

Check against delivery

**Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Enda Kenny T.D.
on the occasion of the launch
of the
2013 Annual Report of the Press Council of Ireland and
the Office of the Ombudsman
May 29th 2014**

Chairman Dáithí O'Ceallaigh,
Dr John Horgan,
Distinguished guests;
Ladies and gentlemen.

I'm pleased to be here today to launch the 2013 Annual Report of the Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman.

Thank you for inviting me.

As you know, at various points, over several decades, it was suggested that we should have such a system regarding the press. But it was a commission set up by my colleague Richard Bruton following the collapse of the Irish Press Group, that gave formal suggestion to something along the lines of what we have today. The idea being further developed by the Ministers for Justice Michael McDowell and the late Brian Lenihan.

While those involved in its creation and development, might have had different perspectives and politics, they were *ad idem* on one matter: the importance of a free press in a democratic society.

Today, in often-difficult circumstances all those of you involved in this work, must strike the right balance between the public-interest aspect in freedom of expression, and preventing unwarranted intrusion into the rights of individual citizens.

You are guided throughout this work by the extensive, voluntary Code of Practice, set out in your Report.

It's a Code that aims to set and guarantee the highest standards of ethics and professionalism in newspapers and magazines in Ireland. Crucially, you work to make sure that good policy becomes and remains good practice.

Your report shows that during 2013 you received 381 complaints. I would say a relatively modest number, given the extent of journalistic activity in Ireland and in the context of our national fascination with what makes, and what we read in, the papers.

It's good news for the reader and the more-than 135 publications that fund the Press Council that many of these complaints are resolved informally either by applying the Code of Practice, or through your excellent conciliation service.

Overall, I believe there is considerable satisfaction in the professional standards applied by Irish print media and upheld by your Council and Ombudsman.

I note that the Council has, in recent times, welcomed a significant new member from the ever-expanding area of digital publishing.
.... That's with the admission of The.Journal.ie.

And I believe the advent of The Journal.ie to this 'fold' is only the first step in encouraging digital media that are professional in character, and see the innate value of adhering to the standards of, and supporting, the Council and the Press Ombudsman.

Our media write a lot about standards in and of our public service. But our journalists themselves can provide an invaluable service to the public. We are fortunate to live in a free democratic society, with rights and privileges – which include freedom of speech. And as we travel through this decade of centenaries, it is worth pointing out that one of the greatest legacies of our shared history with the UK is the concept of a free press. Indeed the outcome of the War of Independence was in no small measure influenced by the National and International Press – something we should consider commemorating as we acknowledge the events of that turbulent period.

Public service was exemplified also, in the most practical way, by the work of two of our most distinguished public servants – Professor Tom Mitchell of Trinity and the first Northern Ireland Ombudsman Maurice Hayes in helping to build this Press Council.

In the last almost-seven years and under the chairmanship first of Professor Mitchell, and more recently of Dáithí O'Ceallaigh, the structures have secured a high degree of international recognition.....for example.... with The Press Ombudsman's being invited to advise other countries looking to establish an independent press regulatory system.

You will be acutely aware that public confidence in the media is vital in, and to, a free and democratic society.

I believe it is fair to say that in Ireland, the press has responded well to the public mood to see and demand greater accountability from all institutions, be they public or private.

You have risen to the challenge even as the traditional, static model of 'print' and 'broadcast' has been overtaken by new and social media, with breaking stories..... history itself..... not just being 'reported live'..... but actually 'lived'.....as they are communicated..... as we saw recently in Kiev.

Yes, this fragmentation of media puts a huge premium on quality, and best professional practice. It makes it vital that citizens' reasonable complaints about any departures from those standards, will be independently assessed, and that accessible and effective redress will be provided.

I believe that, generally, the Irish media, has been respectful of citizens' rights.

They have been mindful not alone of the principles contained in the Code of Practice....but of the protection offered by our Constitution, by the European Convention on Human Rights and by many judgments of our Courts, for instance on the right to privacy.

But even in the best system, breaches occur.

Complaints of unwarranted press intrusion into private life often centre on well-known personalities. But according to circumstances, any individual can find themselves in the media spotlight, And because they can, all citizens are entitled to effective and accessible protection against media publication of false or misleading comments.....against media revelations of their private lives..... where no legitimate public-interest justifies publication.

That's why we must remain vigilant. That's why we must keep reviewing whether the policy of the statutory and voluntary protection of citizens is actually working in practice.

This government has demonstrated its own vigilance.....its own practical support of the press.... by retaining the special lower rate of VAT affecting many of their operations.

In conclusion, let me refer to someone central to all such operations.....the Press Ombudsman, Professor John Horgan...who will be retiring in September after seven years.

John, this is your last Annual report.

In the last half century.... from those early days as a temporary sub-editor in the Irish Press, you have made a signal difference to the press, its standards, credibility and operation in this country.

You have been exemplary in every aspect of your career and are held in great esteem..... and it must be said..... a deep affection by all who work with you.

As a teacher, a Senator, Press Ombudsman you have held and kept the highest standards....you have shown the immense possibilities..... of public service.

I hope your high example will encourage equally-talented....equally-diligent people to work in and for our shared public life in this country.

Public life... public service.... was integral to the life and work of President John F Kennedy.

As it happens.... today is his birthday....if he'd lived..... he'd be 97. ...just a year older than..... the late... Madiba...

Kennedy said that a nation
that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market....is a nation that is afraid of its people.

In Ireland, one of the longest, functioning democracies in Europe.... because our people are sovereign..... our nation will always be unafraid.

The Press Council and Press Ombudsman have a vital role to play in guaranteeing truth over falsehood.... and the fairness of the 'open market'.

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