

## Irreverent. Irrepressible. In the corridors of power

HERE was only one thing my grandfather insisted on watching on RTÉ: Highway To Heaven. We kids knew it was coming up on the television when he

came into our front room and said: 'I see you're watching The Ahhh-Team' in his soft Galway accent. That was the signal that Highway to Heaven would be on soon and we'd better surrender control.

Running from 1984 to 1989, Highway To Heaven was a successful American show about an angel come to earth that was aired on RTÉ. My grandad (on my dad's side) had grown up in Connemara and had lived his entire life in Galway. I don't recall him watching anything besides RTÉ at our house in north Dublin, though we had the British channels.

We often laugh fondly at the interest my grandmother (she too a Galway woman, but on my mother's side) had in racy American soaps on RTÉ. Dallas, of course, was a favourite but so was Falcon Crest. When Falcon Crest's tyrannical matriarch Angela Channing came on screen my grandmother would always say 'here's Reagan's one'. (The actress playing Angela, Jane Wyman, was US president Ronald Reagan's first wife)

My grandparents, all west of Ire-land people, would have kept up on their current events through RTÉ radio and television. They had a reverence for the institution and readily accepted that they pay out to provide US entertainment, along with the serious stuff.

Many I know in rural Ireland would be proud to be represented by the current TDs and senators who laboured at the Media Committee to heave information from highly paid, elite RTÉ television executives.



committee after Wednes-day's events and several agreed with my perception of the culture clash between witnesses and inquisitors over the five-and-a-half hours of compelling broadcasting. One TD said: 'It was like it was beneath them, having to answer questions to the likes of us. Well,

SPOKE to members of that

they had to. On the RTÉ witness bench there was an unusual profusion of designer eyeglasses and an almost uniform clipped Dublin 4, mid-Atlantic accent. This may be unfair, as I don't know the RTÉ representatives' backgrounds as intimately as I do those of the politicians. But certainly, more work has been done on tending to their image than studying the basics of corporate governance, it would appear. There weren't any strong Kerry, Louth or Tipperary accents among them.

I've known Mattie McGrath many years and the rapidity of his delivery can be difficult. Yet when he says 'loyal to', I don't think that I'd confuse that with 'lying to', like interim director general Adrian Lynch in his first appearance at the committee. Mattie referred to this

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event on Thursday and he voiced the suspicion of many that there had been something subliminal going on.

Sinn Féin TD Imelda Munster was the first to mention the flipflops (RTÉ gave away €5,000 worth of them), and that somehow seemed to raise hackles.

Commercial director Geraldine O'Leary was accused by Ms Munster of showing contempt to the committee. Through gritted teeth she said that there was 'no attempt to show contempt for anybody in this situation, Deputy'. In response to another question, she began, peering over her black-rimmed glasses, 'we have tried to explain it in an explanatory note, Deputy, but...

Eventually Ms O'Leary snapped, and revealed that the real villain of all this is not even the committee but journalists asking her questions about her tax-funded performance. The media had 'crossed the line' in their reporting of her husband attending rugby matches and other events with her.

Except, of course, she herself had spoken about her husband attending a dinner before a U2 concert the previous week, meaning such questions – from this newspaper it is to be presumed – were not only legitimate, but in the public interest. A strange thing for an executive board member of the public service broadcaster not to understand

I've covered many of these committees over the past 20 years, and they fulfil a vital democratic role. The banking inquiry into the great-

est scandal in our history was held there too. It was during Ms Munster's questioning that I saw where this RTÉ scandal could go if the Coalition is not very careful. Referring to flip-flops and payments for secret barter accounts, Ms Munster, used the phrase 'Celtic Tiger levels of extravagance'.

It is here that Sinn Féin will fight the political battle. For RTÉ and flip-flops think Charlie Haughey and Charvet shirts or Bertie Ahern and his 'I won it on the horses' excuse. It is the small details that people can identify with that will

be recalled many years later. This shows how important the at-first apparently comical information about flip-flops expenditure and the unauthorised commandeering of a car by Marty Morrissey will be.

Looking around the other day at the committee room suite that held the banking inquiry, I recalled the €200,000 that Anglo Irish Bank spent on golf balls. That spend was part of the €1.38m it spent on branded client merchandise as its shares collapsed. Small money when compared to the €120bn bank bailout that Anglo played a central role in necessitating.

Sinn Féin, as well as its participation in proper Oireachtas scrutiny of RTÉ, will do what a competent opposition party should do and connect the Government to this scandal. For, ultimately, if State agencies go rogue, then it's the Government's fault.

Brian Cowen once told me in an interview that there was an attempt

by the opposition and the media to connect him and his government to Anglo executives. It was unfair – there was never a question mark over Mr Cowen's personal probity but, he admitted, the slur succeeded.



HERE is, however, an element of reality in attempts the opposition is making to contaminate the Government with the contemptible behav-

iour in RTÉ. As the scandal began, I was briefed by Cabinet ministers on the tough stance they wanted to take on RTÉ.

There was talk of splitting the commercial and public service aspects, and a long-required downscaling of RTÉ (which, sadly, will involve redundancies). Some were worried about the financial cost but the senior people have been dragged along by the younger or more clued-in ministers.

For some of the metropolitan types in Government know some of the people responsible for this mess in RTÉ. They may even have created a rapport among the higher-paid stars. Or it is just possible that what populist Sinn Féin has been saying all along is true - that there is an elite in Government, business and the media that looks after itself, making sure it keeps the vast majority of power and capital for itself to maintain the establishment? And that elite looks down with contempt on the rest?

You could see a division at play in

Leinster House last week. There is a growing separation between the elite Cabinet members and top advisers in our cross-party, triparty Coalition. Among that Government elite come the highest paid civil servants, the secretariesgeneral. There is a lower order of politician, on far less money than Cabinet ministers but also, in many cases, on less than half the money those RTÉ executives get.

You could detect a separation between those political elites and ordinary politicians last week. For alongside the forensic opposition questioners there were Govern-ment TDs and senators holding these RTÉ people to account. Fine Gael TD Brendan Griffin (Kerry); Fine Gael senator Micheál Carrigy (Longford); Fianna Fáil chairwoman Niamh Smyth (Cavan-Monaghan) and Fianna Fáil senator Timmy Dooley (Clare) all performed brilliantly. All of them represent rural constituencies.

Fianna Fail and Fine Gael TDs and senators are telling their superiors to get a grip on this crisis before the contamination spreads.

There may need to be some intervention to get a grip on the Department of Media, where Minister Catherine Martin's performance has been laughably bad. There has been talk of a 'war room' being set up by advisers at her department. Sadly for Ms Martin, the invading armies had overrun major cities and strategic outposts before her army got their boots on.

Now, in the words of Mattie McGrath, we must see who the Coalition are 'loyal to'.