

# The strange death of the Scottish press

**Harry Reid**

## **An arrogant, almost imperial, disdain in London for Scottish Institutions**

Here are two episodes that reflect very well on the Scottish press. The first is from the late 1980s; the second is from the early 1990s.

When the Glasgow Herald got hold of, and decided to print, the valedictory report of the UK Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sir James Craig, the UK Foreign Secretary was furious. The report contained trenchant criticism of Saudi Arabia.

The Foreign Office, acting with the Treasury and the Cabinet Office, swung somewhat belatedly and erratically into action to prevent the Herald publishing. The “offending” issue of the Herald was on sale on the streets of Glasgow by 11 pm on the night of publication, but in London it appeared that people at the very heart of UK government could not grasp the separate procedures of Scots law.

The Herald had a caveat lodged, meaning that no Scottish court order could be granted against its publishers in their absence. This meant that solicitors for the Lord Advocate as well as solicitors for the Herald were summoned to an emergency hearing in the house of a senior Scottish judge in Dublin Street, Edinburgh, which took place in the small hours. The judge, Lord Davidson, eventually found against the Herald and awarded an interim interdict against publication but by this time it was 4.15 in the morning, and far too late. Well over 100,000 copies of the paper had been distributed all across Scotland.

The FO insisted that the ambassador’s despatch was highly sensitive and that communication between ambassadors and the foreign secretary had to remain confidential. This despite the fact that the Economist magazine had published the valedictory despatch of the Ambassador to France and no action had been taken by the FO to prevent publication.

The second episode came when the FO barred two Scottish correspondents from briefings given to Brussels-based English journalists by the British Ambassador to the European Union. One of the reasons given – and I’m not making this up - for this anti-Scottish snub was that if people in Scotland wanted to find out what was going on in the EU they could buy English papers. The two papers concerned – the Scotsman and the Herald – decided to publish simultaneous front page stories exposing this nonsense, and informed the FO of their intentions. The FO rapidly backed down.

These two episodes indicated two crucial tendencies: an arrogant, almost imperial, disdain in London for Scotland and Scottish institutions, and also considerable confidence, verve and self belief on the part of the indigenous Scottish Press.

Sadly, this confidence has largely been eroded, as circulations decline, advertising revenues disappear, and editors have to deal with constant debilitating budget cuts. Editor bashing is commonplace but I think a lot of it is glib. The current editors of the Record, the Scotsman and

the Herald have to operate as managers as much as journalists. Their budgets have been, and continue to be, slashed. In desperately difficult circumstances they are not doing too badly. Print journalism is a declining industry, not least because of the rise and rise of the Internet. Young people rarely read newspapers nowadays. But there is still an appetite for the written Press, not least in Scotland, a country with a magnificent journalistic tradition, and a country that used to consume voraciously many excellent indigenous newspapers at breakfast and teatime and often in between as well. But our indigenous Scottish press is now in serious trouble. Why? It was in the early 1990s that UK national titles started to make a concerted effort to penetrate Scotland. With their huge marketing budgets, their constant promotions, and their spurious sophistication – too many cringing and deferential Scots think there is somehow more prestige in reading a UK national than a Scottish national – they soon had a very negative impact on the sales of the leading indigenous papers. They would hire a few Scottish journalists, aggressively and expensively market their so-called Scottish editions – and I'm afraid they found our Scottish papers something of a soft target.

Secondly, many Scots with some justification, lost confidence and belief in their own press. When Andrew Neil became editor in chief of the Scotsman in 1996 he immediately started attacking civic Scotland, his own staff and goodness knows what else. He gave the impression that everything Scottish was second rate. This was a tragedy, because the man had been a brilliant and brave editor of the Sunday Times and he was arguably the most talented Scottish journalist of his generation. Yet he seemed to have contempt for his native land. He appointed as editor of the Scotsman Martin Clarke, an abrasive Daily Mail trained Englishman who shared his views. Clarke went on to edit the Record. Both the Scotsman and the Record, which had been champions of devolution, abruptly changed tack. This actually benefited the Herald, in the short term, but it led to a general and insidious undermining of belief in our Scottish titles. The Scotsman and the Record were seen as inconsistent, and at times even anti-Scottish.

In 1999, the year of the first elections to our new Scottish Parliament, the Herald, which I was then editing, stood alone in being utterly fair to the SNP. We didn't endorse the party but we were fair to it and took it seriously. This caused us enormous problems with the ruling Labour Party, who bullied us disgracefully, told us publicly we weren't "worthy" – whatever that might mean – and gave large amounts of advertising to the Scotsman and Record while announcing that the Herald was not getting anything. In spite of, or because of, this our circulation went up, while that of the other papers went down. 1999 was a very good year for the Herald. But Neil was not finished. In the next year, backed by the tax exiles the Barclay Brothers, he launched a huge blitz on Glasgow and the West, selling the Scotsman at a ridiculously low price and attacking us head on. The price war he started did the Herald great damage but eventually we saw him off and we managed to keep the circulation above the talismanic figure of 100,000 (Now it's not much above 50,000).

What is to be done? The editors and managements of the great indigenous Scottish papers simply must stabilise their decline before it is too late. I'd like people to buy our Scottish national papers, not so-called tartan editions of UK nationals. I'd like readers to be engaged with the papers, to be proactive. Decent Scots should never tolerate or support papers that have an overtly anti-Scottish agenda.

In the mid to long term, I surprise myself by being cautiously optimistic. Our great Scottish national papers may be struggling, but they are not dead yet.