

THOMAS HARDIMAN

The IIC pays tribute to its former president (1983-1987) and life trustee Dr Thomas P. Hardiman



Born: 16 March 1929

Died: 2 May 2020

Former RTÉ director general Thomas Hardiman (91) died suddenly at his Donnybrook home in Dublin on Saturday night surrounded by family.

He was engineer in charge at the inaugural Telefís Éireann (later RTÉ) broadcast from Dublin's Gresham Hotel on New Year's Eve 1961 and advanced through the organisation to become its first director general from within the organisation in 1968 at the age of 39. He succeeded Kevin McCourt.

His appointment coincided with the eruption of the Northern Ireland Troubles and growing tension between government and the national broadcaster over its news coverage. In 1971, concerned at RTÉ's coverage of the Northern conflict, the government issued a directive under section 31 of the Broadcasting Act banning it from transmitting anything that could be interpreted as promoting the aims or activities "of any organisation which engages in, promotes, encourages or advocates the attaining of any political objective by violent means". In 1972 this led to the government dismissing the RTÉ Authority following a radio report by journalist Kevin O'Kelly based on an interview with then IRA chief of staff Seán Mac Stiofáin. O'Kelly was convicted in the courts on contempt charges and sentenced to three months imprisonment after refusing to identify Mac Stiofáin, who was charged with IRA membership. O'Kelly spent two nights in jail.

The new RTÉ Authority was expected to sack Mr Hardiman. But he convinced it that to do so would be to sacrifice the independence of the national broadcaster. As director general he produced a position statement on the role of RTÉ: "a view of Irish broadcasting". This was the authoritative and reasoned statement underlying the operation of public service broadcasting in Ireland until the publication by RTÉ of "change and challenge" in 1989. Hardiman was a keen supporter of the Irish language and it was during his tenure as director general that Raidió Na Gaeltachta was set up in 1972. His resignation in 1975 at the age of 46 came as a surprise. He said it was time for a change and for new challenges.

When Hardiman left RTÉ in 1975 he chaired the National Board for Science and Technology. And, for that work, the National University of Ireland awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1990. He also served as president of the Confederation of Irish Industry, the Marketing Institute of Ireland, the Dublin Chamber of Commerce. He was active on the National Planning Board and Telecommunications Review Group. He chaired the Commission on Technological Education which oversaw development of the National Institutes for Technological Education to university status, one of which became DCU - of which he was first chancellor.

On an international level, he fostered close relations between Ireland and Japan resulting in his being awarded the Japanese Order of the Rising Sun by the late emperor Hirohito in 1986, the second European to be so honoured. He chaired the Asia Europe Foundation and developed the Ireland Japan Association. This led to his accepting chairmanship of the Chester Beatty Library.

Hardiman was also active in European affairs, being for a period president of the International Institute of Communications in London, a member of the committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the EU advisory committee on research and development in Brussels, and chairman of the external relations committee of the Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe in Brussels. As chairman of the Irish Institute for European Affairs in Louvain he oversaw the development of the institute on the site of the old Irish College there.

Born in Dublin's Phibsborough on 16 March 1929, he was the only boy and second youngest in a family of seven whose train driver father Patrick died at the age of 57 when Hardiman was four. He always spoke with great love and admiration of his mother who had a major influence on his early life.

He was educated by the Christian Brothers at Coláiste Mhuire, studying through Irish. Though the first language of the family was English, it had a strong cultural commitment to sustaining and developing the ancestral language. From Coláiste Mhuire he won a Dublin Corporation scholarship to University College Dublin. He had an option to enter the civil service as an executive officer, but his mother encouraged him to take the scholarship to university. At UCD he studied engineering and science, graduating in 1951 with degrees in mechanical and electrical engineering and applied mathematics.

On graduation he joined the then Department of Posts and Telegraphs where he provided engineering services to Raidió Éireann. In the mid-1950s he joined Raidió Éireann as an operations manager moving in to the newly established television service in 1960. As an engineer, one of his proudest achievements was being elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1980 for his services to science.

In 1955 he married Rosaleen Thornton, who survives him, as do their three daughters, two sons and 12 grandchildren.

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