

**Republican
lecture
series**

***THE ROLE OF OFFICERS
IN SINN FEIN***

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THE ROLE OF OFFICERS IN SINN FEIN

Introduction

THOUGH Sinn Fein is a militant republican political organisation with a committed membership, commitment and militancy in themselves are not a sound basis for effective work.

Every organisation — from sporting clubs and tenants associations to revolutionary movements — will only succeed if it has a sound organisational base.

It is very important that Sinn Fein members understand the need for efficiency and professionalism in their activities. This ranges from simple letter-writing through to cash books and organising major demonstrations or elections.



This booklet concentrates on the required skills for four organisational positions:-

- PROs
- Chairpersons
- Secretaries
- Treasurers

Taken together, these constitute the basic organisational structure around which comhairle ceantair and cumann business revolves. Because of its key importance in public activity, PRO work is dealt with at length.

The points listed on each topic are intended to be used as a guide on each question dealt with and should be referred to until experience makes it unnecessary to do so.

Conduct of meetings

There are two types of meeting which can be held regularly by Sinn Fein at local level. These are:-

1. Routine meetings
2. Special meetings.

ROUTINE MEETINGS

These are the normal meetings of cumainn or comhairli ceantair. Certain things are standard to all efficient meetings.

1. The formulation of a proper agenda

An agenda must include:-

- (a) Minutes
- (b) Matters arising from the minutes
- (c) Correspondence
- (d) Reports
- (e) Specific matters
- (f) Other business
- (g) Date, venue and time of next meeting

The agenda for a meeting should

(i) Should be copied or printed and given to every member before the meeting begins.

(ii) Amendments to the agenda to include specific matters, to give notice of items for other business, or to change the order of the agenda should be allowed before the meeting begins.

(iii) The agenda for each meeting should be agreed at the previous meeting.

(iv) The section under 'Other business' allows unforeseen matters to be discussed.

(v) In the event of an emergency matter arising, the agenda should be suspended to allow discussion and if necessary, held back to a future meeting.

(vi) A good agenda closely followed gives a meeting its basic discipline and helps in decision making.

1 (a) Minutes

Good minute-taking is vital for the basic work of any working group. Proper records of activity and decisions, through the keeping of good minutes, ensure a continuity of reference and assist in future planning and in enforcing accountability for work delegated. Basic rules for good minute-taking:-

1. Keep a good quality minutes book.
2. Stick to one secretary for the working year (if possible).
3. Minutes should follow the order of the agenda.
4. The various sections of the agenda should be listed in the correct order in a left-hand margin of the page reserved for that purpose.
5. One clear line should be left between each section of the minutes including sub-divisions for reports and individual points of discussion.
6. All minutes should be headed by the title of the meeting i.e. cumann, comhairle ceantair, special, and the date.
7. The date on which the minutes are read should be at the foot of the minutes and should be signed by the Chairperson.
8. Minutes of previous meetings must be read slowly and clearly and in their entirety.
9. Minutes of individual meetings should start at the top of a clear page.
10. Never start a meeting without first taking a proposer and seconder for the previous meeting's minutes and getting them carried by the meeting.
11. Corrections to the minutes must be taken before the meeting proper begins. They should be agreed and then written at the end of the minutes.

NOTE-TAKING AND REPORT WRITING

Most people's memories are fallible, so note-taking is essential. The basic principles are fairly simple and the techniques easily mastered with practice.

1. Divide your paper in half by drawing a line from top to bottom. Use the left-hand side of the page *only*. Leave the right-hand side blank.
 2. Always note first the *speaker* and the *topic*. This is as important as anything which is said.
 3. Listen and note down *key* words and phrases. Never attempt to take down exactly what is being said. That is a job for a professional shorthand writer, not an activist. The exception is motions and amendments which have to be taken down in full.
 4. Learn to follow the *meaning* of an argument rather than sentences. With practice your hand will learn to take notes while your mind follows the argument. Note-taking can become as automatic as driving a car (and it is much less difficult).
 5. When your notes are completed go back to the beginning *as soon as possible* and begin reading through. On the right-hand side of the page put down the points you missed, your own personal comments and indications about the emphasis and logic of the argument.
 6. Finally, write a report from your notes leaving out those items which, on reflection, are not relevant. A good report should be more concise than the notes on which it was based.
 7. Practise, practise, practise.
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12. Minutes are not intended to be a verbatim account of the meeting but should record only the points discussed and any decisions reached, resolutions agreed and work delegated as well as the main points of reports.
 13. Minutes should not be written directly during a meeting but should be noted and written into the minutes book later in a clear neat hand.
 14. Minutes should be kept in chronological order and while they should not be hidden away they should be kept in a safe place.

