



January 1993

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Recommended Citation

Horgan, John (1993) "Government, Propaganda and the Irish News Agency," *Irish Communication Review*. Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 6.

doi:10.21427/D7BD9V

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/icr/vol3/iss1/6>

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Government, Propaganda and the Irish News Agency

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Origins of the Irish News Agency

The theme of identity forged in adversity has bulked large on the agenda of the founders of many small nation states, and the case of Ireland is no exception. The extent and nature of the Irish diaspora, in addition, has given this theme an added dimension: its propagation to the world at large. Bending the world's ear to the cause of righting Ireland's wrongs has been a constant, if rarely successful, strand in Irish nationalist policy for over two centuries. It is only in more recent times, however, that it has become more formally associated with the official structures of the State, most notably in the seven-year experimental existence of the Irish News Agency (I.N.A.). The history of this institution, unique in the Irish administrative system, provides us with important perspectives on government ideology in relation to Northern Ireland and in relation to the news media themselves, as well as on the nature of professional journalism in Ireland in the 1950s.

In 1945 Séan MacBride, recently elected to the Dail and founder of the Clann na Poblachta party, wrote to Eamonn de Valera ('Dear Chief'), with whom he had evidently been in contact earlier on the same issue, urging the establishment of an Irish news agency to put Ireland's arguments about partition to the world, and to obviate the situation whereby all news about Ireland carried on the international news agencies was sub-edited – often prejudicially – in London¹. De Valera passed the proposal on to the Director of the Government Information Bureau, Frank Gallagher (an able newspaperman who had been the first editor of the *Irish Press*, and who had subsequently found refuge in Mr de Valera's service after tangling with the newspaper's board of management). MacBride was nothing if not enthusiastic: in a period of some five weeks at the end of the year, he wrote to de Valera and Gallagher three times, setting out his conviction that such a Government-subsidized agency was essential

- a) 'to counter hostile propaganda',
- b) because other countries had officially supported news agencies,
- c) because it was unlikely that an Irish News Agency would be a paying proposition in its early years, and
- d) that private setting up of the agency would mean that it would be 'under the control of financial interests'².

Gallagher (and, one presumes, de Valera), expressed reservations. Gallagher's first objection was that the action of the Dáil in voting public money to support such an undertaking would be so misrepresented 'as to kill all hope of the agency ever succeeding'. In other countries, he observed wistfully, governments were freer to 'do a good national act without it being made into a crime'. Sensing a log-jam, MacBride backtracked, suggesting in his last letter that all-party agreement for the agency might be secured, and that the best option might be that the editors or managements of the three Dublin dailies might be asked to consider and report on the possibility of setting up the agency themselves. The latter proposal was the first to get under Gallagher's guard. 'The whole situation would have a different aspect', he averred, 'if the initiative came from the pressmen'³. Nonetheless, this too was shelved.

It was some three and a half years later that MacBride, as the newly-appointed

1. MacBride to de Valera, 14 May 1945. National Archives, S 14544A.

2. MacBride to de Valera, 6 November 1945, MacBride to Gallagher, 15 November 1945, 6 December 1945. National Archives, S 14544 A.

3. Gallagher to MacBride, 15 November 1945, 30 November 1945, 8 December 1945. National Archives, S 14544 A.

4. Dáil Debates (otherwise DD), 16 November 1949, Vol. 118, Col. 977. He gave no further details of the incident, which may have been in relation to a dispute involving the Irish Press.

5. Ó Múimhneacháin to Boland, 23 May 1949. National Archives, S 14544 A.

6. National Archives, S 14544 (as are subsequent quotations, unless otherwise identified).

7. No. 33 of 1949.

8. Séan MacBride, DD, 13 July 1949, Vol 117, Col. 760.

Minister for External Affairs, was at last in a position to put his theory into practice. His qualifications were not only political but professional. For many years he was a correspondent for the French Havas news agency (later to be incorporated into Agencies France Presse), was a member of the National Union of Journalists, and took pride in telling the Dáil that he was 'probably the only member to go out on strike and picket a newspaper office'⁴. His searches in the governmental archives were fruitless – de Valera had apparently removed one of the relevant files on leaving office, regarding it as personal⁵ – but his enthusiasm was undimmed by the passage of time. In January 1949 a memorandum from the Department of External Affairs to the Government noted that 'while we have 32,171 civil servants, there is not one of them who is charged with any function in relation to partition'⁶. The contrast with the situation prevailing in Northern Ireland was underlined.

On 18 May, the proposal was fleshed out in a more detailed memorandum, proposing the establishment of an Irish News Agency whose publications

should include reports of important pronouncements on partition. It should, be strictly non-party and non-political in the sense that it should only deal with matters of foreign policy and matters that are non-controversial at home.

It would be run with a small government subsidy by a company specially established for the purpose.

The [Agency's] Diplomatic Correspondent would in effect be the Government spokesman and propagandist. His task would be to publicize in the form of news the Government's policy on partition.

There would be offices in London and New York, and the annual cost to public funds would be of the order of £20,000. Three days later, the Government minutes discreetly recorded the approval of a 'number of proposals ... in connection with partition', of which the creation of the Irish News Agency was undoubtedly one.

The next task was the passage of the necessary legislation, and the promotion of the concept to Irish public and journalistic opinion. The latter task was far from easy: influential sections of journalistic opinion were implacably opposed to the creation of the agency and were ultimately, as will be seen, partially responsible for its demise.

