

# Fair and Accurate?

THE AMENDMENT AND THE PRESS

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VERITAS

ISBN 086217 178 4  
£ .40P

Veritas Publications, 7-8 Lower Abbey Street, Dublin 1  
First Published 1984  
© 1984 Timothy O'Sullivan  
ISBN 086217 178 4

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Typeset by Printset and Design Ltd  
Printed by Drogheda Independent Ltd

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VERITAS PUBLICATIONS

## THE AMENDMENT

*"The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right."* (The Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, passed on 7 September 1983 by 841,233 to 416,136 votes).

## THE PRESS

*"A journalist shall strive to ensure that the information he/she disseminates is fair and accurate, avoid the expression of comment and conjecture as established fact and (avoid) falsification and distortion, selection or misrepresentation."* (Code of Professional Conduct, National Union of Journalists).

## INTRODUCTION

During the Solidarity revolution in Poland, press censorship was briefly relaxed. This led to an explosion of interest in certain newspapers and magazines. There were queues outside the newspaper kiosks which rivalled those outside the butchers' shops.

As the political crisis worsened, the country's hunger for truth was expressed more and more in negative ways and especially through protest. People deliberately went for walks while the discredited evening news was on TV. The TV reports were rejected even more directly in the country's graffiti, which stated simply: "The TV lies."

Poland's dramatic and desperate situation in 1981-82 was very different from that which existed in Western countries. Yet its experience held many lessons for Western observers, not least in the field of the media. The Poles' fight for a free press reminded people in other countries how precious such freedom was. Their hunger for truth about their society suggested that such hunger was not a cliché, that it existed elsewhere too and was stronger than some newspaper proprietors realised . . . Finally, in its own negative way, the bitter relationship between society and the official media in Poland demonstrated the importance of trust between press and public.

A free press — newspapers, radio and TV — has long been seen in the West as a pillar of democratic society. The press, it is argued, makes public participation in the democratic process possible and makes the great institutions of society more accountable. In recent decades, especially since the arrival of television, the realisation has grown that the press too is a major institution and centre of power in society. Just as it tries to make the institutions of society, including government, more accountable to the public, so the press itself should be socially accountable.

Few democratic societies have yet managed to find meaningful ways of making the press more socially accountable. Indeed, James Curran and Jean Seaton, the authors of a recent book published by Fontana, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, suggest that the media have become less accountable as they have grown more powerful. Many countries, nevertheless, underline the importance of public participation in the press or the media, and the necessity of dialogue between journalists and their public.

This booklet is written as a contribution to such dialogue in Ireland. It examines press coverage of the Pro-Life Amendment campaign. This topic is important for two reasons: 1) The pro-life amendment issue was itself of fundamental public importance. 2) Examination of press coverage of this issue raises general questions about the role and values of the media in our society.

I focus in this booklet on coverage of the amendment in the Dublin printed media, especially in the latter part of the campaign. Included are national newspapers and magazines published in Dublin as well as specifically Dublin publications. My argument has two main strands. I look at the question of bias against the proposed amendment in the Dublin press. I consider whether such bias led to an unbalanced, and therefore undemocratic, public debate.

I write this booklet as a member of the public rather than as a journalist. It is important for the public to understand the pressures which Irish journalists face and to acknowledge their considerable achievement in many areas. It is important for journalists to take seriously criticism by the public of their performance, to understand that hunger for truth exists in Ireland too. It is essential, above all, that dialogue take place between journalists and the public. That, at least, is the spirit in which this booklet is written.

## BACKGROUND

The Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC) was publicly launched in April 1981. Its aim was to achieve constitutional protection for the unborn, to ensure that abortion could never be legalised in Ireland against the wishes of the majority of the people. PLAC was sponsored by the country's leading gynaecologists.

The context of PLAC's proposal was the repeal or steady erosion of anti-abortion laws in other European countries, especially Britain. There was a strong international trend towards legalised abortion and towards acceptance of such legalisation as 'normal'.

Ireland itself had a serious abortion problem: each year more than three thousand Irish women were going to Britain for abortions. Abortion referral agencies were operating in Ireland and a pro-abortion lobby had emerged. There nevertheless remained strong opposition to legalised abortion in Ireland. It was to this opposition that PLAC appealed in campaigning for a constitutional amendment.

An amendment to the Constitution is essentially an act of law-making by the people as a whole. It is therefore an extremely serious matter. When the issue involved relates to the right to life, it becomes even more serious. In a democracy, participation by the people as a whole in such decision-making depends to a significant extent on information and arguments received through the media. It is on this basis that members of the public can reach a judgement on the issues involved.

A central function of the press in a democracy is to present fairly and in detail the information necessary to enable people to decide on questions of public importance. The extract from the NUJ's Professional Code of Conduct, quoted at the beginning of this booklet, suggests that journalists too view their role in a democratic society in this light; or at least do so officially.

