

An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD
Address (by video) University College Cork:

“Negotiating the negotiations: New perspectives and appraisals of the Anglo-Irish Treaty Conference, 1921-2021”

Saturday, 2nd October 2021

Thank you Professor O’Halloran for your kind introduction and to the organisers of this fascinating conference for the opportunity to make a contribution.

There is nothing in modern Irish history which has been discussed or argued over more than the events around the signing of the Treaty in 1921. The Treaty has been a central part of our public discourse for the last century and will no doubt continue to be for many years to come.

In spite of this, there is simply no doubt that there is a lot more for us to learn.

We need to be willing to seek new perspectives. We have to examine our revolution and its aftermath in a wider and more open context. Most of all, we have to avoid the trap of constantly reinforcing ideas concerning personalities and events which were shaped by partisan motives.

For me this has always been a fascinating period. As I grew up I heard stories of heroism and triumph over enormous odds. In my family and community I experienced a pride and a determination to remember a struggle which rocked the greatest empire in the world.

But added to that was always a real sadness.

A sadness that a period of unprecedented unity was followed by tragic division and events which left a deep scar.

That is why as a student I relished the opportunity to engage with this period and its many dimensions. As a young researcher I spent many hours in libraries and archives alone with the words and deeds of a remarkable generation drawn from all strands of society.

What struck me most was how little we understood of the complexity and humanity of even the personalities and events we thought we knew the best.

The certainty about motives and outcomes which so dominated public debate was missing when you looked at the private writings and exchanges of the time.

As Margaret O'Callaghan, Diarmuid Ferriter and others have written about what they have termed 'the history wars' - efforts to shape and manipulate public perceptions, which started almost immediately and carried on for years.

It has often been said that the media carries 'the first draft of history'. But less well understood is the danger of allowing this to become the only draft of history.

The benefit conferred on us to be able to reflect at a distance on periods such as this should not be wasted by simply accepting the framings used in the past.

I am very proud of the fact that over the last quarter of a century Ireland has developed an approach to commemorating the past which enables both a shared pride and a challenging reflection on our past. We do not and must never demand a fixed narrative of the past.

This is one of the elements of modern Irish democratic nationalism of which I am most proud. Unlike in countries which are increasingly reverting to an inward-looking and exclusionary nationalism we have shown respect for the complexity of the past.

In moving forward into marking the Treaty and the events which followed it I feel that there is a lot of wisdom to be found in the guidance of the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations which is led by Maurice Manning and his deputy chairperson Martin Mansergh.

The Advisory Group has served the state well in recent years. In relation to how we should approach events where the very thing being discussed is defined by disunity they have remarked: *“The State’s task is to encourage a reflective and a reconciliatory tone that recognises that neither side had the monopoly of either atrocity or virtue and this was true of words as well as actions”*.

This is the spirit in which we have developed the programme of events and it is why I very much welcome academic initiatives such as this.

The innovative approach of this conference is helping to illuminate a previously little explored aspect of the Treaty negotiations and the surrounding events.

I’m conscious that for the descendants of the men and women who participated in the Treaty negotiations, these events and their aftermath have a very personal resonance and significance. You have done so much, particularly in this very significant commemorative year to ensure that their stories are heard – some are well known faces and others are less familiar figures. Today’s conference helps us to make connections between memory and family history; within the wider context of challenging issues of national and international importance.

I welcome plans by University College Cork for a further major academic conference in 2022 to mark the centenary of the Civil War.

As we approach the centenary of the Civil War, the focus of the State will remain on commemoration, remembrance and reconciliation, in accordance with the guidance of the Expert Advisory Group. This national conference will provide a very fitting and timely forum to examine and debate the events that took place during this traumatic period.

In this contribution today, I would like to make a number of points concerning what we can learn from the events of a century ago in relation to drifts towards conflict and division, the need for us to re-evaluate the extent to which the Treaty is used too broadly to explain our 20th century and the need for us to appreciate the European context for Irish events.

At this conference one of your major themes is to explore the nature and impact of the Irish delegation at the negotiations. In this you are helping to show new perspectives at a very human level.

Each of the members of the delegation and those who assisted them was a fascinating individual and, collectively, they reflected the striking diversity of the movement for Irish freedom. Each was subject to different influences. There was no single road to being on the delegation – and there certainly was no single road followed after they signed the Treaty.

The facts around their motivations and subsequent lives dispels idea that we can find a single simple narrative of binary opposites in the negotiation and implementation of the Treaty.

The enormous charisma and impact of Michael Collins was and remains undeniable. When you look at the scale of his impact in popular culture it is hard not to ask if this is actually doing him a great disservice. He was certainly a more complex man than is often portrayed and he would have rejected narratives which put personality before the ideas and movements he participated in.