Even before the Irish News Agency Bill⁷ reached the floor of the Dáil, journalistic sabres were being rattled in their scabbards. A low-key report in the *Irish Independent* (17 June 1949) indicated that the service to be provided would be 'not elaborate' and would be confined to airmail and short-wave radio. Two days later, its sister paper, the *Sunday Independent*, went on the offensive. Money spent on the new agency would be 'largely wasted'. The Government's proposal, the paper added, 'smacks too much of a plan to set up a propaganda department. Neither Ireland nor the rest of the world wants it' (19 June 1949). MacBride moved swiftly into a damage limitation exercise. The new agency, he told the *Irish Independent* in a special interview, 'will not replace existing media for the supply of Irish news, but will supplement them' (27 June 1949). The editor of the *Irish Independent* was unconvinced. The scheme, he commented, had 'not been sufficiently thought out', and a committee to examine the proposal would, perhaps, be a better idea (7 July 1949). Over in Westmoreland Street, *The Irish Times* (where the editor, R.M. Smyllie, writing as 'Nichevo' indicated that he had briefly considered the idea of starting an Irish news agency before abandoning the idea on grounds of cost) was more patrician, but no less suspicious⁸. 'We do not believe', it stated editorially, 'that the existing news agencies are prejudiced against [Ireland] ... Mr MacBride's diminutive agency certainly will not galvanise the apathetic audiences of the great world into a state of appreciation' (15 July 1949).

The opposition to MacBride was formidable, both inside and outside the Dáil. Inside, Séan Lemass was at his most rumbustious. Additionally he had, as Managing Director

of the *Irish Press* newspaper (a position he was offered when Fianna Fáil were put out of office the previous year, and one which he had embraced with his customary vigour and enthusiasm), more than a passing interest in this particular scheme. Fianna Fáil, out of office for the first time since 1932, had a truffle-hound's nose for proposals that were conceptually or financially shaky, and Lemass, especially where matters of company legislation were concerned, had a keener nose than most. Outside, the National Union of Journalists (or at least some of its adherents) was getting its lobbying apparatus into gear. The NUJ, although weak, was in the process of establishing itself as the major trade union for journalists in Ireland. It had more than four times the membership of its main rival, the Institute of Journalists.

The main plank of MacBride's argument was, indeed, the one calculated to appeal most to Fianna Fáil: the thesis that Ireland should throw off the shackles of domination by the foreign news agencies as it had thrown off those of foreign political domination. 'Because of transmission difficulties, because of our unimportance, if you like, in the stream of world affairs', he told the Dáil, 'all the news that emanates in Ireland is canalised through London'. The need for an independent source of news about Ireland was threefold:

first of all, unlike most other countries we have a national objective to achieve. We still have to gain full control of our own country ... We have to counteract a good deal of foreign propaganda ... We need news channels of our own in order to encourage the development of our industrial life, of our foreign trade, of our tourist traffic, to make known our cultural developments and also to make known our viewpoints in the field of international affairs as the need arises.⁹

Blithely quoting de Valera himself (who had told the Dáil the previous year that the dwindling flow of emigrants to those countries 'most sympathetic to us' necessitated the provision of fresh channels of communication), he made no bones about the fact that the new service would not be a paying proposition, and underlined its principal function as a conduit for the Government's anti-partition policy abroad. Some of his arguments were acceptable only if his listeners were prepared to accept that the same word could embody two different and opposed meanings within the compass of a single paragraph ... It is not,

to be a propaganda machine or a machine which will present news other than in an objective, truthful and accurate way. It may be said that it will serve as a propaganda medium in so far as one of its main functions will be to place Ireland on the map and that to that extent it will be serving a proganda service by making Ireland known throughout the world in different spheres.¹⁰

It was not intended that the news agency should be the official mouthpiece of the Government: that function was being very efficiently performed by the Government Information Bureau¹¹ – but, when necessary, 'it will give Ireland's viewpoint on political affairs'. It was not going to be a 'political propaganda machine', but one of its essential functions would be to negative 'unfriendly, hostile or sensational propaganda about Ireland'¹².

This stylish exercise in having your cake and eating it was accompanied by the offering of one substantial – and ultimately fatal – hostage to fortune: an undertaking that the new INA would not deal in 'hot news', i.e. the kind of news that daily and weekly Irish media were generally in the habit of collecting for themselves. This commitment was evidently designed to mollify the NUJ, whose members' low earnings were frequently supplemented by work as correspondents for larger or foreign media enterprises. In the event, it failed to do even that and, in addition, presented the Opposition with a weapon which it used to considerable effect.

9. DD, 13 July 1949, Vol 117, Col. 760.

10. Ibid, Col. 761.

11. Official files document a certain amount of mutual antipathy between the Information Section in the Department of External Affairs and the Government Information Bureau. Cf. National Archives, S 4858, especially memoranda from Patrick Lunch, Secretary to the Government, complaining that Conor Cruise O'Brien in the Department of External Affairs Information section tended to 'foist on the Information Bureau ... work of an arduous nature which is sometimes not obviously related to the proper functions of the Department'.

12. DD, 13 July 1949, Vol. 117, Col. 762.

13. *Ibid.*, Col. 819.