There is an obvious problem if in practice journalists become largely participants in, rather than observers of, public debate. As Bishop Cahal Daly noted in the context of the amendment debate: "The media have such control over news-presentation and opinion-reporting that, if they themselves become partisan, national debate becomes distorted and the state of national opinion misrepresented." (Catholic Press Congress, October 1983).

The next sections focus on this basic question: did partisanship take precedence over the obligation to report

fairly and accurately in media coverage of the pro- and anti-amendment campaigns?

## THE MEDIA AND THE PRO-AMENDMENT CAMPAIGN

Journalists who wished to clarify the issues at stake in the referendum for the public were clearly obliged to present the pro-amendment case fairly and accurately. This meant examining seriously:

- the legal case for the amendment;
- the context in which the proposal was being made, nationally and internationally;
- the ethical issues at stake in abortion;
- the recent advances in medical knowledge of unborn life and its development;
- the increased ecumenical co-operation in opposition to abortion in many countries.

Few of these areas received any serious attention in the Dublin printed media. Instead, the anti-amendment views of many Dublin-based journalists strongly coloured their presentation of the pro-amendment case. Long before the wording of the proposed amendment was made public — in November 1982 — the Dublin media had registered considerable hostility to the pro-amendment position. Coolly ignoring the strong Irish opposition to legalised abortion, many journalists dismissed PLAC as a tiny right-wing pressure group. In the media view — insistently repeated — PLAC had taken advantage of imminent elections, and the weakness of politicians, to push through a divisive and entirely unnecessary proposal.

Particularly explicit statements of the typical Dublin-media line came in July 1982, when two Dublin magazines, *Magill* and *In Dublin*, published in-depth reports on the background to the pro-life amendment issue.

Pat Brennan in *Magill* presented the forthcoming referendum as a successful coup by a "tiny" ultra-conservative pressure group during a period of political uncertainty. Fintan O'Toole in *In Dublin* focussed on "The People and the Theories" behind the pro-amendment campaign. Neither reporter took a critical look at the people or the theories behind the anti-amendment campaign. Their similar stand-point was revealed in their respective article headings: "Backlash and Blackmail" (Brennan) and "The Moral Monopoly" (O'Toole).

These articles are good examples of the way the Dublin media viewed and handled the referendum issue in 1982-83. During the debate the *Sunday Tribune* was the only Dublin newspaper or magazine to take an in-depth look at the anti-amendment campaign (AAC) and the background to its establishment. PLAC, on the other hand, was subjected to the most intense scrutiny throughout and consistently presented as a small, manipulative pressure group.

Few journalists were as outspoken as Pat Brennan in *Magill*: "A small group of zealous Catholics . . . rearguard action . . . a plethora of little-known, right-wing Catholic organisations, many with links with the secret Knights of Columbanus." Yet her article, reprinted in an anti-amendment pamphlet, is noteworthy for its considerable influence on later media coverage of the campaign.

Later in-depth reports on the referendum in Dublin dailies or Sundays drew, sometimes heavily, on this article. Just three examples may be given here: The *Sunday Tribune* feature by Emily O'Reilly and Joe Carroll on "The Pro-Life Campaign. How it Started. How it Succeeded. The People Behind it." (24 April 1983); Isabel Conway's *Irish Press* feature close to referendum day on "the background to the current debate" ("Campaign Dividing the Nation", 29 August 1983); and Colman Cassidy's *Sunday Press* article "A Beginner's Guide to the Referendum" (21 August 1983).

The slant common to all of these articles was summed up in Colman Cassidy's description of PLAC as "a tiny, albeit powerful pressure-group which virtually in no time managed to force both C.J. Haughey and Garret FitzGerald in turn to concede the need for a referendum." In fact, Dr FitzGerald had committed himself to the referendum before Mr Haughey.

On the same day as Mr Cassidy's "Beginner's Guide to the Referendum" in the *Sunday Press*, the *Sunday Independent* published a detailed article, "Plain Man's Guide to the Referendum" by Willie Kealy which purported to present "clear, unbiased factual information". Mr Kealy addressed those considering voting 'yes' as follows: "If you are totally opposed to abortion in any circumstance, including where the operation is performed to save the life of the mother, then you have no problem." He was particularly critical of the politicians who "allowed themselves to be pressurised into commitments to hold a referendum". Mr Haughey had "trapped" Dr FitzGerald, who himself had shown "moral and political cowardice".

These arguments about a tiny and manipulative pressure group ignored above all the *context* in which the amendment proposal was made — the strong opposition to legalised abortion on the one hand, and the growth of a small but influential pro-abortion lobby on the other. As already suggested, it was to the large anti-abortion consensus in Ireland that PLAC appealed in launching its campaign; had such a consensus not existed, few politicians would have taken the PLAC proposal seriously.

