drifted from third person plural pronouns to first person plural. Headlined 'The unrepentant and the doomed', it said:

Let no one make any mistake about it, the current political realities make more casualties inevitable and we say this with the same sinking feeling of sad inevitability with which we have been accurately predicting the course of events ... there is still a regrettably long hard struggle ahead to convince the Tory leadership of the basic injustice of their cause and the basic rightness of ours. That struggle is the one we must concentrate on ... Britain knows that neither the world nor the Irish are going to allow her to get away with any more Irish Sharpevilles. (*Irish Press*, 2 February 1972)

Bloody Friday in Belfast, within six months of Bloody Sunday in Derry, was described on the front page of the *Irish Press* as 'a savage bomb blitz which killed 11

people, injured 130 and virtually devastated the centre of Belfast'. The Provisionals' claim of responsibility was noted on the page one strap heading. The editorial was headlined 'Chain of Madness'. It said:

An intensification of the (bombing) campaign was forecast in yesterday's *Irish Press*, but it was expected that it would be directed against the British army, military and possibly economic targets, not callously against the civilian population ... the parties who either directly or indirectly contributed to yesterday's carnage should have tested their belief in their aims and methods by helping the ambulance men in Belfast yesterday to shovel dismembered bodies into polythene sacks, and with that blood on their hands as well as their consciences, have gone to grieving widows and orphans and explained how this carnage was the only way to bring about their objectives.

The people of Ireland, North and South, desire an immediate end to the round of killings, maimings, destruction, and this can only come about by getting round the conference table ... It is to be profoundly hoped that out of the shock of yesterday's events may come the impetus to start the talks which alone can save Ireland from what could be the darkest period of her troubled history. Let us hope that it is not too late. (*Irish Press*, 22 July 1972)

The paper's editorial when the Stormont parliament was 'prorogued' in late March 1972, between Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday, said that while Stormont was 'gone forever', direct rule from London was not an end in itself, but a means to an end and, it hoped, an end to the killings. But it added that, however the deal was wrapped up it 'means the introduction of direct rule by the United Kingdom over part of this country' (*Irish Press*, 25 March 1972).

Ambivalence

Editorial sentiments like those appeared at a time when *Irish Press* coverage of the Troubles regularly had to share page space with prominent and deferential coverage of former IRA men at the time of their deaths or the anniversaries of their deaths. As many of these men were national heroes or State founding fathers and as most of them were linked to Fianna Fáil, the paper paid them due homage while condemning elsewhere on its pages the daily violence of the Provisional IRA, which claimed a direct link to them. Added to this strange juxtaposition of reverence for the old IRA and condemnation of the contemporary one – already noted above at the time of Dan Breen's death – was the use of the paper's staff, passively or actively, as a conduit for information about the Provisional IRA in what had become a propaganda war as well as a real war.

The dichotomy was evident in the days before and after Bloody Friday in Belfast. Just four days before the outrage, the paper devoted nearly a full page to an exclusive and exhaustive insiders' account of a secret meeting in London a few days earlier between Britain's Secretary of State for the North, William Whitelaw, and the entire leadership of the Provisional IRA, including the hitherto unheralded Gerry Adams, who was flown by the RAF to London from the H Blocks where he was interned. The report, trumpeted in a strap across the top of the front page, was prac-

tically a verbatim account of the meeting and was, in the words of the reporter who wrote it, 'confirmed to me by a high-ranking member of the Republican Movement' (*Irish Press*, 17 July 1972).

And two days after Bloody Friday, while the paper led its front page with a report on emergency weekend talks about the North at Chequers, it also carried on its front page a picture across five columns of President de Valera emerging from a mass marking the 50th anniversary of the violent death during the Civil War of IRA leader Cathal Brugha, who was described in the caption simply as 'the patriot Cathal Brugha'. Page 3 carried a report on the mass, which it said was organised by the 'Dublin Brigade of the IRA'. The report also noted that the Taoiseach was represented at the mass by Major Vivion de Valera TD, a son of the founder (*Irish Press*, 24 July 1972).

