

## Dropping the Captain

The short but eventful editorship of Louis McRedmond at the *Irish Independent*, 1968-70.

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Recent events both before and after the publication of Lord Justice Leveson's Report into regulatory aspects of the newspaper industry in Britain have tended to concentrate on ethical and professional issues as manifested in the practices of a substantial number of British national papers. Of less immediate concern – but, it could be argued, of some significance in the longer term – has been the relationship between proprietors and editors. It can reasonably be suggested that because the issues surrounding journalism practice are at least as cultural as they are legal or regulatory, and because culture within organisations flows down from the top rather than seeps up from the bottom, these relationships are deserving of further study than they have received to date. In the specific British context, the role of the effective proprietor of the News International group of newspapers has been evident in two sharply contrasting ways: in Mr Murdoch's doughty, if behind-the-scenes, defence of Rebekah Wade, until the pressure of events forced her resignation from the editorship of the *News of the World*; and in the extraordinary removal of the editor of *The Times*, James Harding, and his replacement by James Witherow - actions carried out without the prior approval of that newspaper's independent directors, whose rights to oversee and approve such dismissals and appointments had been specifically written into the agreement by which Mr. Murdoch had assumed ownership and control of these newspapers.

The appointment and dismissal of editors of national newspapers is, with few exceptions, a process remarkable, on either side of the Irish Sea, for its opacity. As important questions of reputation are involved, this is perhaps to be expected; but it is still remarkable that an industry which demands so much transparency of others manages, in this respect at least, to keep its cards so close to its chest. This essay is an attempt to elucidate and document, on the basis of a previously unavailable collection

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0780/0780.asp>

of papers, the issues involved in such a process in the case of the appointment and dismissal of one Irish national newspaper editor almost half a century ago.<sup>2</sup> Whether they are relevant to today's controversies is for others to decide.

Irish national newspaper editors were, for most of the twentieth century, a relatively protected species. They tended to live long, if not quiet, lives, and, once in position, tended to be hard to dislodge, at least as long as their title was commercially successful. At the same time, and for the very reason that the stability of their employment is linked in one way or another to the revenue they generate for the shareholders of their company, retribution for perceived failure could be swift and irreversible.

The long tenure of office of most Irish national newspaper editors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is, therefore, also a sign of the relative prosperity and stability of the industry itself, as well as a lack of volatility in society generally over the period. Between 1905 and the appointment of Louis McRedmond in 1968, the *Irish Independent* had only three editors; the same was the case in the *Irish Times*. Only at the *Irish Press*, where there were more than twice that number in a much shorter period, and where the duration of editorial appointments was sharply circumscribed by political whim,<sup>3</sup> was a different pattern evident, not least for the political reasons noted.

In those circumstances, the relatively short editorship of Michael Rooney at the *Irish Independent* could be seen as something of a blip in editorial fortunes at that title, although it was undoubtedly relevant that Rooney's apprenticeship had been over-long: his retirement came after a total of no less than 37 years' continuous service with the paper. He had been imprisoned by the British in Northern Ireland in the 1920s, and had been an assistant editor to Frank Geary, this predecessor as editor, Geary since 1935. As McRedmond himself noted at a function to mark Rooney's retirement, Rooney had been "a fiery little bundle of turbulence that burst out of a County Down fishing port [Ardglass] to make life very troublesome for more than

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<sup>2</sup> I am most grateful to Mrs Maeve McRedmond for permission to access the papers of her husband, the late Louis McRedmond, editor of the *Irish Independent* 1968-70, prior to their transmission to the Media History Archive at Dublin City University, where they will eventually be made available for research purposes. For the purposes of this article they will be described as LMcRP.

<sup>3</sup> This was particularly marked during the long suzerainty of Major Vivion de Valera, the son of the paper's founder, Eamon de Valera, and himself a member of the Dáil for many years.

one minion of Lloyd George.”<sup>4</sup> There was no doubt, however, that – whatever the circumstances of his departure – the 1960s had seen such rapid social and economic change that even a fairly conservative board at the paper could see the need to replace a man who was an able but now virtually superannuated representative of an older generation.