I am the first Taoiseach who looks up from his desk to see both Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera staring down at him. I can't but reflect on the fact that neither would be comfortable with a popular view which has so often neglected to tell of for how long and how successfully they worked together before the final Treaty negotiations.

Neither would have supported the idea that the other's contribution to the enormous success of the War of Independence was overrated – and they would have understood that in the year after the Truce they both operated subject to forces not fully within their control.

The leader of the delegation, Arthur Griffith, is one of the most overlooked figures in our history, perhaps because he often espoused marginal views and had been so comprehensively and quickly superseded by de Valera in 1917. He has also lacked any natural advocate in our subsequent party politics.

However, in reality he was not just a major personality of his time, he was a relentless propagandist for the cause of Irish self-determination. He lacked the popular support and republican instincts of others, but his contribution was vital.

A lot is known about his actions and influences during the negotiations, but his early death means we know very little about how he would have approached the implementation of the Treaty settlement over a longer term.

It was by no means a united delegation and their motivations for signing the Treaty varied greatly.

Not one of them signed with an expectation that it would be uniformly welcomed – or that it was a deal which they could confidently say carried no risks.

It is actually with the other members of the Delegation that some of the most remarkable perspectives on the Treaty are to be found – particularly when you see their later careers.

Eamonn Duggan was resolute in his commitment to Collins, the Treaty and, subsequently, the protection of the Treaty settlement. He served the Cumman na nGaedheal governments and opposed efforts to supersede the Treaty at every point.

Within the Delegation he played a critical role in establishing the balance of positions. In this, he was very representative of a significant part of the military and political opinion back in Dublin.

Robert Barton is, by any measure, a fascinating character. Born into wealth and privilege he developed first a commitment to improving the lives of Irish people on the land and then to more radical political goals. He had served as a member of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in 1916 and dealt with prisoners in the aftermath of the Rising. His conversion to the republican cause was comprehensive. The pressures he was placed under in London perhaps foreshadowed the later pressures faced by many more as room for debate was steadily removed.

And in George Gavan Duffy we see a career which directly defies any attempt to present the personalities and groups of the time as fixed and unchanging.

He was also deeply torn between different arguments and his contribution to the Dáil ratification debate shows somebody who is trying to shake people out of increasingly intransigent views of each other.

A striking, and little appreciated fact is that two of the five plenipotentiaries, Barton and Gavan Duffy, were subsequently close to de Valera and his Fianna Fáil governments. In Barton's case, he served on the Board of the Agricultural Credit Corporation and played a critical and unpaid role in the development of Bord na Mona.

Gavan Duffy's case is actually remarkable. In 1932 de Valera considered appointing him as Attorney General, and five years later he included him within a small group who he consulted during the drafting of a republican constitution intended to fully replace much of the Treaty.

In 1940, as a member of the High Court, Gavan Duffy issued a ruling which directly led to the release of IRA internees – an early judgement in what was for the most part a judicial career defined by trying to use and develop the powers given to the courts by Bunreacht na hÉireann.

And when you look at the secretariat which accompanied the Plenipotentiaries you see even more diversity in backgrounds, views and subsequent careers.

This matters because an essential starting point for seeking new perspectives on that time is to understand that even the people who negotiated and signed the

Treaty did not have a single, shared belief in what it meant or expectation of how it would be received.

We have had far too much in our popular debates of looking at each event as inevitable and each individual decision as fitting into a black or white view.

It is only when you understand this can you begin to engage with both the remarkable success and central failure of that time.

By any measure, reaching the stage where the British government agreed to these negotiations was a dramatic achievement. There was no single reason why the cause of Irish independence was so successful in such a short period. The disparity in strength was enormous and the men and women who led the struggle lacked most of the resources available to independence movements elsewhere in Europe.

However what they did have was the repeatedly-affirmed support of the majority of the people. They sought, achieved and maintained a broad support base. And critically, this was not a one-dimensional movement. It progressed through electoral, administrative, judicial, military and other means – each of which sought to demonstrate the inherent democratic legitimacy of their activities.

Perhaps the most impactful of the tactics developed was an unprecedented propaganda campaign which brought the world's attention to Ireland and the behaviour of British forces here.

The period of unity achieved between 1917 and 1921 was truly exceptional and it would have been naïve to expect it to be maintained.

When you look at the proposals and counter proposals which were circulated at the time, and also the campaigns which were undertaken to try and sway opinion within Ireland after the Treaty was signed, too little attention is paid to the fact that many were desperately seeking to keep open the space for compromise.

The sheer number of times when there were initiatives to stop the drift to conflict was remarkable.

