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Ireland's first Press Council launched

New independent regulator to resolve press complaints and maintain high journalistic standards

9 January 2008 - - The inaugural Press Council of Ireland and Office of the Press Ombudsman were today formally launched in the presence of the Minister for Justice, Brian Lenihan TD, and representatives of the Irish print media industry. The launch marks the beginning of a new era of press regulation in Ireland, with all citizens now having access to a new system for handling press complaints.

Today's launch marks the culmination of nearly four years of dialogue between the press industry, the Department of Justice and other interested parties. In 2004, a press industry Steering Committee began devising a model for a Press Council that would be independent of Government and, in operation, independent of the media. That model is today fully operational.

Speaking at today's launch, the independent Chairman of the Press Council of Ireland, Professor Tom Mitchell, said: "The Irish public now has available to it a new procedure for dealing with complaints against the print media that is independent, accessible, simple, quick and free. I believe this is a significant development and a very good news story.

"It is right and indeed necessary in today's world that members of the public, when aggrieved by what they read in the papers, should have access to a more straightforward and less forbidding mode of redress than the courts."

Make-up of the Press Council

The Press Council, which appoints the Press Ombudsman, consists of 13 people: seven independent members (including the Chairman) who were chosen through a process of public recruitment; and six members who have a media background and were nominated by the industry.

The independent members of the Press Council are:

Professor Thomas Mitchell (Chairman), former Provost of Trinity College Dublin;

Mr Seamus Boland, CEO of Irish Rural Link;

Ms Mary Kotsonouris, a qualified solicitor and former District Court Judge;

Mr John Horgan, former Chairman of the Labour Court;

Ms Maeve McDonagh, Associate Professor of Law in UCC;

Dr Eleanor O'Higgins, Senior Lecturer in the UCD School of Business; and

Mr Peter O'Mahony, former CEO of the Irish Refugee Council.

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The six industry members of the Press Council include:

Ms Rosemary Delaney, Managing Editor of multi-media firm WMB Publishing Ltd;

Mr Michael Denieffe, Managing Editor of Independent Newspapers (Ireland) Ltd;

Mr Martin Fitzpatrick, Treasurer of the Irish Executive Council of the National Union of Journalists;

Mr Michael McNiffe, Editor of the Irish Sun;

Mr Eoin McVey, Managing Editor of The Irish Times; and

Mr Frank Mulrennan, President of the Regional Newspapers and Printers Association of Ireland.

Professor Mitchell praised the work of the industry Steering Committee that devised the model for the Press Council. “The Committee drew on a range of expert advice, looked at a variety of international models and consulted regularly with the Department of Justice to ensure adequate input from the Government,” he said.

“The Committee’s goal was to produce a model that would be workable, strongly independent and with the authority to be effective and command public confidence,” he said. “Particular efforts were made to ensure the Press Council would be independent to the greatest degree possible of both the Government and the industry, and the model reflects that.”

All members of the new Press Council were appointed by an independent Appointments Committee consisting of: Dr Miriam Hederman-O’Brien, a former Chairman of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission; Dr Maurice Manning, President of the Irish Human Rights Commission; and Kevin Murphy, former Ombudsman and Information Commissioner. Professor Thomas Mitchell also chaired the independent Appointments Committee.

Office of the Press Ombudsman

Ireland’s inaugural Press Ombudsman, meanwhile, is the academic, author and former public representative, Professor John Horgan. In his role as Press Ombudsman, Professor Horgan will be the first port of call for members of the public who wish to lodge a complaint against a newspaper or magazine.

The Office of the Press Ombudsman is now fully operational, and has already begun to receive and investigate complaints.

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“Our objective is to provide an independent, quick, fair and free method of resolving complaints in a society which also values press freedom,” said Professor Horgan. “This provides a new context within which the inevitable conflicts can be managed productively. It will also, I hope, enhance public confidence in the role of the print media as a vital component of our public life.”

The position of Press Ombudsman was publicly advertised and a shortlist was drawn up by the same independent Appointments Committee responsible for appointing the members of the Press Council. Interviews were then conducted by the Press Council before Professor Horgan was appointed.

A new Code of Practice for the Press

All complaints received by the Office of the Press Ombudsman will be considered against the framework of a new Code of Practice for Newspapers and Periodicals. The new Code contains 10 principles covering areas such as truth and accuracy, fairness and honesty, respect for the rights of others and privacy.

“The Press Council and its Office of the Press Ombudsman will draw its authority from many sources, first of all from its independence, from the ability and standing of its members and from the distinction of its Ombudsman,” said Press Council Chairman, Professor Tom Mitchell.

“But its authority will also be strengthened by the fact that it has undertaken its work with the support of all the print media organisations – and the NUJ – that have accepted a carefully formulated Code of Practice, built around best practice throughout the free world, and have committed themselves to observing its provisions.”

More information about press regulation including details of how to make a complaint about a newspaper or magazine, and a copy of the new Code of Practice, is available from the Office of the Press Ombudsman and on the website www.pressombudsman.ie

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