

Speech to Irish Association
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St Stephen's Green

Thank you for the kind invitation to speak here to the southern branch of the Association.

I will address you as a Dublin audience. Belfast speaking truth to Dublin power.

I don't often get an opportunity to be heard in the south. Occasional letters in the Irish Times - and they are more difficult to place - would be my normal entrée. And as you may be aware, I recently failed to gain a Seanadseat in the University of Dublin constituency, or Trinity College Dublin - if that is still its name.

This therefore will be a chance to get over a number of my thoughts on history, politics and about being, now since May, a Belfast city councillor.

As you know, I was northern secretary of the Association for a number of years. Perhaps my most memorable achievement in that job was organising an event in Belfast in 2001 which I wanted to call *Children of the Revolution* but was eventually entitled *Ancestral Shadows*. It involved five offspring of the revolutionaries of the 1916 to 1921 period – Garret FitzGerald, Maire McSwiney, Ruairi Brugha, Una O'Higgins O'Malley and Joseph McCullough, son of Denis who was head of the IRB in 1916, and technically Irish President for about a week. This was only possible as all of them were members of the Association.

It was quite telling that so many of that revolutionary second generation adopted a conciliatory and even-handed approach to Unionists in the north – perhaps because of, or through, the Irish Association. Sadly all except Joe are no longer with us.

The next or third generation went many different ways; some are simply Free State patriots, others that I have met and worked with were active in the Two Nations campaign, and the revisionist history school.

It would be interesting to return in fifty years to see if sons and daughters of the recent IRA campaign were adopting any of the same attitudes. There is however one key difference. The earlier parents were influenced by a mixture of factors and had varied motives - Republicanism, Catholicism, Cultural Nationalism, Anglophobia, Feminism, Socialism - but it is fair to say 'Armed Hibernianism' was not prominent amongst them. That would be the strongest feature of 1970 to recent date. And there is no Co. Tyrone amongst the twenty-six counties.

Oddly most of the prominent northerners stood aside from the civil war, while the surge of memorable literature that emerged from the Troubles of the early 20th century in Ireland has not and I think will not be replicated. Ironically the best writers and journalists of recent times are the most sympathetic to the Protestants of Ulster. Those writers were and remain appalled by the violence of the IRA and their Sinn Fein allies.

Having written a book on Roger Casement and his diaries - now out of print and selling at antiquarian prices, I can say I probably know more about the origins and development of the Irish revolution than most.

Redmond and Casement were both uncomprehending about Ulster. Both believed the leaders were bluffing. How could they be so wrong? This aspect needs particular study in the current decade of centenaries. And indeed the effect of the pointless yet extensive war waged by Michael Collins on Northern Ireland. Brief it may have been but it ensured a siege mentality in Northern Ireland for decades. Ninety-two RIC and RUC officers were killed in Northern Ireland in three years in the 1920s, for all the dominant notion of Belfast pogroms. That level of killing has long consequential effects.

I am also aware of just how much the new state went its own different way after 1921, differing from so many of the revolutionaries' intentions as well as from the north. There is no better book on the early days of partition and on the history of Belfast journalism than *The Widening Gulf* by Dennis Kennedy a former Irish Times deputy editor and one-time President of this Association.

I have put part of Unionist Ulster's problem down to the fact that in every generation its liberal element is peeled off and emigrates, neutralises itself, or in a few cases becomes Irish nationalist. The intransigence of what is left however sees Unionism through to another generation. But the world only sees the intransigence and is uncomprehending - as it did with Ian Paisley - until even he softened in the face of a kinder, sweeter south.

The hegemony of the 1916 founding myth has gone and, as happened, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the history that was suppressed resurfaced and the old adherents of Home Rule Ireland have re-emerged.

Irish history has taken the form of revisionism while the modern, urban, prosperous southern society of the last fifty years has created something else again. A state apart from Belfast. Somewhere that does not grasp the northern question nor wants to, which is why the 1998 referendum result was Soviet-style in its 94% approval of the ending of the constitutional claim to Northern Ireland.

That percentage figure tells a story of lost opportunities. I long held the view and campaigned about it in the early 1970s, that Articles 2 and 3 were the source and moral imperative of the Provisional IRA. With them gone, so went the legitimacy of the armed struggle. The Irish state had a chance in 1974 and again in 1985 to do the needful and didn't. In those instances, the benign views of Conor Cruise O'Brien and Garrett Fitzgerald came to nothing, which proves that liberals can rarely deliver.

But then when last did a people move in front of itself, in front of myths, even if eroding? The result however was the most prolonged conflict in Europe in centuries; a thirty years war.

Pre-partition attitudes are back after a hundred years. It is more like the rebirth of the complex Austro-Hungarian empire than a distortion of the past like Putin's Russia.

As an indication of the widening gulf between north and south, I instance one impending change that will deepen the matter and that is the removal of RTE Radio's long wave 252 band. When medium wave transmissions ended, long wave was the only way those in Belfast who don't listen on digital radio at home, or in their car heard Radio Eireann. Now there will be no coverage for most of us. It is your choice but it makes me unhappy. RTE TV, which I recently started to receive in south Belfast, does produce many excellent historical and documentary programmes like that involving Eoghan Harris on the Dunmanway massacre in April 1922.

Enough of the past however, as a good future beckons despite the difficulties on parades and flags that dominated the Haass talks in which I was one of the two Ulster Unionist Party's representatives. Those issues are now joined by a myriad of others deriving from the fundamental flaw in the consociational settlement of 1998. Initially we could agree, at least, on dividing up the money but when the flow threatened to reduce, even there agreement seems impossible.

We are doomed to have to try to agree on fundamentals while operating on two parallel lines. Something needs to change perhaps a committee running each department without a single party veto but with a high hurdle for progress much as with our new councils. Oddly this is much the same as the Ulster Unionists proposed in 1998.

[The rest of my remarks detailing my experiences on Belfast City Council since May and the Haass talks was unscripted.]