1 (b) Matters arising from minutes

Matters arising from minutes are those points and decisions made which required some action between meetings and which are not covered by items on the agenda. They are normally minor points and usually relate to points such as:-

1. Was that letter written?
2. Did you do that?
3. Did that collection take place?
4. These points should be marked in the margin and the answers recorded as they may be relevant at a future meeting.

1 (c) Correspondence

The correspondence relevant to minutes is correspondence received, this includes:-

1. All correspondence should be filed.
2. As correspondence goes out of date, it should be destroyed.
3. All circulars should be read and discussed.
4. All other letters should be read.
5. Decisions should be made on all correspondence.
6. Matters raised in correspondence (i.e. instructions, requests or information) should be acted on.
7. Correspondence which the meeting does not wish to act on should be marked in the minutes as "noted".
8. All correspondence other than routine circulars should be answered or acknowledged except "noted" items which need not be.
9. All items received should be noted in the minutes with relevant decisions beside them.

Responsibility for minutes, correspondence and reports rests with the secretary.

1 (d) Reports

In an active organisation, reports are the most crucial part of the agenda. A report is designed to outline (i) what activities are being carried out or proposed in a particular area of involvement (e.g. local election campaigns of one sort or another or finance), or (ii) the proceedings of other meetings.

Reports should be:-

1. Typed or clearly written.
2. Concise and to the point.
3. Should finish with conclusions or recommendations.
4. Should be followed by decisions on the matters reported on.

SPECIAL MEETINGS

A special meeting will usually be called to discuss one particular issue, whether it be an item of policy or some practical matter of immediate urgency. A formal agenda for this reason is unnecessary.

Chairperson

ROLE OF CHAIRPERSON:

The chairperson has two basic functions:-

- a) To ensure the orderly and efficient conduct of meetings.
- b) To direct members as to the rules and constitution of Sinn Fein as they affect matters under discussion at meetings.

a) The means by which the orderly and efficient conduct of meetings is secured can be summed up in the following points:-

1. Set a fixed period for a meeting to last. For example, an evening meeting beginning at eight should always finish at ten. This concentrates people's minds on getting through the agenda in the time available to them.
 2. A watch is needed to allow the chair to indicate that the meeting should move on to the next business on the agenda when enough time has been spent on one item.
 3. Rambling or verbose speakers should be politely but firmly cut short.
 4. Contributions must come through the chair and not be made to or at another person at the meeting.
 5. Separate conversations in the room must be drawn to the meeting's notice and attention be demanded.
 6. Other than the chair, no one should interrupt a speaker except on a genuine point of order. If this 'point of order' is actually an intervention to make a new contribution, it must be ruled out of order.
 7. If a motion is put and seconded, and then an amendment is proposed, the amendment must be voted on first, and if passed, the amended motion is then voted on.
 8. The proposer and seconder of a motion have the right of reply to the discussion, but this right is not held by the proposer and seconder of an amendment.
 9. If there is a tie in a vote for a motion or an amendment, the chair can use his/her casting vote to pass or defeat it.
 10. Where there are more nominations than positions, the chair must take an open or secret vote and announce the result.
- b) The chairperson must be able to direct members on questions relating to the Constitution and rules of Sinn Fein:-
1. A copy of these should be available to him/her at every meeting.
 2. He/she should be familiar with the constitution and rules by repeated study.



● Rambling or verbose speakers should be politely, but firmly, cut short

3. He/she must, where necessary, point out when suggestions, proposals, motions, etc., are not in conformity with the rules and constitution.

Useful reading 'Mr. Chairman', by Hal Wannington.

Treasurer

The responsibility of a Treasurer is to ensure that a clear and accurate record of monies received and spent is kept on a continuous basis.

The following is a summary of the basic points to be kept in mind about a Treasurer's job.

1. Have a proper, long-lasting and hard-covered copybook.
2. Use left and right-side pages when keeping records — the left for income and the right for expenditure.
3. Each page should be ruled as follows:
 - (i) A 1 inch to 2 inch column for the date.
 - (ii) A wide column stating nature of money item.
 - (iii) A column for the amount of money paid out.
 - (iv) A column for the amount of money received.