Ambivalence arising from these regular reminders of the valour of the old IRA persisted for most of the first decade of the Troubles. In the month of August 1975, events in the North merited front page coverage on 25 of the 26 publication days and on 13 of those days they made the front-page lead. The only exception was 30 August, when the entire front page and all of pages 3, 4, 5 and 10, as well as a further 11-page supplement, were devoted to the death of Eamon de Valera. The pages were replete with articles and pictures recalling de Valera's role in the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence, including a 1921 remark by him about partition, when he told the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis: 'There is no difficulty finding the boundaries of Ireland. The Almighty marked them forever in the Atlantic' (*Irish Press*, 30 August 1975). The main story on the Troubles that day was relegated to page 7 and the editorial, filling half of page 10, made only one passing reference to the North, claiming that without de Valera 'the re-unification of the country...could have been discarded'.

Official unease over perceived equivocation about violence on the pages of the *Irish Press* came to a head just over a year after de Valera's death, when the IRA murdered the British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs, near his residence in Dublin. The murder was unreservedly condemned in the *Irish Press* editorial on 22 July 1976, which said that 'one of the first principles of civilised dealings between states' had been violated by this first assassination of a diplomat in the history of the Irish State. It added: 'With the Ambassador's death the question of the North and of violence here moves on to a new plane.'

However, a number of 'Letters to the Editor' published in the *Irish Press* following the murder caused a huge row between the newspaper and the Government. A proposal to establish a memorial fund to honour the late Ambassador was supported by some letter-writers, but strongly criticised by others as an insult to all who had died for Ireland. Among those following the correspondence was the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, who disclosed to the London Correspondent of the *Washington Post* that he was keeping a file of the letters and that he might use a proposed Criminal Law Bill against the newspaper that published them.

Threat to Press Freedom

Controversy raged for nearly a fortnight in the media and in the Dáil after the *Irish Press* exclusively revealed the existence of O'Brien's file, following a personal tip-off

to Tim Pat Coogan from the *Washington Post* correspondent, Bud Nossiter. 'O'Brien's Threat to Press' said the front page heading on the exclusive story across five columns (*Irish Press*, 4 September 1975). The editorial, simply headed 'Censorship', ran the full length of the page and noted that the 'Letters to the Editor' appeared 'only a few centimetres from this editorial column'. It said that that would be 'a very short step indeed' for Conor Cruise O'Brien 'and those who think like him' to further suppress opinion and pave the way to full-scale political censorship. It continued:

The proposed law is the most serious threat to the freedom of the press and liberty of expression ever proposed in this country under native government, except for the period of Emergency during World War 2 when there was an internationally created state of emergency. Now we have a domestic and largely artificially created one, but one of its principal effects is going to be the ease with which, if the new legislation goes through, the Government can gag the Press – to a far more damaging degree even than it now inhibits RTÉ's news gathering activities. (*Irish Press*, 4 September 1975)

Further full-page editorials appeared on the following days, alongside a full page reprinting of all of the contentious letters and of the entire *Washington Post* article on the story. In that article Nossiter wrote:

He (Conor Cruise O'Brien) pulls from his files letters to Coogan's *Irish Press*. They denounce contributions to a memorial fund for the murdered ambassador as an insult to the patriots who died for Irish freedom. 'With this kind of language', O'Brien says grimly, 'you induce young people to join the IRA, putting youths at the disposal of men who may order them to kill or maim'. (*Irish Press*, 9 September 1976)

The *Irish Press* editorial on the day it reprinted the *Washington Post* article also ran the full length of the page and it said:

The plain fact of all this controversy is that ... Dr Cruise O'Brien was caught with his hand in the cookie jar by the *Washington Post* reporter to whom he spoke, never dreaming that his infamous file of newspaper cuttings would become public knowledge. The good doctor probably imagined that he was talking to someone from a big-time international newspaper, that all that passed between them would be above the heads and beyond the purview of the peasantry of the local Irish press. (*Irish Press*, 9 September 1976)

Within a week, the coalition government, which was only the third non-Fianna Fáil government since that party came to power nearly half-a-century before, backed down and abandoned its planned media curbs by accepting a Fianna Fáil amendment without a division in the Dáil. The ensuing *Irish Press* editorial said:

It is, of course, extremely gratifying to the *Irish Press* in particular and Irish journalism in general that the government should so greatly water down the

infamous section of the Criminal Law Bill which has given rise to such widespread fears of press censorship ...