De Valera defended his own record by arguing that what he had most in mind was the proposed short-wave service (viewed with some disfavour by the Inter-Party Government), but it was left to Séan Lemass to mount the most ferocious attack on MacBride for 'setting up a company which will not be a company and ... a news agency which will not be a news agency'¹³. The NUJ troops came in behind Lemass in the shape of Séan McCann, a senior journalist on the *Irish Press* and a Fianna Fáil deputy, who told the Dáil that he was 'speaking on behalf of working journalists who feel that their livelihood is being attacked in this Bill'. If the agency became, in time, a paying proposition, 'that can only mean that the agency will be in competition with other journalists who send 'copy' out of this country'¹⁴.

14. *Ibid.*, Col. 832.

In point of fact, the agency was, in the Bill, given the powers normally pertaining to a news agency, i.e. power to distribute news inside Ireland. When this was pointed out by an Opposition deputy who wanted to limit the dissemination of news to places outside the country, Mr MacBride gave his reasons. If such a statutory ban were in place, the agency would, for example, be unable to provide news to the proposed short wave service. Nor would it be able to disseminate news to the Irish-based correspondents of foreign newspapers and agencies.

15. DD, 16 November 1949, Vol. 118, Col. 952.

If he had thought that the latter explanation would blunt the edge of the attack by the resident correspondents of American and other agencies, the Minister was being too optimistic by half. His principal opponent, Séan Lemass, immediately focused on the central flaw in the Government's strategy: if the agency did not disseminate 'hot news', it would not be an agency; if it did, it would imperil the livelihood of Irish journalists, because foreign newspapers and magazines will be supplied with 'free news' by civil servants, while trade union journalists who depend for a living on the dissemination of news to foreign journals will be forced into unemployment¹⁵.

16. *Ibid.*, Col. 958.

MacBride had in fact already met an NUJ deputation, whose anxieties, quite naturally, were that in so far as it was possible, the staffing of the news agency should be from members of the NUJ or some other recognised trade union¹⁶. These anxieties he was prepared to meet in full: the other matters raised by the union in the circular which had been sent to Lemass were not raised 'as such' by the delegation. Taking MacBride's words at face value, what appears to have happened is that there were two schools of thought within the NUJ: the central, organizational one related to the need to ensure that journalistic work continued to be performed by journalists, whether they were employed by the State or by anyone else; the second, reflecting the special interest of a sub-set of NUJ members, saw the agency as a direct threat – not to their livelihoods, for most if not all of them were in senior editorial positions in major Dublin media – but to the additional payment they received for acting as 'stringers' for foreign news agencies. MacBride correctly identified the union's major concern, but dangerously underestimated the power and influence of the foreign correspondents' group, as later events made clear.

The agency thus created was an oddly-shaped enterprise. According to the brief given to it by its progenitor in the Dail, it was to be occupied primarily with publicising the Government's attitude on partition abroad; it would work in harmony with the existing media; it would be a small organisation costing around £20,000 per year in public subsidies, and issuing possibly 1,000 words a day; it would not deal in 'hot news'; and it would be assisted by an Advisory Board, which might also facilitate the eventual takeover of the agency by the national newspapers.

17. National Archives, S. 14544 A

The first year

As things turned out, virtually every one of these parameters had been shattered within the agency's first year in operation. November 1950 saw a major reversal of policy: 'the task of publicizing partition abroad', Mr MacBride told Mr Lemass in the Dáil, 'is the responsibility of other agencies ... The INA is not an organ of propaganda'¹⁷.

While it was certainly true that the anti-Partition aspect of the proposed agency's activities had not figured as fully in the Dáil debates as it had in the Cabinet discussions, this abrupt change of policy created a certain vacuum at the heart of the agency's activities, which was filled rapidly by a decision, taken by the new Board, to go into the business of providing 'hot news' both inside Ireland and overseas. This decision was taken for two reasons: because of a feeling by the Board that the agency's work on behalf of Ireland abroad would not be taken seriously by other media unless it was also acting as a normal news agency, and in order to broaden its revenue base. It was, of course, completely in conflict with the Minister's statements to the Dáil, and Mr MacBride, 'while evidently regretting that he had been so explicit in the matter, agreed that the Board would have to act as it considered best'¹⁸. It also immediately undermined any possibility of a friendly relationship with the rest of the domestic media. The agency grew rapidly in size, and in the scope of its activities: within a year of its establishment it was producing about 9,000 words a day. The Advisory Board was never set up.

The fact that the INA was certainly not a news agency in the generally accepted sense of the term did not deter those most directly associated with it, or those who saw it as a useful new career outlet in a country in which there had been little media change for at least a quarter of a century. There were some 200 applications for staff positions, and – to at least some surprise – the position of General Manager was given, on 18 May 1950, to Joseph Gallagher, a journalist who had been born in London (his father came from Enniskillen), but who had no Irish journalistic experience. Another key appointment was that of Brendan Malin, an *Irish Press* journalist with considerable experience of the Dail and political reporting, later to become an editor in Boston. The first Board comprised



Board meeting, INA. from left: Robert Brennan (Director), Noel Hartnett (Director), Roger Greene (Chairman), Peadar O'Curry (Director), Conor Cruise O'Brien (Managing Director).
Photo: Courtesy of Hugh Hartnett.

the Dublin solicitor Roger Greene (Chairman), Conor Cruise O'Brien, (Managing Director: this was only one of Dr. O'Brien's responsibilities: he retained others in his role as a Counsellor in the Department of External Affairs), and Board members Peadar O'Curry (later editor of the *Irish Catholic*), Robert Brennan and Noel Hartnett¹⁹.