CREDIT			DEBIT		
1st June			Debit balance brought forward		7.23
5th June			400 papers received		68.00
5th June	30 returns Receipt 25774	5.10			
5th June	Payment Receipt 25774	68.00			
8th June	Total for week	73.10	8th June	Total for week	75.23
			8th June	Debit balance carried down to next week	2.13

● Typical cumann An Phoblacht/Republican News account book for one week

INCOME			EXPENDITURE		
1st June	Balance brought forward from last week	50.00			
3rd June	Collections	50.11			
			3rd June	Payment to local election A/C	60.00
			3rd June	Payment to Connaught Receipt 472	7.00
5th June	Papers sold	73.82			
			5th June	Papers paid for AP/RN Receipt 25774	68.00
			6th June	Raffle tickets bought	23.00
6th June	Membership fee - Seanush	5.00			
6th June	Membership fee - Maire F.	5.00			
			8th June	Two memberships paid to Head Office, Receipt 76	10.00
8th June	Week's total income	183.93	8th June	Week's total expenditure	168.00
8th June	Carried down to next week	15.93			

● Typical cumann account book for one week

4. A total of the week's income and expenditure should be at the end of each page and a balance (either credit or debit) recorded. This should be carried forward and be the opening item in the following week's accounts.

5. The best time to write up weekly accounts is the night after the cumann meeting.

6. It is the duty of the Treasurer to ensure that receipts for both monies paid and returns made to *An Phoblacht/Republican News* are received by the cumann.

7. A separate book should be kept for *An Phoblacht/Republican News* accounts, as well as a folder to hold AP/RN statements of account.

8. As far as holding cash is concerned, a Treasurer should have a cash-box to hold it in safety.

9. If large sums of money are on hand over a period, they should be put into a deposit account.

10. Similarly, local election funds should be in a separate deposit account.

11. If money is needed at short notice, the Treasurer should first clear it with the Chairperson.

● If some special event involving many transactions is expected — such as a raffle involving 25 ticket sellers, each making a separate return of monies, or a large number of people being approached for sizeable donations for an election — then a special temporary book could be opened and the net balance transferred to the main cumann account book.

The organisation of fund-raising is a separate issue and is not covered here.

PRO

Requirements for republican PROs:-

1. PROs must have a good grasp of Irish and republican history.
2. PROs must have a good grasp of republican policies.
3. PROs should have read all internal republican education lectures.
4. PROs must read all republican publications e.g. *AP/RN* and *IRIS*, from cover to cover.
5. PROs must constantly read newspapers, periodicals, magazines and new books.
6. PROs must constantly monitor TV and radio, both news and documentaries. PROs will therefore have a good grasp of social, economic and political developments.
7. PROs must keep abreast of changes, organisational and policy, within the Movement.

The role of a PRO

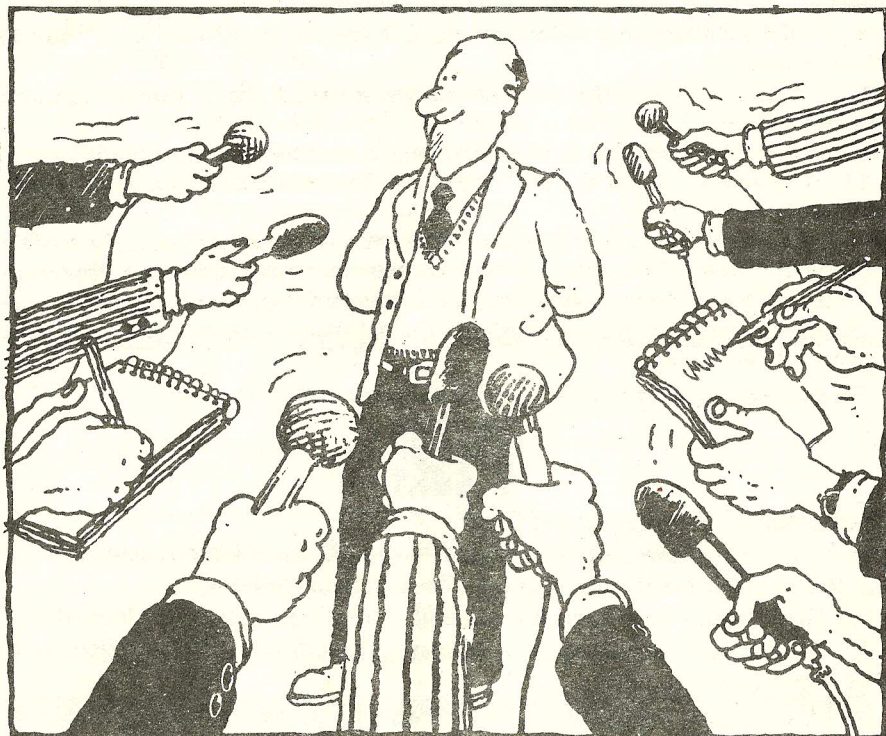
There is a tendency within the Movement to downgrade the job of Press Officer and to simply fill it as an afterthought. However, having a good Press Officer is vitally important and being a good press officer is a job in itself.

