

Alliance

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ALDERDICE SAYS THREAT TO PRESS FREEDOM FROM 'INSIDE'

ALLIANCE LEADER, DR JOHN ALDERDICE, WILL TODAY ADDRESS A SESSION OF THE PATRICK MCGILL SUMMER, AT THE HIGHLANDS HOTEL, IN GLENTIES, CO DONEGAL ON THE SUBJECT OF 'THE MEDIA, POLITICS, AND NORTHERN IRELAND'. THE FOLLOWING ARE EXTRACTS FROM HIS SPEECH.

DR ALDERDICE WILL SAY:

"IT HAS LONG BEEN MAINTAINED THAT A FREE AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY IS DEPENDENT UPON THE EXISTENCE OF A FREE PRESS. THERE IS MUCH HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR THIS VIEW. THE POWER OF THE PEN, HAS BROUGHT DOWN DICTATORS, REINED IN GOVERNMENT EXCESSES, AND PROVIDED A DISCIPLINE AND CONTROL OVER POWERFUL LOBBIES OF THE STATE, THE CHURCH, AND OF COURSE THOSE INCREASINGLY POWERFUL ECONOMIC GIANTS WHICH SOMETIMES SEEM BEYOND THE CONTROL OF THE GOVERNMENT, LAW, OR MORALITY. FOR THIS REASON THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN ATTEMPTS BY GOVERNMENTS, TO WIN, WOO, OR MUZZLE THE PRESS, IN ORDER TO KEEP THEM UNDER CONTROL, AND THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS HAS BEEN MOST OFTEN EQUATED WITH FREEDOM FROM GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL. THIS REMAINS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE, NOT JUST IN THE GROSS FORM IN WHICH WE SEE IT IN DICTATORSHIPS, OR IN THE CONFUSION OF BERLUSCONI'S ITALY, BUT IN OUR OWN COMMUNITIES. THE BROADCASTING BAN IN NORTHERN IRELAND IS ONE VERSION. IN PASSING MAY I SAY WHAT A FOOLISH PIECE OF LEGISLATION IT IS. FROM THE START I HAVE CRITICISED IT, AS THE WORST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS. IT DIMINISHES THE FREEDOM OF THE JOURNALIST, BUT THOSE WHO ARE UNDER THE BAN STILL GET MORE ACCESS TO THE AIRWAYS THAN MANY LAW ABIDING POLITICIANS, AND IT BRINGS THE INTERNATIONAL OPPROBRIUM OF CENSORSHIP, WITHOUT ACTUALLY BEING CENSORSHIP AT ALL. IT IS A NONSENSE AND SHOULD BE REMOVED. BUT IN MY VIEW THE MOST SERIOUS THREAT TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD DOES NOT LIE WITH GOVERNMENT, BUT WITHIN THE MEDIA COMMUNITY.

ALREADY THIS WEEK AT THE SUMMER SCHOOL YOU HAVE HEARD CONCERNS RAISED ABOUT THE POWER OF THE OWNERS. THIS IS A SERIOUS MATTER, WHETHER THERE IS A MONOPOLY OF GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP, OR OF OUTSIDE BUSINESS OWNERSHIP. IT IS CLEAR THAT MANY OF THESE OWNERS HAVE NO INTEREST IN MORALITY, JOURNALISTIC INTEGRITY, OR THE WELFARE OF SOCIETY, BUT ONLY IN PLAYING A MARKET AND MAKING MONEY.

