

The Glasgow Media Group details the effects of the broadcasting ban, now two years old

The sound of Irish silence

'This is not a restriction on reporting.' (Douglas Hurd, House of Commons, October 19, 1988).

WHATEVER Douglas Hurd's intentions our research shows that this has not been the case. In fact Sinn Fein appearances on British network television news have been severely restricted.

In the year before the ban we counted 17 interviews with Sinn Fein on BBC News out of 633 on Northern Ireland as a whole. MPs and ministers from the Conservative Party were interviewed 121 times. This includes 50 interviews with Tom King, then Northern Ireland Secretary, who was interviewed more than anyone else in the period.

On the network news in the year before the ban Sinn Fein representatives were seen or their voices heard on 93 occasions. More than three quarters of these were in items dealing with violence — for example, in news commentaries which deplored the killings at Enniskillen. There were only six appearances by Sinn Fein in items which dealt with their political policies.

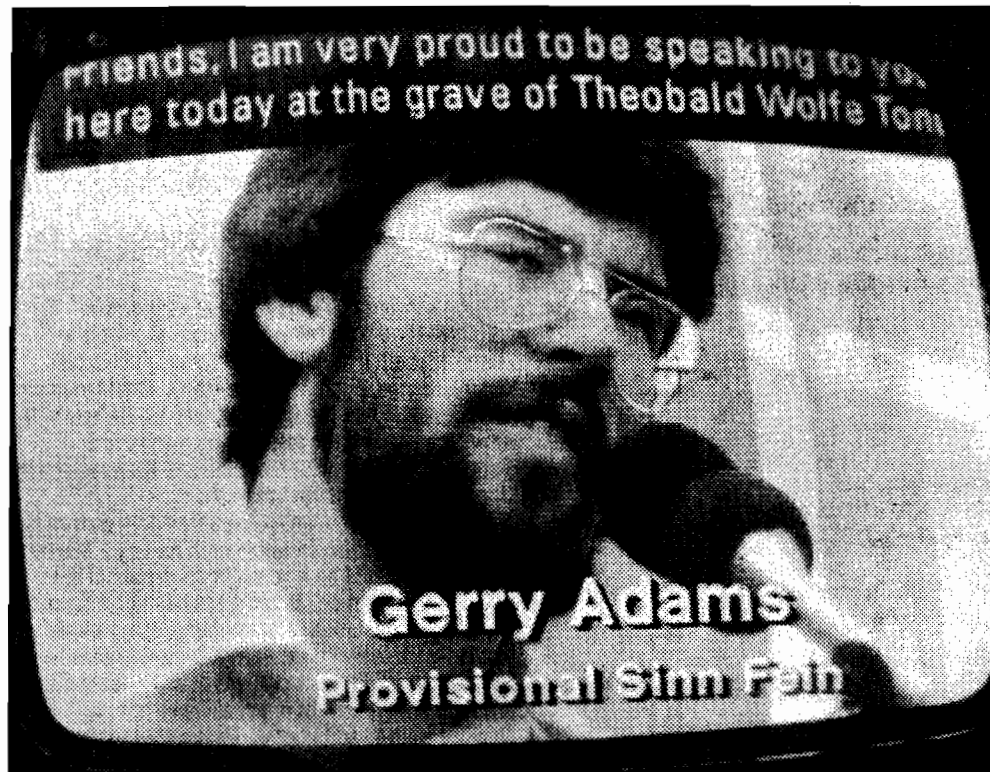
In one of these Gerry Adams commented on developments in Anglo-Irish relations that "I think the Republican position has been vindicated by the ...

events of the last few weeks." From such references it is hard to see how viewers could come to an informed conclusion about what the Republican position was.

The main argument used by Mr Hurd in introducing the ban was that television had provided an "easy platform" on which to "propagate terrorism." This draws heavily on Mrs Thatcher's contention that broadcasters provide the "oxygen of publicity" for terrorists. The assumption is that cutting off that supply will suffocate the armed struggle of the IRA.

It is clear, however, that the ban has not stopped the activities of the IRA. Far from the IRA or Sinn Fein gaining an "easy platform" our evidence suggests that the opposite has been the case.

In the period before the ban journalists' questions were routinely hostile. For example, "How does it feel to be branded one of the guilty men? ... You're very silent Mr Corrigan?" and do "you feel that you have a better line to God and God's wishes than the bishops and the clergy do?" Such coverage is hardly favourable to Sinn Fein. Audience research by the BBC has indicated that past interviews have increased hostility to Republicans. After the killing of Airey Neave it found that an interview with the INLA "increased hostility to



the IRA and INLA and aroused sympathy for the security forces." It is worth noting that British journalists have not broadcast an interview with a member of the IRA or other Republican paramilitary organisation since 1979, nine years before the ban came into effect.

Coverage of Sinn Fein in the year before the ban was very limited, both in numbers of appearances and type of coverage. Once the ban was in place interviews became more complex to arrange. They require voice overs and sub-titling as well as clearance by senior management. For journalists on tight deadlines the temptation was simply to leave Sinn Fein out. In the year before the ban republicans appeared 93 times. In the following year the num-

ber fell to 34, a drop of more than 63 per cent. This was in 1989, the 20th anniversary of the deployment of British soldiers, which in itself generated more interest.

It is also clear from our study that interviews with Sinn Fein, when they did occur, were shorter and less informative than before the ban. BBC executives have acknowledged this point in private.

The confidential minutes of the BBC's Editorial Policy Meeting (November 29, 1988) record this. John Conway, the former head of news and current affairs, Northern Ireland, told the meeting that when the Sinn Fein councillor Francis McNally was interviewed as a brother of a murder victim, the interview said "much less than it would have prior to the ban."

A second argument that the Government used in introducing the ban was that republican appearances caused offence. But John Birt, the BBC deputy director-general, has argued that "There is no evidence the BBC can uncover that our audiences are offended by responsible and relevant journalism." The IBA too have claimed that they have had no complaints. Interestingly, after the INLA interview in 1979, BBC audience research showed that 80 per cent of those sampled thought it right to broadcast the interview.

What is at stake in the battle over the ban is the official view of the "Troubles" which seeks to portray its enemies in Ireland as terrorists lacking any political motivation, and as simply criminals and gang-

sters. Successive governments have tried to limit, and preferably eliminate, any hearing for this opposition in Ireland. The broadcasting ban marked a new attempt to do this directly by legislative action.

PHOTOGRAPH: HOWARD DAVIES

The close coincidence of the views of the broadcasters and the State on terrorism and the evidence of our study shows that coverage of Sinn Fein has not allowed them an easy platform. On the contrary much coverage has been directed at discrediting the party as part of the campaign to defeat terrorism. One of the objections of the broadcasters has been that they no longer have control over their part of the battle.

The ban has silenced some voices on Ireland with which the Government disagrees and been applied to historical figures such as Eamonn de Valera, Sean MacBride and Maud Gonne. Critical voices are defined as "supporters of terrorism" and marginalised, while the prospect of broadcasters offering an informed account of the crisis becomes even more remote.

This article, by Lesley Henderson, David Miller and Jacqueline Reilly, is extracted from Speak No Evil: The Broadcasting Ban, the Media, and the Conflict in Ireland, £10 from Glasgow University Media Group, The University, Glasgow G12 8LF.