In ignoring the context in which the amendment proposal was made, how well did journalists carry out their obligation to report fairly and accurately? In describing the amendment as sectarian, how fully did they examine Protestant and secular opposition to abortion? In investigating PLAC but not the AAC, did they apply the standards of their own code of conduct?

## THE MEDIA AND THE ANTI-AMENDMENT CAMPAIGN

Opposition to the amendment was expressed on many grounds throughout the debate. Serious reservations were voiced about the necessity for an amendment at all, or about the wording which emerged. Some people expressed anxiety about what they saw as a Catholic crusade. These views were reported at great length and with great sympathy by the media. The analysis which follows is not intended to brush aside these arguments or the people who made them. It highlights, rather, the media's kidglove treatment of the organised opposition to the amendment: the Anti-Amendment Campaign.

During the referendum, only one piece of major investigative reporting was carried out in the Dublin media on the anti-amendment campaign. This was Emily O'Reilly's report in the *Sunday Tribune* on 15 May 1983. The article was headed with a quote from a leading anti-amendment activist, Ruth Riddick: "The Current Political Objective is the Defeat of the Amendment. The Pro-Abortion Lobby Comes Later."

In her article, Emily O'Reilly reported in some detail on the background to the establishment of the anti-amendment campaign. Central to the story of how the campaign was organised, Ms O'Reilly stated, was the role of the Women's Right to Choose group. She described as follows an early meeting of what was to become the Anti-Amendment Campaign: "A clear consensus emerged from the meeting

that the Right to Choose issue in the campaign should be played down . . . Much of the meeting was taken up with deciding what to call the campaign, should it be Pro something, or Anti something. Fifteen suggestions were put forward including 'Pro-Choice', but 'Anti-Amendment' was finally decided on."

The *Tribune* article went on to detail the involvement of some leading anti-amendment activists in abortion referral and summarised as follows the position of the anti-amendment campaign on abortion: "Right from the very beginnings of the campaign, there were divisions and conflicts over the issue of the prominence that should be given to the demand for the legalisation of abortion here. Many of the original group insisted that it be a prominent part of the campaign, and others, however, especially those who came in at a later stage, ensured that it remained a separate issue. Indeed, a significant proportion of those now prominent in the campaign are opposed to abortion."

The last sentence apart, Ms O'Reilly's analysis was substantially confirmed by anti-amendment activists writing in a socialist magazine *Gralton*, after the referendum (October-November 1983). Like Emily O'Reilly, the contributors to *Gralton* highlighted the division in the Anti-Amendment Campaign on whether or not the pro-abortion case should be put to the people. These activists, however, viewed the division almost entirely in tactical terms and were critical of some anti-abortion statements which had emanated from the anti-amendment side. In the last months of the campaign, according to Eddie Conlon, a national organiser: "Those who believed there was a tactical need to leave abortion out of the argument, became virulently anti-abortion — much more so than they really are."

Anne O'Donnell, another prominent activist, concurred: "I do think, however, that some individuals may have gone over the mark in trying to appear different from what they really are." Mary Gordon and John Cane, who wrote the major piece in *Gralton* on the referendum, were in no doubt as to what had been at issue in the debate. The passing of the amendment, in their view, was a major defeat for "abortion rights" in Ireland.

The connection between the pro-abortion lobby and ideology, and the Anti-Amendment Campaign, discussed so frankly in the *Tribune* and *Gralton*, was emphasised in much pro-amendment literature during the debate. It was also noted in the articles of a few pro-amendment columnists, e.g. Fr

Michael Cleary, then writing for the *Sunday Independent*, and Des Rushe of the *Irish Independent*. Yet the Dublin media as a whole ignored both this connection and the background to the establishment of the Anti-Amendment Campaign.

As noted earlier, this uncritical acceptance of the AAC stood in sharp contrast to the media's hostile treatment of PLAC. Emily O'Reilly's article was to remain the only in-depth report in her own paper or elsewhere on the Anti-Amendment Campaign. Even this article left unexamined some obvious contradictions in the AAC, e.g. between its avowed neutrality on, or even opposition to, abortion, and at least two of the grounds on which it officially opposed the amendment.

The line almost universally followed by the Dublin printed media during the referendum was that the pro-abortion lobby was tiny and that to link that lobby with the Anti-Amendment Campaign was to indulge in a form of McCarthyism. Thus, Vincent Browne, in a signed *Sunday Tribune* editorial on the eve of the referendum: "(The pro-abortion) lobby is so miniscule and unrepresentative that they can be discounted entirely." (4 September 1983).

A week later, though, the *Tribune* editorial line had changed somewhat: "The anti-amendment campaign was also more than a little dishonest . . . there was . . . a dishonesty involved in the argument that the amendment could facilitate the introduction of abortion rather than the reverse. Technically this contention might have had validity but it was so far removed from what the anti-amendment campaign was about that it was disingenuous to deploy that argument. Anyway, it fooled no-one." (11 September 1983).