The fact that the *Irish Press* was so involved in this, fortunately victorious, battle for the freedom of the press is in a sense irrelevant. Tomorrow it could be any newspaper or section of the media. What is important is that a vital component of any democracy, the freedom of the press, is preserved. We should be looking to the government for an implementation of the Helsinki Agreement (on the dissemination of information) and not listening to the sound of governmental scissors at work on our newspapers. Our Northern Ireland brethren will respect us all the more for being allowed to see us freely discussing ourselves, warts and all. After all, what do we have to hide? (*Irish Press*, 15 September 1976)

In the Dáil debate, incidentally, the *Irish Press* was attacked from both sides of the house. Eddie Collins of Fine Gael said that the paper's editorials were 'irresponsible' and 'beneath the dignity of any national newspaper', but Neil Blaney, formerly of Fianna Fáil, said that the editorials did not go far enough and that they should have echoed the sentiments of some of the notorious letters to the editor (Dáil Éireann, 8 September 1976).

Two years after that row, Tim Pat Coogan was himself a conduit for IRA messages, a role which he later said enabled him to save lives. He said that a UDA leader told him that that illegal organisation would stop killing Catholics at random if the IRA stopped using no-warning car bombs. Coogan contacted the IRA with the message. He said one of the founders of the Provisional IRA, Daithí Ó Conaill, subsequently contacted him by phone in the *Irish Press* newsroom and said: 'Right, we'll stop the bombing and they can stop knocking off Catholics. You're the channel. Tell them that' (Coogan, 2008: 218).

Coogan has maintained that his coverage of the Troubles never condoned violence. He told an interviewer in 1984: 'The editorials are there to be read. The condemnation of violence is explicit and continuous' (Moran et al., 1984). He also said that he had resisted the 'self-censorship that permeated most of the print media' during the Troubles, declaring:

The record of the *Irish Press* on matters Northern will show that I managed to maintain a relatively uninhibited coverage of Northern events throughout. (Coogan, 2008: 189).

Not everyone shared Coogan's certainty. A confidential Stormont Cabinet memo of February 1971, released in 2002 under the 30-year rule, described the *Irish Press* as 'a paper bitterly hostile to Northern Ireland' (*Phoenix*, 2002).

Accusations – particularly in contemporary magazines *Magill* and *In Dublin* – that the *Irish Press* was 'pro-IRA' have been dismissed as 'unfair' by newspaper historian Mark O'Brien. He has argued that the paper's approach of condemning violence, urging compromise and educating the southern population about the root causes of the conflict 'was correct in the long term' (2008: 169).

Coogan's editorials also caused internal tensions at Burgh Quay. In 1980 a minority of journalists (31 out of about 200) publicly disassociated themselves from an edi-

torial on the North (O'Brien, 2008: 169). A former assistant editor, John Spain, has recalled asking to be relieved of having to write editorials on the North in Coogan's absence. 'It became a sort of office joke that the leaders I wrote – after one atrocity I called the IRA a bunch of subhuman Neanderthals – were the polar opposite to Coogan's leaders' (*Irish Voice*, 7 November 2007).

Updated editions of Coogan's IRA book reappeared on the bestsellers' list periodically in the 1970s and 1980s and his book on the H Blocks, *On the Blanket*, which he had written during the first half of 1980 before the dirty protest gave way to the hunger strikes, was also a bestseller.

IRA Moves Toward Constitutional Politics

The election of H Block prisoner Bobby Sands to the House of Commons in April 1981 was reported in an *Irish Press* front page off-lead, being deemed less important than the Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis pledge by environment minister Raphael Burke to introduce a £4,000 grant for first-time house-buyers. 'Sands Victory Shocks North' said the heading over a three column report that began: 'Bobby Sands, the 27-year-old Provisional IRA hunger striker, is the new MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone ... his victory yesterday ... sent shock waves through the Loyalist camps and startled Catholics in the Community at large who are opposed to violence' (*Irish Press*, 11 April, 1981).

