

## Chapter 6

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### **In sickness and in health: politics, spin and the media**

Since the foundation of the state the relationship between politicians and the media has been characterised by the fraught, sometimes divergent, but ultimately symbiotic relationship between political communicators and journalists. This chapter explores, through interviews with journalists turned spin-doctors, the concept of political communication through the pejorative filter of spin. It considers the origins, connotations, and applications of spin in the context of the complex and inter-dependent relationship between media and politics and contends that the concept and effects of spin – positive and negative – are exaggerated. Specifically it argues that spin is an exercise shared, expected and required by both politics and the media and that it is driven by a complex set of rules to which both sides are ultimately and increasingly bound.

The concept of political spin is so pervasive that it is easy to forget the term itself is less than thirty-years-old. In the course of that time it has become synonymous with mistrust of politicians and ‘a euphemism for deceit and manipulation’ (Andrews, 2006, 32). The term emerged from the sporting world, first from baseball in the US, and later cricket in the UK. Moloney (2001, 125) notes that spin ‘aligns the popular image of untrustworthy and scheming politicians with that of the wily spin bowler in a cricket match who, with the flick of a wrist, flights a curving ball of uncertain length and line towards the yeoman batsman defending his wicket.’

The term spin, personified later by the spin-doctor, entered the British lexicon during the ‘age of spin’ that characterised the electoral breakthrough and subsequent governments of Tony Blair’s New Labour. Moloney (2001, 127) makes the case that ‘spin . . . an aggressive, demeaning work of promotion and detraction by one part of the political class for another . . . began as a defensive response by Labour to editorial hostility shown by the Murdoch media between 1979 and 1994, when Tony Blair became leader.’ Lloyd (2008, 142) noted that the New Labour leadership is now ‘regarded very widely – indeed world-wide – as something of a locus classicus when it comes to the political management of news. New Labour was created, after 1994, with the perceived need to manage its relations with the news media at the very heart of its project.’ That period, personified by Alastair Campbell, presented the public with a new and not always pleasant caricature of the political spin-doctor: the shadowy, almost comically media-obsessed master of the dark arts. Spin then, has come to symbolise, at least in part, declining trust in the political process, but its definition depends on one’s perspective. Regardless, the effects are such that, ‘certainly we have now reached a time when any form of communications by a government is described as spin’ (Andrews, 2006, 41).

If one accepts the contention that spin is a concept deserving of derision or suspicion, how should the bounty of blame be apportioned? One could make the case, as argued by the media, that spin is a reflection of the unattractive underbelly of the body politic; a symbol of dishonesty, manipulation and coercion. One could equally contend, as politicians and spin-doctors regularly do, that spin is not spin at all; rather it is context and information, delivered for the welcome and greedy consumption of a

news media that is driven and defined increasingly by celebrity, rows and resignations to the detriment of policy and meaningful debate.

While there is much truth in these converse perspectives, each ignores the reality that one needs the other to survive. While the political side of this complex marriage can be seen to wear the connotations of spin more heavily – perhaps because the media has the power to frame the relationship – it is nevertheless reflective of a game to which both sides subscribe. Politics is played out through an inter-dependent and complex relationship between elected representatives (and their parties and agents), the media and voters. To load the blame for increased scepticism of political communication entirely at the door of politicians and spin-doctors is to ignore the dynamics of that relationship. Lloyd (2008, 147) argues that spin is a ‘joint creation by two classes of people who need each other, in some cases desperately; it was what one of these classes, the journalists, who had long lived by “spin”, said was practised by the other, whose profession was also indivisible from it.’ Similarly, McNair (2011, 63) argues that the relationship between politics and the media is defined by a ‘relationship of mutual inter-dependence between politicians and journalists.’

### **From batsman to bowler**

With the notable exception of P.J. Mara, spin-doctors in Ireland – in contrast to the US and the UK – have been less to the fore of the public consciousness. One could argue that the historical convergence of Irish political parties in the centre, devoid of the sharper ideological divide evident in the US and UK, has facilitated a form of political spin particular to Ireland: more concerned with tribe than ideology and subject to an arguably less polarised and partisan news media. Since the late 1970s the

government's communications infrastructure has grown and developed in an effort to meet the challenges of a divergent media and evolving political landscape. Since then successive governments have sought the assistance of journalists in the management of political communication and media relations, underlining perhaps, the inter-locking relationship between media and politics.