"What the anti-amendment campaign was about", the *Tribune* leader-writer did not, however, examine or state. This failure to subject the AAC or its arguments to critical scrutiny was a major feature of amendment coverage in the entire Dublin media. It applied to the Dublin daily newspapers as well as to a whole range of other printed media, and amounted to news suppression on a significant scale.

## THE DUBLIN DAILIES

Any examination of amendment coverage in the Dublin printed media must clearly give due emphasis to the Dublin morning newspapers. The research of this writer for various periods of the campaign found that the coverage of all three Dublin dailies was strongly biased against the amendment. The *Irish Times* and *Irish Press* both campaigned vigorously

against it. Coverage in the *Irish Independent* was also slanted against the amendment but this newspaper made a greater effort than the others to examine the pro-amendment case. For the purposes of this booklet, a particular week — 22 August to 27 August — was taken in the run-up to the referendum, and coverage in the dailies analysed. The results are reported and discussed below.

#### AUGUST 22-27: NEWS REPORTS IN DUBLIN DAILIES

	Pro-Amendment Column inches	Anti-Amendment Column Inches
<i>IRISH INDEPENDENT</i>	406	528
<i>IRISH TIMES</i>	309	665
<i>IRISH PRESS</i>	165	281
<i>ALL THREE DAILIES</i>	880	1474

These figures were arrived at by counting the column inches devoted in the papers' newscoverage to pro and anti-amendment statements, views, news items and reports. Editorials, letters and feature articles, e.g. the 'Referendum People' series in the *Irish Times* were not included. Neither were items considered as neutral, e.g. RTE's statements on proposed coverage of the debate. The figures should be regarded as approximate.

These figures are one small pointer among many to the fact that the newspapers gave much greater attention to the anti-amendment case. The newspapers' bias was more pronounced than even the figures indicate. Reports of priests' pro-amendment sermons are included in the pro-amendment figures, even though most journalists wrote these reports from a strongly anti-amendment perspective. The *Irish Press* is particularly flattered by the figures above. A major part of its pro-amendment coverage during the week was its lead story on the Catholic Hierarchy's statement (Tuesday) in full, but the headings for it and the introductory paragraphs by T.P. O'Mahony amounted to an anti-amendment interpretation of what the bishops had actually said.

In addition to front page reports, leader page articles, editorials etc., each of the three papers was by now devoting some or all of an additional news page to the referendum. During the week 22 to 27 August, the major stories on this page in all three papers were usually anti-amendment stories.

Major photos on this page were also usually of anti-amendment personalities. A rare exception, in Saturday's *Times*, showed a gesticulating representative of SPUC. Photographic bias was particularly evident in the *Times*. Seven photos relating to the amendment were published on page 1 during the week. All were of persons opposed to the amendment. The bias extended even to the 'Referendum People' series, which on Tuesday showed a smiling Dr Maire Woods (AAC) and a very bleary-eyed Dr Julia Vaughan (PLAC).

A major news story during the week was the Catholic Hierarchy's statement in support of the amendment. This statement highlighted the seriousness of the issues involved in the referendum, and the Church's responsibility to speak on the matter. It recognised the right of each person to vote according to conscience and called for a decisive 'yes' vote. All three papers gave front page coverage to this story. All three gave the bishops' statement in full. All three, but particularly the *Times* and the *Press*, played down the bishops' support for the amendment. "Bishops back free amendment vote", 'No' vote "not a stand for abortion" were the headings over T.P. O'Mahony's lead story in the *Press*. Ironically, Mr O'Mahony applauded the "most important step" the bishops had taken towards ending the widespread confusion on the central issues, but played down completely their call for a decisive 'yes' vote.

In the *Times*, Tuesday's lead story, "Bishops accept right of personal conscience in vote" highlighted the Catholic Hierarchy's recognition of the right to vote according to conscience, but not their main message: "We are convinced that a clear majority in favour of the amendment will greatly contribute to the continued protection of unborn human life in the laws of our country." The *Independent's* front page heading on Tuesday was: "Amendment: Bishop's call for Yes Vote", but the opening paragraph read: "The Catholic Hierarchy openly declared last night that they recognised the right of people to vote according to their consciences in the coming referendum on abortion."

Coverage of the controversy in the Irish Farmers' Association followed very similar lines in all three papers during the week; the *Irish Times* was, perhaps, less partisan than the others. All focussed on the division in the IFA rather than on the questions of principle involved in the suspensions. All emphasised the calibre of the officers who had taken an anti-amendment stance. None gave detailed attention to the

groundswell of opinion in the IFA which had led to the suspensions.

