

‘Ending the revolutions: a reflection on the Easter rising and the partition of Ireland’

by Jeff Kildea*

Introduction

For more than 90 years members of the Irish National Association, their friends and supporters, have assembled here in front of this magnificent monument to commemorate the men and women of 1916. I would like to start by thanking the organisers of today’s event for doing me the honour of inviting me to join the long list of speakers who over the years have addressed this assembly.

Today we gather on the 105th anniversary of the Easter rising, that singular event in Irish history which marked the beginning of the Irish revolution. A revolution that for the next six years was sustained by the will of the majority of the people of Ireland, leading to the establishment in 1922 of an Irish state no longer governed from Westminster.

But it is an unfinished revolution. Those who took part in it envisaged an Irish state that would encompass the whole of Ireland and not just the 26 counties that today comprise the Republic of Ireland. While we gather here today to remember the men and women who began the Irish revolution by taking part in the rising, in a month’s time we will be reminded of another revolution that occurred in Ireland. Not a revolution begun and sustained by the will of the people of Ireland, but one imposed from Westminster by legislative fiat.

For, on 3 May 1921 – a century ago next month – Ireland was divided into two separate states: Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, each with its own parliament with power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the portion of Ireland within its jurisdiction, subject to certain matters reserved to Westminster.

As you know, Southern Ireland was stillborn, with the elections for its parliament having the unintended consequence, at least as far as Westminster was concerned, of providing elected representatives not to that parliament but to the second Dáil Éireann. Northern Ireland was a different story. Its parliament did meet as was intended, and the state thereby created, if not the original parliament, continues to exist today.

Today I want to speak to you about those two revolutions – the popular revolution that began in 1916 and the imposed revolution that began in 1921. To look back to their beginning and to look forward to their end – their Alpha and their Omega.

The revolution begun in 1916

You might recall that, during the celebrations in 2016 to mark the centenary of the Easter rising, there were debates in Ireland as to the morality of the engagement of the men and women of 1916 in armed struggle and whether the rising was in truth an undemocratic attempted putsch against legitimate authority. I was bemused at the time, and still am, at the handwringing of many of those engaged in those debates. Do the Americans have such qualms when celebrating significant anniversaries of their revolution; do the French?

Nevertheless, in the arcane world of moral philosophy, questions do arise as to the right of people to take up arms against constituted authority. But those questions must not be examined in a vacuum, but rather must be considered in the context in which the insurrection occurred.

* An address given by Dr Jeff Kildea, Honorary Professor in Irish Studies, University of New South Wales, at the Commemoration of the Easter Rising held at the Sydney 1798 Memorial, Waverley Cemetery, on 4 April 2021.

For more than 40 years before the Easter rising the vast majority of the people of Ireland had peacefully and constitutionally pursued the goal of self-government, only to be rebuffed time and again by successive governments and parliaments at Westminster. For how much longer were the Irish people supposed to keep returning large majorities of home-rule members to the Westminster parliament before they were entitled to say 'enough', to change tack and choose a different method of exercising their right to self-determination?

As you know, in 1912 Asquith's Liberal government did introduce a home rule bill. But it did so, not because of any commitment in principle to Irish self-determination, but because it was dependent for its survival on the votes of the Irish Nationalist Party. The bill was eventually enacted in September 1914, over the continued objection of the House of Lords, though it was suspended until after the end of the First World War.

Even so, at long last, it seemed as if the patience of the Irish people had been rewarded. But like quick silver, that hope soon slipped through their fingers with the formation of a coalition government in 1915 when the Liberals invited into their cabinet unionist MPs who had vehemently opposed Irish home rule and had sided with those who threatened armed insurrection against the government to resist home rule. Not much moral handwringing went on then.

The determination of the unionists in the cabinet to deny the Irish people their aspiration for self-government was confirmed soon after the Easter rising, when Lloyd George negotiated with both sides in Ireland an agreement for the immediate implementation of the 1914 Home Rule Act. Despite Lloyd George's signing off on the agreement on behalf of the British government, the unionists in the cabinet scuppered the deal.

A similar perfidy was on show in April 1918 after another settlement of the home rule question was agreed at the Irish Convention. The British government insisted on tying the grant of home rule to Ireland's accepting conscription. In no uncertain terms the Irish people showed their disdain for this latest example of Britain's subordination of Ireland's interests to those of its own. In a show of unity few thought possible at the time, all shades of Irish nationalist opinion from Sinn Féin through to Redmondite home rulers united against the British government's proposal.