If the job is to be done seriously and well it requires time and careful attention. The PRO will need to show initiative and he/she must have the confidence of the organisation.

A PROs job should be to:-

1. Make a systematic list of local media.

2. Monitor TV and radio.
3. Issue press releases.
4. Keep cuttings of all relevant stories.
5. Devise briefings and campaigns that will use the media.
6. Organise, where practicable, news conferences.
7. Think of feature stories and convince the local media to cover them.
8. Build up a relationship with the media.
9. Organise complaints when coverage is wrong or unfair.



Making contact with the press

While always remembering that in the main the media is hostile to our position, and therefore less likely to honestly and objectively record our views, it is of great benefit if one can build up a personal relationship with journalists.

Knowing every journalist in, for example, Dublin, would be difficult. However, PROs should put together a list of correspondents who work for papers, TV and radio, etc., and where possible what they specifically do (e.g. Billy Graham, political correspondent, *Irish News*). Having made up the list, the PRO, as the situations offer themselves, should contact the specific journalists and try to meet with them, or simply introduce themselves as the Sinn Fein PRO.

It is important to have the journalists' telephone numbers — home numbers if possible — and where possible a number where they can get you.

Find out what their schedules are, in particular final deadlines, what time the copydesk stops working, etc., and would they use photos if you supplied them.

How to contact a newsroom

If a PRO has to issue a statement on a topic, or reply to an imbalanced story or report, it will be necessary to get in touch with the newsroom.

Try always to get through to the reporter who is responsible for the topic you are issuing a statement on or report you are reacting to. Say who you are and that you have a short statement about the issue. Have this written down beforehand. If the reporter is not available ask to speak to the news editor; he or she may pass you on to another reporter who will take down your points, but you will at least have lodged in his or her mind the fact that you are trying to give the newsroom your facts and opinions on the story.

You can suggest to the reporters on the bigger newsdesks that you put the statement over to the copy-desk (the copytypist takes down the statement onto a typewriter as you dictate it). However, shortness is important — 200 to 300 words. Always provide a contact telephone number.

Points to remember when contacting the press

1. Think about what you are going to say and take your time. If necessary, say you will call back.

You do not have to reply immediately to any query from a journalist. Obviously, if you are aware of the particular situation you should comment. However, if the query relates to something you know little or nothing about or something you haven't thought a great deal about then do not rush into a comment. Either arrange for the journalist to call back or for you to call him/her. Always ring back if that is the arrangement. Remember the wrong statement or comment from the wrong person can create massive problems.

2. Write down your thoughts.

If you have an arrangement to talk to a journalist on a particular topic it helps if you write down in advance the points you wish to raise. Writing down the points helps to discipline PROs into developing a concentration on facts, and facts are important if one is to convince a journalist that your view is the correct one. In addition, writing down the main points in advance helps to ensure that you do not forget any points when talking to the journalist.

If you have nothing to say, say so. You should explain why you are saying nothing. Perhaps you are not the person with the responsibility for the issue, if possible arrange for the journalist to contact the correct person. If a statement is to be made later say when.

