

A friendly Irish voice

INTERVIEW WITH SIR TERRY WOGAN

BROADCASTER



TERRY WOGAN

began his career with RTE, the Irish national broadcaster, before moving to BBC Radio, where he achieved unprecedented audiences, particularly with the breakfast show on BBC Radio 2. He later switched to television and notably hosted the Children in Need charity appeals and his own chat show "Wogan". For over 30 years he provided the BBC's commentary for the Eurovision song contest. He was appointed OBE in 1997, and is a Freeman of the City of Limerick.

What insights have you gained into the relationship between the British and the Irish from working in television and radio, over the course of your career?

It's been a long time since I left Ireland: God was still a boy back then! I've lived longer in the UK than I ever lived in Ireland, so I can probably give you a better idea of the attitudes of the British to the Irish who live here in Britain and the attitudes of the Irish toward their presenters who have lived here for a long time.

I came over here in 1969 and started work as a broadcaster with BBC Radio, eventually moving to the morning radio show, which is the most popular slot. That was on BBC Radio 2, which in those days was also the most popular station in Britain, with an audience of between eight and nine million people.

It all went very well, and the British public accepted me immediately; Irish broadcasters have always been accepted in Britain, as have the Irish. I always say the reason Irish broadcasters do well in the UK is because the British cannot categorise us because of our accent; they can't tell which school we went to, and so we don't face the old North-South of England prejudice. People like Dave Allen, Graham Norton and myself have all benefited from this.

Anyway, I took over the morning show on Radio 2 in the early 1970s. This more or less coincided with what are euphemistically called "the troubles" in Northern Ireland. Then came the IRA bomb attacks on the British mainland, and I would find myself broadcasting on some mornings to an audience of around nine million people the day after a bomb had gone off, killing and injuring a lot of innocent British people. And I was very conscious of that, but at no point in the intervening years did I ever experience any anti-Irish prejudice whatsoever. I never received any letters or faxes or emails telling me to get back to where I belonged.

That said, I think there were other Irish people who had it more difficult. There were cases of insults, but even so, nothing really prejudicial or antipathetic; nothing like what the Muslim minority is experiencing at the moment in Britain. Nobody ever set fire to Irish clubs – the Irish are perfectly capable of doing that for themselves...

But no, there wasn't really any anti-Irish feeling,

and I think the reason for this is because despite our two countries' history, we have always pulled along together. So, even when things were at their worst with the troubles in Northern Ireland, and bombs going off all over the place and innocent people being killed, we never saw the appearance of any kind of anti-Irish movement. In large part, this is because everybody in Britain knew somebody who was Irish: friends, neighbours, their children's school friends; in fact it has been shown that around one in six people in Britain have Irish blood. So, there were all these connections that made it a little easier to endure what was going on around us.

I've been complimented in the past by Irish people living in Britain for doing my bit to help things by being a friendly Irish voice. And looking back to when things were at their worst, Irish people sometimes still tell me that it made things easier for them during what was a very uncomfortable period. But the truth is that there was very little public expression of anti-Irish sentiment.

Here's an example of the mutual respect I see, and that is quite extraordinary in the context of the relationships that exist within the UK, and with Ireland. When I go to rugby matches in Croke Park or before, to Lansdowne Road, when the English players would come on to the pitch on any Irish ground, they were, and are, applauded. When the British national anthem is played, it is played to a respectful silence, in Croke Park or wherever. But when I go to the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff all I hear is widespread anti-English sentiments, and even booing when *God Save The Queen* is being played. And, of course, in Scotland this is even more marked. The team march out as though they were a group of rebels...

So, I am inclined to believe, whether they are superficial impressions or not, that there is a bond between the Irish and the British, in Britain, and it is one that has existed for a long time – which, considering the history, is extraordinary.