18. Draft of Memorandum for Government, Department of External Affairs, 1953, National Archives, DFA 422/1//16/3

19. Robert Brennan was a friend of de Valera's and Irish Ambassador to Washington who had also been active in Sinn Féin publicity during the War of Independence. He served later as Director of Radio Éireann. He eventually later resigned on grounds from the INA Board on grounds of ill-health. Noel Hartnett resigned on becoming a member of Seanad Eireann. They were replaced by Messrs. John Grehan and Andrew McDonnell. Roger Greene died in 1955, when he was replaced by F.W. Padbury, of the eponymous advertising agency, who in addition functioned as Managing Director, Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien having retired in June 1955 after giving 'valuable services in setting up and carrying on the agency' (Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Irish News Agency, 16 March 1955. National Archives, S 14544 D). Other directorial appointments made at this time included Mr Seamus O'Farrell, a journalist and former senator, Senator J.G. Lennon, a Northern Nationalist member of the Stormont Senate, and Mr. P. Smyth..

20. John Healy, personal interview, 2 May 1983. John Healy at one stage became 'Joan Duffy, INA Woman Feature Writer,' after provincial papers had asked the INA for a series of features of interest to female readers.

21. *The Irish Times*, 28 November 1959.

22. Its rapid development of an esprit de corps can be seen from the fact that the proposal to appoint Douglas Gageby as Editor in Chief led to unrest and the threat of industrial action, because he was an outsider. John Healy, personal interview.

23. Later with the *Irish Press*, editor of the *Catholic Herald*, a senior editorial executive with RTE and editor of the *Carlow Nationalist*.

24. He had suggested a somewhat similar arrangement as far back as 1921, but the idea had been overtaken by the Civil War crisis. Brennan to Taoiseach, 12 July 1952. National Archives S 14544.

25. Department of Foreign Affairs, Memorandum for the Government, July 1952. National Archives, S 14544 B.

26. Draft Report of the Irish News Agency to the Minister for External Affairs for 1951-52, National Archives, S 14544 B.

The agency began its work unofficially by carrying out an interview with the Taoiseach, John A Costello, which was circulated internationally in time for St. Patrick's Day, 1950. Its first official reporting assignment for the new agency was coverage of the St. Columbanus celebrations in Luxeuil in France in the summer of 1950. What the latter had to do with publicizing Ireland's anti-partition policy abroad demanded a certain effort of the imagination, but the air was already thick with flying straws. A checklist on 9 November revealed that the bulk of items published as a result of the agency's labours had been in newspapers or magazines in Ireland itself, 312 in all, compared with 60 in the United States and 28 in other countries. In other words, much of the output of an agency designed for the export trade was in fact coming home to roost. This was particularly true of the British media, who – if they used INA copy at all – tended to use it only in the Irish editions of their publications, thus totally frustrating the intentions of the agency's founder²⁰.

The Irish Times, alone among Irish media, was relieved. Editorially welcoming the 'change of heart' it detected in the Minister's remarks in the Dáil, it suggested that criticism ... that seeks to sap confidence in it at this early stage is unworthy as well as unwise'. The agency's was a 'likely youngster', and the criticisms of it in the provincial press emanated from 'a common source'²¹. Indeed, in the first two years of its existence, the agency operated with vigour and professionalism: even at this remove in time, it is possible to sense something of the excitement that is generated by the launch of a new media institution staffed by able and keen young journalists²². Its total staff (including clerical, administrative and despatch personnel) numbered 48 by September 1952, including nine in London and two in Belfast. Along with some 100 free-lance correspondents, its staff journalists included Douglas Gageby as Editor in Chief, Jack Smyth, Derry Moran, John Healy (later 'Backbencher'), Karl Ross, Aidan O'Hanlon, Desmond Fisher (the INA 'Economics Editor' in 1953-54)²³, Philip Mooney, Lochlynn MacGlynn, Kevin O'Kelly (the INA Picture Editor), Kevin Collins and Michael Finlan. It had secured a back-to-back agreement with the Hearst-controlled INS news service in the United States, whereby INS carried INA-generated stories for its American clients, while the INA had a monopoly on selling the INS service to Irish media clients. This arrangement, which echoed Robert Brennan's priorities in particular²⁴, was seen as essential to the INA's successful functioning. So was its new photographic department, which achieved a coup of a kind by securing international distribution for the 'now famous picture of rioting in Derry City, showing Six-County policemen dispersing unarmed demonstrators'. Almost two decades before the Derry Civil Rights march was televised across the globe, the photograph was already a potent instrument of political policy: this particular picture, the agency proudly informed the government, was known to have reached an audience of 8,500,000 people, and it was 'probably the first time that a highly important political fact – viz. that partition is maintained by force – has been so effectively brought across to an audience of large dimensions'²⁵. 'The quasi-monopoly in the handling of Irish news for the world's press', the Agency's Board added with satisfaction, 'once possessed by two or three of the great international news agencies, is now broken. Secondly ... the state of affairs whereby all Irish news was edited in London before issue ... is now a thing of the past'.²⁶

Critics of the INA

While the new agency was thus trumpeting its triumphs, however, other forces, seen and unseen, were already gnawing away at its foundations. Professional journalistic pique (allied, in the case of the *Irish Press*, to political pique) at the well-subsidized nature of the agency's activities, was rapidly coming to the boil. From a different but equally predictable perspective, senior civil servants in the Department of Finance, viewing with alarm the agency's apparently insatiable appetite for cash advances, regarded with a growing scepticism its increasingly articulate but ultimately unconvincing promises of better times to come.