Louis McRedmond would appear to fill the need for a fresh face, and a fresh style, perfectly. He was young – only 36 – and was a qualified barrister who had been with the newspaper since 1958, serving as sub-editor, literary editor and chief leader-writer before his appointment as deputy editor in 1967.<sup>5</sup> He was, too, a committed Catholic, but one of the Vatican II generation: his reports from that Council during its last session in the autumn of 1965, and from the first Synod of Bishops in 1967, established a new voice in what had traditionally been a very conservative publication, whose overt obeisance to Catholicism had been explicitly praised by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. John Charles McQuaid, on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary in 1955.

Benedict Kiely, who worked for the paper as a leader-writer in earlier days, frequently recalled his riding instructions from the chief leader-writer of the day, an elderly barrister, as follows: “You can write anything you like about Godless Communism, or the ratepayers’ burden – but don’t, for God’s sake, come to a conclusion about anything.”<sup>6</sup> Under McRedmond and colleagues like Frank D’Arcy, the editorial line of the paper, and the breadth of its book-reviewing developed cautiously but incrementally (it was the only paper to publish a positive review of John McGahern’s controversial first novel, “The Barracks”).

Leader-writing, however, was not always a painless exercise. As early as 1962, a year before the Second Vatican Council began, the young leader-writer experienced a crisis of conscience which was, in its own way, a harbinger of things to come. A student newspaper in University College Dublin had written an editorial denigrating the Rosary – such innocent times! – which had aroused some controversy within the college and the threat of disciplinary action against those involved. McRedmond was instructed to write an editorial criticising the students involved, did

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<sup>4</sup> MS notes in LMcRP, undated, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Irish Independent, 16 March 1968, announcing the change of editorship to take place in July.

<sup>6</sup> Personal recollection of conversation with Ben Kiely.

so with increasing reluctance, and eventually sent it to the editor with what a detailed memorandum indicating that, on re-considering what he had written, he had come to the conclusion that its publication would “do considerable harm in the long run to the Irish Independent.” It would give rise to charges that the paper was parochial, narrow-minded, intolerant, and ill-informed about the college, not least because the National University of Ireland, of which UCD was a constituent college, was not a Catholic institution “and its rights (as opposed to its practice) in the matter of religious censorship are doubtful.”<sup>7</sup>

“All these considerations”, he commented, “will operate among graduates and students. This is a fruitful area for expanding our circulation, being at present heavily oriented towards the *Irish Times*. It is a consideration I constantly have in mind in our leader-writing policy and I flatter myself that our efforts are beginning to show results. This one leader, I am convinced, could set us back ten years in this regard. Catch them early and you will keep them; throw them into the arms of the *Irish Times* now and they will stay there.”

Six years later, this little contretemps, and its possible implications for the future, had long been forgotten. But the appointment of the new editor also came at a time when the speed of technological change was beginning to accelerate, and the Independent’s Board of Directors Report for 1968 noted that although profit for the year had increased by more than £50,000 over 1967, and the dividend to shareholders had increased from 12% to 15%, devaluation had increased newsprint costs by £130,000 and there had been a costly national wage settlement. It also disclosed that the company had purchased a computer – the first of its kind to be installed by a newspaper in Ireland - which “will not only serve the commercial and administrative needs of our business but will also be capable of automatic typesetting if desired.”<sup>8</sup>

The financial figures for 1968, encompassing the first six months of McRedmond’s editorship, were satisfactory. Skilful utilisation of capital allowances had reduced the company’s tax charge, and the total dividend on the ordinary shares for that year increased from 12% in 1967 to 15%.<sup>9</sup> The Chairman’s statement for the

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<sup>7</sup> Louis McRedmond, memo to the Editor, 12 December 1962, LMcRP. The other quotations in this passage come from the same source.

<sup>8</sup> Report of 64<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting, *Irish Independent*, 4 April 1969.

<sup>9</sup> Chairman’s statement, *Irish Independent*, 4 April 1969.

year noted the appointment as editor of Louis McRedmond, “in whom your directors have the greatest confidence.”<sup>10</sup>

In hindsight, it is clear that the new editor was assuming office at a time when his freedom to manoeuvre – financially if not editorially – was far more restricted than he might have assumed it to be. Initially this was not apparent, but McRedmond had been in office for less than a year when the pressure began to build up. Although the cover prices of all Dublin newspapers were increased during the 1969 (this was organised on a coordinated, cartelised basis by the Dublin Newspapers Management Committee, thus avoiding the risk of anything as unseemly as price competition), management decided to take further steps to reduce costs. At a time when these costs (including taxation) seemed to be rising inexorably, the commercial imperative of maintaining and if possible increasing profits and dividends led inexorably to one conclusion - tight control over pagination, the prioritisation of advertising space, and a concomitant reduction in the amount of editorial space available to the new editor.

