

How growing up in Northern Ireland shaped Big Issue editor Paul McNamee

By **Marian Scaife** -



Big Issue Editor Paul McNamee is convinced growing up in Northern Ireland through the Troubles has fundamentally impacted his approach to journalism

Thanks to his repressed catholicism and internal truth compass Paul McNamee is strengthening the identity of the Big Issue.

Paul McNamee, 51, has never taken authorities at their word. Without trying to sound, in his words, “too grandiose” he refers to growing up as a Northern Irish catholic with a nationalist background “feeling part of the repressed minority”.

McNamee believes that his heritage fundamentally impacts the way he thinks. “I grew up through what is known as the Troubles and I think my attitude in life, in its entirety is informed by that period. Everybody was affected by it. Everybody knew somebody who was shot or blown up or whose family had.”

This shaped the type of journalist McNamee wanted to be, he regards himself as a news journalist first and foremost. He describes an urge to “never accept whatever is the prevailing opinion, to always challenge, to always look, to be better”.

It was his catholic background that landed his first journalist job on a free Belfast newspaper. As the “token catholic” on the paper’s protestant team McNamee recalls

receiving letters from political prisoners including members of the loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). When asking a colleague what he should do with such letters he was advised to print them.



McNamee's early career has prepared him well to stand up for parts of British society that are too easily ignored. Social justice and change is the bedrock of the Big Issue and its campaigns have a central role.

For McNamee the advocacy for individuals is just as important as a wider campaign. Since the implication of the government's Department of Work and Pensions assessments of individuals for Personal Independence Payments (PIP) Big Issue journalists have been challenging those decisions on behalf of people caught in the poverty trap.

"We've been able to take their stories, investigate on their behalf, advocate on their behalf with relevant authorities, and frequently bring change and positive change for them. That to me, is just as important as any big campaign." says McNamee.

Truth and trust are importantly interlinked for McNamee. He sees them as essential components for the Big Issue's future. "The positive thing within publishing is that there has to be independent voices who can find their way through, who will be listened to and who work on trust. I talk about trust a lot with our team. We have to be a trusted voice. Our reach is not the same as The Sunday Times or a social media organisation, but it's growing."

When it comes to the Big Issue editorial team McNamee feels the generation gap between himself and junior members. He describes being from the "slightly damaged" generation and acknowledges he talks a lot about growing up in a fractured Northern Ireland.

He is beginning to accept that younger generations have to approach Northern Ireland's history and politics from their own knowledge base. Of his own experiences that inform his Big Issue editorship McNamee says "they have been there all the time and will be there until I am put in the ground".

