

THE IRISH NEWS

Pro fide et patria

Edition number: 41,805

The Irish News, founded 1891, and Belfast Morning News, founded 1855, published by The Irish News Ltd, 113-117 Donegal Street, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT1 2GE. Telephone: 028 9032 2226; fax 028 9033 7505. www.irishnews.com

Registered at the Post Office as a newspaper

RTE must show equality to all

RTE's plan to drop its medium-wave radio broadcasts from next month may well be regarded by its Dublin-based executives as both a necessary and inevitable step.

It is certainly true that the change will make little difference to the majority of RTE listeners across Ireland, who can easily retune to the FM band.

However, as our coverage today explains, the move, if it goes ahead, will have a potentially dramatic impact on the station's audience in Belfast and many other parts of Northern Ireland.

Many northerners fear that RTE Radio One, which offers a comprehensive range of news, sports and entertainment programmes, is effectively turning its back on Ireland's second city.

The key issue is that the present RTE FM signal in Belfast, as the station openly accepts, varies between the weak and the non-existent.

Most listeners in the city and across much of north Down and most of Co Antrim, an area with an estimated population of 600,000 people, are forced to rely instead on the medium-wave alternative.

RTE also broadcasts on long wave, but this is not available in many cars and ordinary household radios.

The only remaining options, via the internet or satellite dishes, are of no use to all motorists and many older listeners.

It is obvious that RTE must upgrade its existing FM signal across the north significantly, and the station has at least indicated that it is working towards achieving this aim before the scheduled medium-wave shut-down on March 24.

Unfortunately, the lack of specific information in relation to the FM initiative, and the fact that, as of yesterday, the section on the official RTE website dealing with the changeover offered no advice whatsoever to northern listeners, does not increase confidence about the outcome.

There will be a widespread feeling that improvements to the FM signal should have been in place long before the axing of the medium-wave alternative was even considered.

It will also be noted that, according to Ofcom, the body which regulates the communications industry in Northern Ireland and Britain, RTE's attempts to link environmental concerns to its proposals are debatable.

There is plainly a strong case for postponing the medium-wave switch-off until all interested parties are fully satisfied about the consequences.

If some form of intervention is required from Stormont, it is clear that a number of MLAs are already paying close attention to the matter.

Whatever happens, RTE must be seen to demonstrate that it holds all its listeners throughout Ireland in equal esteem.

You've been framed



SOMETHING'S MISSING: Being put in the picture on Belfast's Royal Avenue

PICTURE: Brendan Murphy

Pay parity for assembly members means P45s

IT IS no surprise that the body reviewing the salaries of our MLAs was asked to do so by Peter Hain. He apparently feels his political colleagues are worth every penny or pound they can get their hands on, as well as the carrots he occasionally threw at our munching politicians.

In a classic Northern Ireland Office tactic, the Senior Salaries Review Body let it be known that later in the year it may be 'minded' to recommend a 16 per cent rise for assembly members.

Salaries are always sensitive matters and it cannot be easy for politicians to have their private affairs laundered in public. But the fact remains that they chose to lay bare their souls when they stood for election and more importantly, being paid from the public purse, they forfeited the right to privacy in matters concerning how much they receive from that purse and how they spend it.

Politicians are totally accountable to the public, not just at elections but throughout the conduct of their affairs while in office, and unfortunately that means total transparency.

Most people were surprised to discover that Derek Conway, a hitherto unknown Conservative MP, employed his two sons from the public purse as research assistants when they were still at college. Mr Conway, it transpired, also employed his wife as a constituency worker. His was not an isolated case. It was soon shown that the practice was quite common among the political classes.

Most parties realised that a cynical and wearisome public would not tolerate anything less than the truth about the extent of these publicly funded family meal tickets and ordered their members to come clean on the issue of relatives on the payroll.

The DUP refused, saying it was a private matter.

Tom KELLY



It is not and sooner or later, either at Westminster or Stormont, even the DUP will have to comply with this most reasonable of requests. If politicians think there is nothing wrong with what they are doing, why did they not voluntarily publish details of the status of their relationships with those they employ? After all the issue is not about what is being paid. It is about who they are paying. Who politicians employ with public funds

"If politicians think there is nothing wrong with what they are doing, why did they not voluntarily publish details of the status of their relationships with those they employ?"

is very much a legitimate matter of public interest. Not that any of them are doing it but imagine the public outcry if a politician was paying a mistress, rent boy or criminal through their publicly funded office allowances. Would the public not have a right to know? But let's be clear. There is nothing wrong with the practice of employing family members provided (a) they are fit for the job and (b) they are actually doing the job. Siphoning off public funds through one's office expenses just because one can is not acceptable.

There is clearly a loophole in the governance of Westminster and the devolved assemblies that needs closing. This would provide legitimacy in terms of cover and practice to those politicians who genuinely employ suitably qualified family members as their researchers, bookkeepers, secretaries or constituency workers.

On the issue of a proposed 16 per cent pay rise for assembly members, Sinn Fein was quick off the mark in assessing the public temperature and was quickly followed by other parties.

On the margins of the debate some were justifying a rise by suggesting that the review body was only benchmarking the Northern Ireland Assembly against the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament. Frankly that is rubbish. There are 129

members in the Scottish Parliament governing a population of some 5.1 million, which equates to one representative for just under 40,000 members of the public and they receive a salary of £53k. In Wales there are only 60 members in the assembly governing a population of 2.9 million, which equals one representative for around 48,000 citizens and they are paid £43k. In Northern Ireland we have 108 members overseeing the administration of a mere 1.7

million people, which equals one representative for less than 16,000 citizens, for which they are paid £43k. Our hard-working assembly members are entitled to more pay but if they truly want parity with other parts of the UK that means issuing P45s to about 40 of them. It's a kind of political package that pays more for less. But don't hold your breath in expectation. We have already got four victims' commissioners instead of one, a junior minister doing three jobs instead of one and a former cabinet minister employing his octogenarian mother.