When people have just undergone great suffering for a cause, things we might see as small can matter very much – particularly when no one is certain about how things will progress.

The insistence of London on effectively closing the opportunities for bridging widening gaps in Ireland was a huge factor – and one which pro-Treaty leaders felt the impact of.

This type of intransigence on small but important things is something which seems very close to the decisions which meant that the Treaties of Versailles, Trianon and Saint Germain were sources of division in some countries rather than a new beginning.

I think we should also reflect more on the socio-economic and gender dimensions of the new divisions and the drift towards conflict.

There is simply no doubt that there were many social groups who feared that they were being pushed back from what had been their equal ownership of the cause

of Ireland. The resentment towards the new prominence of professionals and the tone used to describe their views caused very real divisions.

While Ireland did not have the clean and dominant class divisions seen in other countries – something which spared us from some of the worst events of the 20th century – there was certainly a class bias shown in the divide on constitutional issues.

And there is simply no doubt that the Treaty debates and aftermath saw rampant misogyny used in the service of belittling and marginalising the voices of women.

Because of their prominence on the anti-Treaty side, women were often caricatured as hysterical and unthinking – with no attempt to respect their central role in the success and legitimacy of the Irish revolution.

The refusal to equalise the franchise before the Pact Election was a shameful episode in a period which set back the political position of women for many decades.

As well as needing to understand the complexity of that time I believe we need to stop seeing the Treaty as the explanation for everything which followed.

The Treaty is a critical and defining moment in many ways – but the determinism which sees it as defining all allegiances and activities which followed is superficial and distracts us from a more critical and comprehensive engagement with our history.

As I've mentioned, even the act of signing the Treaty did not permanently fix the political positions of the delegates.

In terms of our politics, while the Treaty is an important starting point, the narrative that our politics have simply been 'civil war politics' has been a very effective way of avoiding considering differences which academic research has pointed to time and again.

In 1971 a Norwegian sociologist worked with the ESRI to carry out a then unique survey of civic attitudes in Ireland. Exactly 50 years after the treaty he measured the extent to which supporters of different parties were linked to different positions in the civil war.

Amongst people who reported that their family had a direct linkage to the Civil War, there were very clear biases in party support – but equally there had been major movements.

For example, a total of 41% of Fianna Fáil voters said that they had a direct link to the Pro-Treaty side of the Civil War – and 50% of Fine Gael voters reported being linked to the Republican side.

Even amongst voters who were over 70, and had therefore been adults when the Civil War broke out, there were swings in party support which challenged the idea of their politics being defined solely by which side they were on in that conflict.

There is great comfort to be found in fixing upon a single explanation and framing for political divides. However, in taking this approach we have missed more challenging perspectives.

We did not have the ideological extremes of many countries or the dominance of parties defined solely by class allegiance. But there is no evidence that we would have achieved more prosperity or broader progress if we had simply followed other models of party politics – and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that our centrist politics helped us to avoid some of the 20th century’s worst extremes.

As I have said, we need to appreciate the greater complexity of the Treaty times, move away from seeing the Treaty as the single determining factor defining what follows and to recognise the failure to stop escalating divisions.

Added to this I believe we must start seeing the European context for our revolution and our civil war.

We are often very bad at looking beyond our shores for contemporary influences and contexts in our history. Only when we do this can we actually determine what is unique here and what we share with a much wider community.

The five years after 1917 was the greatest period of state formation and civil conflict in Europe’s history. There were 27 violent transfers of power and even more low-level civil and cross-border conflicts.

In many parts of Europe it formed what some historians have called “an extended civil war” and undermines the settled Anglo-French perspective which sees the First World War as ending in 1918.

Europe at that time grappled, mostly unsuccessfully, with issues of nationalism, sectarianism and extreme utopian ideologies of the right and left.

As Robert Gerwarth has written, what developed was “a new logic of violence” which culminated in the catastrophe of the Second World War.

In Ireland, we also experienced a Treaty settlement which created and reinforced many divisions and did not bring a clean end to conflict – but we escaped much of the spiral of events seen elsewhere. That is something which required that two sides continued to share many values and aspirations.

The essentially liberal and democratic ideals of the Proclamation remained powerful.

They helped to guide progress and also served as a rebuke to avoidable failures.

One of the foundations of a country which can grow and progress is that it is willing to seek new perspectives on its history and its dominant narratives.

It uses hard-won freedom to explore and broaden its national narrative, not to insist on a conformity to one interpretation.

At a moment in European and World history where there is a growing intolerance to this diversity and a new historical revanchism is showing its head, I am very proud that our country is taking a different route.

I commend everyone involved in the preparations for this conference - and I hope you all enjoy the discussions for the rest of today.