Margaret Thatcher's refusal to meet the hunger strikers' demands was condemned as 'flinty' in the April 22 editorial. It went on:

However one looks at it, Mr Sands is a politician in prison. He has been elected because of his politics to the British Parliament itself. He has been elected while still in jail and on hunger strike, two very special categories in themselves. The Special Category status he is looking for is something the prisoners once had and which was taken away from them ... the stalemate and tension over the H Blocks is a fitting symbol of the faecal society within which the larger prison of Northern Ireland society has become – a society where industry decays, new prison accommodation multiplies, and the children of the rioters of 1969 go forth to do battle with the RUC of 1981. (*Irish Press*, 22 April 1981)

The front page on the day Sands died after 66 days on hunger strike described him as a 'prisoner, protester and poet' and that day's editorial maintained an emotional tone, beginning thus:

Belfast narrowed his options as a boy, gunmen chased him from his home, from his job. At 18 he picked up a gun himself and walked – with the IRA. In jail Britain narrowed his options to two – live as a criminal or die for an ideal. (*Irish Press*, 5 May 1981)

The editorial said that Sands would not have gone on hunger strike and would not have been elected an MP if the British had granted the concessions agreed the previous December to end an earlier hunger strike. If the British had delivered on the December deal, it said,

Long Kesh would now be a place unknown outside Belfast virtually, instead of being a symbol throughout the world of the last clenching of the jaws of the otherwise almost toothless British bulldog. (*Irish Press*, 5 May 1981)

Five months later, an editorial on 5 October welcomed the end of the hunger strikes:

Ten deaths inside the prison, six times that number outside, a community polarised as never before and the political and international stage surrendered to the paramilitaries – that has been the price paid ... we have all been losers in this grisly conflict – the Thatcher government in Britain, whose reputation was dragged across the front pages and TV screens of the world, not less than the people of this island, north and south. (*Irish Press*, 5 October, 1981)

The editorial predicted that it would take a decade to undo the damage caused, partly because of the way the strikes had transformed the Republican movement. The Provisionals, it noted, had gained greatly in terms of propaganda, finance and recruitment, while also winning seats in parliament north and south of the Border. But, it asked: 'Is it not time that they also made a fresh start by putting away the bomb and the armalite?'

Five more years passed before the Provisionals fully embraced the ballot box by abandoning the Sinn Féin policy of refusing to recognise the established parliaments, including the Dáil. The Sinn Féin Ard Fheis that abandoned abstentionism was covered in three separate page one reports, including the lead story, as well as on all of page 4 and most of another inside page on 3 November 1986. The accompanying editorial, headlined 'Change of Tactics', said that the Ard Fheis vote was a matter of strategy, not principle, and it emphasised that it was not a case of Sinn Féin suddenly embracing the democratic system. It said:

The Armalite, rather than the ballot box, still rules. The killings will still go on, even while seats in the South are being contested and even if some are won ... Nevertheless, however cynical and tactical the new move may be, it is to be welcomed. Anything that brings Sinn Féin and its membership into closer contact with constitutional politics and the democratic system offers hope of progress ... Exposure to public scrutiny and other political opinions may not convert Sinn Féin overnight, but it will be a valuable and healthy experience for them that must have some effect on the military campaign. (*Irish Press*, 3 November 1986)

The capture off the Kerry coast in September 1984 of the trawler *Marita Ann*, laden down with hundreds of guns and skippered by future Sinn Féin TD Martin Ferris, prompted an editorial predicting more headlines 'by, with or from the IRA' and observing that the Republic had to cope with the consequences of the Troubles, but not the causes (*Irish Press*, 1 October, 1984).

The editorial just a few weeks later when the IRA almost succeeded in murdering Margaret Thatcher and her Cabinet during the Conservative Party conference in Brighton acknowledged the renewed strength and endurance of the IRA. It said:

The horror and the hurt caused to people must appall all of us, but people have suffered in Northern Ireland since the Troubles began and it must be said that a rigid British intransigence ... has been a major contributory factor to the continuation of that cancer.

The editorial said that Northern Ireland had been the scene of many recent deaths and bombings, 'some of them far worse in scale, though perhaps not in significance, than yesterday's' and it went on:

We must not condone what happened ... but we cannot bury our heads in the sand and pretend we do not understand why it happened. Yesterday's unconstitutional horror could not have occurred had the advice and the urgings of constitutional and moderate politicians been heeded before now. (*Irish Press*, 13 October 1984)

The constitutional and moderate politicians were tested a year later by the signing of the Anglo Irish Agreement, which also prompted one of the last *Irish Press* editorials to trumpet its nationalist legacy. The front page lead story on the morning after the signing acknowledged that it was historic, but said that opinion was divided among nationalists, with Fianna Fáil criticising it and the SDLP supporting it. The page one headline said 'Nation Split on Deal' and the off-lead quoted Charles Haughey describing it as 'a major setback to Irish unity' and pledging to oppose it in the Dáil. The editorial noted that Haughey's preferred option was Irish unity and it said he was 'perfectly right and consistent' in this, adding: 'There will never be peace in this country until Irish unity finally comes about' (*Irish Press*, 16 November 1985).