Politicians employ former journalists as spin-doctors because of their insider-understanding of a sector with which they are obsessed and desperate to influence. One could argue however that the belief amongst politicians – that the acquisition of former journalists might equate to more positive coverage – misunderstands the nature of the potential 'pay-off'. The journalist turned spin-doctor does of course understand the media – and as a result he or she understands acutely the limits of spin and that the expectations of the political master are likely to be disappointed. Iarla Mongey, former political correspondent with Independent Network News (INN) and deputy government press secretary in the Fianna Fáil – Progressive Democrats coalitions from 2000 to 2005 described the attraction for politicians of employing a former journalist as follows:

You know the people, you know the individuals, and you know the industry. You know that if you're dealing with a reporter from Today FM, what they're looking for is entirely different from what the chief political correspondent is looking for . . . you also put a human face on the government for journalists. You're one of their own, so they come to you for background, for context. You know instinctively what frustrates them having spent so much time yourself knocking on the door trying to get in (Mongey, 2007).

The recruitment of former journalists as political communicators suggests a belief on the part of politicians and political parties that such individuals bring with them a knowledge and understanding of the media that might translate more effectively into that which is most elusive, valuable and transient: public regard and popularity. Inside knowledge and an acute understanding of ‘the rules of the game’ is considered valuable, perhaps even essential. Cathy Herbert, former press advisor to minister for tourism, sport and recreation Jim McDaid and to the late minister for finance Brian Lenihan believes that former journalists bring with them a set of skills that can counter the less media-savvy inclinations of attention-seeking politicians:

Even though politicians live by the media and are absolutely obsessed by the media they are also notoriously inept at handling the media. In my experience they are extraordinarily naïve. You really do have to coach them; somebody who has worked in the media knows the way journalists think (Herbert, 2013).

It is worth noting that while politicians undoubtedly recognise the nature of that interdependence – by virtue of their co-option of former journalists – it is a reality that is, perhaps, not entirely accepted by the media. Many journalists who moved from journalism to the post of government press secretary have experienced a ‘poacher turned gamekeeper’ reaction from their former journalistic colleagues. Shane Kenny, former RTÉ broadcaster, and government press secretary 1994–97, was disappointed by ‘the level of antagonism and the gulf that was there, the coldness, the warm contact with colleagues that suddenly turned into this cold distance of people at conflict. Nothing can prepare you for that change until you actually experience it’ (Kenny, 2007). Richard Moore, a former journalist with the *Irish Press*, spent 15 years

advising government ministers, including Michael Lowry, Alan Dukes, Mary O'Rourke and Dermot Ahern, on media relations. He too noticed an interesting change of perspective on the part of his former colleagues:

Some of them reacted with this idea that because I was a journalist and now I was in this job that my function was to provide them with exclusives non-stop and to keep feeding them stories. One or two of them got quite nasty about it and then some of them had this idea that you're just a lapdog of the system and you've turned your back on the great noble tradition of journalism (Moore, 2007).

He argued that the concept of spin is a myth 'wheeled out by journalists who consider public relations as something lesser or lower than journalism':

I find it highly entertaining that journalists are always on about spin this and spin that. In my experience, a journalist rings you up to ask you about a story. You tell them what the official government line is and then half the time, they're looking for extra information and interpretation from you. You have to give them a lot of background information, and that certainly isn't spin as far as I'm concerned (Moore, 2007).

Dermot O'Gara, director of communications with the Labour Party since 2005 and a former journalist, similarly took issue with the presentation of political communications as something less noble than journalism:

I didn't even see it as a move to a different profession. As far as I'm concerned, what I used to do, and what I do now, is part of the same continuum, I just moved into a different part of it. Much like when I was a journalist, my job concerns communicating information to the general public. In my current role I try to control it or shape it, but journalists do that all the time as well (O'Gara, 2013).

The negative reaction from former journalistic colleagues was not the only challenge faced by newly appointed press secretaries. Now firmly ensconced within the circle of power many journalists turned spin-doctors reported an initial difficulty in de-tuning and realigning the focus of their knowledge and instincts. As remembered by John Downing, who worked as a journalist for 20 years before becoming deputy government press secretary in the 2007–11 government: 'I remember going to one meeting and filling a notebook; the devil in my head was thinking, go out that gate now and you've probably got three page one splashes and a half a dozen leads that you could feed out over the next few weeks' (Downing, 2013).

