

Sinn Féin MP's resignation demonstrates the dangers of social media for politicians

On 15 January, Barry McElduff, Sinn Féin MP for West Tyrone, resigned after a video he posted on Twitter offended victims and families of the 1976 IRA Kingsmill massacre. **Paul Reilly** (University of Sheffield) examines what this incident means for politicians who make use of social media in Northern Ireland.



Barry McElduff. Picture: [Sinn Féin](#), via [\(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

Did Twitter cause the downfall of Sinn Féin MP Barry McElduff? At first glance, it certainly appears so: in his resignation statement, he attributed his departure to the video he posted on Twitter on 5 January, 2018, in which he appeared to mock the victims of the 1976 massacre near the village of Kingsmill, in which ten Protestant men were killed. On the 42nd anniversary of the IRA atrocity, McElduff posed in a supermarket with a loaf of bread on his head, which also bore the name Kingsmill. McElduff, no stranger to using social media to poke fun at political rivals (for example his [‘vending machine’ video](#) mocked Arlene Foster’s role in the renewable heating incentive scandal), nor posting irreverent pictures of himself with [objects on his head](#), appeared to be caught off guard by the furore over the video. The subsequent Twitter storm saw politicians from across the sectarian divide condemn the video and reject his subsequent apology (in which he denied the video was linked to the anniversary), with the Ulster Unionist MLA Doug Beattie amongst those who [called for his resignation](#).

The politics of Whataboutery

‘Whataboutery’, a phrase used to describe the [‘blaming and finger pointing that goes on between communities in conflict’](#), was evident throughout this Twitter storm, especially amongst those tweeters who sought to deflect criticism from McElduff. For example, former Sinn Féin MLA Daithí McKay drew an unfavourable comparison between McElduff’s decision to resign and DUP MP Gregory Campbell’s refusal to do the same for sharing an offensive joke on Facebook, which had referred to the unlawful killing of three IRA terrorists in Gibraltar in 1988. While some republicans expressed scepticism about McElduff’s explanation, others suggested that the video was unintentionally offensive and just another example of his zany sense of humour. Self-styled parody group LADFLEG argued that McElduff’s apology should be accepted and concurred that he [had not intended to cause hurt](#) to the Kingsmill families.

The widespread condemnation of McElduff, fuelled by criticism of Sinn Féin's initial decision to suspend the MP on full pay for three months, was repeated in the op-eds and editorials of newspapers such as the [Belfast Telegraph](#), and [Irish Times](#). The implications of this incident for ongoing efforts to repair relationships between the DUP and Sinn Féin were discussed on current affairs programmes such as BBC Northern Ireland's [The View](#), while an [online petition](#) calling for McElduff to resign gained over 38,000 signatures in just one week, ensuring the controversy remained in the headlines, as did reports that the [Police Service of Northern Ireland were investigating the video](#). The Kingsmill massacre itself was the subject of further media coverage courtesy of a controversial cartoon drawn by Brian John Spencer, which included a bloody image of the atrocity alongside a caricature of Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams wearing a loaf on his head. The local artist claimed this was to highlight the hypocrisy of Sinn Féin championing equality issues. This cartoon was then retweeted by DUP MLA Christopher Stalford, who [deleted his post](#) only after a request from a Kingsmill family member. Alliance Party leader Naomi Long was amongst those to use Twitter to condemn this 'gruesome tit for tat' and the use of the massacre by unionists to score political points over Sinn Féin. Nevertheless, McElduff's position only became untenable nine days after his initial post, when an interview with sole Kingsmill survivor Alan Black was aired by Irish state broadcaster RTE, in which he described the MP as 'dancing on the graves' of the ten Protestants killed in the massacre.

Sinn Féin MP Barry McElduff chose to post a light-hearted video by putting something on his head:
Of the thousands of items in a shop, he chose bread;
Of all bread brands, he chose Kingsmills;
Of all days to do it, it was the anniversary of the Kingsmills Massacre.
What odds? pic.twitter.com/kuxf0pKPTk

— Sam McBride (@SJAMcBride) [January 6, 2018](#)

Hybrid media logics and the Kingsmill bread video row

So, what does the Kingsmill video controversy tell us about Northern Irish politics in the era of social media? Self-evidently, content posted and shared on the social media accounts of local politicians often provide fodder for both their supporters and their critics. Whether or not one accepts McElduff's statement that the offence caused to the Kingsmill families was unintentional, it is clear that his attempt to be irreverent or humorous online backfired spectacularly and ultimately led to his resignation. In an era in which US President Donald [Trump's tweets are considered official statements](#), politicians should be in no doubt about the visibility of their online posts and expect to be held accountable for them. The cost for Northern Irish politicians wishing to use Twitter to speak directly to citizens is the increased scrutiny of their tweets, both old and current, of 'likes' (as seen in the case of Sinn Féin's Máirtín Ó Muilleoir who [faced calls to resign for 'liking' the video](#)), and retweets. The online shaming of Northern Irish politicians who post such controversial content online also focuses attention on the failure of the main political parties to address conflict legacy issues, such as engaging with the needs of victims and survivors.

Moreover, it also illustrates the increasing importance of hybrid media logics in Northern Ireland. Andrew Chadwick argues that the United Kingdom demonstrates many of the key characteristics of a hybrid media system, based on the interaction between older and newer media logics, which includes ['technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organizational forms'](#). Drawing on case studies such as [#Bullygate](#) in 2010, when bullying allegations about then prime minister Gordon Brown were leaked, he discusses how professional journalists increasingly integrate social media into their professional practice, which means that non-elite actors have potentially greater opportunities to shape and contest news within the political information cycle. The McElduff case provides further evidence of how these media logics operate in the context of Northern Irish politics. Take, for example, the way professional journalists such as the News Letter Political Editor Sam McBride shared the controversial video on their Twitter accounts and questioned whether it was [a coincidence that McElduff had put a Kingsmill loaf on his head on the anniversary of the massacre](#). Professional journalists also published verbatim the social media reactions of politicians to the video and resignation, with the Derry Journal providing a comprehensive list of tweets from journalists and politicians on their [website](#). The McElduff case is by no means the first example of these media logics in operation, with citizens and groups such as LADFLEG playing an important role in drawing the attention of professional journalists to a range of controversies. It is clear that in the context of an increasingly hybridised media system, Barry McElduff may not be the last Northern Irish politician to pay a high price for what they post online.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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