

RTÉ

Statement by the Board of RTÉ

In recent weeks the Board of RTÉ has been engaged with the most serious editorial question that has arisen since the late 1960s and that work continued at a special meeting today. The Board is keenly aware of the range of concerns that have been expressed about the Prime Time Investigates programme, Mission to Prey. Those concerns centre on the wrong done to Fr. Kevin Reynolds, and they extend to questions about the very title of the programme and to doubts about the possibility of fair treatment for priests and religious in broadcast coverage of public affairs.

Under the Broadcasting Act 2009, Board members represent the interests of viewers and listeners and must ensure that RTÉ's news and current affairs are accurate and impartial. These are key duties for the Board, and they are fundamental to the trust that RTÉ must keep with the public.

Among other things, this means that all sections of Irish society and all citizens must be confident that RTÉ will be fair to them. When RTÉ makes a mistake, the Board must ensure there is no cover up and no rush to self protection.

The Board fully respects the external independent statutory inquiry to be conducted by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. RTÉ will cooperate with that inquiry and will make available to it the results of two investigations which were set in train a number of weeks ago.

The first of these inquiries is being carried out under the supervision of the Director General. In parallel, Professor John Horgan was commissioned to make an independent assessment of editorial practice in RTÉ Television Current Affairs.

The purpose of the Director General's inquiry is to establish the sequence of events, journalistic practice, and editorial decisions which led to the broadcast of the Prime Time Investigates programme. He has already presented an update on his inquiry at the Board meeting on 20 October.

Clearly the treatment and defamation of Fr. Kevin Reynolds in the programme was a grave failure of judgement. But recognising that failure is not enough - the Board has to establish what happened and why.

That is the Board's responsibility in law. It is a duty owed to Fr. Reynolds, the person most clearly wronged in this case, and it is also a duty owed to licence fee payers and to staff at RTÉ.

At today's meeting, the Board has posed further detailed questions about the production of the programme and subsequent communication with the public. Those questions extend to the manner of the broadcast of the correction order following the settlement of legal proceedings, last Thursday evening.

The Director General has undertaken to complete his report and to offer his recommendations at the next meeting of the Board on the 15th of December.

At that meeting, the Board will also receive Professor John Horgan's recommendations resulting from his independent review of editorial processes at RTÉ Television Current Affairs. That review began at the request of the Director General on the 14th of November.

The Board believes that it is essential to have Professor Horgan's independent assessment. Crucially, it will help identify any structural editorial weakness which may have contributed to the misjudgements that led to the 'Mission to Prey' programme.

While these investigations and reviews continue, RTÉ's news and current affairs programming will be the subject of heightened public scrutiny and concern.

By agreement with the Director General, the Managing Director of RTÉ News and Current Affairs, Ed Mulhall, has decided to step aside from his role for the duration of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland inquiry initiated by the Government.

The Editor of Current Affairs, Ken O'Shea will likewise, by agreement, be stepping aside from his post for the duration of the BAI inquiry. These decisions have been agreed in order to remove any possible doubt about the objectivity and impartiality of RTÉ's News and Current Affairs services at this time and are taken without prejudice to any party.

As announced yesterday, broadcast of the planned series of Prime Time Investigates has been deferred from December until current inquiries are complete. Executive Producer Brian Páircéir and Reporter Aoife Kavanagh will not be involved in any on-air programming for this period and as with all other relevant members of staff, they will be engaged in assisting the RTÉ and BAI inquiries.

The weeks ahead will no doubt be very difficult for RTÉ. However the Board is confident that under the leadership of Director General Noel Curran and with the full cooperation of its staff, RTÉ will learn important lessons from hard experience. Nothing less is required to recover the public trust that must underpin all we do. To that end, the Board will act judiciously, following full consideration of all relevant matters.

23 November 2011

ENDS