During the October/November period in 1969, McRedmond went to considerable lengths to quantify what was happening, and asked some of his staff to calibrate the three morning newspapers’ allocations of editorial and advertising space, the better to buttress the argument he was simultaneously presenting to the Board that this policy was actually resulting in their newspaper being unable to print important news stories that their rivals were carrying. His papers include detailed statistics for some of the days in question. On 30 October 1969, for example, the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Press* had a total of 160 columns of total space available. Of these, the *Irish Times* carried 108 columns of editorial matter, the *Irish Press*, 117 (it will be remembered that persuading advertisers of the merits of the *Irish Press* was always an uphill task). Nonetheless, on the same day the *Irish Independent* carried only 95 editorial columns in a paper carrying a total of 176 columns – in a paper that was effectively two pages bigger than either of its competitors. On November 5<sup>th</sup> the discrepancy was even more marked: the *Irish Independent* carried only 108 editorial columns out of a total of 192, the *Irish Press* 120 out of 176, and the *Irish Times* 116 out of 176.<sup>11</sup> Each set of grim statistics was accompanied by a sheaf of cuttings of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> LMcRP.

stories for which one or other of the rival papers – but not the Irish Independent - had found space.<sup>12</sup>

If this had been the only problem, it might have been soluble – but subsequent events were to make clear that there were other issues as well. At the very end of December, less than eight weeks after his presentation to the Board of his latest analysis of the pagination issue, Louis McRedmond was called to meet the directors, and dismissed, without having had any prior warning and without notice, with effect from the following day, 31 December. He had been in post for only eighteen months. The suddenness of the decision and its execution was underlined by the fact that the January 1 edition of the newspaper, which McRedmond now no longer edited, carried a book review by him in which he was described as the editor.

He immediately called an editorial meeting to tell his shocked colleagues the details of what had happened – or as much detail as he felt he could reveal without breaking the confidentiality of meetings he had had with the Board. “I want you to know”, he said, “that on a number of occasions since I became editor I have drawn the Board’s attention to the position as I saw it. In particular, I have stressed the need to restore to the editorial operation the prime place it should hold in the production of the paper, I have had no more than a limited success in convincing the Board of the validity of my views.”<sup>13</sup>

But this was not all. In language which was honourably, if frustratingly, imprecise for his hearers, he also revealed that there had been “much discussion” between the Board and himself about the kind of paper they should be producing. “I can say in general terms”, he added, “that the Board quite honestly felt that the paper was suffering because of the editorial principles by which I have been guided. Perhaps I can put it most fairly by saying that I have had great difficulty in comprehending the mind of the Board, while the Board was genuinely unable to understand me.” The *Independent* board subsequently commented to the Irish Times that his removal had been a change of staff, not of policy: McRedmond’s response was brief and to the point: “I can only conclude that I have been removed because the board doesn’t like the way in which I was running the paper.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Details in packets for a number of successive days in LMcRP.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Irish Press, 3 January 1970.

The apparent lack of comprehension on the part of the Board did not, however, extend to financial matters. The first six months of 1969 showed a 15% drop in the profits of the company in an economic environment which was plainly stuttering. After a decision at the AGM in April of the same year shareholders and investors stumped up £700,000 for an additional 2.8 million ordinary shares. Ominously, there was no reference to dividends and, by the end of 1969, the net annual profit of the group's newspapers (it should be remembered there were three of them in this stable, as well as the titles of the Argus group) had declined by almost £75,000 to £270,000. Reporting this to the next AGM in April 1970, the chairman of the company, Mr. T.V. Murphy, said that this was "satisfactory in the very difficult trading conditions which existed during the year."<sup>15</sup> He also noted that cover price and advertising rates increases during the year had failed to compensate for rises in production costs (not least the completion of a productivity agreement with the powerful printers' union, the Irish Graphical Society). Tax had also sky-rocketed: there was a supplementary Budget in October to meet unexpected levels of public expenditure, and the company's liability for wholesale tax more than doubled during the year to a total of £190,000, i.e. more than double the reduction in net profit before tax. The Chairman's statement highlighted the departure of the company's Technical Director, Christopher Wilson: the departure of the editor on New Year's Eve 1969 was not even mentioned.

