

## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



## BETHANY HOME AND THE 'IRISH TIMES'

TWO MONTHS ago *The Phoenix* published a special investigation into the *Irish Times*' suppression over many years of information about ill-treatment of children in

Protestant mother and baby homes, despite being offered a wealth of such information

The newspaper was interested primarily in targeting the abuse of children in homes run by Catholic religious orders. Our investigation also recorded the role of Ralph Walker, whose family owned the *IT* until 1973, in the adoption of Protestant children from the Church of Ireland linked Bethany Home, which buried at least 262 children.

Given the deathly silence from the *IT* following our investigation, we wrote to editor Paul O'Neill as well as a number of its most prominent columnists a month later suggesting that silence was not an option. Last weekend the newspaper finally admitted the Walker family's involvement in the Bethany Home.

There is much that could be said about this two-page spread, including on the undoubted good faith of author Jennifer O'Connell. Reference to the childhood abuse suffered at Bethany by "Protestant victim", Derek Leinster, is significant. She reported him thus, "You don't have to be a Catholic to be listened to as a victim of institutional abuse, but it seems to help. That is my experience as a Protestant victim of institutional neglect", wrote Derek Leinster in an op-ed for this newspaper, published in 2009".



Paul O'Neill

She went on to say, "The story that he told in that article and subsequently in letters and articles published in the *Irish Times* and elsewhere, and in the two books he has written since, paint a still shocking picture of life in mother and baby homes in the 1940s".

Actually, Leinster wrote his books in 2005 and 2008. The *Irish Times* ignored them. His 2009 *Irish Times* article, written on advice from academic Niall Meehan, was contributed immediately after the *Guardian* published a piece about him. In December 2009, *The Phoenix* wrote, "Following coverage in the *Guardian* last June the *IT* gave space to an opinion article by Leinster followed by a paragraph on the Bethany Home in a report on the Redress Board but has since declined to cover his campaign. A letter from Senator David Norris in support of Leinster's opinion piece was not published in the paper and various public statements by Leinster have not been covered either. Neither of his two books have been given coverage or a review by the paper."

In the following 12 years, *The Phoenix* wrote on the continued refusal by the paper of record to cover the abuse of children in

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Protestant homes preferring, it appeared, to present such abuse as a uniquely Catholic phenomenon. Meanwhile, Meehan unearthed devastating information in minute detail about Bethany's child mortality rate. After initial publicity, the *IT* ignored issues outside Catholic religious institutions.

It was presumed by some, including this magazine's editorial staff, that this was a defensive response by a newspaper traditionally linked to Protestant churches. It then emerged in our special report in January that the family that formerly owned the *IT* was closely connected to Bethany's dubious adoption procedures.

It is now impossible to deny the very specific details of the Walker family's links to Bethany, the very high mortality rate of children there and the shameful circumstances of adoptions carried out with Ralph Walker's involvement and that of the newspaper's legal representative, Hayes Solicitors. But having fessed up to this history of involvement, the *IT* should admit that it has failed more recently to adequately report abuse in Protestant settings, in and beyond Bethany.