The Irish-Australian politician, Hugh Mahon, summed up well the Irish attitude to Britain's continuous moving of the goal posts when he said:

[The Home Rule Act of 1914,] won after 40 years' constitutional effort ... was a solemn act of the British Legislature ... accepted by Ireland in good faith, and ultimately dishonoured by England. ... By all the rules of the game - by the rules, in fact, laid down by England herself - Ireland won the contest, yet her opponent refused to deliver the stake. People who think that the game should be renewed with nothing more than the same cards must take the Irish to be fools who are incapable of profiting by experience.

Of course people will resort to violence if their just demands go unanswered long enough. In such a case, moral culpability surely lies with those who persist in denying them justice, not with those who ask for it.

As for the argument that the Easter rising was an undemocratic putsch, it too ignores the factual matrix surrounding the events of Easter week. Proponents of that point of view argue that the 1916 rebels were a breakaway minority that had no connection with any of

Ireland's elected representatives and therefore had no democratic mandate to engage in armed struggle. But a series of wins by Sinn Féin in by-elections in 1917 and its overwhelming victory in the general elections in December 1918 provide retrospective ratification by the Irish people of the actions taken by the men and women of 1916, an endorsement that has continued undiminished among Irish voters down to the present and which received de facto acknowledgement by Queen Elizabeth II during her visit to Dublin in 2011 when she laid a wreath at the Garden of Remembrance.

And so, it is right and fitting, that we gather here today, as members of the Irish family abroad, to honour the men and women of 1916 whose sacrifice began the revolution by which the people of Ireland gained their freedom after centuries of foreign rule.

The revolution imposed in 1921

But as I have observed, it is a revolution not yet complete and the forthcoming centenary of that other revolution, the one imposed by Westminster and which resulted in the partition of Ireland, provides an opportunity for us to contemplate how the popular revolution started in 1916 might be brought to its fulfilment.

While I doubt that many here today will pause next month on Monday 3 May to celebrate the 100th anniversary of that second revolution – the one which established two states in Ireland, it does provide a point of focus for us to reflect on what needs to be done to bring both revolutions to a satisfactory conclusion.

The first point to note is that the *Government of Ireland Act 1920*, which brought about the establishment of Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland each with its own parliament, envisaged partition as a temporary measure. A stop-gap solution to what was then perceived to be an intractable political problem: the reconciliation of the aspiration of the majority of the Irish people to be governed by a parliament in Dublin and the desire of the minority, mostly concentrated in the north-east, that they be not so governed.

Integral to the legislation was a third body, the Council of Ireland, set up with a view, and I quote, 'to the eventual establishment of a Parliament for the whole of Ireland'. In other words, the ultimate goal of the 1920 act was a united Ireland. Until then, the separate parliaments would govern their respective internal affairs, while the Council of Ireland would have power to make orders with respect to matters affecting interests common to both states. As events turned out, the Council of Ireland, like the parliament of Southern Ireland, was stillborn.

Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that partition was never intended as an end in itself. Rather, its purpose was to provide a breathing space to enable the British government to extract itself from Ireland while providing the Irish people, north and south, with a pathway to a unified self-governing Ireland. No matter that from the point of view of the majority of the Irish people, who by then had moved on from home rule to desiring independence, it was an unwanted solution imposed on them without their consent. So much for the argument of the democratic deficit of 1916.

And in the world of realpolitik, as seen from Westminster, its policy of partition was a success. With a bit of a tweak, thanks to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, which granted Southern Ireland dominion status and a new name, the Irish Free State, Britain was able to withdraw from Ireland in 1922.

Like so much of English rule in Ireland, partition was an expedient imposed on the Irish people to serve English interests 100 years ago, an expedient that was necessary because of the consequence of another English policy imposed on the Irish people as an expedient to serve English interests 300 years before that, namely, the plantation of Ulster.

Although Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom after 1921, the British government soon lost interest in Irish affairs, leaving the new northern state to govern itself without interference from Westminster. As a result, northern unionists were able to entrench their dominance by abolishing proportional representation, setting up a gerrymander, and pursuing discriminatory policies against the nationalist community, all without hindrance from London.