McRedmond's abrupt exit was not, however, unnoticed in other quarters. The day after his dismissal, about 50 journalists on the Irish Independent stopped work as a protest: it would have been a much more serious stoppage had McRedmond himself not asked his former colleagues to mount a purely symbolic protest that would not damage the production of the paper.<sup>16</sup> Letters flowed in from all corners of the country: from Senator John Kelly,<sup>17</sup> from the historian Sister Benvenuta McCurtain, OP (who referred darkly to "the venality of the capitalists"),<sup>18</sup> from the editor of the Church of Ireland Gazette, Rev. Andy Willis;<sup>19</sup> from Alexis FitzGerald, future Senator and close to the Fine Gael leadership, protesting against the "monstrous"

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<sup>15</sup> Chairman's Statement, MS copy in LMcRP..

<sup>16</sup> *Irish Times*, 2 January 1970.

<sup>17</sup> 3 January 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>18</sup> 4 January 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>19</sup> 2 January 1970, LMcRP.

treatment McRedmond had received,<sup>20</sup> and from many colleagues on the *Irish Independent* and on other newspapers.<sup>21</sup> On such letter-writer was the editor of the *Sunday Independent*, Hector Legge, whose own departure was only a few months down the line. He advised McRedmond to emulate Kipling, and to treat triumph and disaster, “those two imposters”, just the same.<sup>22</sup> Another came from John Mulcahy, editor of *Hibernia*, who commented: “What is happening in the I.I. (and in the I.T. and of course in RTE) is that commercial considerations are gradually ossifying editorial freedoms.”<sup>23</sup> From the *Western People*, Jim McGuire wrote to observe: “What has happened to you may impel us further towards a Press Council but there are so many individual pressures and threats to editorial freedoms today that I feel only a united editorial association could meet them adequately. It is manifestly unfair that in so many cases an individual should be pitted against corporation might [sic] and left to fight his own battle.”<sup>24</sup>

A few days after McRedmond’s defenestration, interviewer Ted Nealon on the RTE current affairs programme “7 Days” suggested to the former editor that the transfer of staff from the *Evening Herald* to the *Irish Independent* was “intended to produce a more ‘pop’ kind of newspaper.” McRedmond’s successor, it had already been announced, was Aidan Pender, until then editor of the *Evening Herald*, who transferred to the morning paper together with his assistant editor, Vinnie Doyle. “It seems to me”, McRedmond replied to Nealon, “that this is what’s happening.”<sup>25</sup> The same report quoted from an interview with the managing director of Independent Newspapers, Mr. M. Murphy, the previous October, in which the board’s policy had been expressed in the following terms:

“We have always adopted the policy – my ancestors, my grandfather and his children, and now my generation have always adopted the policy with our editors – that we appoint an editor and give him a free hand; and if we don’t like what he puts in the paper, we change the editor. Up to now it has never happened.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 5 January 1970, LMcRP

<sup>21</sup> These and other letters of various dates in LMcRP.

<sup>22</sup> Legge to McRedmond, 1 January 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>23</sup> Mulcahy to McRedmond, 2 January 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>24</sup> McGuire to McRedmond, 8 January 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>25</sup> *Irish Press*, 3 January 1970.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

The other part of the problem identified earlier was that falling revenues in Middle Abbey Street were in part related to, or at last echoed by, falling circulation. Circulation of the *Irish Independent* in the 1968, the year in which McRedmond was appointed, rose slightly over that of 1967, but by 1970 it had declined from 172,000 to 165,500. It is, however, useful – indeed necessary - to put these figures into perspective. In the same period, the circulation of the *Irish Press* had declined by 2,000, that of the *Evening Press* by 2,000 and that of the *Evening Herald* by 4,000. Not even the *Sunday Independent* showed signs of improvement. Only the *Irish Times*, of the morning papers, showed an increase of 2,000, to a total of 54,000 which – although highly satisfactory by the level reached by that paper in the early 1960s - could not reasonably have been portrayed as a threat to its Abbey Street contemporary. Indeed, in Abbey Street at that time, and for some time thereafter, the *Irish Press* was generally regarded as the more potent threat. Taking one thing with another, it appears that the directors of the *Irish Independent* may have been panicked by a downturn (which, as the other newspapers' figures demonstrated, was arguably related as much to the state of the economy as to any particular editorial policy) into taking a step more drastic than the circumstances warranted.