3. The use of telephones.

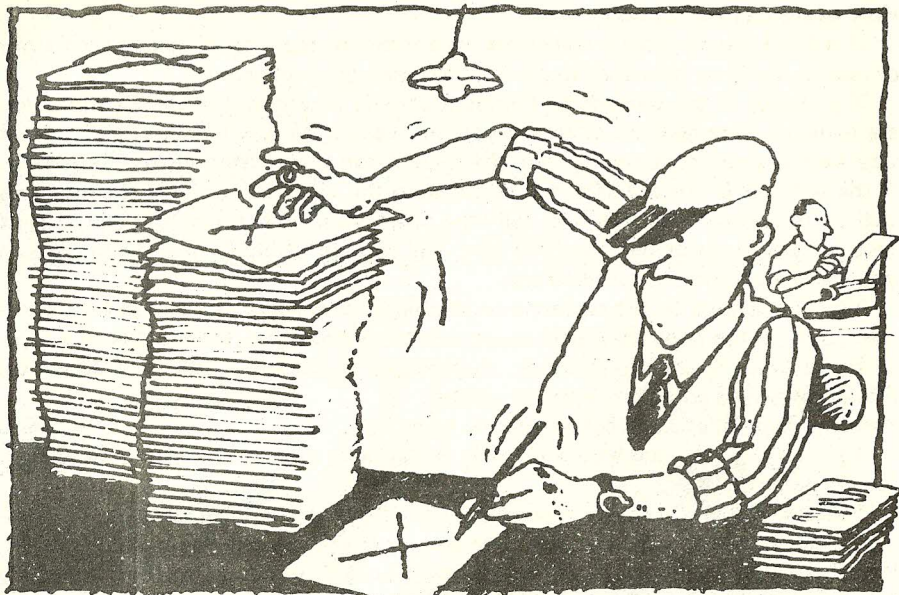
Journalists make extensive use of the telephone. People tend to talk more on the phone than face to face. Always remember that a telephone cannot relay the subtle language of face movements which are important in conversation. It is better to arrange to meet the journalist personally. Never, however, refuse to talk simply because it's by phone.

4. Phone back.

If after an interview you come up with additional information, or if you have forgotten to make some important point, then get in touch with him/her.

5. "Off the record".

If you want to give information to the press but you don't want it known that it came from Sinn Fein, journalists will generally agree not to quote the source. It is after all in their interests to keep on good terms with good sources of information. Make it clear before you say anything that it is off the record and that



● Most press releases will receive only a cursory glance so they must be clear, to the point and easy to read

the journalist agrees.

Press releases

The press release is probably the single most important means of communication with the media. News editors and journalists like press releases: they save work. The reporter or sub-editor values having the facts displayed in an accessible form with pointers for further information.

Producing press releases requires work and care. A typewriter is essential. A method of copying (duplicator or photostat machine) is also necessary. A hand-written press release won't be ignored, and if the story in it is important it will be used; but there is a hundred times more chance of having the material used if it comes over as easy to read and, from the technical point of view of the sub-editor and printer, easy to handle.

Therefore press releases should be either typed or clearly hand-written. The text of the press release should also be double-spaced (i.e. one line space between each two lines of writing); this gives the sub-editor room to write in instructions to the production staff.

Press releases have different functions. They:

- Give advance notice of an event.
- Provide a report of a meeting.
- Convey decisions taken by the party.
- Announce new campaigns and provide progress reports.
- Give details of a report.
- Circulate speeches in advance.

Press releases give their senders the chance to offer their selection of facts and views without these being filtered through anyone else. Furthermore, you can decide when to provide the information. You can also provide the information in a more permanent form than through an interview.

The benefits that a press release offers you are:-
 You can think carefully before committing yourself to words.
 You have a permanent record of what you say.
 You have a better chance of arguing a case, or making a point, than you do in the atmosphere of an interview.
 It is easier to read than reporters' disjointed notes.
 It can be kept for several days and not get mislaid.
 It summarises the information and views you want to communicate to the press.

How to write a press release

Basic rules

A press release is, in all its forms, essentially a news story. Whether a two-line announcement about a new appointment or a 10-page account of a complicated report, the press release has to obey the basic rules of news writing. The first rule learnt by every trainee journalist is to concentrate on the five Ws:

What?
 Who?
 Where?
 When?
 Why?

Every press release should begin with four of the Ws and you should start off by writing:

What is happening
 Who is doing it
 Where it is happening
 When it is happening

What, Who, Where, When do not have to be in that order, but they should always be in the first sentence or two of your press release.

The fifth W is Why something is happening. It is necessary to explain the reasons behind, or causes of, the situation that justifies producing the press release. In practice it is simple.

The introduction

The first sentence or two — in journalists' jargon, the 'intro' — can be the key to the success or failure of the press release. At the start of a day's work, a busy news editor will have a pile of press releases, statements and letters from which to select the items which will be turned into news stories by reporters or sub-editors. There is rarely time to read through the full length of a press release, so only the first few sentences are quickly scanned. The press release has to catch the news editor's attention immediately — to do that, the intro has to contain the most interesting fact about the issue or event.