On Wednesday in the *Independent* Tracey Hogan's lead story had the dramatic heading: "Abortion: Cashman silenced by IFA", and carried somewhat cynical undertones. The organisation had wanted to avoid embarrassment in the run-up to the referendum; it was seriously divided; Mr Cashman had been silenced; there had been a purge. An adjoining article by P.J. Cunningham was headed: "Move was a reaction by the grass roots", but did not in fact report on grass-roots views. Instead, the groundswell of opinion was presented as manoeuvring "by irate influential figures" determined to make Mr Cashman and the others "shed their pound of flesh". On Thursday, Mr Cunningham returned to the theme of faction fighting with words such as "revenge", "knives of vengeance", and "blood-letting".

In the *Press*, Stephen O'Byrnes suggested on Tuesday that there was a "hint of electioneering" in Michael Slattery's criticism of the anti-amendment group. Mr O'Byrnes did at least note that the IFA's headquarters "had been inundated" with farmers protesting at the stance of their leading officers. However, neither this article, nor other Dublin media coverage of the controversy, examined in detail the strength of grass-roots feeling on the subject.

Editorial comment differed somewhat in the three papers during the week. The *Times* had an anti-amendment editorial every day. The *Independent* had two leading articles during the week. One was a response to statements from the Catholic and Church of Ireland bishops. Although fairly even-handed, it focussed on the possible medical and legal difficulties of the wording and emphasised the idea that to vote against the amendment was not to vote in favour of abortion. The editorial did not recommend a vote one way or another but played down considerably the Catholic bishops' support for the amendment. On Friday the *Independent* made a strong editorial attack on the leaking of a document made public at a 'Handicapped for the Amendment' press conference. The document purported to show that an amendment permitting abortion in the case of severe handicap had been discussed in Government circles. The *Independent* editorially argued that the Government was right to have "a wide range of options" examined, and specifically attacked PLAC for "causing" the document to be leaked. PLAC's denial of involvement in the leak received one and a half column inches at the bottom of page 5 the following day.

The *Press* also had two editorials related to the referendum during this week. On Tuesday the paper attacked the strong support of individual priests for the amendment, and applauded the Catholic bishops for saying that Catholics were free to vote 'yes' or 'no'. The editorial ignored the bishops' strong support for the amendment. On Thursday an editorial on the IFA contrasted the amendment issue with the "real problems" — e.g., the milk super-levy crisis — the country was facing.

Features and columns were strongly slanted against the amendment, particularly in the *Times*. The *Times* political columnist, John Healy (twice), Conor Cruise O'Brien and Dick Walsh, all attacked the amendment during the week. Even the 'Referendum People' series showed bias.

On Tuesday, for example, Sheila Wayman's portrait of Julia Vaughan was much more critical than her interview with Maire Woods. Where Dr Woods had gained great insight into Catholic bigotry from her childhood in India, Dr Vaughan thought the entire issue "very simple" and was "vague" about PLAC's financial support.

The *Press* carried a feature article by Pat Brennan on Wednesday which contrasted Monica Barnes' "commitment to women" with Alice Glenn's "deeply conservative" attitudes. On Friday there was a piece on the referendum in Irish by AAC sponsor, Risteárd Ó Glaisne.

The *Independent* carried both pro and anti-amendment features and columns during the week. On the pro-amendment side, a major article by William Binchy was Monday's news analysis feature. Columnist, Des Rushe, wrote in support of the amendment on Wednesday and Thursday. Mr Rushe's columns received much less space and prominence than those of his anti-amendment colleagues, Maurice Hearne and Bruce Arnold, who attacked the amendment on Monday and Saturday respectively. Mr Arnold suggested on Saturday that ordinary people did not know what their vote meant. Journalistic paternalism appeared too in Liz Ryan's Saturday TV column. In her view, the level of intellect of many of those involved in the debate was not sufficiently high to provide stimulating viewing for those who sought some "dialectic" on the issue.

#### **SINGING THE SAME SONG: 1. The Singers**

The anti-amendment perspective adopted by an immense variety of newspapers and magazines was the most marked



feature of referendum coverage in the Dublin printed media. Publications as diverse as *Magill*, *In Dublin*, *Image*, *Irish Farmers' Monthly*, *Hot Press*, *Phoenix* and *Southside Express* — to take just a few examples — proved curiously at one on the referendum issue.

Some campaigned more strongly than others. *In Dublin* and *Hot Press*, for example, carried columns by two of the more vehement anti-amendment campaigners, Nell McCafferty (*In Dublin*) and Michael D. Higgins (*Hot Press*) and competed with each other in virulence of language. Through covering entertainment and the music scene respectively, these two publications had built up a significant young readership. During the referendum debate they addressed that readership with a strongly anti-amendment message.

