

'It felt like a real vindication': Big Issue editor reflects on the journey to winning prestigious award

By **danibacon** -



"Really I was quite moved": The Big Issue editor, Paul McNamee, reflects on winning award. (Image: The Big Issue)

In the wake of winning the Outstanding Contribution to Journalism award on November 12, Big Issue editor Paul McNamee reflects on his journalistic past, the road to earning the award and the future of the publication.

Paul McNamee is the UK editor of *The Big Issue*, a social justice magazine launched in 1991 to help homeless and vulnerable people earn an income through selling copies. Appointed in 2011, McNamee became the magazine's first unified editor, overseeing all national, regional, and online editions.

Hailing from Ireland, Paul McNamee began his career as a reporter for a free sheet in North Belfast, describing it as a "baptism of fire" due to the tough location. He later collaborated with broadcaster Colin Murray to launch music magazine *Blank*, which paved the way for his role as a feature writer at *NME*. However, during his early 30s,

McNamee realised he wanted a change, describing a desire to transition into "harder news".



Following working with publications such as the *Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian*, and *Irish News*, and whilst editing an independent magazine in Belfast, McNamee was introduced to *The Big Issue* through a chance opportunity. His wife noticed the Scottish edition was hiring a deputy editor, and McNamee was approached by the magazine's chief executive, who admired his previous work.

"My introduction to *The Big Issue* was more editorial than any kind of attempt to make any social change," McNamee reflects, "But when I got into it, I saw what a remarkable organisation it was and is. And I wanted to remain."

McNamee's takeover as editor instigated a positive change as he emphasised the integral role that *The Big Issue* has in journalism.

"I wouldn't say *The Big Issue* was in decline, but people didn't take it seriously, it wasn't listened to. It was just kind of like people bought it and threw it in the back seat of a car and ignored it. My role, as editor was to make [*The Big Issue*] say something and make people want to read it... And then ultimately change the world."

McNamee began with "small inroads" with the hope of tipping the dominoes to guide *The Big Issue* to the forefront of trusted and sought after journalism.

"People started to notice, [*The Big Issue*] became part of the debate. Then I became like a new statement spectator, *The Big Issue* is a kind of triumvirate of weekly news magazines."

At the Society of Editors awards ceremony held on November 12 this year, *The Big Issue* received the Outstanding Contribution to Journalism award, a monumental moment for McNamee. "That meant a great deal to me," he says, "it felt like a real vindication of a decade and a half's work. Really I was quite moved."

The award recognised the publication for helping millions of people affected by poverty in the UK for more than 30 years and its services to journalism. "You can't really measure yourself by how others give you little baubles and tokens and so on, but on this occasion I feel we can, and it was important," McNamee says, "So I think there is, for my part, some positivity about the future."

