



**RESPONSE OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND PANEL OF THE PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH IN IRELAND TO THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF
MEDIA IN IRELAND BY THE FUTURE OF MEDIA COMMISSION**

JANUARY 2021

1. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has over 217,000 members belonging to 535 congregations across 19 Presbyteries throughout Ireland, north and south. The Council for Public Affairs is authorised by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to speak on behalf of PCI on matters of public policy. The Republic of Ireland Panel of the Council specifically considers matters relating to that jurisdiction. With regard to the consultation on the future of media in Ireland the following comments are offered.
2. As one of the minority churches in Ireland, PCI appreciates the opportunity to express its views with regard to Public Service Media, its role, shape and funding in Ireland. The approach to this task is informed by two perspectives. The first of these is as followers of Jesus Christ whom, along with all Christians, we regard as the embodiment of truth. He is, to Christians, The Way, The Truth and The Life.
3. The discussion of truth, its importance and reality might appear to be a somewhat abstract point at which to begin a comment on the role of Public Service Media in Ireland. However, it is an idea that lies at the very heart of the Reithian principles embodied in the duty of Public Service Media to "Inform, Educate and Entertain."
4. Over the last decade, but increasingly in the last few years, the role of mainstream media, and Public Service broadcasters in particular, as conveyers of truth has been greatly challenged. Indeed, the very idea of objective truth has come under assault in an era of "alternative facts". This hostile environment to truth makes it all the more important that in a small society such as Ireland, we continue to value and support providers of news and factual programming that are seen to be independent of, and unaccountable to, commercial interests or politically motivated owners.
5. This applies not just in the basic duty to inform, with regards to the daily news output, but also as part of the duty to educate with the provision of good quality factual and investigative programming. For Public Service Media to be able to reflect back to us, as a society, a truthful and honest picture of who we are then it must be able to do so in a way that is not only impartial, but also seen to be impartial.
6. We are conscious that no news or factual programming source, no matter how well skilled or funded, will always be completely right or totally impartial but a publicly funded media that, at its

heart, strives toward impartiality and truthfulness will go some way toward restoring public trust in the very concept of truthful, well-researched news and factual programming.

7. The second perspective that informs this contribution is as part of a minority community in an increasingly pluralist Ireland. We hope, both for ourselves and for all minorities in Ireland, to be represented fairly, proportionately and honestly in the media. This role of representation of minorities is one that is uniquely suited to Public Service Media, as minorities, by definition, are much less commercially interesting than the majority community.
8. One of the main forms of visibility for the Presbyterian community over the years on RTÉ television and radio has been the “Service on Sunday” programme. The various RTÉ staff and external contractors who have worked on these programmes have been excellent but we are conscious that each year the Religion department of RTÉ has undergone a continuing series of cuts that has, inevitably, led to a reduction of quality in output of the Religion Department.
9. Moving almost all of the Mass / Sunday Service content into the Donnybrook studio has produced a homogenised and bland looking series of programmes that does little to express the rich religious diversity on the island of Ireland. Providing the funding that would allow RTÉ to show different faith groups worshipping in their own places and contexts would greatly enrich the Religious Department’s output and go some way towards addressing the fall in viewing / listening figures that was occurring before the pandemic.
10. Finally, a thought on funding and the justice or otherwise of the licence fee. The licence fee is a simple form of regressive taxation, in that it costs the same amount for a family on a low income as it does for a family on a higher income. If the licence fee moves from being a discretionary tax which we can chose to pay by having or not having a tv, to being a compulsory tax on all media users, then it would only be fair to change it from a set figure (which will hit the poorest hardest) to a percentage of earnings, the cost of which will be spread more evenly around society and might even provide a more secure base for public service broadcasting into the future.

Very Rev Dr Trevor Morrow

Convener, Republic of Ireland Panel