Paddy Quinn, the Reuter correspondent in Dublin and a senior journalist on the *Independent*, voiced his displeasure about the activities of the INA to the Department of the Taoiseach to such an effect that an investigation was set up. The *Irish Press*, enraged that an INA despatch on the famous 'Battle of Baltinglass' had been published in the *Gaelic American*, thundered editorially that it was 'a shameful perversion of the truth. And the Irish public has to pay for it'²⁷.

The change of government on 14 June 1951 was accompanied by an intensification of NUJ pressure. In itself this was not surprising: members of the new administration had been openly hostile to the INA at its inception, and the NUJ presumably expected that they could now count on new and powerful allies at court. Against the run of play, the new Minister for External Affairs, Frank Aiken, hesitated, his scepticism held in check by some powerful lobbying from within his own Department. Opposition questions from Fine Gael deputies Oliver J. Flanagan and Patrick Cogan, among others, pressed the Minister on the extent to which the INA was prepared to go into open competition with existing Irish media (as was indeed already happening). Aiken kicked to touch: the matters raised were 'solely the responsibility of the board of directors of the Irish News Agency'. Lurking in his ministerial brief was a sheaf of arguments from Conor Cruise O'Brien, including the fact that 'Nationalist Ulster' was particularly appreciative of the INA's work.

At one point, indeed, Aiken moved onto the offensive in support of the agency. The occasion was when the *Irish Independent* published an editorial on 8 May 1952 complaining at the fact that the INA's picture desk, which acted as the Irish agency for the international Planet photographic group, had been issuing photographs of 'vast and enthusiastic crowds carrying giant portraits of Marshal Stalin in Red Square'. The offending picture had in fact been published in the previous day's issue of the *Evening Herald*. 'I do not allege,' Aiken told Sir John Esmonde, the Fine Gael TD who had unwisely raised the matter in the Dáil,

that the crowds in Red Square carried the giant portraits of Marshal Stalin because they were following the example of the *Irish Independent*, but within the last couple of years the Independent published pictures of Marshal Stalin with a smiling face; Marshal Stalin drinking a toast at the Kremlin; Marshal Stalin at dinner; and at least three other pictures of the same gentleman ... Indeed the *Independent* was so keen on publishing what it now calls Russian propaganda that in 1950 it ordered direct from the UP-Planet, and published, another photograph of massed units of the Red Army parading through Red Square.

Warming to his task, he went on to inform the Dail that 'the manager of the INA is the son of a TD, the brother of another, and brother of a senator. It will be news to these members of the Oireachtas that they are harbouring the chief of an anti-American, pro-Russian cell'.²⁸

The discussions with the NUJ had been precipitated by a *démarche* to de Valera on 22 November 1951 from T.P. Kilfeather, on behalf of the Oireachtas Press Gallery, expressing the Gallery's 'grave concern' at the 'unfair and unjust competition' of the INA, and expressing its alarm at the 'continued encroachment' of the INA, whose activities should be confined to those 'not harmful to Irish journalists'.²⁹ The nationality of those journalists currently employed by the INA was, conveniently, ignored. The agreement between the INA and the NUJ, which issued in a joint statement on 20 December, was a victory for the latter in all but name. Its main effect was 'to prevent the agency from selling domestic news or pictures to the Dublin dailies and the *Cork Examiner* ... Commercially, the effects of the agreement were naturally adverse'.³⁰ The agency's defenders in the Department of External Affairs located responsibility for all of this in a small but rather influential group of journalists who

27. *Irish Press*, 3 January 1951. The 'Battle of Baltinglass' was a political dispute centred on the appointment of a sub-postmaster in the Co. Wicklow village of the same name.

28. DD 15 May 1952, Vol. 131, No. 12. See also National Archives, Department of Foreign Affairs file 340/12/88/9.

29. National Archives, S 14544.

30. Replies from Department of External Affairs to queries from Cabinet sub-committee on the future of the INA, 15 September 1952. National Archives, S 14544 B.

31. Department of External Affairs memorandum to Department of Finance, February 1953. National Archives, S 14544 B.

32. Ibid.

33. *Irish Independent*, 8 December 1952.

34. Statement, 31 May 1954. National Archives, S 14544 C.

35. Department of External Affairs Memorandum to Department of Finance, February 1953. National Archives, S 14544 B.

36. Department of External Affairs Memorandum to Government, 29 June 1954. National Archives, S 14544 B.

37. Draft of Memorandum for Government, Department of Foreign Affairs, 1952, National Archives, DEA 422/11/16/3.

are in large measure not engaged in the active collection of news. At least 90 per cent hold editorial positions on the Dublin daily newspapers and recast the news submitted to those newspapers by working journalists who receive no payment for the exported material. It is easy to see why such vested interests should be continuously and actively vocal in their opposition to a national news agency which pays cash for all news written.³¹