The rest

Once you have got Who, What, Where, When and Why out of the way in a simple, direct form, you can get on with the rest of the press release. Concentrate on the facts. Give the number of people involved, the venue of a meeting, spell out first names, quote statistics.

The headline

Choose a simple headline for the press release (usually a short version of the first sentence will do). Leave it to sub-editors to think up fancy headlines: yours is there to help the news-editor spot the interest of the story.

Points of Style

Press releases are not essays in English literature, nor are they marked by journalists as if they were exam papers. Information and views should be presented, in a clear, digestible form. Keep sentences short. A maximum of 25 or 30 words will do.

Use vigorous, even aggressive language. The journalists will scan the press release for one or more of those accepted 'news' points: conflict, unusualness, scandal, individualism. Help them by constructing sentences which suggest action.

Use verbs like:

accuse	refuse	demand	blame	shock	fight
confront	act	reject	deny	challenge	warn

Avoiding jargon

Not only can political language be long-winded and evasive but it is often strewn with clichés and jargon. A press release has to be sharp, which means that you have to select your target audience.

Whilst a lot of political jargon is understood by republicans, it might as well be Martian for the majority of newspaper readers.

Using Quotes

Every press release should include direct quotation. Sub-editors like quotes. They make a story come alive by personalising a narrative. Quotes can also be used to get over strong opinions that would look out of place in straight narrative.

Speech

The oldest form of press release is to distribute copies of speeches in advance. In a sense, the longest form of direct quote is the speech. But journalists are not overkeen on speeches. They prefer people doing things rather than people saying things. A speech will have to contain something newsworthy — a new announcement, a particularly sharp attack, fresh demands — to get reported. In any case, the journalist working on the story based on the speech will turn much of it into indirect speech, and will describe what was said and its import rather than report it directly.

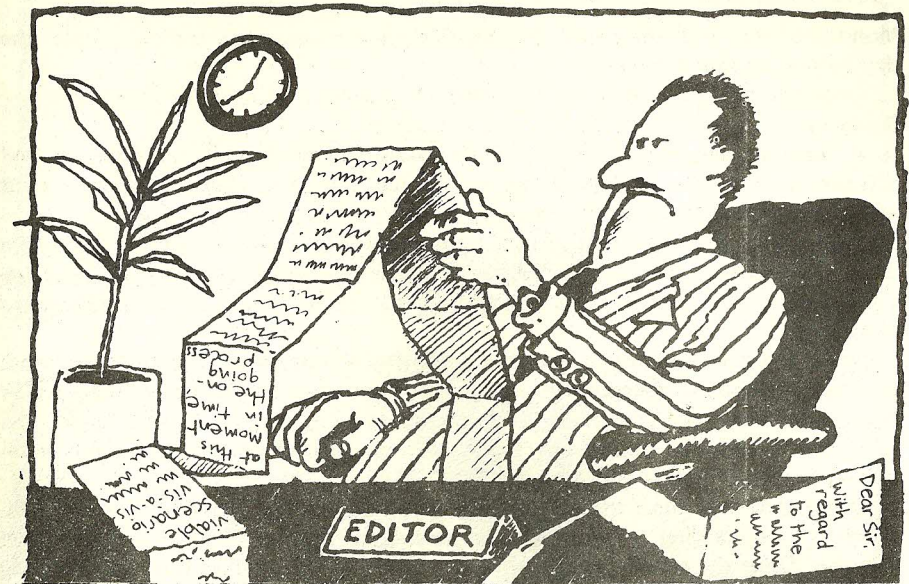
Embargo

The great advantage of press releases is that they can use the embargo system. This means that you can send news to the media some time in advance of when you want it to appear.

An obvious example is a speech to be made at a meeting. You send the speech in the form of a press release; but it would spoil the impact of the meeting if the contents of the speech were printed in the afternoon. So you write across the top of the press 'NOT FOR USE UNTIL 8pm TUESDAY 20 JANUARY' or, more simply, 'EMBARGOED 8pm 20 JAN'.

The third use of the embargo is to try and control the timing of release of your news so as to secure coverage in particular media. Sunday is generally held to be a weak news day. Individuals or organisations often embargo stories for Sunday, so that they stand a chance of getting used on Monday rather than on the more competitive weekdays when courts, councils and parliaments are in action making news.