The *Irish Farmers' Monthly* addressed quite a different readership but had a remarkably similar line. Its cover story in September 1983 ("Amendment Agony in the IFA") highlighted the alleged sectarianism of the referendum debate and made numerous references to pro-amendment lobbying among farmers by Opus Dei, and the Knights of Columbanus.

In September too, Claire Boylan, editor of the glossy women's magazine, *Image*, recorded her suspicion of the amendment and quoted the views of a few prominent Irish women who were against it. In a curious passage, Ms Boylan announced that she had not sought the views of writers like Mary Kenny, because their anti-abortion position was so well known . . . Some women being less equal than others?

A few weeks earlier, Mary Feely's lead story in the Dublin free-sheet, *Southside Express*, had highlighted Deputy Alan Shatter's extraordinary claim that the amendment could "make abortion legal" (17 August 1983). Response to Mr Shatter the following week was not on the front page and received less space and prominence than the paper's continuing anti-amendment coverage.

During the referendum debate, the *Irish Medical News and Appointments* sheet, or 'Yellow Pages' of the IMA, began to publish a column by Dr David Nowlan. The Yellow Pages had previously published only news and advertisements of interest to doctors. Dr Nowlan, a strong opponent of the amendment, was medical correspondent of the *Irish Times* and contributor of a column, 'Second Opinion' to the *Irish Medical Journal*. Ironically, in view of his already major access to the media, Dr Nowlan's new column in the Yellow Pages was called 'Another View'.

The anti-amendment line followed by so many of the Irish media was remarkably mirrored in foreign coverage of the referendum issue. In the case of the Irish and British media this was sometimes for the simple reason that the same people wrote for both. Journalists like Mary Holland and Conor Cruise O'Brien bridged the gap between the two media — one prolific journalist and anti-amendment sponsor, Mavis Arnold, even had her hostile perspective on the referendum published in the Encyclopaedia Britannica! (Book of the Year for 1982).

The allegedly sectarian quality of the amendment was highlighted in the *Guardian* in November 1982 in an article by Peadar Kirby and Aidan White, beginning: "It was never going to be a good clean fight." The amendment was repeatedly attacked by Mary Holland in the pages of the *New Statesman* as well as on Channel 4. "Priests have last words in Irish abortion debate", Patrick Bishop told his *Observer* readers on the eve of the referendum (4 September 1983).

Coverage by other foreign media was very similar in tone. International newsagencies have long viewed the abortion issue from a strongly pro-abortion perspective, opposition to abortion being seen in terms of sectarianism or conservatism. Not surprisingly, therefore, international agency reports on the referendum followed a line uncannily similar to that of the Anti-Amendment Campaign. Thus, a story on the referendum result in the Canadian *Globe and Mail* newspaper, which was based on Reuter and Associated Press reports, stressed the themes of divisiveness and conservatism (9 September 1983).

Most of the foreign — and especially British — publications on sale in Ireland and covering the referendum, were strongly anti-amendment in content and tone; unlike the Dublin media, they did not feel obliged to play down the pro-abortion argument. Some publications paid little attention to the referendum debate itself, but were nevertheless strongly pro-abortion in ideology. This applied to many of the British women's and teen magazines which took a strongly pro-abortion line and carried ads for abortion agencies.

The vast quantity of anti-amendment and pro-abortion print which circulated in Dublin during the debate had one simple result. Anyone walking into a Dublin newspaper shop looking for a pro-amendment newspaper or magazine and seeking to avoid publications with an anti-amendment bias faced a long search. In the case of unsolicited free-sheets, like *Southside Express*, the question of choice did not even arise.

The marked absence of diversity in media coverage of the abortion issue raised disturbing questions about the meaning of pluralism, Irish style, and of free debate in a pluralist society. Was much anti-abortion opinion to be excluded from an increasingly pro-abortion mass media? Was the public to be prevented by media uniformity from exercising its freedom to choose from among a wide variety of newspapers and magazines?

These issues were raised during the referendum campaign, notably by Desmond Fennell, one of the few pro-amendment columnists in a Dublin newspaper. After the referendum, Mr Fennell produced the following reflection in the *Sunday Press* on coverage of the debate by the Dublin media:

They campaigned, almost exclusively, for one side only, and the minority side at that, leaving the majority view virtually unrepresented. Pluralist democracy is not flourishing in the Dublin media. Of course, the odd thing about many of these Dublin media people is that, while wanting everyone to be of one mind and not divided, they say they believe in pluralism! The reason is that they simply don't know what the word means . . . By pluralism they mean secularism, freedom from religion, subjection to money power, state power and the mass media. (11 September 1983).