I've spoken at the Irish Embassy in the presence of the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, and have said that as far as Ireland is concerned, our mutual history has been one of general mayhem coming from the British side; and this is a view that senior British figures are quite prepared to accept. Of course there are differences between us, but

actually, we're not all that different: we're the same kind of mixture of Norman and Viking and the odd Celt; I don't think we Irish have much Anglo-Saxon blood in our veins, but the general mixture of races is the same. In any event, I think we've managed to survive the worst of what has happened. From the Irish point of view, the country has grown up enormously and the old inferiority complex that existed in the 1960s has evaporated.

What part do you think Ireland's three Eurovision Song Contest wins played in boosting the country's confidence internationally?

I think the Irish used to take the Eurovision Song Contest a lot more seriously than anybody in Britain did, and that is probably largely my fault. But it is true that Ireland was the outstanding winner, time and time again. And let's be honest, it was wonderful. You'd go to Dublin and that great music interval 'Riverdance' would make the small hairs on the back of your neck stand up.

I've said in the past that Riverdance seemed to me to mark the arrival of the 'Celtic Tiger', although obviously there were economic reasons as well. But during the boom in Ireland perhaps we saw almost too speedy an end to the inferiority complex, and we took on a slight superiority complex: people would come over from Ireland and rail on to me about Gordon Brown not wanting to join the euro, and who did Britain think she was! But I suppose you have to remember that Ireland had never known a boom before, and most people had known nothing but penury for such a long time – and of course, a lot of people really did believe that the boom would never end, and there was an awful lot of appalling behaviour by the banks because interest rates were being kept low by the EU, which encouraged a lot of people to buy property they couldn't afford.

But even though Ireland did go into a deep economic depression, it doesn't seem to have affected the confidence of the people. Irish people's confidence has been affected by unemployment, that's true, and sadly, anti-immigration has raised its ugly head again. That said, people who know about economics, or who at least pretend to, tell me that Ireland, above all the EU countries that have been affected by economic disaster, is the one that has fought back and that is recognised as having addressed its problems, which is why it appears to be coming out of the terrible fog more quickly and in a better state than Spain, Italy, Portugal or Greece. There is a lot of respect in the international community for Ireland, and always has been. Nobody has a bad word to say about the Irish, at least not in my hearing!

When I lived in Ireland, we were more conscious of the history. People in this country really still have no idea of the repression that Britain visited on Ireland for 800 years. But then, the empire visited that kind of thing on India and lots of other places as well.

How would you say the attitudes of the British and Irish towards each other have changed since you first arrived in Britain?

I don't think that attitudes have changed that much. I arrived here in late 1969. Most of the Irish people I met in the years that followed had come across to Britain with very little; they'd come over as labourers, they worked in the building industry, in demolition, because there was no work in Ireland. They had come across with nothing, and the ones that I was lucky enough to meet, many of them had been enormously successful; they'd built huge companies. Obviously, I have to admit that I didn't meet many of the people who were living in Kilburn who had had a hard time, and hadn't succeeded.

By the time I came over there wasn't the marked prejudice that existed up to the 1950s, when you still used to see advertisements for flats to rent that said "No blacks, no dogs, no Irish". As I said, the Irish that I met had all been very successful; they were bringing up children, sending them to public school, and they were growing up with English accents. They were all very confident. And now, the Irish you meet in Britain are all well-educated professionals, they're not coming across here to work on the motorways, or to do jobs the British won't do.

Unfortunately, prejudice exists everywhere; for example between the English and the Scots, and between the English and the Welsh. There will always be prejudices between countries, particularly within Europe. But the thing we have to remember is that we must go forward. The Americans and the Japanese have forgotten about Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima and now work together. The rest of Europe has cooperated with Germany in setting up the European Union, and Germany is now the most powerful nation in the EU. And if things are not entirely forgotten, they are at least set aside. The Poles, who suffered perhaps more than the Irish in terms of oppression over the centuries, particularly in World War II from Germany and Russia, now have a working relationship with both those countries. So, we Irish must also remember that we aren't the only people that have a history.

I think that Ireland and Britain get along perfectly well now, and there is no reason why we shouldn't continue to do so. E

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