

'It will be there until I'm put into the ground' – How the Troubles shaped Big Issue editor and his work

By **Phoebe Leonard** -



Big Issue editor Paul McNamee grew up during The Troubles in Northern Ireland (image credit: Paul McNamee)

Paul McNamee, editor of The Big Issue, recalls being the “token Catholic” at his first job and how growing up in Northern Ireland affects his work and daily life.

Paul McNamee didn't intend to become editor of The Big Issue.

His early career began in music magazines in Northern Ireland, and it was only when he felt he was too old to continue going to gigs professionally that he moved onto harder news and social justice issues. But his childhood and the time he spent working in Northern Ireland was incredibly impactful for McNamee, 51, especially because he grew up during the period of the Troubles.

“It has fundamentally informed the way I am and how I think about things. My attitude to life is informed by that period,” McNamee says. “It’s been there all the time and I think it will be there until I’m put in the ground.”

The Troubles have affected both McNamee's personal and professional lives. Whilst working on his first job at a free sheet newspaper in a Protestant-heavy area of North

Belfast, he was the only Catholic team member.



"When you reached 30 staff on the team, you needed a Catholic, and that was me. I was hired to be the token Catholic."

This experience is what inspired McNamee to work in a different type of journalism from what he'd been doing before, leading to his role at The Big Issue. And although he has been incredibly successful in his career, including recently winning an award for outstanding achievement in journalism at the Media Freedom Awards, his trauma still affects his work.

"I think it annoys some of my junior staff because I do talk about it a lot," he says. "We're all slightly damaged, those in my generation, and we haven't gotten through that yet, the weird generational trauma of it."

And it's not just in conversations that his childhood has an impact – it recently affected his editorial decisions. The release of crime drama *Say Nothing*, which follows the abduction of a young mother by the IRA, caused issues for McNamee when one of his writers covered the show in an article.

"He did an interview with the actor who's playing Gerry Adams and I kept going back to him and saying 'no, no, no, that's not quite how it is'. I had to stop myself and realise I'm trying to write my own history into this."

The Troubles have also created a passion for the truth, because he became dubious of authority and what they tell you. He now champions truthfulness and believes there needs to be trust between publications and their readers, including The Big Issue.

"I think we have to carry on telling the truth," he says. "And so long as we're able to do that and people come to us, that's that's a positive."