Iarla Mongey also agreed that the change was a shock to the system: 'there were occasions in my first few weeks that I was told about certain things and my eyes were as wide as saucers' (Mongey, 2007). Richard Moore concurred but also stressed the need to be wary of being fed a story to see whether it appeared in print: 'it took me a good while to adjust and you're thinking, Jesus it's great to be on the inside track. You had to be slightly wary as well . . . I'm not suggesting that this was the case but you were never sure if you were being fed a story to see if it might appear. You had to be very discreet, there was certainly a temptation' (Moore, 2007).

## **‘Handling the media’**

But while politicians may believe that a spin-doctor with experience of working in the media is more useful and effective it is a contention that is not necessarily shared by those who made the move from media to politics. Seán Duignan, former RTÉ broadcaster and government press secretary 1992–94 observed that while journalists certainly bring useful attributes, knowledge and qualities to the role, the tangible benefits are over-stated and often misunderstood by politicians:

Politicians never understand that you can’t ‘handle the media’, not really. They think that if they find the right person, the right spin-doctor that he or she will have the golden touch with the media. Because I worked so long in the media, I knew myself that this was impossible. You can feed and feed the media and the media will eventually bite your hand off. The media isn’t in the business of saying ‘good day for government.’ The media is in the business of asking ‘what’s with these people? What are they at? What are they hiding?’ (Duignan, 2007).

RTÉ broadcaster and former *Irish Examiner* journalist, John Murray, who worked as press advisor to Mary Harney from 1995 and served as deputy government press secretary from 1997 to 2000, agreed that the perceived benefits of hiring former journalists quickly dissipate upon assumption of the role:

Once you cross the line, journalists think of you differently. It doesn’t matter whom you were friendly with in the newsroom, their job is to make your life difficult. You could argue that the political benefit of having a former



journalist in the role is over-stated. If you talk to a spokesperson in government they will inevitably say ‘I’m trying to get stuff out that’s positive and nobody’s listening’. That’s because the media has no interest – the media is interested in rows, resignations, and controversy. There is a complete divergence of interests and you realise after a while that you’re at cross-purposes. I remember speaking with a former government press secretary and he said ‘nobody wants to know about all the good we’re doing.’ And of course he was absolutely right; they don’t (Murray, 2013).

Iarla Mongey agreed that the notion of spin and news management is over-estimated and that most of the time, when a negative story breaks, the ability of a spin-doctor to manage or control the story is severely constrained:

You might get a call from the *Sunday Independent* or another newspaper on a Friday or Saturday evening to tell you that they have a particular story. When they ask you at that stage for a response, you know the story is already written and the best you can hope for is a paragraph at the end. They have already done judge, jury and executioner and they’re just looking for a few final words (Mongey, 2007).

If the powers of the spin-doctor are limited in the context of the day-to-day exchange with the media, the constraints of their influence can become even more apparent in times of crisis. This is certainly true of the Fianna Fáil – Green Party government of 2007–11 as it lurched from crisis to crisis. Liam Reid, former *Irish Times* journalist and media advisor to then minister for communications Eamon Ryan described the

period from 2010 through to the end of the government's life in March 2011 as 'less a question of communications and more one of palliative care' (Reid, 2012). John Downing described the lead up to the EU/IMF bailout in November 2010 as 'absolutely hellish . . . In the autumn of 2010 things began to spin out of control and by early winter things were absolutely out of control . . . It was totally about damage limitation at that stage' (Downing, 2013). Richard Moore compared the final weeks of the administration to 'the crumbling and dissolution of an empire. It was like the fall of Saigon, the helicopter taking off from the top of Dáil Éireann with a few ministers swinging off the wheels shouting 'get me out':

What happens in the kind of crisis that we saw in that government is that people get into a kind of a siege mentality . . . No matter what was said, they were in the bunker, and the hard hats were on. They found it very difficult, I suppose they were tired as well; they'd been there a long time (Moore, 2013).