## SINGING THE SAME SONG: 2. The Song

If an extraordinary range of publications campaigned against the amendment, the range of arguments mustered by these publications was almost as astonishing. Few of the arguments were avowedly pro-abortion. The proposal was presented instead as sectarian, anti-pluralist, divisive and unnecessary. We already had an anti-abortion law and the Irish people would never permit the legalisation of abortion. In seeking to ban again what was banned already, we risked making ourselves a laughing stock abroad. Towards the end of the campaign there was much emphasis on public confusion and apathy. And, after senior politicians lent some credence to this view, the proposal was presented as risking women's lives, as 'anti-women'.

Even this argument was not usually made as part of any general pro-abortion statement. Only a few journalists nailed

their pro-abortion colours firmly to the mast. Most paid lip service to the anti-abortion position, and angrily denied any suggestion of being pro-abortion themselves. Indeed, journalists went to some lengths to dismiss the existence of any pro-abortion sentiment in Ireland. As noted earlier, editor Vincent Browne told *Sunday Tribune* readers on the eve of the referendum that the pro-abortion lobby was "miniscule", and could be entirely discounted. Would Ireland still be Ireland, an *Irish Times* leader-writer had mused months earlier, if abortion were to come here?

Journalists managed to muster a great range of arguments on the amendment. What should be emphasised here is that most of these arguments were anti-amendment and that very few were explicitly pro-abortion.

The media's approach to the amendment confirmed in its own way the strongly anti-abortion consensus in Ireland: a consensus to which PLAC appealed in launching its campaign. This consensus is important in considering media coverage. Its existence undermined media criticism of 'manipulation' of the politicians by a small 'unrepresentative' pressure group.

Indeed, given the Irish consensus on abortion, accusations of manipulation in the amendment controversy could more justifiably have been advanced against pro-abortion journalists. In commenting on the amendment debate, some of these journalists were obliged to communicate three conflicting messages. They were forced at the same time 1) to acknowledge the popular consensus against legalised abortion, 2) to play down their own views on abortion, and 3) to imply in their arguments that PLAC was somehow less representative of the people as a whole on the amendment issue than they were themselves.

The question of how 'representative' PLAC was could only be settled on referendum day. The accusation of 'manipulation' appeared to be based on an unexamined assumption that all referendum proposals should come from, or be tightly controlled by, the Irish political elite. Senior journalists, in many ways, form part of this elite.

The assumption that referendum proposals should come only from the political elite was a curious one for liberal journalists to make. The opposite argument, that there should be scope for referendum proposals from outside that elite, is much easier to justify in democratic terms. In countries such as Italy, referenda have been held when a sufficiently large number of the public petitioned for them.

## THE MEDIA AND ABORTION

Coverage of the amendment in the media was clearly linked to the way journalists viewed the abortion issue. In the Dublin media, the reporting of abortion by now follows a fairly standard pattern. The pattern was well illustrated in the *Irish Independent* in a long article by Ces Cassidy: "Amendment over, but the Abortion Trail goes on." (7 December 1983).

Clearly unimpressed by the people's decision in September, Ms Cassidy focussed on "a pattern of statistics that cannot be eradicated by simply casting votes". Amendment or no amendment, she wrote, "the abortion trail to Britain goes on." Her report highlighted the increasing number of Irish women having abortions in Britain, uncaring Irish attitudes to unmarried pregnant women, deficiencies in contraceptive provision and "sex education" and the role of the Catholic Church in the "repression" of women. The article carried a photo of a woman with the caption: "Contemplating a British solution to an Irish problem." Although Ms Cassidy made brief reference to the work of Cura, her general message was summed up in her concluding quotation from a British pro-abortion activist: "The women . . . are coming in increased numbers for abortions. And they will continue to come as long as politicians are happy enough to export the problem."

In general, in the Dublin media, journalists highlight the number of Irish women going to Britain for abortions. They attack 'repressive' Catholic attitudes, 'farical' family planning legislation and what have come to be described as 'Irish' solutions. Journalists argue that the country should stop 'exporting' its abortion problem. The thrust of these arguments appears to be that abortion should be legalised here. In media circles, the highest praise is reserved for those who interview women about their experience of abortion. This type of reporting has generally been seen as tackling taboo subjects and facing up to reality.

The most significant point about much media coverage of abortion has been the reality or realities it ignores. Little has been written or broadcast, in the context of the abortion debate, about the major advances in recent decades in our knowledge of unborn children and their development. Nor have journalists presented, in word or pictures, the reality of what happens in abortion. Indeed, those who focus on that reality are generally subjected to the fiercest criticism in the media.

Few Dublin-based journalists have examined the disastrous

history of legal abortion in other countries or the implications of legalisation. When, in a BBC2 *Horizon* lecture, the test-tube baby pioneer, Dr Robert Edwards, coolly pointed to the existence of legalised abortion as a justification for experimentation on the unborn, his comments provoked little analysis, still less an outcry, among Irish journalists. (See *The Listener*, 27 October 1983).

