

VETERAN JOURNALIST: James Kelly wrote an Irish News column until his death at the age of 100

Dictators hate journalists and there's a reason why

Tom COLLINS



EVERY day in this slot, someone is mouthing off.

Some of what you read will confirm your view of the world: that we are going to hell in a handcart; that Ireland cannot be united too soon; that Brandon Lewis really is the worst secretary of state since all the others; that Ian Paisley Junior needs to go on more holidays and leave us to get on with our lives.

Some of what you read might challenge your preconceptions, or knock you out of that most fabled of places – your comfort zone. Occasionally it will give you a bit of a laugh – though not often enough, I suspect. The world is no longer a place of laughter.

The Irish News used to be damned with the slogan: deaths, dogs and dogma; while my granny, a lifelong fan of Jimmy Kelly, referred to the *News Letter* as "the penny liar" – even when I worked there.

When I became editor of *The Irish News* in 1993, she put me on warning that should anything happen to Kelly's column my life would not be worth living. He was still going strong when I left the paper.

Opinion writers like to think of themselves as having the wisdom of Solomon. Don't tell the editor, but they are just human beings with opinions.

And we all have opinions. Opinions are easy to come by. Walk into any bar, and you will be able to sample opinion in all its glory. Mine are no more valid than yours.

The great CP Scott, who edited and owned *The Guardian*, coined a phrase that I keep in mind always when writing.

Comment is free, but facts are sacred.

We live in a world which is increasingly driven by emotion. In the media we have seen the rise of the 'commentariat' and a drift towards ego-driven journalism on radio, television and the more lurid popular tabloids.

But journalism is more important than the latest spat over a shock jock, contrarian or dilettante (fill in your own names).

This week, the newspaper industry is running a campaign. It's called Journalism Matters, and it does. The important bits of this paper, and the countless others that have survived the onslaught of social media, is the bit devoted to the discovery and dissemination of the facts.

Since its foundation, *The Irish News* has been rooting out inconvenient truths that have shamed governments, called the powerful to account, and exposed horrendous abuses of human rights by successive governments who have put the preservation of the state above fairness, equity and justice.

In the spirit of the week that's in it, it is also worth recording the *News Letter*'s evisceration of the DUP and its dubious ash for cash scheme. Facts trump politics.

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Look across this country, and you will see local newspapers standing up for their communities, often in the face of opposition from officialdom – everything from obfuscation to open threats. I doubt there is a single journalist who has not been abused or threatened for trying to do their job. Some have lost their lives because of their dogged pursuit of the truth.

Every time you hand over your cash in the newsagents, or pay your monthly subscription for *The Irish News* online, you are investing in your right to know what is going on in the world. And you are investing in your right to be treated equally under the law – because journalists are looking after your interests.

Quality journalism is under threat. It is under threat from governments who want the world to see only a view that flatters them; it is under threat from gangsters who want to make a living off the backs of the communities they terrorise; and it is under threat from social media giants who steal news and profit by it.

Worse, the truth is under attack by algorithms that are programmed to sow dissent, to promote lies and untruths, and to magnify extremism.

In an age when it is popular to decry journalism with accusations of false news, the simple truth is that journalism – old style dogged journalism – with its reverence for the facts is often the only thing standing between us and dictatorship.

There is a reason why the first people dictators go for are journalists. According to the International Federation of Journalists, more than 40 were killed last year – many murdered – and almost 250 were imprisoned.

Journalism Matters… too right it does. That's my opinion anyway, it's also a fact.

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 4 1971

Faulkner on Minority

STORMONT Premier, Mr Brian Faulkner, said last night that the only way to deal with the IRA was to defeat them militarily by inflicting such losses that they would conclude that they were not going to shake the will of the community or overthrow the government.

Speaking in Ardglass, County Down, Mr Faulkner said anti-Unionists had tended to be carried away by their own propaganda into making impossible demands and taking up ridiculous positions from which they found it difficult to retreat. The Government's every blemish had been put under the microscope but their achievements had been swept aside as being of no account. Mr Faulkner said he was not going to don the sackcloth and ashes for 'fifty years of Unionist misrule'. He said the Government fully recognised that because of historical political allegiances, there was a special problem in NI in that the political minority had no prospect of coming to power. That was why issues of civil rights and the guarantee of fair play in every sphere was especially important. 'But no-one should imagine', he said, 'that this special position gives any minority the right to veto the operation of government or to exercise some sort of controlling influence. The majority remains the majority and the rights of Unionists are not to be disregarded….'

2 RUC Men Shot Dead

TWO policemen were shot dead as they were investigating a burglary in the Andersonstown area of Belfast yesterday.

Priests Call for Torture Probe

SEVENTY-seven per cent of the North's priests have signed a statement asking for a judicial inquiry 'to expose the full truth of what has been done to people arrested since August 9 under the Special Powers Act'.

In their statement, the priests say: 'We are convinced that brutality, physical and mental torture and psychological pressures have been inflicted on the men arrested under the Special Powers Act. We believe these barbarities are still being inflicted on innocent people convicted of no crime – at the Palace Barracks, Holywood, under the protection of law by the Special Branch of the RUC'. Copies of the statement have been sent to Westminster MPs, General Tuzo [the GOC] and the Taoiseach.

BRIAN Faulkner's belated acknowledgment that the northern minority were entitled to fair play and equality made no impact on the nationalist community while drawing angry criticism from his own right wing. The call from nearly 400 priests for a judicial inquiry into the widespread allegations of the torture of detainees underscored the deepening chasm between the Unionist government and the nationalist population.

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