

SEÁN GALLAGHER

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Mr. Pat Rabbitte
Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources
Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources
29 ó 31 Adelaide Road
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Via email at minister.rabbitte@dcenr.gov.ie

12th March, 2012

Dear Minister

I should first say that I am personally grateful to you for the public contributions which you have already made in respect of the finding by the Broadcasting Authority last week that our national service broadcaster, RTÉ, contravened their statutory duty in the *Frontline* debate of 24th October, 2011, and particularly your contribution to RTÉ's Morning Ireland programme of Thursday, 8th of March

I should also say that my concerns in respect of the *Frontline* programme relate to the democratic process, and not to last year's Presidential Election. This is not about me.

What troubles me now is the emerging evidence that RTÉ seems to have stage managed or set the agenda for what I understood to be a question and answer session between the candidates and members of the audience. That was the basis on which I participated in this programme. The evidence is contained in an interview with an audience member in yesterday's *Sunday Independent*, and I find it deeply disturbing.

This follows the decision by the Broadcasting Authority, which highlighted an institutional failure by RTÉ.

This new information relating to the *Frontline* programme and its production staff raises the most fundamental questions about the trustworthiness and impartiality of our national broadcaster. It was not available to the Broadcasting Authority. In my view RTÉ have not justified the confidence of the BA who took the view that *there was no evidence that would lead one to question the bona fides of the programme presenter or the production team in its approach in the programmes that were the subject of the complaints*. RTÉ have let the Broadcasting Authority down. The evidence now emerging should have been disclosed to the Broadcasting Authority. And it should have been made available to me.

On the information made available to it, the Broadcasting Authority decided that *the complaint was not of such a serious nature to warrant an investigation or public hearings*. I had requested public hearings specifically so that the documentary records relating to the programme should be made available. RTÉ have refused my request for these documents under a Freedom of Information Act request.

What is interesting to note is that the decision that the matter was not serious was criticised in an *Irish Times* editorial of 8th March as *illogical*. It has also been criticised in other news media, including the *Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Independent*. There is a growing consensus that this is a very serious issue indeed, and that it merits your further consideration, and a public inquiry.

Trust in our national broadcaster is at the core of our democracy. That trust has now been brought into serious question.

I urge you, as Minister for Communications with responsibility for RTE to consider whether the emerging evidence (not available to the Broadcasting Authority), and revealed in the *Sunday Independent* warrants a full investigation so that unanswered questions arising from the programme can be examined fully, and answered.

The investigation in my view needs to provide full discovery of all communication within the production team including the presenter; communication within RTE regarding the Frontline programme; between RTE and members of the public with particular reference to the methodology and process of selecting audience members; all communication between RTE and members of the audience in the period leading up to and after the programme and all communication between RTE and the campaign teams, candidates and parties regarding the Frontline programme.

It is a matter of urgency that trust in our national broadcaster be restored. In my view it will take a full and comprehensive investigation if this is to happen.

Yours sincerely,

Seán Gallagher

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