Timing an embargo needs careful thought. If you give a press release to regional newsrooms at 5pm in the afternoon, it will be too late for the local evening paper and the regional television programmes. If you embargo it for 12noon the next day, you will be likely to get more coverage from those two media but you



● Like press releases, letters to a newspaper stand a better chance of being used if they're short and easy to read

may not get it in the local morning paper, nor on the breakfast-time local radio shows which is when local radio has its biggest audience. One approach is to embargo a story for 3am; that way you can hope to get coverage in the morning papers and on morning radio.

Do not over-use or abuse the embargo system. Journalists are not impressed by embargoes. PROs try to whip up interest over some unimportant bit of news by placing an embargo on it, and there is growing concern about the manipulative use of embargoes by some public bodies.

What a press release should look like

The appearance of a press release tells the journalist at a glance if it is going to help him or not. It should give a confident, easy to read impression and provide certain basic information in addition to the text of the release.

More importantly, a sub-editor has to be able to handle a press release with ease; she/he must have room to write in instructions to the printer or rewrite parts of the text. The more care taken over the presentation of a press release, the more chance of it being used with little alteration.

Letters to the editor

All newspapers and magazines carry a letters column, and letters columns are widely read. Yet people organising a campaign or running a dispute often forget about them when planning media coverage.

A good letter can be a spur to a news editor to initiate news coverage of the points mentioned.

The letters column should also be used to put over general political points, you should write letters of support to the local press. If possible, type the letter, or write it out very clearly. Use one side of the paper only. Be conscious of deadlines (letters columns tend to get sub-edited and set in type fairly early in the production process). For a weekly paper it is best to get the letter to the office on the

Monday of the week the paper appears. For an evening paper, the morning of the day before is a safe deadline.

Letters to the editor are a useful means of keeping an issue in the public eye.

Phone-ins

A radio should be a mandatory piece of equipment in political offices so that officers can listen to local news reports to see how their case is being presented and join in phone-ins to put over the republican point of view.

You can — and, at times, should — organise a phone-in campaign. Ask half a dozen members to try to participate in a particular day's phone-in and argue the same case in their different ways, make sure members are told to ring in with hard questions.

Never try and read out a question or general contribution into the telephone: it will always sound stilted. Keep the question short. Don't cram more than one or two points into each contribution. Be aggressive or courteous, depending on how you want to put over your point. Don't be frightened to say that something is untrue or rubbish if that is the case.

Often you may have to wait a while until the special phone-in number is answered. Keep hanging on: the calls get answered in strict first come, first served rotation. Once the studio producer has answered, you may find him or her asking you about the question or point you want to put. Be careful not to tell them if you are going to put an identical question or point of view to one that has already been broadcast.

Coverage

Complaining about bad media coverage is a vital part of the process of getting good media coverage. The reason is simple. Journalists live in a news vacuum, one in which they have little contact with the people who are the objects of their coverage. Journalists criticise each other — and when the criticism comes down the newsroom hierarchy it can be fiercely vicious — but they do so by using journalistic criteria that do not have a direct relation to the situation portrayed in the story.

A letter of factual correction, or one pointing out unfairness, is not going to convert sloppy and/or right-wing reporters into paragons of radical, painstakingly accurate journalism; but it will sow a seed of doubt that will make them a bit more careful in the future about republican stories, and it should also worry the editor, who would not want to be accused of carrying incorrect or biased pieces.

There are different ways of complaining and varying responses to a complaint. If you fail to get satisfaction, there are even ways of taking a complaint beyond the newsroom, programme, newspaper or broadcasting station.

Get the complaint right

Absolute accuracy is crucial when making a complaint. You must be able to pinpoint the facts that are wrong. This is a particular problem with television and radio, when you can't go back to check the words. If you hear or see something that is inaccurate in a programme, write it down at once. Trying to remember the offending words an hour later is virtually impossible.

Register it quickly

The quicker you are with your telephone call about an offending item, the more impressed will the newsroom be that there is something seriously wrong. Ask to speak to the editor or producer, don't be put off by secretaries. Insist that you have an important complaint and, when you get through, explain yourself firmly but politely.



● If you have a complaint, register it quickly, be firm, but be polite.

Whatever the offence, the guilty party should be able to put it right by one of the following:-

Publishing a full retraction

Putting it right 'in passing'

Promising a better article in the future

Promising to print a letter of complaint

Saying that a letter will be considered for publication