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THE NEWSPAPERS

THERE can be no doubt at all that the first friend of the homeless Catholics in Dungannon was the *Dungannon Observer*. Anyone who wants to see what the first marches for civil rights in Northern Ireland looked like has no alternative but to consult the issues of 15 June and 17 August 1963.

Then on 31 August there were large pictures of squatters in their own homes. More pictures on 7 September. The Unionist *Tyrone Courier*, whose owner was a liberal Protestant, told the same story more discreetly, with an eye on his biased readers.

From Dublin there was virtually nothing at first, but then by far the best supporter of the Catholic minority in the long run, the *Irish Press* and the *Evening Press* weighed in, for the first time on 29 August, and then on 3 September 1963.

As time went on we were driven to the conclusion that the people in the Republic of Ireland most interested in civil rights in the North were people of republican leanings. The last mentioned two papers continued to send reporters to interview people involved, and commissioned writers to deal with the whole Northern Ireland problem.

From the point of view of general publicity, and of keeping the anti-Unionist community informed about the progress of the protest movement, it was the *Irish News* of Belfast which played the most important part. It told the day-to-day story as the civil rights movement got under way, and detailed the manoeuvres of the various participating groups within it. The *Irish News* printed every statement and letter we ever sent them as well as many others from interested parties. Pictures,

which from early days we realised could best pull at the heartstrings, were rare in the *News*.

After an interval, the Dublin papers added their voices, the *Sunday Independent* having a trenchant contribution every week, written by James Kelly. What riled us greatly was that his articles only appeared in the Northern edition of the newspaper—we all knew the facts in the North, we wanted the rest of Ireland to be informed. The *Irish Independent*, when it eventually recognised the conflict, produced some good reports. Later, in its grand and intellectual way the *Irish Times* delved deeper than any other organ.

A new paper started up. It was the *Tyrone Democrat* giving us all the coverage we could hope for, and daringly striking out with a leading article—something that many local papers did not do, the explanation being that attitudes were so biased that a newspaper took a risk of losing readers if it expressed an opinion. Surely this is an indication of the sort of place we were compelled to live in.

To our astonishment and delight, some interest had awakened on the mainland. The *People* of 20 October 1963 printed a very professional piece of investigative journalism on Dungannon housing. The London *Universe* produced a full-page article on 5 June 1964 with pictures of one of the Dungannon marches. It is noteworthy that not until the violence started did the British press generally begin to interest itself in our doings.

About this time the *Irish Post* made its appearance in Britain. Directed at the Irish exiles there, its modern approach favoured our cause, and it frequently weighed in on our behalf.

Later, with violence at its height, the press of the whole of Western Europe and the USA joined in. Eastern Europe, including Russia, was not averse to making critical comment.

After the British Government and the Unionist Party, responsibility for all that happened must be laid at the door of the Unionist press. With one honourable exception, and for as long as I can remember, the Unionist newspapers in our province have been steadily misleading and misinforming the decent Protestant folk by hardly ever, if at all, attempting to explain why the Catholics expressed grievances. Protests from

what representatives we had at local and parliamentary level were either not reported at all or misleading extracts given. This conspiracy of silence resulted in Protestant people being shocked, bewildered and frightened by the events of 1969.

We had one consoling thought through the darkest days of the 'troubles'. There was a newspaper, the *Belfast Telegraph* which was trying very hard to support what it, and we, saw as the right. That it could do this and still enjoy a very wide circulation convinced us that there were a lot of moderate Protestants in Ulster. The only evening newspaper published in Northern Ireland, it is widely read.

In spite of the *Telegraph* frequently nudging the Unionist establishment in what it thought was a reasonable direction, it continued to prosper. The leaders in the paper were headlined 'Viewpoint'. In December 1966 it was calling for the momentum of change to be kept up; in September 1970, and again in October it was calling for reforms; in April 1971 it felt that there were too many marches; in June of that year it called on the Government to listen to reasonable advice from whatever quarter; then with sterling courage in June 1971 it struck at the heart of things by saying 'No bridges can be built whilst a Protestant organisation [the Orange Order] occupies a privileged and powerful position in the party hierarchy.' In March 1965 the *Telegraph* leader writer questioned the shifting of the University of Derry to Coleraine; in April 1965 it supported the Northern Ireland Labour Party's appeal for electoral reform; in December 1966 it was campaigning for fair treatment for the minority. It certainly took its courage in both hands when, in October 1966, it stated categorically that 'the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee and the UVF embrace criminals'. Mr William Craig's sectarian speeches in December 1968 and counter demonstrations in June 1969 both came in for condemnation. In August 1965 the *Telegraph* drew attention to the failure to develop the west of the province; again in November 1965 there was a condemnation of discrimination; housing policy in Derry condemned (28.7.67); slowness of reforms (29.2.68); opposition to the name 'Craigavon' for the new city (7.7.65). The *Telegraph* felt compelled to strike out on the first day of February 1966 about the antagonism it was receiving from right wing Unionism; then on 8 June 1966 it attacked the 'lunatic fringe of