The *Independent* alone numbered among its staff journalists the Dublin correspondents of the Press Association, Reuters, Associate Press, the Exchange Telegraph, and a Canadian agency. External Affairs argued strongly that the agreement was being eroded in practice, and that the editors of the Dublin dailies frequently deplored it and urged the agency to scrap it, but without giving the agency any public support on the issue.³² Nor indeed was the NUJ the only other organisation involved. The Institute of Journalists (IOJ) entered the fray twelve months later, with a statement signed by its secretary, Donal O'Donovan, registering a protest against the fact that 'journalists, as taxpayers, are compelled to contribute to a subsidy which is being used to menace their employment'.³³ Eighteen months later, the Institute of Journalists, together with the Guild of Journalists, warned the INA that it was unwise to deal with the NUJ alone, and that the members of their organizations would not consider themselves bound by any agreement between the INA and the larger union.³⁴ The Department of Foreign Affairs, in one of its most waspish rejoinders, said that the IOJ memorandum was 'known to have been drafted by Reuter's correspondent in Dublin'.³⁵

Financial Problems

The hard-headed servants of the Minister for Finance were not so easily put off the scent. Possibly emboldened by the knowledge that their new political masters were at best undecided about the value of the INA, they moved to take control of the debate, urging in a memorandum on 5 February 1952 that 'no time should be lost in reorganizing the agency on economic lines'. At this point the agency's losses for 1951-52 were put at £45,000, and its projected demand on the exchequer for the following year was for £40,000. For its part, the agency submitted a steady stream of figures to Finance, showing how the ratio between expenditure and income was improving: the following table shows its funding situation over the first four years of its operation.³⁶

INA FINDING, 1950 - 1954

Year	Total Expenditure	Exchequer Funding	Commercial Sales	Exchequer as % of total
1950-51	£45,038	£30,000	£2,116	91.8%
1951-52	£46,335	£45,000	£4,253	
1952-53	£76,802	£63,500	£14,778	81.1%
1953-54	£62,546	£45,000	£17,922	71.04%

The Minister for External Affairs also argued that the method of financing the Agency was inappropriate, in as much as the monies used in the first three years of its operation, although categorized as repayable cash advances, consisted in large part of capital sums. In its first year in operation, he demonstrated, the ratio of expenditure to revenue had fallen from 129:1 in the first quarter to 14.4:1 in the final quarter³⁷. The Department of Finance, unimpressed, argued that the losses were incurred because the agency was

merely duplicating at considerable cost to the taxpayer a service which Irish newspapers are fully equipped to obtain from their own reporting organisations or through foreign news agencies. Furthermore, the value from a national standpoint of some, at least, of the items transmitted abroad, e.g., strike of seamen at Dublin port, sporting events, suspension of Marshall Aid, is questionable.

38. Department of Finance Memorandum to Government, 5 February 1952. National Archives, S 14544 B.

The agency, it argued, should be developed in such a way as to facilitate its eventual disposal to the Irish newspapers to be run on a cooperative basis.³⁸

The matter was brought to a head in July 1952, when the Cabinet was faced with a request for a supplementary estimate for the agency in the sum of £38,500. The Cabinet eventually agreed, but with considerable reluctance: the price was the agreement of the Minister for Foreign Affairs to the establishment, on 26 August 1952, of a special Cabinet sub-committee to include, along with the two ministers most directly concerned, the Minister for Education and the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. The Department of Posts and Telegraphs submitted some well-meaning but naive suggestions for reduction in costs, including the delightful proposal that foreign correspondents working in Ireland should be 'invited to plug Irish news of importance on a fee basis'. The Department of External Affairs shot down this particular brainwave with little difficulty: it would be

39. Department of Posts and Telegraphs memorandum, 16 December 1952, and reply from Department of External Affairs. National Archives, S 14544 B.

open to the suggestion in Fleet Street that the Irish Government was attempting to corrupt journalists. The stories that were 'plugged' would still have to go to London offices who would be liable to throw them out – unless indeed it is suggested that fees should be paid in London also, in which case the £15,000 suggested would not go very far'.³⁹

The question of reorganization was shelved, but came up again the following year, when a report on the agency's organization and methods was carried out by accountants Urwick, Orr and Partners for the Department.⁴⁰ The report suggested that no great changes could be recommended, and noted that 'discipline and morale undoubtedly reflect the enthusiasm and driving force of the General Manager and the Editor in Chief'. The net cost to the agency of the Irish News Service (INS) of £4,000 per annum, it advised, 'should clearly be accepted as a policy expense'.

40. Report, 10 January 1953. National Archives, S 14544 B.

In February 1953 Finance returned to the attack, stating bluntly that the agency should be wound up. Its decision on the dissemination of 'hot news' had been 'completely at variance with the Minister's engagements to the Dáil', and it had not been demonstrated that a continuance of the INA was warranted by its values as a national institution. If it were to continue, Finance noted, with the air of a chess grandmaster who has just checkmated an opponent,

there would be a need for careful supervision of the agency's activities to ensure that only material clearly conducive to the national interest would be circulated by it for publication. Intervention of this kind would, inevitably, lead to charges of Civil Service control and Government interference. The agency could hardly hope to survive under such conditions'.⁴¹

41. Department of Finance Memorandum for the Government, 4 February 1953. National Archives, S 14544 B.

External Affairs, replying, had to eat a certain amount of crow: the departure from the undertaking made by Mr MacBride in the Dáil was acknowledged – but this undertaking itself had been unrealistic. That apart, the Department fell back on what was essentially MacBride's old position: that to wind up the agency now would be a confession that Ireland had failed 'to shake off Reuter's dominance over the field of Irish news'.⁴²

42. Department of External Affairs comments on Memorandum by department of Finance, February 1953. National Archives, S 14544 B.