I WOULD DRAW YOUR ATTENTION TO THE FACT THAT THE SAME NEWSPAPER CAN BE FOUND TO PRODUCE ENTIRELY DIFFERENT AND INDEED ENTIRELY CONFLICTING EDITORIALS IN EDITIONS PUBLISHED IN LONDON AND DUBLIN. THE CLEAR PURPOSE BEING, NOT TO INFORM, AND NOT TO CHALLENGE, BUT SOLELY TO PANDER TO NATIONAL PREJUDICES, AND SO MAKE MONEY. THE MORE WIDESPREAD THIS PRACTICE BECOMES, AND IT IS NOW ENDEMIC, THE LOWER BECOMES THE STANDING OF THE PAPER, AND THE LOWER TOO THE STANDARDS OF ITS READERS. IT HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO FIND HIGH QUALITY ANALYTIC WORK IN EITHER NEWSPAPERS OR ON THE AIRWAYS. ALMOST EVERYTHING IS MERE REPORTING. JOURNALISTS DO NOT HAVE TIME TO GO TO PRESS CONFERENCES, WHERE THEY CAN CHALLENGE AND EXPLORE THE ISSUES. THEY COPY, OR IGNORE, BITS FROM THE LATEST SHEETS ON THEIR FAX MACHINE, AND THIS IS SUB-EDITED INTO BITE-SIZED SCANDAL, HORROR AND SPECULATION.

EVEN IN THE CURRENT TOPICAL ISSUE IN NORTHERN IRELAND, THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ARRIVAL OF TROOPS ON THE STREETS, THERE IS PAGE AFTER PAGE OF REMINISCENCE, BUT REMARKABLY LITTLE ANALYSIS OF WHY WE ARE STILL IN THIS MESS.

THIS CHANGE IN THE TYPE OF MATERIAL THAT IS BEING PRINTED AND BROADCAST, ON THE BASIS THAT PEOPLE SHOULD BE GIVEN WHATEVER PAPER THEY WANT TO PURCHASE, ENTIRELY UNDERMINES THE MORAL BASIS FOR THE FREE PRESS. IF ALL THAT IS PRODUCED IS A MEDIA DIET OF BREAD AND CIRCUSES, THEN WHAT WE HAVE IS A DANGEROUSLY FLABBY AND WEAKENED SOCIETY, RIPE FOR TAKEOVER BY EXTREMISTS.

PROTESTS BY JOURNALISTS THAT THEY USE THEIR FREEDOM TO REPORT OBJECTIVELY AND EXPOSE FEARLESSLY ARE UNIMPRESSIVE WHEN WE LOOK AT WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING. WHEN SECTION 31 WAS LIFTED THE RESPONSE OF THE MEDIA WAS TO PAY ATTENTION TO SINN FEIN OUT OF ALL REGARD TO THEIR ELECTORAL STRENGTH. DURING THE PERIOD 20 JANUARY TO 2 MARCH FOR EXAMPLE SINN FEIN WAS INTERVIEWED 51 TIMES. ALLIANCE WAS INTERVIEWED 3 TIMES, DESPITE HAVING A SIMILAR NUMBER OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES IN NORTHERN IRELAND. THE ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY HAD LESS THAN HALF AS MANY INTERVIEWS AS SINN FEIN, THOUGH THE SDLP WERE ALSO HEAVILY OVER-REPRESENTED COMPARED WITH THEIR ELECTORAL STRENGTH. IN SHORT IF IT IS NOT ELECTORAL SUPPORT, OR WHETHER WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY IS PRODUCTIVE OR CONSTRUCTIVE WHAT DOES DETERMINE MEDIA INTEREST. IT WOULD SEEM THAT IT DEPENDS ON THE EXCITEMENT FACTOR. IF WHAT YOU ARE SAYING OR DOING IS DEEMED TO BE 'EXCITING', AND THIS MAY MEAN BEING ASSOCIATED WITH MURDER, EXTORTION, OR JUST CHEAP ABUSE YOU ARE MORE MEDIA WORTHY. THIS HAS AN IMPACT. THOSE WHO ARE SEEKING PUBLICITY ARE ENCOURAGED TO BECOME LESS RESPONSIBLE AND MORE EXTREME, IN ORDER TO CATCH THE LIMELIGHT.