Many journalists manage, in fact, to cover the abortion issue without serious examination of its central question: that of whether abortion is the taking of human life. Rather than face the central question, journalists take refuge in stereotyping opponents of abortion. Such opponents are sometimes presented as 'sectarian' in outlook. In this perspective, abortion is seen as a Catholic issue and Protestant and secular opposition is ignored. Alternatively, opponents of abortion are presented as 'anti-women' and the argument that abortion damages women is ignored or ridiculed.

No discussion of the media and abortion can ignore the question of the NUJ's pro-abortion policy. Irish journalists opposed to abortion failed in 1980 to change union policy in this area. In 1981, the policy was confirmed as extending "wherever the union has members", i.e. to Ireland as well as Britain. The NUJ, itself British-based, also pledged support for the Women's Right to Choose Group in Ireland. While the Irish Area Council of the NUJ dissociated itself from these decisions, they remain union policy and are supported by a significant number of Irish journalists, especially in Dublin. The issue of the union's pro-abortion policy was almost entirely ignored by the Dublin media during the amendment debate.

At a more individual level, journalists who opposed the amendment did so on the basis of genuinely held personal convictions. These included the view that the amendment was sectarian, anti-women and reflected a selective social concern, i.e., that PLAC opposed abortion but not other social evils such as unemployment or bad housing. The opposition of journalists was reinforced by some aspects of the mass campaign. Ron Aitken, a pro-amendment Presbyterian who was active in Cork, has argued that more effort could have been made, early in the campaign, to contact and organise sympathetic Protestants, "warning them of the manner in which pro-abortionists would build their campaign, deliberately driving wedges between the Churches". (*Human Concern*, Winter 1984).

One journalist who was necessarily very aware of the anti-

amendment views of many of his colleagues was Patrick Nolan, a religious affairs correspondent of the *Irish Times*. In an article on the eve of the referendum, explaining his own support for the amendment, Mr Nolan put the campaign in useful perspective. Recalling the first press conference given in April 1981 by PLAC's sponsoring gynaecologists, Mr Nolan wrote:

My impression of the campaign patrons — leading gynaecologists and obstetricians — was that they were idealistic and sincere. Their case for the amendment was based on human rights. Supported by influential legal opinion, they saw a case for changing the Constitution if abortion was not to be legalised, if the unborn were to be protected. At the outset, they said they were approaching the issue on a non-denominational basis and that they would be consulting the Churches. One of them was a non-Roman Catholic. I honestly could not regard that conference as the start of a sectarian campaign that would seek to impose medieval authoritarianism on the country. With all necessary respect to opposing opinion, I simply do not see it in that light today. (*Irish Times*, 6 September 1983).

## CONCLUSION

The Pro-Life Amendment Campaign proved an eye-opener for many ordinary Irish people. It gave them a new understanding of their own society, the values that society was developing and the problems it was facing. The debate stirred people's consciousness by raising important questions. How authentic and consistent was the country's pro-life stance? How adequately did people's Christian performance match the needs of a society in deep crisis and suffering?

The referendum campaign focussed attention on the press in Ireland, its role and purpose. This booklet has strongly criticised coverage of the referendum in the Dublin media. The same criticism could be applied to coverage of other issues and, more generally, to the values currently promoted in the press. Critics of the press must also acknowledge its significant contribution to the cause of many neglected and deprived groups in our society.

The importance of dialogue between press and public is worth emphasising in conclusion. The urgent need for such dialogue was clearly spelt out in Bishop Cahal Daly's speech,

"Christians and the Media", to the World Press Congress in October 1983:

We need not fear the challenge of national or international media. All we need fear is the slave spirit, the passive, captive mind. The Church and our educators generally must aim to make us actively critical, questioning . . . if we are not to become simply cultural expatriates, living in Ireland but thinking other people's thoughts and repeating other people's slogans.

## Further Reading

- Ron Aitken, "Courage and Chicanery in the Irish Referendum campaign", *Human Concern*, Winter 1984.
- Loretto Browne, "The Campaign to Legalise Abortion" in *Abortion Now*, Life Education and Research Network, Dublin 1983.
- Bishop Cahal B. Daly, *Christians And The Media*, XIII Catholic World Congress of the Press, Dublin, October, 1983.
- Luke Gibbons, "Man Bites Dogma: The Press and the Amendment Campaign", *Magill*, April 1983.
- Gratton*, October/November 1983.
- James Hitchcock, "The Mass Media". *Human Life Review*, Spring 1983.
- Mary Holland and Peadar Kirby, (editors), *The Abortion Referendum. The Case Against*. Anti-Amendment Campaign, Dublin, 1983.
- John T. Noonan, J.R., *A Private Choice. Abortion in America in the 1970's*. The Free Press, New York, 1979.
- Tim O'Sullivan, "The Abortion Debate and the Media: A Lesson in Pluralism?" *Intercom*, September 1983.