

## **Nessa Childers MEP – Speech delivered at the conference**

### ***‘Media Democracy: Why does it matter?’***

**February 6<sup>th</sup> 2012 – Radisson Blu, Dublin 8.**

As an MEP I work with 27 different countries and 27 different media, and each country’s media has different relationships with diversity. And it was observing these relationships during my work in the European Parliament that sparked off my interest in diversity of media ownership and eventually prompted me to host this conference, to give an opportunity to discuss the importance, or need, for variety in media ownership.

The word pluralism is now being widely used by EU institutions as the relevant term when looking at media, ownership and diversity of voices and opinion. The term was fashionable in the 70s and is now back in favour as an umbrella term to cover people, businesses and opinions in media. To be relevant pluralism must not only be about the market place, it must involve journalistic and editorial independence, and there must be support for high-quality public broadcasting services, and guarantee a place for content with a cultural and economic value.

I believe too that any discussion on pluralism and its influence on democratic accountability must take into account that our understanding of democracy requires deep analysis in an era of global corporations, trans-national corporate lobbying, corporate donations to political parties and the dependence by the

body politic on expensive marketing and sophisticated advertising campaigns to sway public opinion.

How journalists can deal with dedicated public affairs and communications professionals is part of the diversity equation. Add to this mix multi-national corporations that are also media conglomerates, and the lines between what is news, what is information and what is marketing communications becomes more and more difficult to discern.

As I said in my opening remarks my interest in media diversity was prompted by my direct experience in the Parliament observing and dealing with a wide range of media. However as a member of the European Parliament's Culture and Education committee, my work also involves the issue of media pluralism, and this too influenced my decision to host this conference on ownership, and I intend that it will be the first in a series of events which will examine media pluralism in all its aspects. Questions around public sector broadcasting; community radio and TV; how the media represents women, and the role of women in media and how diverse ethnic voices and experiences are represented are also critical in any debate on diversity and will be included in future seminars.

In 2009, shortly after I became elected to the European Parliament, a resolution was tabled calling for action to protect media pluralism and ban monopolies. The debate focused on the crisis of media freedom in Italy. For me, from a European point of view, two countries - Italy and Hungary - are an important part of this story.

The implications of Berlusconi's ownership of Italy's biggest private free TV

Company, publishers and advertising company fascinated me, and the questions this raised for journalistic independence in a country where one owner, with a strong personal agenda dominated. The story in Hungary is equally stark where a state crackdown on the media, judiciary and central bank independence represents the most serious attack on democracy in the EU for a generation. The stream of anti-democracy laws coming from Viktor Orbán's government in Budapest are worrying in the extreme. These measures include a government appointed Council which decides if media output is 'balanced' or not; the replacement of key figures in the state-run media with party apparatchiks; and a recent refusal to renew the license of a liberal radio station which has been critical of the right-wing government; journalists from the country's public sector broadcaster are now on hunger strike. The situation in Hungary is in breach of human rights protected in EU treaties and the European Commission has initiated proceedings against Victor Orbán's government. Orbán dismisses these proceedings as part of a conspiracy of the European left, although he has pulled back on some of his plans; the proposals to restrict journalistic freedom remains. If you ever wanted to see what the withdrawal of democracy in Europe looked like, check out Hungary.

In Ireland this year we will see the publication of a bill to regulate media mergers and it will, I believe, clearly need to include a strong base in competition law, but the overall parameters will be very interesting for all stakeholders. We need to protect diversity and I sincerely hope that the legislation will make progress in that direction. A report from this conference will be submitted to the Minister during consultation on the Bill.

Today we look at private sector media ownership and what this means for journalistic independence. In order to include the opinions of working

journalists during today's debate I commissioned a survey of journalists in the Republic on this question of ownership. The results are interesting. Nearly half of those surveyed believe that Ireland does not have adequate media diversity and agree that legislation is needed to protect diversity, and 42% of respondents welcome the fact that the government is introducing legislation on media mergers. Less than a fifth of the respondents believe we have adequate diversity and 77% believe that media diversity is at risk in Ireland due to trends in media ownership. Half of the respondents agreed that internet media is helping to protect diversity, and 61.3% agree strongly that we need regulation to protect diversity in print media. But although the journalists in the survey are concerned about diversity, in their day to day work over a half say that owners do not directly influence their work – however a not insignificant 20.3% say owners have influence on their work. This is just a small snapshot of the survey and the complete report is available on my website from today. .

This issue is treated as an important part of the fabric of European democracy by both the Parliament and Commission. The European Commission has set up a high-level group on media pluralism and freedom. This group's mandate is to see how the EU can enable freedom and pluralism of the media, including independent media governance. Both the Commission and the European Parliament believe these are key elements for enabling the exercise of freedom of expression, one of the essential foundations of the European Union.

Since 2009 there has been much debate, discussion and interest in this issue in the Parliament and this event today brings this debate to Dublin – this conference is fundamentally about journalists and how they can go about their work, and about journalistic independence and how this links to democracy. Ultimately I hope today will be about journalists and their trade and their ability

not only to work and earn a living, but to function as an independent and important part of an energetic democracy.

As well as submitting a report during the consultation phase on the Irish Government Bill on media mergers, I also intend to submit a report from this conference to the high level group in Europe. Finally and before I conclude, can I thank all the speakers and chairs for making their expertise and time available to us today, and especially to thank the Minister for his interest, and he will be along later to address the conference.

**ENDS**