

Continuing a Fifty years tradition on RTE's *This Week*

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It's said that we stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. So it is for me in my new job at RTE. Since September I am a presenter and reporter on RTE's *This Week* programme — a show with a fifty-year history where some of RTE's most distinguished journalists plied their craft.

This Week was born in November 1968. It was one of three news programmes — *World Report*, *News at One Thirty* and *This Week* — launched on the same weekend. Technically *World Report* is the oldest of the triplets by a few hours, and each Sunday morning it still delivers fascinating reports from all corners of the globe. The *News at One-Thirty* was the forerunner of the current *News at One* on RTE Radio and holds most memories for me.

I lived a short bike ride from the primary school in Carrick-on-Shannon and came home for lunch each day bursting to tell my own news. But when the RTE news pips came on the radio at 1.30 my father — who also returned home from the town for lunch — shushed us kids into silence.

It was during these hushed lunches in the 1970s and 80s that I learned about the hunger strikers in the North and the daily bombings and shootings carried out by “men wearing balaclavas”. This last sartorial detail always puzzled me. As the proud owner of a maroon knitted balaclava that protected my face as I cycled in wind and rain, I felt the balaclava was being totally misused by the IRA!

This Week went on air in 1968 just as the northern troubles started. Founding presenters Mike Burns and Sean Duignan recently recalled racing to a civil rights march in Derry, fearing it would be over by the time they arrived. The troubles lasted another 30 years

and kept *This Week* busy for much of that time.

Sean Duignan recalls interviewing a “wee slip of a girl” about a civil rights march. She was so impressive that Duignan had to look down at his notes to see who she was. Bernadette Devlin soon became internationally known as a civil rights activist.

Of course, *This Week* attracted the biggest political players. Listening to audio clips from five decades, it's clear that politicians saw the programme as the place to deliver a message. Fine Gael Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald launched his constitutional crusade on *This Week* in 1981. “I want to lead a crusade...to make this a genuine republic on the principles of Tone and Davis. And if I can bring the people with me on that path...then I believe we have the basis on which many Protestants in Northern Ireland would be willing to consider a relationship with us.”

Fianna Fail leader and Taoiseach Charles Haughey was a feared interviewee. RTE Broadcaster Sean O'Rourke recalls that Haughey's big trick was to arrive at the RTE studio early, catching staff off guard. But Haughey's most famous interview was with RTE's Gerald Barry during an internal party heave. When Barry pointed out that things were not looking good for him, Haughey replied: “As Sean McEntee once said to another reporter — go dance on somebody else's grave!”

This Week charted the fight for social change in Ireland and the resistance to it. In 1971 Oliver J Flanagan spoke out against a bill tabled by a young female senator to permit the sale of contraceptives. “As a result of the introduction in the Senate by Mary Robinson of her proposed legislation,



Co-presenters: Carole Coleman with Dave McCullagh & Justin McCarthy

I thought someone should have the moral courage to stand up in parliament,” Flanagan told *This Week*. Almost five decades later Health Minister Simon Harris told Aine Lawlor on a special *This Week* referendum results program that he never foresaw the size of the majority who voted to legalise abortion.

Interviews with newsmakers have been the mainstay of *This Week*. In 1981, David Hanley knocked on the door of Irene McArthur's home and persuaded her to talk about her son Malcolm who'd been arrested and tried for the murder of the nurse Bridie Gargan. “In my religious upbringing I was taught a life for a life,” she said. When Hanley asked if this applied to her own son Mrs McArthur replied: “well that's very difficult but I know my first reaction when I heard about this murder in the park was that I wouldn't waste money on a trial.”

In 1994 investigative Journalist Veronica Guerin told *This Week* about when she was first shot and injured by members of Dublin's criminal underworld. “I can still hear the sound of the shot. There was a stinging sensation and I heard his footsteps. I said to myself I've been shot. I just couldn't believe I hadn't been killed,” Guerin told the programme.

In half a century up to 80 journalists have worked on *This Week* — Kevin O'Kelly, Olivia O'Leary, Roisin Duffy, Richard Crowley and Colm O'Mongáin to name but a few. Now Justin McCarthy, John Burke, David McCullough and I are taking the wheel. There will be no shortage of issues to cover. I predict that Brexit, migration, housing, health, climate change, and local politics will keep the show going for another fifty years!