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Title: Letter from Minister for Posts and Telegraphs
Conor Cruise O'Brien to Taoiseach Liam
Cosgrave on the subject of media coverage of
the Sinn Féin demonstrations at the grave of
Theobald Wolfe Tone at Bodenstown,
enclosing a letter on the subject sent by the
minister to the chairman of the RTÉ Authority,
Donall Uas Ó Móráin.

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 DEPARTMENT OF POSTS AND TELEGRAPHS
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 GENERAL POST OFFICE
 BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH I
 DUBLIN 1

19 June 1973

Mr Liam Cosgrave TD
 Taoiseach

Dear Taoiseach

I enclose a copy of a letter I have sent to the Chairman of the new Authority about coverage of Sinn Féin-IRA demonstrations at Bodenstown.

There is no doubt that Sinn Féin-IRA - both branches - get great mileage out of these celebrations, whatever way the Government handles them.

If arrests were carried out in such a situation, resistance would certainly be offered and subsequently great propoganda use could be made of what would be presented as the desecration of what Pearse called "the holiest place in Ireland".

If, on the other hand, proceedings are not interfered with by the Police, then a Government effort to minimise coverage of the events concerned can be very plausibly represented as interference with the freedom of the Press and broadcasting, and even people who do not sympathise with Sinn Féin-IRA can be led to join their protests on such an issue.

Finally, if the State interferes neither with the ceremonies nor with their coverage, the resulting presentation in the Press and Media will look to many, especially in the North, as official condonation by the State of the public flaunted activities of illegal armies.

To some extent it looks like a "you can't win" situation. I don't think however it is really as bad as that. I think the key to the situation lies, not directly in the Media coverage but in what is covered: the degree of impunity enjoyed by the illegal organisations, or on the other hand the determined activities of the law enforcement agencies. To the degree that the latter form of activity makes news - as in the case of the Claudia - we have seen that the Media are eager to cover it. If - alternatively - people in paramilitary uniforms parade, then media people can argue that that too makes news. There may have been - as suggested above - special and adequate reasons for not interfering with these ceremonies at Bodenstown this year. A crackdown on paramilitary uniforms and gestures in the wake of Bodenstown seems correspondingly desirable.

I suggest it is also desirable, and would have "positive" news value, to decide on and announce very shortly the single day of national reconciliation. You asked Paddy Donegan and myself to examine this, and we are in substantial agreement on it. As his Department is primarily concerned perhaps you would ask him to report to the Government at an early date on this? In view of the future commemorations now imminent in the North and the general weariness of so many people North and South with all these commemorations the present month would be an exceptionally good time for such an announcement.

Yours sincerely

Conor Cruise O'Brien

*The chance is rapidly
 positive: I believe the Sullivan
 will too.*

19 June 1973

Dear Chairman

You will have seen some newspaper comment over the weekend regarding RTE coverage of Sinn Féin-IRA activities.

Some of the commentary suggests that, while the Government is disposed to deal severely with the "Officials" it might be disposed to take a more lenient or cautious attitude towards the "Provisionals".

You will be well aware, without my having to tell you, that there is absolutely no foundation for this idea. The Government will do everything in its power to rid the country of all the varieties of illegal armies.

Speculation of this kind, ill-founded and indeed somewhat fantastic as it is, has nonetheless a momentum of its own, by tending to encourage the illegal armies, and to perplex law-abiding citizens as to what their attitude should be towards these groups. RTE coverage of the activities of such groups, combined with Press commentary of this kind, presents some difficult problems. If for example, RTE stands on its right and duty to cover the news, but professional commentators in the Press say that such activities were in fact given more prominence than their news value required, then the idea that RTE is being manipulated for political propaganda purposes will look plausible to a certain number of people, who will then interpret this in their own ways, in a country in which speculation can sometimes be pushed very far out.

Specifically, the decision of RTE to lead off television news bulletins last Sunday week with the Provisional Ceremony at Bodenstown has caused disquiet in this way, as also - though to a lesser extent - has the coverage of Sunday's ceremonies at Bodenstown.

I was quite puzzled myself by the choice of Mr Martin McGuinness as news lead on Sunday week, but decided not to query it. However the inferences which have now been drawn by a section of the Press from this do make it desirable for us to communicate on the subject. Perhaps you would let me know what you think about the matter generally, and in particular whether you think the prominence given to Martin McGuinness was compatible with the existing guidelines, and whether, if so, you propose to cover such matters in your revision of the guidelines. Believe me, I am not attempting to prejudge these matters, or to minimize the difficulty and delicacy of the decision involved. But I do think it desirable that we keep in touch about these problems.

Best wishes

Yours sincerely

Conor Cruise O'Brien

Donall Uas Ó Móráin
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TF