THERE IS NO EVIDENCE AT ALL THAT JOURNALISTS HAVE USED THEIR POSITION OF GREATER FREEDOM SINCE THE ABOLITION OF SECTION 31, TO PUT THE HARD QUESTIONS TO SINN FEIN. THE TERMS PEACE PROCESS, AND LASTING PEACE HAVE BEEN TROTTED OUT REPEATEDLY, AND JOURNALISTS HAVE WILTED WHEN REBUKED BY MR ADAMS FOR

'GETTING INTO THE POLITICS OF THE LAST ATROCITY', INSTEAD OF CHALLENGING HIM.

LET ME MAKE IT CLEAR THAT IN ALL OF THIS I AM NOT TRYING TO KNOCK JOURNALISTS. I BELIEVE THAT THEIR WORK IS CRUCIAL TO THE HEALTH OF OUR SOCIETY. THEY ARE NOT MERE OBSERVERS, LIVING IN A MORAL VACUUM, THEY ARE VITAL PARTICIPANTS IN THE EVER PRESENT STRUGGLE FOR A FREE AND LIBERAL SOCIETY. FREEDOM IS NOT SOMETHING THAT JUST HAPPENS. IT MUST BE WORKED FOR, NOURISHED AND PROTECTED. IT REQUIRES THE MAINTENANCE OF STRUCTURE AND BOUNDARIES. ONLY A MEDIA WHICH IS BASED ON SOLID ETHICAL PRINCIPLES, COMMITTED MORE TO INTEGRITY, THAN PROFIT, PREPARED TO CONFRONT, AND INTERROGATE ALL THOSE WHO CLAIM THEIR ATTENTION, AND ESPECIALLY TO LIGHT UP THE DARK CORNERS WHERE GOVERNMENTS, BUSINESSMEN, CHURCHMEN, TERRORISTS AND THEIR APOLOGISTS, AND EVEN OTHER JOURNALISTS, DO NOT WANT THEM TO GO.

THIS IS A PLEA TO THE MEDIA. OUR FREEDOM DEPENDS ON YOUR INTEGRITY. WE ARE COMMITTED TO PROTECTING YOU FROM THE UNDERMINING OF YOUR FREEDOM FROM WITHOUT. YOU MUST PROTECT US BY GUARDING YOUR FREEDOM FROM BEING UNDERMINED FROM WITHIN. IT IS NOT THE EXISTENCE OF A FREE PRESS THAT ENSURES A FREE SOCIETY. IT IS WHAT A FREE PRESS DOES WITH THAT FREEDOM.

Following the killing of three would be robbers in West Belfast by undercover soldiers, the editorials in the London and Dublin editions of the Daily Star were as follows:

IT'S IRA WHO SHOOT TO KILL (London)	WE WANT THE FACTS (Dublin)
<p>Undercover troops shot dead three men robbing a betting-shop in West Belfast. The robbers were brandishing replica guns indistinguishable from the real thing. Whining do-gooders - joined by Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA - immediately jumped on the left-wing bandwagon, and demanded to know whether our security forces are operating a shoot to kill policy. The three villains - all with records as long as your arm - were dressed in IRA 'uniform' of black balaclavas and black woollen gloves. The Army must not waste time on a ridiculous inquiry into these absurd allegations. Anyone who tries to commit a robbery in Northern Ireland carrying weapons - or lifelike replicas - can hardly expect to be welcomed with tea and scones. And do people have to be reminded: it is the IRA who STARTED the shoot-to-kill policy.</p>	<p>No one is above the law. And that includes the security forces in the North. Last Saturday in Belfast they shot dead three raiders outside a betting shop in what can only be described as strange circumstances. Taoiseach Charles Haughey rightly said that his Government had 'serious disquiet and misgivings' about the incident. But yesterday in the House of Commons Ulster supremo, Peter Brooke, refused demands from MPs to hold an independent inquiry. Not good enough, Mr Brooke. Surely you cannot dismiss so lightly reports of eye-witnesses who said that even after the raiders had stopped, further shots were fired into their bodies. The Government here must not let the matter rest. They must insist that all the facts are brought fully into the open. Nothing else will satisfy decent people (reprinted in <i>UK Press Gazette</i> 29 January 1990)</p>