The rise in the circulation of the *Irish Independent* in the first year of Pender's editorship was some 4,000, but this left the circulation figure still considerably lower than it had been in the final two years of Michael Rooney's editorship prior to McRedmond's appointment. This strongly supports the supposition that overall economic conditions, rather than any specific failure of editorial policy, played a larger part than the directors were at that time prepared to admit in their decision to change the captain of the ship. With hindsight, McRedmond's 1962 predictions about the possible rise of the *Irish Times* – and the reasons it might take place – can be seen as prescient, but, on the other hand, the board of Independent Newspapers were plainly not in the mood to imperil (as they saw it) the national reach, and conservative bedrock of its success by altering course in the direction of an unknowable, and unquantifiable, future. The uncertainty of the overall economic situation, and the need to restore dividends to their previous generous levels, would undoubtedly also have featured among their objectives, although their analysis of the causes and effects of the downturn was undoubtedly less comprehensive, and therefore in all probability less accurate, than it might have been.

A few days after Louis McRedmond's departure, the *Irish Times* commented editorially that the circumstances of his dismissal added to the argument for a press council which "might...encourage newspapers to be more forthcoming about themselves." Professional discretion, it added, "should not be used as a cover for hiding facts which, in any other organisation, the newspaper would without hesitation expose."<sup>27</sup> The NUJ protested, to no avail. Behind the scenes, negotiations about severance were in train. McRedmond was offered a return to his former position as chief leader-writer; at a salary of £3,588 (the editor's former salary), a figure which would decrease to £3,000 in subsequent years.<sup>28</sup> This offer was, understandably, refused. The compensation on offer was subsequently increased by a further £2,000 following vigorous legal action on McRedmond's behalf by his solicitors, Arthur Cox and Co.<sup>29</sup> His barrister, Declan Costello, refused to accept any payment for his services in this regard.<sup>30</sup> McRedmond immediately donated part of his settlement to the NUJ Widows and Orphans Fund.<sup>31</sup>

At around the same time, McRedmond spoke more forcefully to his former colleagues at a presentation and reception they organised for him in the North Star Hotel, in Amiens Street, in March – an occasion which was, for obvious reasons, not publicised in the *Irish Independent*, but which appears also to have escaped the attention of other newspapers which might have been interested in it. His colleagues' support since his dismissal and on this occasion was, he said, the 'peg' for a new lead story – "the story of the solidarity of Irish journalism."<sup>32</sup>

"In this age", he added forcefully, "when the citizen lives at the mercy of specialists, bureaucratic and often anonymous government, democracy could scarcely survive without the newspaper for its champion. As I have said before now, it cannot be marketed as you would market soapflakes. It provides an essential service that can never be wholly comprehended in the material terms of commerce. What makes the newspaper an essential service is the work of the journalist. It is a weighty burden, for

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<sup>27</sup> *Irish Times*, 6 January 1970. The Press Council of Ireland was established 37 years later.

<sup>28</sup> B. Pitcher, Group General Manager, Independent Newspapers, to McRedmond, 14 January 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur Cox & Co. To McRedmond, 4 March 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>30</sup> Costello to McRedmond, 29 May 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>31</sup> Jim Eadie, NUJ, to McRedmond, 16 March 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>32</sup> Notes dated March 1970, in LMcRP, from which the related quotations are also drawn.

it demands a knowledge of men and affairs beyond the ordinary. It demands the practical skill of writing and the spiritual virtue of courage. It is a combination that merits honour, because without it in its journalists no newspaper is worthy of the name. The reader of the newspaper gets better value for his pennies than he knows. And the employer of a journalist acquires no hired hands to be pushed about at will. He owes to these men and women the respect proper to an amateur in the presence of professionals.”<sup>33</sup>

He was now, of course, unemployed, and began work immediately as a free-lance journalist: Douglas Gageby, the editor of the *Irish Times*, immediately commissioned him to write for that newspaper at a rate of £100 a month. This would not be for a regular column (McRedmond expressed aversion to the idea of a column “for fear of becoming an insufferable pundit”<sup>34</sup>) but for regular articles, the subjects of which which would be agreed between McRedmond, Gageby, and the news editor, Donal Foley.<sup>35</sup> This was a considerable relief to a journalist who, with his wife and four young children, had only very recently moved into a new house which lacked even a carpet on the stairs.