The Cabinet agreed to subsidize the agency to the tune of £45,000 for 1953-54, but determined that there should be no supplementary estimate, and that proposals for re-organisation would have to be tabled. The writing was plainly on the wall. The INA, for

its part, staked everything on a last throw. It terminated its agreement with INS and, in August 1953, made a new agreement with the United Press (despite the hostility of the UP correspondent in Dublin). This included taking over the UP contract with Radio Éireann, and involved the agency going on a 24-hour footing for the first time. The Government – initially unaware of this dramatic new commitment – was unimpressed, and decided in February 1954 that External Affairs, Finance, and the Attorney-General should consult on the drafting of a memorandum 'on the problems that would arise and the financial commitments that would be involved if it were decided to wind up the agency at an early date'. After this, events moved swiftly. Within a week, the Government subvention had been reduced by £10,000. Six days after this, an External Affairs memorandum revealed that the agency's assets were £64,240, and its liabilities £441,718 – more than half of the latter sum being due to UP under the terms of its 10-year contract. The Attorney-General reported that the agency was 'hopelessly insolvent' and, on 26 February, the Cabinet agreed to provide the INA with £45,000 for 1954-55; that there would be no funding for subsequent years, and that 'the agency should be requested to take, without delay, whatever steps may be necessary in the light of the decisions above'.⁴³

43. National Archives, S 14544 C.

Roger Greene, the INA chairman, embarked on a frantic last-ditch attempt to stave off closure. The British paper wall, he told Aiken on 11 March, would be strengthened by a hostile international press. A critical question, of course, was whether the UP agreement could be repudiated. Aiken plainly thought it could be, and told Greene on 26 March that it would be 'futile' to seek a reversal of the Government's decision. Greene, while accepting that the UP contract could be terminated on a technicality, told Aiken on 8 April that Reuters had already been in Dublin propositioning some of the agency staff, and argued that 'the full significance of the Irish taxpayer having sunk approximately £200,000 in financing an Irish agency through its difficult formative years to hand it over to its main rival, a constant enemy of Ireland ... will not be lost on you'. The NUJ, he added, was already offering to close ranks in the light of this threat to the agency. Within the week, Greene had followed this up with a letter to de Valera, saying that a Government decision to bankrupt the agency would be 'an event without precedent in the history of the State'. Aiken replied on 23 April in a more eirenic tone, asking what effect a new agreement with the NUJ would have on the INA finances. De Valera, however, was less forthcoming, and did little more than forward a hostile opinion from the Attorney-General, Aindrias Ó Caoimh, to Greene, over his own signature, on 31 May.

Dissolution

Another change of Government on 2 June 1954, gave the agency an unexpected reprieve, and it seemed to enter an Indian summer. A Government decision on 2 July 1954 effectively rescinded the previous government's decision to wind up the agency, but on condition that it ran a tight ship and submitted a further memorandum on its plans. The new Minister for Finance, Gerard Sweetman, was not unfavourable. Writing to Liam Cosgrave, the new Minister for External Affairs, on 20 August 1954, he argued for increasing the INA's revenues rather than decreasing its expenditure, and that it should be continued, at any rate, for a period.

44. National Archives, S 14544 C.

I know unofficially, that there is a possibility of a proposal being put forward that Radio Éireann should be governed by a corporation. I am prepared to explore even the possibility of fusing the agency and Radio Éireann under the same direction.⁴⁴

The following week the Government decided to set up an inter-departmental committee to examine the whole question, to reduce expenditure on the agency, and to explore possible synergies with Fògra Éireann, Radio Éireann, and the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, as well as the possibility of a new agreement with the NUJ.

The inter-departmental committee, whose secretary was Sean Ó hÉidéan, decided that it was not within the committee's remit to deal with the major issue of policy, but reported that it had learned informally that 'the opposition of the NUJ to the supplying of internal news in the 26 counties is as strong as ever it was'. The most novel suggestion made by the committee as a cost-cutting exercise was that the agency's full-time journalists should be replaced by stringers who would excerpt stories from the national media for export.

Such a practice of 'milking' news is, we understand, quite common in the newspaper world ... The proprietors do not give approval of the practice but they tacitly allow it so as to enable their best men to get additional emoluments'. If this were done, it might be possible to run a smaller agency which would, in addition, be more acceptable to journalists.⁴⁵

By this time, however, the tremors of imminent dissolution had again begun to make themselves felt. J.P. Gallagher had resigned as General Manager. Roger Greene had died: F.W. Padbury had been appointed in his place, together with a new Board. Conor Cruise O'Brien had resigned, and with him, or so it seemed, some of the fight had gone out of the Department of External Affairs, which now told the Government that 'the material benefit which has accrued to the State from the operations of the agency has hitherto been negligible'.⁴⁶ The option of winding up the agency was again put on the Cabinet table, but temporarily withdrawn. The new Board, while it rejected the Department of Posts and Telegraph's plan to 'milk' the national media for the INA's export trade, was equally unrealistic when it proposed to External Affairs that the Agency be given the monopoly of the distribution of news emanating from abroad. The last option – disposal of the agency to the national newspapers – continued to be officially regarded as desirable, but impossible.

