

OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN

GAILLIMH

DÁMHA NA nDÁN IS AN LÉINN CHEILTIGH

Ard-Dioplóma i gCumarsáid Fheidhmeach

SCRÚDUTHE NA BLIANA 1999-2000

SEIMEASTAR II

GAEILGE

Pádraig Ó Héalaí

Cáit Ní Dhomhnaill

Dhá uair an chloig a cheadófar.

1 Déan coimriú i nGaeilge (250-300 focal) ar an sliocht seo

Public service broadcasting is essential to the life of a democracy

RTÉ is an exception among the institutions and State or semi-state companies which the Government may feel tempted to sell off or cut down to size. Prosperity is good for us: the more people who share in it the better. And, for many, that means being able to avail of the essential services which prosperity ensures we can afford. But some would argue that public service broadcasting is a luxury we could do without or which might best be provided by private enterprise. I don't agree. Public service broadcasting is essential to the life of a democracy, in line of importance next to a free press.

Ideally, the service should be wholly funded by the state, as the BBC is, but kept at arm's length from the government of the day. Even when its revenue comes partly from the state and partly from advertising, the station's independence must be guarded.

One of our most experienced broadcasters, Muiris Mac Conghail, said on Raidió na Gaeltachta's *Cois Life* the other day that the national broadcasting service was the most important cultural institution in the State. He's right. It's also the most democratic, accessible and provocative. And our exasperation at what we see as its failures is often a measure of the extent to which we feel it's ours. It's hardly necessary, in the season of Seán Ó Mórdha's monumental

Seven Ages and John McGahern's *Amongst Women*, to record our pride in its achievements.

In another season, people of my generation enjoyed the great days of the Radio Éireann Repertory Company (the Rep); the collections of Seán Ó Riada, Séamus Ennis, Ciarán MacMathúna and Seán Mac Réamoinn; the poetry of Austin Clarke, talks and stories of James Plunkett. We hung about parked cars on windy Sundays to catch the excitement of Micheál O'Hehir; one word in ten was enough to claim a share of that famous night when Cavan beat Kerry in the Polo Grounds, New York.

It's a long way from there to the sudden, mysterious decision by Síle de Valera that RTÉ is to have no part in Digico, the company that will operate a new system capable of delivering up to 30 TV channels to every house in the State. RTÉ was to have had a holding of up to 40 per cent in Digico — or so it was assumed since the Broadcasting Bill was published in May of last year. Now, it will have none. And what will this mean? In the *Sunday Independent*, Colum Kenny, a senior lecturer in communications at Dublin City University, explained: 'Whoever controls Digico as envisaged, will effectively decide the package of TV services on it. If Digico passes completely into multi-national hands, as Cablelink has, the Irish public could lose control of nearly all of its airways.'

Mac Conghail thought it was enough to provoke immediate action by the RTÉ Authority, the opposition parties and anyone with the interests of public service broadcasting at heart.