In this new role, and in accordance with a suggestion he had made to Gageby, he wrote to Archbishop McQuaid suggesting that he might write a series of articles on the Archbishop and his episcopate for the *Irish Times* which “would be valuable in helping people to appreciate an important chapter in the history of the Irish Church.” Dr. McQuaid was courteous, but not for a moment tempted. “I fear”, he replied, “that your Editor, for all the good intentions that I am willing to allow him in this instance, would give you a quite impossible task.

“Unless you had access to my private archives you could not describe my episcopate. They will remain closed for long after my death. And they will contain many surprises for those who have already attempted to assess my years as Archbishop of Dublin. You could, of course, state what you have come to believe is my character. But, you will readily understand that, as you graciously suggest you would first show me your text, I could not sanction the praise you might think it necessary to apportion. The blame that you would find in me, I would at once allow to pass without comment. Both you – and your Editor – cannot fail to know that I have

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> McRedmond to Gageby, 9 March 1970, LMcRP.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas Gageby to McRedmond, 3 March 1970, LMcRP.

never yet answered when I was blamed or even reviled. I do not intend to change. All that side of one's life can very safely be left in the hands of God."<sup>36</sup>

Undaunted, Louis went about creating a new professional life for himself, culminating in his appointment, later in 1970, as the Director of the then one-year, later two years, and finally degree course for budding journalists at the Rathmines College of Commerce<sup>37</sup>. This evoked a letter of congratulations from his successor, and the first appearance of his name in the *Irish Independent* in almost nine months.<sup>38</sup> Three years later he took over the senior post of Head of Information at RTE, in which capacity he was a redoubtable defender of public service broadcasting, not least in controversies involving Conor Cruise O'Brien during the latter's period as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in 1973-1977. He retired from this position in 1986. He was a regular correspondent, until shortly before his death in 2011 at the age of 78, for *The Tablet*, and was the author of a number of significant books, including a history of the Jesuits in Ireland.

This episode, unique in the degree to which it can now be examined and analysed, is despite its remoteness in time a not entirely irrelevant or untimely reminder of the significance of the relationship between editors and proprietors. Much recent controversy has centred on the need to protect journalists from the whims of their editors or from the profit-driven agenda of their proprietors. It can also be argued, however, that this is also an appropriate time to explore and discuss ways in which the powers and responsibilities of editors can be safe-guarded not only against the power of the State but against the power of proprietors, in ways which recognise that the freedom of editors, no less than that of rank and file journalists, is a public good which needs to be recognised and, if necessary, defended, in the interests of the freedom of the press specifically and of democratic values generally.

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<sup>36</sup> Hand-written letter, J.C. McQuaid to Louis McRedmond, 2 March 1970, LMcRP. The letter-writer was correct in assuming that subsequent scholarly research in his archive would provide evidence of his talents as an administrator and his role as a moderniser of the Catholic Church in Ireland. He could hardly, however, have anticipated the way in which hands other than those of God, such as those of John Cooney and Diarmaid Ferriter, would explore the self-same archive and discover, in addition, his theological conservatism, and the single-minded, tenacious and often ruthless nature of his pursuit of ecclesiastical and temporal power in an age when the modalities of such power were irreversibly changing.

<sup>37</sup> Later relocated, repurposed, and re-defined as the Dublin Institute of Technology (Aungier Street).

<sup>38</sup> Pender to McRedmond, 11 September 1970, LMcRP.