Cathy Herbert recalled that 'everyone was scared; nobody knew what was going to happen, as this was totally unprecedented. I remember a very senior person in the department [of finance] said to Brian Lenihan, "minister we don't know how to advise you – we've never been here before". This was an unprecedented crisis' (Herbert, 2013).

Ultimately, the move from batsman to bowler recognises the inter-related nature of the game played between and with media and politics. That there is still something of a stigma surrounding the move from journalism to public relations is evidence of the tensions that define the relationship: perhaps the media seeks to diminish the inter-

dependence by marking the narrow and blurry division as one that cannot be crossed. While the skills and understanding are both valuable and transferable, one could make the case that the effects of the transition on politicians and politics are over-stated. Politicians recruit the insider – a star player – in the hope of a game-changer, but in fact the game continues in accordance with the rules. Former journalists understand that the expectations of their new employer – faced with the normal rules of engagement but also in times of crisis – are not based in reality.

If the ability to ‘handle the media’ is over-stated, particularly in times of crisis, then what other practical benefits might politicians expect from the employment of former journalists? One such benefit is the understanding, honed through years of experience in the media, that the age-old political maxim is true: a cover-up or mistruth is often more damaging than any initial misdemeanour. As Stephen O’Byrnes, a former journalist with the *Irish Press* and the *Irish Independent* and government press secretary 1989–92 put it: ‘the golden rule of the job that I was in is that you can be economical with the truth but don’t tell a lie. If you tell a journalist a downright lie you’re finished’ (O’Byrnes, 2007). One might cast a sardonic eye on the relationship between political communication and the truth, and yet, all those interviewed reported an instinctive understanding that it is usually lies, not mistakes, that sink political careers. As noted by former Fine Gael press secretary, Peter White, ‘spin-doctoring, or massaging of public opinion, is a strange business because the truth has a funny old way of coming out in the end’ (White, 2004). Thus, while spin is often presented as synonym of dishonesty or even lies, both sides understand that to lie would be to derogate from the rules of the game, rules underpinned by mutual trust. As defined by

John Dowling, spin is more about providing context and background for a hungry media:

There is very little that you can do in the role other than begin and finish with the truth. There is an imperative to maximise your case of course, so one person's spin is another person's presentation. Often it's about background stuff. You'd say 'look, we're not saying anything whatsoever about that on or off the record, however since I know you, let's talk about it and I'll tell you what I do know'. That's where spin comes in, when you're explaining context and background . . . Peter Sutherland used the phrase 'deep background', and you are in Indian territory then (Downing, 2013).

This requirement and expectation of trust between two apparently competing forces underlines the interdependent relationship that is in evidence between an attention seeking political establishment and a content-hungry media. It is difficult to imagine how a spin-doctor could be effective once exposed as a person whose insights cannot be trusted. Such actions would disrupt the delicate inter-dependence that exists between the two camps. Seán Duignan observed that when spin and lies are synonymous, political disaster is quick to follow: 'if you lie to journalists then you're done. I'm not saying that from a moral point of view, but that is how it happens. Most of the great scandals in politics have been due not to the actual misdemeanour but to the attempted cover-up' (Duignan, 2007). Having worked as a reporter with the *Irish Independent* and as deputy government press secretary in the rainbow government of 1994–97, John Foley recalled that at no stage throughout the life of that government was it ever suggested that he should tell a lie to a journalist: 'it can be a very

pressurised job in the day-to-day activity. In all that activity, it was never suggested to me that I mislead. I certainly tailored information; that was my job, but then you're dealing with adults who know the business' (Foley, 2007). The relationship is, perhaps, best described by journalist Sam Smyth: 'spin-doctors are like good head waiters. If you like and trust them you are prepared to take their advice. A bad spin-doctor, like a bad waiter, will try to flog you yesterday's stale item' (Foley, 1997).

### **A jester on the king's knee**

As we have seen, the image of the spin-doctor as an all-powerful master of the political environment is at odds with the mundane realities of the role, which are determined to a large extent by the personal and political instincts and quirks of the spin-doctor's political master. Thus the spin-doctor can see his or her role reduced to that of the human shield; assailed daily in the trench between an expectant media and the media-obsessed politician. Seán Duignan recalled that while he had little or no influence on Albert Reynold's thinking and was severely constrained by his political and personal style, he was never permitted to be too far away from him:

The reason for that is the never-ending obsessive paranoia with the media in political circles; right up to the very top. That isn't just Albert Reynolds; it was Jack Lynch and Garret FitzGerald as well. The press secretary is like the jester on the king's knee; the king doesn't like the jester to be too far away from him at any stage. Why? Because the media drives him crazy. Who comes between him and the media? The press secretary (Duignan, 2007).