From Britain's point of view, the success of its Irish policy can be gauged by the fact that for more than 45 years after 1921 successive British governments hardly needed to think about Ireland, compared to the 45 years before during which Ireland was a running sore that dominated and often shaped British politics.

But by 1968 the contradictions inherent in Britain's policy had accumulated to the extent that they burst forth like a flooded river breaking through a dam, plunging Northern Ireland into a civil war that demanded not only the attention of the government in Belfast but of those in London and Dublin as well.

In trying to end that civil war there were many missteps along the way that set back or failed to produce a resolution: internment without trial, Bloody Sunday, Sunningdale, the Anglo-Irish agreement. But eventually, after an excruciatingly protracted negotiation during the 1990s, the Good Friday agreement was signed in Belfast in 1998, ending the civil war in the north.

Twenty-three years on, the peace has held but the communal divisions remain. Nevertheless, the Good Friday agreement set up a three-dimensional framework that has enabled power sharing between communities, firstly, within Northern Ireland through the Northern Ireland Assembly and Northern Ireland Executive, secondly, in a north-south direction with the North/South Ministerial Council, North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association, and North/South Consultative Forum, and thirdly, in an east-west direction with the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, the British-Irish Council, and an expanded British-Irish Interparliamentary Body. The sheer complexity of these arrangements, compared to the imposed set and forget solution of 1922, illustrates well the difficulty of achieving a solution on which all stakeholders can agree and which will endure.

Ending the revolutions

And so, as we pass the 100th anniversary of the temporary solution of partition and look forward to the permanent solution of an all-Ireland political entity, it will be imperative to learn from the mistakes of the past. An imposed solution based on expediency, as in 1921, rather than a negotiated agreement respecting the aspirations of individuals and collectives, as in 1998, will fail to achieve a lasting result. To that end, the Irish government has set up 'Shared Ireland' initiative. However, some fear it is more about accommodating the status quo than building trust on the road to a united Ireland. Time will tell.

Under the Good Friday Agreement, the reunification of Ireland can only occur with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland and of the Republic of Ireland. But it would be a mistake to see the referendums, by which those consents are to be manifested, as an end in

themselves. Rather, they should be the culmination of a lengthy process of consultation and negotiation, as was the case of the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement. If winning 50 per cent plus one is seen as the goal then a satisfactory conclusion to the revolution begun in 1916 will continue to evade us.

Policymakers will need to think outside the square. A united Ireland does not need to be a single unitary state. There are many models of shared sovereignty to choose from. Our own federal structure is one. Switzerland is another. Nor does such a constitutional arrangement need not be tied to the current divide established 100 years ago between the 6 counties of the north and the 26 counties of the south. The possibilities are limitless.

Over the coming years it would be a mistake to sit back and let the demographics build a majority for a united Ireland. The time should be spent engaged in a broad consultation that will achieve an outcome acceptable across the spectrum of communal identities in Ireland, north and south, one that will last. One that will not breed the sort of simmering discontent that occurred in the north between 1922 and 1968 and eventually boiled over into the 30-year civil war.

It will not be easy. If it were, a solution would already have been found and implemented. There are practical issues to be addressed, such as integrating the two economies in circumstances where an underperforming economy in the north is being subsidised by British taxpayers to the tune of £10 billion per year. Irish taxpayers will have to shoulder the burden if they are to persuade their northern compatriots to vote for reunification. Also, many in the north will be reluctant to give up the NHS in favour of the health system of the south. Even as the experts devise solutions to these practical problems, there will be bumps along the way that will threaten to derail the process.

Brexit, which some commentators have seen as a stimulus to reunification, might turn out to be one of those bumps. In the past few weeks we have seen unionists and loyalists uniting around opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol, which was designed to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. They are blaming Ireland and the EU for their pain, seeing it as a punishment imposed on them, rather than as a consequence of Brexit itself, thus threatening to resurrect the sort of them vs us mentality that has sustained partition for 100 years. But just as such bumps were eventually smoothed out during the negotiations for the Good Friday Agreement, creative diplomacy hopefully will prevail.

Conclusion

As we gather here this Easter Sunday, a day that proclaims hope for humanity, let us look forward to that Easter Sunday in the not-too-distant future when a speaker will stand here on this spot and declare to the assembled gathering that the revolution that the gallant men and women of 1916 began has at last come to a successful conclusion and that partition did indeed turn out to be temporary. Whether that be in five years, ten years or longer, our hope here and now is that that day will come.

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