The agency might have dwindled gracefully to vanishing point over the following few years but for two other, contemporary factors. One was the unremitting hostility of the *Irish Independent*, which of course generally supported the Inter-Party Government. It published a hostile leading article describing the INA as 'a pure extravagance' on 9 November 1954. It returned to the fray on 10 February 1955 with a plea to the Government to 'spare the community further losses' by winding up this 'unqualified failure'.⁴⁷ On 9 January 1956 another leading article, its arguments a virtual paraphrase of those that had gone before, described the INA as an 'indefensible venture'. On 20 March its leader on the INA was entitled 'Pouring Money Down the Drain', and on 22 May it described a proposal to allow the INA to engage in the general dissemination of news within Ireland as 'audacious'. Two days later, for good measure, it published two anonymous letters giving similar arguments against the agency's continued existence.

More significantly, perhaps, the INA was also losing potential allies within the Cabinet. Early in 1956 the leader of the Labour Party, William Norton, wrote to Cosgrave to complain at the INA's circulation to Irish newspapers of a misleadingly sub-edited version of a speech he had made to American industrialists in the US. The misleading text had in fact come from United Press and, although the INA had on its own account put out a correction and the full text of Norton's speech an hour later, *The Irish Times* had used the offending version. Norton went for the jugular, copying his letter both to the Taoiseach and to the Minister for Finance.

I gather, that there is no obligation on the Agency to see that the reports which they are supplying to the press are in accordance with public policy ... I have doubts on whether it is doing the job it was set up to do.⁴⁸

The last nail had been put in the INA's coffin, but it took yet another change of Government to finally inter the corpse. The decision to close the INA was actually announced by the Minister for Finance, Dr. James Ryan, on 8 May 1957, in advance of

45. Report of Inter-Departmental Committee, 16 March 1955. National Archives, S 154544 D.

46. Department of External Affairs Memorandum for the Government, 13 January 1956. National Archives, S 154544 D.

47. *The Irish Times*, in that spirit of friendly rivalry which has characterised relationships between the national media, announced proudly on 30 April 1955 that its services to its readers would now be augmented by the UP-INA service. This gesture, coming as it did some five years after the INA's inauguration, was presumably largely symbolic.

48. William Norton to John A Costello and to Liam Cosgrave, 5 March 1956. National Archives, S 154544 D.

49. Cabinet Minutes, Item 3, 4 June 1957. National Archives, S 154544 D.

50. National Archives, S 154544 D.

51. *The Irish Times*, 16 July 1957.

the formal Cabinet decision on 4 June.⁴⁹ The Managing Editor and the Chairman received a year's emoluments in lieu of notice. Executives got six months, journalists three months, and administrative staff two months pay. In a pitiful coda, the NUJ finally, and vainly, bestirred itself on behalf of its colleagues whose efforts it had been denigrating for most of the previous six years. Michael McInerney – whose personal bona fides were hardly in doubt, and who was acting on behalf of the Irish Area Council of the NUJ – wrote to the Taoiseach on 13 May to say that the Union was 'profoundly shocked' by the decision, affecting as it did the sixteen NUJ members who were still on the INA staff, as well as 100 other members who acted as stringers. On 29 May the General Secretary of the Union, H.J. Bradley, wrote from London to Mr de Valera to express his Council's concern (in language which seemed to have been quarried directly from one of Mr Sean MacBride's speeches) that Ireland, alone of the Western European countries, should be without a national news agency, and its perturbation 'that the employment of a considerable number of journalists in Dublin, Belfast, London, and the United States, would be affected by the closure of the agency'.⁵⁰ With such unlikely mourners, and with little fanfare, the INA finally closed its doors. Its obituary was a five-paragraph single-column story in *The Irish Times*, beginning: 'The Government-sponsored Irish News Agency, which was established in 1950, closed down last night. Its news service stopped at midnight'.⁵¹

Conclusion

It is doubtful, given the circumstances of its birth, whether the INA could ever have been an unqualified success. Mr MacBride's parental pride blinded him to its many defects, and those who came after him were neither skillful enough nor, in the end, committed enough to overcome the hostility of key personnel in the journalistic profession and of the Department of Finance. One of these adversaries alone might have been enough to sink the enterprise – and yet the fact that it survived for so long in the teeth of such odds was itself a tribute to the sinewy pertinacity of its staff. Many years later Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien, translated now to the cabinet table as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, returned to the theme with only a hint of wistfulness, urging the creation of an Irish News Agency 'based on, and run by, the newspapers of Ireland outside Dublin, with a certain amount of State support'. He said:

The concept I have in mind, is something distinct from the old Irish News Agency... A lot of good effort went to that Agency, and some of the best journalists in the country worked for it. But from its inception it suffered from certain radical defects. It was founded on the sole initiative of the Government of the day, without having enlisted the support of the press. Its ties to the State, and dependence on the State, were too close and too great. And it was aimed too much at the press outside this country, without being able adequately to fulfil the basic function of a normal news agency, which is to serve the press of its own country. I am convinced that a really viable Irish news agency must answer the needs of Irish newspapers, and must be controlled by them. It would also have to have the support of the journalistic profession and the National Union of Journalists. If those conditions could be fulfilled the State would be prepared to help, but its role would have to be one of support, not of leadership or control.⁵²

52. Speech to the Conference of Connacht Editors at Castlebar, 1 August 1973 (mimeo).

The wheel had come full circle.