John Murray similarly recalled the constraints of his role in the Fianna Fáil – Progressive Democrats government of the late 1990s:

This was the time of the tribunals and what Bertie [Ahern] knew about Ray Burke and so on. I would say 95% of my contact with the media was journalists asking why we weren't pulling out over this or that. It was forensic and it was brutal . . . It got to the stage where I actually stopped proactively ringing journalists because there was no point; it was impossible to get the message out, they were only interested in discord and scandal . . . I remember at one of the political correspondents' dinners, Chris Glennon, former journalist with the *Irish Independent*, stood up and said 'I was going to say thanks John for all the help you've given us, but you've actually given us no help, you haven't even risen to a "no comment".' Mary Harney was laughing and sort of saying 'good man John.' It reflected the fact that I'd become a protector of the Progressive Democrats through saying as little as possible. It was akin to P.J. Mara's great quip, 'no comment, and that's off the record' (Murray, 2013).

The grind of the role is underlined by Richards (1996, 8–9), who argued that, for much of the time, press secretaries 'deal with tedious logistics, they are dependent on elected politicians and often they face an unequal contest against the expanding media and the large number of political journalists.' Richards further contended that it is 'for the elected leader to decide the terms of the relationship.' The terms of that relationship can often dictate the extent to which spin and effective (or not) political communication come to define a government's tenure and relationship with the

media. As press secretary to the rainbow coalition of Fine Gael, the Labour Party and Democratic Left between 1994 and 1997, Shane Kenny's experience was similar to that of Murray's in that he worked for a political leader who believed in government cohesion above all else:

John Bruton was much more 'closed' in office than I thought he would be, and that became an issue. He said in the Dáil on becoming Taoiseach, before I became press secretary, that the government would conduct its business as if behind a pane of glass. He made it quite clear to me afterwards that government cohesion was the main issue for him and that his key concern was keeping the government together. In terms of the flow of information, he felt that it was the honourable thing to do to provide information only when government had discussed and decided on an issue. That doesn't suit journalists and I knew that I was going to be in a very difficult position because the option of briefing (off the record) was entirely ruled out. He made it entirely clear to me that he didn't want any briefings to take place (Kenny, 2007).

By reverting to a more restricted, and arguably more honest and ethical, form of political communication, the rainbow coalition – through Kenny – disrupted the balance of the relationship between government and media and, as a consequence, changed the terms of the game: much to the chagrin of journalists. Writing in 1995, Geraldine Kennedy of the *Irish Times* argued that Bruton had placed an 'iron curtain around government operations' and had reduced the flow of information 'to a trickle of east European proportions' (Kennedy, 1995). While acknowledging that Bruton

was more ‘closed’ than might have been expected, Kenny described Kennedy’s claim as ‘wildly over-the-top’:

Bruton could, of course, not control the information flow or briefings by the other parties in the coalition, but there was a distinct effort being made by everyone in the government to work in a harmonious way and . . . a very important part of that was that the three of us met the pol corrs together . . . This took place after the three of us met the Taoiseach to be briefed by him. This united front itself was very effective in demonstrating the cohesion of the government. The media loves conflict and was put out by not finding it. Differences in terms of handling issues were generally sorted out in the programme manager forum, but if not, then at a political level, by and large without being distorted and enlarged by media megaphone.

Seán Duignan reported a rather different experience with Albert Reynolds:

For the full period of the Fianna Fáil – PD administration, which lasted less than a year, Reynolds gave an on-the-record news conference once a week. I went to Downing Street when I was appointed and when I told them what we were doing they told me that it was crazy and couldn’t be done. ‘You simply can’t have people coming in and talking to the Prime Minister on any topic under the f\*\*king sun; it’ll do for you’. Well it nearly did for Albert (Duignan, 2007).