This is an area which is attracting increasing attention – and, in some cases, legislation – in Europe, both within and outside the EU. As a recent EU research project indicated,<sup>39</sup> a number of European countries give cultural or legal status to the rights of journalists in general and of editors in particular. In Belgium, for instance, “Newspapers and magazines do not have such legal obligations to have an editorial statute. However, a tradition exists of foundations within newspapers that take care of the editorial principles and the values of the newspapers. The statutes of these foundations mostly contain specific safeguards with regard to the editorial staff’s independence (e.g. in case of take-overs or in case a chief editor is appointed or dismissed). It is also worth noting that there is a recent initiative of the Flemish government to make press subsidies dependent on the presence of an editorial statute or on other factors ensuring the independence of the editorial staff.”<sup>40</sup>

It would be reassuring if these traditions were seen to be gaining ground. However, recent events in the same country, which no doubt mirror what is happening elsewhere, indicate that the line between the independence of the editor and commercial policy may be in the process of becoming blurred. As the author of the Belgian case history section of the MEDIADEM report noted in 2011:

“The position of a strong independent editor-in-chief or editorial board who can serve as a barrier between the journalists and the management, was mentioned at various occasions as an important condition for safeguarding the independence of journalism. It seems, however, that editors-in-chief (and other members of the editorial board) are increasingly dealing with commercial aspects and other ‘non-journalistic’ activities that were traditionally only dealt with by management. It is not uncommon that editors are paid bonuses based on increased sales figures (which brings a risk that commercial interests might prevail over journalistic interests). In other words, the separation between journalistic activities and commercial strategies seems to be dismantled at the level of the editorial board. Figures show that editors-in-chief in the Flemish media remain on post for an average duration of only two

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.mediadem.eliamep.gr/findings/>. ‘European Media Policies Revisited: Valuing & Reclaiming Free and Independent Media in Contemporary Democratic Systems’ (MEDIADEM) is a European research project, aimed at examining the factors that promote or hinder policy development for media freedom and independence.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, Country Reports: Belgium: pp. 29-30.

years and that increased pressure by sales figures is the main reason for this phenomenon.”<sup>41</sup>

Norway, which is not a member of the EU, has what might be regarded as particularly advanced provisions in this regard. Specifically, the three key sections of a short Act (of only five sections) on editorial freedom passed in 2008<sup>42</sup> laid down that media comprised those publications, broadcasters or other mass media “that engage in journalistic production and dissemination of news, current affairs and social debate”, and continues:

**Section 3.** Obligation to have an editor.

Media as named in Section 2 shall have an editor. In this Act, editor means the person who decides on the content of the medium or part of it, whether he is called editor, publisher, or something else.

**Section 4.** Editorial Freedom

Within the framework of the fundamental principles and purposes of the operation, the editor shall lead the editorial operation and take decisions on editorial questions.

The owner of the media enterprise or the person who leads the enterprise on the owner’s behalf may not instruct or overrule the editor in editorial questions, and neither may he demand to know the content of the script, text or pictures, or to hear or see programme material before it is made publicly accessible.

**Section 5.** Occasion to deviate from the act.

The provisions of Section 4 may not be deviated from through agreement or other legal grounds to the disfavour of the editor.

Although these provisions sound remarkably like what might be for the best in the best of all possible worlds, journalistically speaking, it should not be forgotten – as Louis McRedmond frankly accepted in interviews at around the time of his dismissal – that while micro-management by a proprietor might reasonably be seen as an unacceptable form of interference with the freedom of the press, the ultimate freedom available to a proprietor is to dismiss an editor, with or without reasons

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<sup>41</sup> *Does media policy promote media freedom and independence? The case of Belgium*, Bart Van Besien, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) December 2011, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> Act Relating to Editorial Freedom in Norway: ACT-2008-06-13-41

stated, as long as the proprietor is prepared to accept the reputational and other consequences that may flow from his decision.

Asked whether the real power of newspapers rested in the boardroom and not in the editorial chair, McRedmond replied, with brutal frankness: “Yes, that is true, but let me say this is not wrong. I think the board is in effect the owner of the paper. They are entitled to decide what kind of product they want, what kind of editor they want. These are their rights.”<sup>43</sup>

In an imperfect world, the tensions between editorial freedom and commercial considerations, between the public good of independent journalism and the necessity for media enterprises to survive financially if there is to be any journalism at all, cannot be resolved on the basis of simple formulae or even of complex legal agreements. But these tensions and issues should continue to be discussed, particularly in media which have so much to gain – or to lose – as they are worked out in practice, and if those media are to make, and continually remake, the service to democratic society which is a core element of their mission.

3 April 2013

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<sup>43</sup> *Irish Press*, 3 January 1970.