

29th June 2003

Pigs May Fly Over TV Studios

By Bob Quinn

If Brian Dobson, Irish Television's chief male newsreader had been sacked for his recent breach of professional ethics, pigs would surely have taken to the air over Dublin. Dobson, was exposed as doing journalistic nixers i.e. privately helping to train Health Board managers in the art of responding to hard media questions – from such as Mr. Dobson. When his professional bilocation was revealed he came out with his hands up – live, by phone, on a popular RTE evening radio current affairs programme – said he was sorry, that he had made a wrong call.

If long-standing Staff Guidelines had been invoked, he might well have been sacked.

Immediately others confessed, among them Sean O'Rourke, presenter of the station's flagship News At One. He too, had helped train public figures, presumably in the usual techniques of giving soft answers to hard questions. Last year O'Rourke, on the live news, rubbished the arguments of the Chairman of Primary School Managers against allowing advertisers' direct access to schoolchildren. O'Rourke said the arguments were 'po-faced'.

It transpires that many prominent Irish public broadcasting figures are as happy with part-time market opportunities as Network 2's rogue builder, Dustin the Turkey, or the average plumber in the nation's black economy.

National radio success (and TV failure) Gerry Ryan was in the 'stable of stars' run by Carol Associates and could command thousands for endorsing a product. Pop music and popcorn cinema expert Dave Fanning lucratively opened a cinema omniplex. Agony Uncle Joe Duffy writes a weekly column in one of the more vulgar Irish tabloids. A singular irony is that some of these RTE-created personalities are in the stable of a company called ProMedia which is the brainchild of one Pat Kenny, ancient cornerstone of RTE current affairs and currently presenter of RTE's biggest weekly earner, the Late Late Show. Kenny himself has been known to present inhouse gigs for Renault cars, which happened to be a sponsor of his television show. He also famously opened the

'Fermoy & Bunratty C0-Op Superstores' – for an undisclosed fee. Kenny's show, by the way, was the station's (and the world's) longest-running – 30 years - late night TV chat show under the genius of almost-retired Gay Byrne, himself no slouch in the extra-curricular nixer stakes. Now nearing 70 and probably persuaded that he is still a youngster by Bono's on-air gift of a Harley-Davidson, Byrne abandoned retirement to present the Oirish version of 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' After a 40 year marriage to the public broadcaster, Byrne defended his commercial instincts by stating that he was never on the staff of RTE.

It is only natural that the crew of the sinking ship that is Irish public broadcasting should reserve places in the lifeboat of commercialism when their employer has been doing it for years. It stems from the worst-of-both-worlds mode in which RTE was launched in 1961: a dual mandate which gave it a small license fee and encouraged it to scrabble for advertising to pay its 2000-strong staff. Originally a 50:50 arrangement , the station's annual income of over 200 million now relies two-thirds on the philanthropy of commercial interests. Its most prominent personalities have long embraced the Coalition Government's mantra: Ireland is nearer to Boston than Berlin. The position of Government Information Officer is traditionally a sinecure of RTE journalists. However, even with the recent boost in license fee, brokered by soon-to-retire Director General Bob Collins with Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, the organisation has already notched up a 2.1 million loss this year.

In a hilarious gesture towards locking the stable door, Clare Duignan, Director of RTE television programmes, has this week memo-ed extracts from a 14-year-old Staff guidance manual to potential and actual freebooters on the staff. Among other pious aspirations it says that RTE employees may not engage in activities which would 'conflict with or be inconsistent with their official duties', 'contribute to any external publication', 'must seek special permission in writing' to engage in extra-curricular activities.

The wonder is that shock and dismay were displayed by the Irish print media at these recent revelations. My recent book, 'Maverick', detailed all of the sad facts of how the Irish Public Broadcaster had become little more than an advertising and sponsorship vehicle on the American model. The book was the first serious insider look at the station in twenty years and was too embarrassing to be mentioned, even in passing, by the above personalities, even in the multifarious discussions that prefaced RTE's successful

bid for an increase in the license fee to E150 last year. The word was out, a la Fawlty Towers and the War: Don't Mention The Book.

In response to several curious requests under the Freedom of Information Act, RTE is at the moment desperately searching for any written record of staff permissions to do nixers. In the unlikely event of such being discovered, another fleet of pigs will take to the sky.

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