Reynolds was arguably the most instinctively ‘unspun’ Taoiseach of recent times: he offered – in a refreshing if naïve nod to openness and transparency – a weekly on-the-record briefing to the political correspondents, and they, as remembered by Duignan, ‘did their professional job and bored into him. Very often we would have absolutely no idea what topic would be thrown in’ (Duignan, 2007). Thus, the spin-doctor, constrained already by rules of engagement with the media, and relative impotency in times of crisis, is further hampered by and subject to the whims and disposition of the political chief.

### **Team tactics**

If the reputed powers of spin-doctors are over-stated in the face of crisis, the inability to lie and the constraints applied by political masters, it is worth noting that effective political communication is further dependent on the mundane realities of internal communication. The history of political communication in Ireland lends credence to the suggestion that spin and its effectiveness is driven by political realities, rather than the other way around.

While the notion of coalition government is now the norm it originally came as something of a shock to Irish political parties; particularly to Fianna Fáil. Recalling the atmosphere that pervaded the formation of the first Fianna Fáil – Progressive Democrats coalition in 1989, Stephen O’Byrnes stated that ‘the government had been conceived, born and reared in pure acrimony. The relationship was purely on the basis of a forced marriage’:

Here were a bunch of people who had left Fianna Fáil only a few years before – some of the best and brightest people like Des O’Malley, Mary Harney and Bobby Molloy . . . The tensions were appalling. I worked in government buildings and I’d meet Haughey in the corridor at least once a day, but for a long time he wouldn’t even look at me (O’Byrnes, 2007).

From a communications point of view, this marriage of inconvenience was a nightmare. O’Byrnes remembers that, due to inter-party tensions and distrust, rarely did he and his Fianna Fáil counterpart P.J. Mara make any attempt to coordinate external communications:

At critical times we would call each other and say look; broadly speaking this is my line on this particular issue. In that instance he would warn me if they were going with a different tactic. We might finesse the thing a small bit but generally we didn’t (O’Byrnes, 2007).

The bad blood between Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats was something of a gift to the media, as both parties delivered separate, uncoordinated briefings to the political correspondents’ lobby, as recalled by O’Byrnes:

As a former journalist, I could write the script for that situation. P.J. Mara goes in and he is asked for the Fianna Fáil view on a particular issue. He says ‘x’ and then I go in later and I’m asked for the PD view on the same issue. Because I don’t know what he has said, I might say ‘y’. Inevitably the next

day, all the headlines would shout about a ‘major rift’ between the government parties (O’Byrnes, 2007).

Inter-party relations worsened when Albert Reynolds replaced Charles Haughey as Taoiseach in 1992. When Reynolds appointed Seán Duignan as government press secretary he encouraged him not to communicate with the PDs at all. In his memoir, Duignan recalls the reactions of Mara, who had agreed to stay on in a transitional capacity, and Bart Cronin (then head of the government information service) to the suggestion that he link in with his PD counterpart:

I was quickly disabused of that notion. Both PJ and Bart told me that, since the formation of the government, contact between the government press secretaries had – ‘by mutual consent’ been kept to a minimum. So, rightly or wrongly, I stayed clear of O’Byrnes. Nor did he seek to contact me (Duignan, 1995, 12).

O’Byrnes recalls that, ‘as bad as things were between P.J. and I, in terms of not briefing jointly, at least we did talk tactics occasionally and we both wanted the government to work.’ O’Byrnes says that in the remaining nine months of that government ‘Seán Duignan did not speak to me good, bad or indifferent’ (O’Byrnes, 2007). Duignan, while eager to point out that there was no personal animosity between himself and O’Byrnes, noted that effective communication was made impossible due to the mutual antipathy and outright hatred between many senior people in both parties, ‘Albert absolutely despised the PDs . . . they hated us and we hated them’ (Duignan, 2007). As O’Byrnes remembered, ‘it had to end sooner rather

than later because there was absolutely no trust in that government . . . not only did we not brief jointly or talk tactics, we didn't actually talk at all. We were in the same building but one of us might as well have been on the moon' (O'Byrnes, 2007).

The subsequent Fianna Fáil – Labour Party government of 1992–94 saw something of a new departure in internal coalition communication, a reflection of the recognised weakness of the previous administration's strategy, as well as the strong hand played by Labour in the formation of the government. Seán Duignan stayed on as government press secretary while Dick Spring appointed *Irish Press* journalist John Foley as deputy government press secretary. Foley recalls that 'we were a two-hander. Very unusually at the time we did joint briefings. I also did briefings on behalf of Diggy [Duignan] and vice versa. In previous governments there had been a clear divide' (Foley, 2007).

