



The oldest treatment: from left, Larry O'Toole who campaigned for an end to RTE censorship of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams and Conor Cruise O'Brien, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in 1973

# How RTE censored its censorship

Ten years have elapsed since the Supreme Court ruled that RTE was censoring itself. Niall Meehan, secretary of the Repeal Section 31 Campaign, looks back at RTE's willing muzzling

## MEDIA OPINION

Ten years ago, I conducted a two-week study in DCU's School of Communications on how often RTE lied to maintain that it was censored under Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act.

By coincidence, news of the existence of the Hurst-Adams document, a key starting point for the peace process, broke the day the study commenced. Had RTE told us a could not interview Gerry Adams, my main thesis that RTE was censoring the existence of censorship would have been up the spout.

However, the first day's news set the tone. Newswriter Bryan Dobson reported that John Hume was unavailable for interview because he was in the US. What of Adams? Was the audience told that although the other end of this political double act was physically available, RTE could not interview him either? No, they were not. Adams remained a non-person in a story named after him for two whole weeks. It was typical of the RTE response to censorship, one that frequently left outsiders gazing on in disbelief.

That year, 1993, was a bad one for RTE. In its campaign to uphold the law, RTE broke it. On March 31, the broadcaster was found by the Supreme Court to have been operating an illegal system of self-censorship. Under cover of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, RTE had systematically extended the scope of the censorship rules. It had presented a Sinn Féin member (now Sinn Féin councillor) Larry O'Toole from speaking about a trade union dispute in which he was the spokesperson.

After the High Court declared the practice illegal RTE appealed to be re-considered and told the Supreme Court it would allow a Sinn Féin actor to advertise a bar of soap. The



In 1993, the Section 31 team took their opportunity to adapt an RTE advertising campaign to their own ends. The above poster was originally an ad for Bill Soggar's show. The 'TV Tour' and 'End Censorship Now' was added afterwards.

US Newspaper Guild declared. "We are astounded that RTE, instead of welcoming this liberal interpretation of a restricted censorship statute, is asking the Irish Supreme Court for a greater restriction of its free-speech rights."

### Blanket ban

RTE said that its blanket ban was an exercise of its discretionary powers. Yet, when faced with precisely the same dilemma, the BBC said that a Sinn Féin member could not be held to be representing his or her party during any waking moment. Under British censorship rules, Gerry Adams was broadcast speaking on behalf of constituents.

Since the 1970s RTE had been ordered to stop Sinn Féin and IRA representatives or spokespersons from being broadcast. Section 31 permitted government to issue an annual censorship order. Loyalties were also banned, but by common admission of ministers, Section 31 was aimed at Sinn Féin.

The order issued by Flannia Hill minister Gerry Collins in 1971 led to the sacking of the RTE Authority and the jailing of journalist Kevin O'Kelly over his refusal to name IRA chief of staff Sean Mac Stieghin as the voice on a taped interview. After Conor Cruise O'Brien became Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in 1973, he accused RTE of allowing a "spiritual occupation" by the IRA. A special

management regime was put in place. Those who would not toe the line were sent to agriculture, children's aid and religious broadcasting.

By 1976 the National Union of Journalists said that the government loan on "security" issues was not questioned by RTE. There were major stories of local, national and arguably world significance that RTE was afraid to touch. Allegations of British involvement in the 1974 Dublin Monaghan bombings were left unmentioned. Miscarriages of justice affecting the Birmingham Six and others were largely ignored.

RTE sent its security correspondent to the Sinn Féin IRA Press to report his impressions over pictures of the journalists of Sinn Féin delegates. During this brief yearly ritual RTE said that "ministerial restrictions" affected coverage. A system of self-censorship was secretly in place at the conclusion of O'Brien's tenure as minister in 1977. Subsequent governments left that system in place.

This is confirmed in a recent biography of President Mary McAleese by Ray Muz Munnis, CEO law-Chenoweth. McAleese was an RTE reporter during the IRA hunger strikes. Her biography recounts how the unfortunate Forbes MacFad was roaredly denounced as "a fucking Paddy", after he broadcast an objective account of the growth in nationalist support for the hunger strikers.

RTE's day-to-day practice aimed the specter of accepted opinion on

the North. The absence of a republican voice allowed the promotion of the idea that the SDLP represented a form of nationalist extremism, and that ministers were in the minority at the steepest middle of the political continuum. John Hume was relentlessly attacked.

In RTE, imaginary Provos were seen everywhere. Teacher Eileen Flynn was infamously and publicly sacked from her job in Westford because she was pregnant and unmarried. Hesitant and uncertain, she ultimately agreed to be interviewed by RTE, until management instructed that she be asked (on the basis that her partner was) if she was an SF member. RTE banned an advertisement for a book of short stories by Gerry Adams and refused to allow him to be interviewed as the author of a work of fiction.

### Ray Burke steps in

In 1988 an exalted RTE reporter, Jerry McGeever, recorded and later broadcast Martin McGuinness as the bodier of three unnamed IRA members shot by the SAS in Gibraltar travelled over the border. Ray Burke was minister at the time. For reason now becoming apparent, he carried ministerial responsibility for broadcasting around on his back as he traipsed from department to department. Burke rang RTE to express his strong rage and to assert that "the foundations of the state" were

shaking. McGeever was hailed before her boss and accused of being "a member of the Repeal Section 31 Campaign" (even this was suspect). She was sacked in the bid to shore up the foundations of our brown censored society.

Many accounts of those days in RTE ascribe its failings to a take-over of RTE current affairs by the Workers Party, whose hysterical anti-provisional formed the backbone of RTE's system of self-censorship.

### The two Joos

However, this is to miss the point. There was a peculiarly RTE alliance between the systems of media control originally devised by the two Joos (McCarty and Sullin) at work. The conservative leaderships of the Irish political establishment were happy to see the republican viewpoint excluded, even if that meant the eventual if short-lived emergence of the Workers Party. The attempt by the Workers Party to control media coverage of the North was largely successful because it was in tune with a conservative fear of the consequences of permitting exposure of nationalist experience in the North. That conservative attitude continued to affect coverage long after the demise of Section 31 in January 1994 and of Workers Party influence. It was also not confined to RTE.

Epilogue: after Larry O'Toole won his appeal, he became the first Sinn Féin member to be knowingly interviewed by RTE in 20 years about how he felt by how won his case. Ironically, he also became the last one banned some eight months later, when RTE refused to allow him to be interviewed on the same subject for an item in an RTE-Channel 4 co-production.

As he had become a Sinn Féin candidate in an election some five months off, RTE said he was now a Sinn Féin representative in his every utterance.

Minister Michael D Higgins put an end to this farce, when he abolished the Section 31 Order. What RTE did then is another story.

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