Less than two years later, with Haughey back in power as Taoiseach for the last time as head of a single-party Fianna Fáil government, Tim Pat Coogan stepped down as editor, after 20 years in the post.

Coogan's departure allowed the management of the *Irish Press* to proceed with plans to convert the paper from broadsheet to tabloid format. Stories about the North appeared less frequently on the front page of the tabloid, despite a pledge in the final broadsheet on 9 April 1988 that the paper would remain 'a popular quality newspaper for all Ireland'.

The Peace Initiative

The influence and status of the newspaper had declined dramatically over the course of the Troubles, in line with a relentless drop in circulation. An initial rise in sales in the months following the outbreak of the Troubles was soon reversed and followed by year-on-year falls, which accelerated in the years after its founder's death. A further steep fall followed Coogan's departure and the conversion to tabloid format. The circulation department had asked Coogan to reduce coverage of the North on page one and by 1993 his successor, Hugh Lambert, did not mention the North at all in a lengthy interview about his own editorship, although the *Irish Press* was the first newspaper in the republic to welcome the Gerry Adams/John Hume peace initiative in the same year. By then, sales were less than half what they had been in 1968 and the paper was being outsold not just by the *Irish Times*, but also by the *Cork Examiner* and by some of the British tabloid imports and by the recently-launched Anglo-Irish tabloid, the *Star*.

The paper ceased publication within a year of finally being able to run as its front page headline the words 'A New Dawn' heralding the IRA ceasefire that came into effect at midnight on September 1 1994. The leader said that it was a day when courage replaced all the cowardice of the previous 25 years, adding: 'All fair-minded people must recognise this in the IRA's historic decision to put away the bomb and the bullet.' It also said:

Certainly, yesterday marked the end of a deadly era in Irish affairs. Nevertheless, it would be only prudent to advance with extreme caution in the days and weeks ahead. There is still much pain and hatred. There is much healing to be done. (*Irish Press*, 2 September, 1994)

The *Irish Press* was gone when the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998. And it was forgotten by the time the IRA made its ceasefire permanent in July 2005. The paper had ceased publication after a lifespan of fewer than 64 years on 25 May 1995, on the day that it reported on the historic meeting between Gerry Adams and the British Northern Ireland Secretary, Sir Patrick Mayhew. The meeting took place in Washington DC on the fringes of a conference hosted by US President Bill Clinton to encourage US investment in Ireland in the wake of the first ceasefire. The report, on page 10, said Adams described the meeting as frank, friendly and positive, while Mayhew's spokesman said it was 'civil' and added that Mayhew had told Adams that Sinn Féin could best promote confidence 'by using its influence with the IRA to get substantial progress on decommissioning of their stock of arms and explosives' (*Irish Press*, 25 May 1995).

A similar sentiment had been expressed in the very last *Irish Press* editorial on Northern Ireland, published in its penultimate issue on May 24, alongside a 12-page supplement on the Washington conference. The editorial said that the conference was generating enormous goodwill, but that investment decisions were based on economics, not sentiment. It continued:

This will require evidence from the Irish representatives in Washington – and most notably Mr Adams – that the peace is permanent and that there is a determination to find a negotiated political settlement which will provide long-term stability ... Deprivation, poverty and unemployment are all inextricably linked to the paramilitary violence which has extracted such a heavy toll on both communities over the past 25 years. There is now an opportunity to change that and to offer today's youngsters the jobs and prosperity that the Troubles have denied to so many of their parents.

AUTHOR

Ray Burke is the author of *Press Delete: The Decline and Fall of the Irish Press* (Curlach Press, 2005). A native of Galway city and a graduate of University College Galway (now NUIG), he has worked as a journalist in London and Dublin since 1977. He worked for the *Irish Press* from 1983 to 1995 and was the paper's last News Editor. He has been a news editor at RTÉ since 1996 and is currently Chief News Editor of RTÉ News.

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