Improved internal communication between the parties, despite the government's eventual acrimonious disintegration, facilitated the effective operation of the administration for longer than might otherwise have been the case. It provided tentative proof (at least in the early stages) that if the age of single party government had passed, then an emphasis on cohesive internal communication was essential to effective political communication and governance. These lessons were further woven into the fabric of Irish political communication with the formation of the 1994 government of Fine Gael, the Labour Party and Democratic Left; the first in the history of the state to take office without the need for an election.

While RTÉ broadcaster Shane Kenny was appointed government press secretary, John Foley stayed on as deputy government press secretary and Tony Heffernan was employed to represent Democratic Left. Foley recalled that there was a ‘deliberate attempt to maintain a homogenous government . . . I was there when the formation of the thing was being worked out so we attempted to continue that arrangement, and by and large we did. We would have been in touch all the time’ (Foley, 2007). Kenny similarly recalls a ‘strong professional relationship’ between the three men, which led to coordinated internal and external communication (Kenny, 2007). This trend has remained – for the most part – at the heart of coalition government in Ireland. As John Murray remembered:

For the most part, myself and Joe [Lennon, government press secretary] would have been a united voice . . . there was often pressure from the backbenches or the grassroots asking why did we sign up to this or why are we supporting that. There was pressure to brief separately or to make a break for it but after a while I realised that there was no benefit to the PDs of ploughing a lone furrow. You can only really do that once, and when you start creating that sort of mistrust and spinning against your partners in government then the government is doomed (Murray, 2013).

Similarly, Iarla Mongey recalls of his time as deputy government press secretary of the Fianna Fáil – Progressive Democrats government of 1997–2005:

Even where there were different points of view or divergent opinions, I used to tease Mandy [Johnston, government press secretary], ‘well regardless of

where we stand on these issues we'll go river-dancing in here [political correspondents' lobby] together' . . . The last place you wanted to be discussing your differences was the political lobby. You might be doing it through other avenues, before or after that but you certainly didn't want to be there, and at odds with the person you had walked into the room with (Mongey, 2007).

Similarly, John Downing observed:

It is very, very important to present a government front . . . Journalists would have loved divide and conquer and part of the job was to minimise that and to downplay it. I had a very good personal relationship with Eoghan [Ó Neachtain, government press secretary] . . . We were a back channel of communication between parties when inter-party relations were rough. We spoke to each other and we spoke about how to minimise the damage and how to try to navigate through difficult situations (Downing, 2013).

The experiences of successive Irish governments, and the spin-doctors employed to represent them, lend weight to McNair's (2011, 123) contention that, 'some of the great failures of party-political communication in recent years can be attributed to inadequate internal public relations'. The importance of internal communication, adds another item to the long list of barriers and pitfalls around which the spin-doctor must navigate.

## **Conclusion**

The notion of spin as a pejorative function of the modern political environment is, arguably, over-stated. Spin-doctors are subject to – and have limited influence over – the vagaries of the political landscape, and must work within the context and confines of public sentiment, inter-party relations, a voracious and expanding news media and the political dispositions and personal inclinations of their political masters. The literature, and the experiences of journalists turned spin-doctors in Ireland, underlines the symbiotic and decades-old inter-dependence at play between politics and the media; each needs the other to survive. Media outlets, whether print, broadcast or digital, find themselves with ever more space to fill and limited resources with which to source and produce content. In this environment, the journalist is likely to need the spin-doctor all the more. Similarly, politicians are caught between the twin pressures of declining public trust in politics and institutions and the need to communicate through a fractured, divergent and celebrity-fuelled media. The often fraught relationship between the body politic and the media is perhaps a reflection of this hyper-mediatisation. As Lloyd (2008, 144) argues, there is ‘an extra cause of bitterness between journalists and politicians: both see their constituencies shrinking and are forced to cling to the other all the more, often blaming the other for the declining state of their fortunes.’ Changes to the game – such as the altered media, political or economic landscape – bring with them a sense of drift or panic for all concerned, but, as has always happened, the players will adapt and the game will continue as before.

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