Protestants' and the Paisley movement as 'a palpable challenge to law and order'. Could one have asked for more generous sentiments in a Northern Ireland Unionist newspaper?

Widgery Report

In the USA the *Washington Post* commented thus:

There are still innocent souls abroad who think that Lewis Carroll's King and Queen of Hearts are creatures of fantasy. But the publication of Lord Chief Justice Widgery's report on Londonderry's 'Bloody Sunday' makes it clear that Alice's Wonderland is very much alive.

The King and Queen of Hearts, it will be recalled, presided over the trial of the knave and invented a procedure of sentence first, verdict next, and evidence last. Careful readers of not only Widgery's report but those of two earlier commissions on Ulster can conclude only that Carroll's method has served as a model.

Widgery, Britain's chief criminal judge, not only absolves the Army for the killings on January 30, but even praises the paratroopers for their 'superior field craft and training.'

This of course explains how the paratroopers managed to kill thirteen and wound perhaps an equal number with only one hundred and two shots, while escaping any wounds themselves from the bullets that Widgery thinks the IRA was firing at the same rate.

Equally imaginative is Widgery's treatment of the paratroopers' orders. The only recorded order Widgery finds forbade troopers from invading Rossville Street. They did precisely this, and that is where most of the killing took place. Widgery simply decides that the written log of the military orders was mistaken.

The good judge was equally inventive with the case of one victim on whom 'arms' were found. This man had been examined by two doctors who saw nothing on him. But when the soldiers displayed his corpse, four bulky home-made fragmentation bombs were found stuffed in his pockets. Widgery says he cannot believe the soldiers planted this 'evidence'. On the witness stand they all seemed honest, except, of course for two whose accounts of

gunfire were too much even for the Lord Chief Justice to swallow.

Widgery's report is no more ingenious than that delivered last November by Edmund Compton, Britain's former Ombudsman. He was asked to look into charges that Catholics interned without trial were being subjected to torture during interrogation. Compton found that some men had been forced to stand spread-eagled with their finger tips against a wall for hours, that their heads had been bound in hoods, that a noise-making machine had kept up a continual whine, that they had been deprived of sleep and fed on bread and water. But this, Compton assured the world, merely constituted 'ill treatment' and not 'physical brutality'. The distinction, he said, lay in the fact that the interrogators did not enjoy what they were doing nor were they indifferent to its effect on their victims. How Carroll would have relished that.

Between Compton and Widgery came the report of Sir Leslie George Scarman, judge of the High Court of Justice. His tribunal was charged with looking into the 1969 riots in which a Protestant-dominated police force and a now defunct all Protestant auxiliary police got in their licks at Catholic civil rights marchers.

Judge Scarman handed down his verdict earlier this month. With fine impartiality it found everyone not guilty. The IRA was not guilty. Neither was the militant Protestant Rev. Ian Paisley, nor Bernadette Devlin, a leader of the Catholic cause. Most importantly the police and the vigilante auxiliaries were equally blameless. The police, of course, did make a few mistakes, like the failure to prevent Protestant mobs from burning down Catholic houses. But on the whole they struggled manfully to do their duty.

The point is that these tribunals produce reports carefully tailored to suit the government's needs at the moment. Compton was created to clear the Army and the Ulster police of torture charges.

Scarman was issued at a time when London had taken over direct rule of the province and wanted to ruffle the fewest possible feathers.

Widgery was set up to restore the paratroopers' 'good name'.

The *Washington Post* ends by pointing the contrast between such reports and enquiries held in America about My Lai, the Chicago riots and the misbehaviour of the Ohio National Guard. Unlike what happens in Britain, where they 'deliver the verdict desired by the Government of the day', each of these American cases was unfavourably reported—in America. The original British Government reports should be read in full. This is one United States columnist's opinion only.