

## THE NEED TO SAFEGUARD THE PRESS

"I regard any threat to the freedom of the press in Ireland as a threat to the State itself." The words of Justice Minister Frances Fitzgerald, issued in the wake of threats made to Independent News and Media reporters last week is another disturbing development in the wake of the Regency Hotel and Ballybough assassinations of February 5th and 8th.

We may not be in the 'Gangland' territory which Dublin currently occupies, or which Limerick, for far too long, as a community was held hostage by, but we cannot and should not underestimate the presence of criminality in our city and county.

In recent years, we have seen jury trials collapsing in Waterford. We have also been told by persons too frightened to come forward publicly about the intimidation that they and their families have suffered from at first hand.

We have stood in fire bombed properties. We have seen the devastation that Waterford's criminal element has wreaked upon many communities, particularly in our city.

We've also seen at first hand, on the steps and inside the door of Waterford Courthouse, the manner in which jurors can be intimidated.

We have seen jurors withdrawing from potentially sitting on high profile trials, citing knowledge of a defendant in some cases, when fear, one suspects, is the actual - and entirely understandable - cause. And the case for the Special Criminal Court being availed of in this city, in relation to several high profile criminal trials, is both real and justified.

We have heard politicians, very bravely in some instances, speaking out publicly against the criminal fraternity, and the threats that have been made against them in taking such a stance. And, throughout all of that time, we have been grateful that lives have not been lost.

Only last week, in an column written between the double Dublin murders, we referenced how regrettable it was that it took the murder of journalist Veronica Guerin to stir the then government into action, leading to the creation of the Criminal Assets Bureau.

Yet here we are, just a few months shy of the 20th anniversary of her murder, and this State is once again attempting to face down killers, thugs and bullies who pose a threat to the security of our country.

"Her brave attempt to shed some light was to cost her life," stated the Independent's leader column on Friday last. "Her death was an attack on every freedom that our State stands for. And our State hit back. The Gardaí made sure that no effort was spared. Yet 20 years later, journalists are once more targets of threats within this newspaper group."

According to Taoiseach Enda Kenny: "One of the pillars of a functioning democracy is freedom of speech, and in any self-respecting society journalists must be afforded the freedom to go about their jobs without fear of reprisal. Those who engaged in the recent killings on our streets will be brought to justice and no resource will be spared in doing so."

Edmund Burke once famously said: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Action is always preferable to reaction. Prevention is always preferable to cure. But those who wish to slaughter with impunity, and those who wish to silence those brave reporters must be met with resistance from the good men and women of An Garda Síochána and every resource this State can call upon. And they must be crushed.