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Uncomfortable 'truths' and the Centenary Anniversary of the 1916 Rising in Ireland

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How to deal with uncomfortable 'truths' from the past has long posed problems for historians and politicians alike and this is exemplified by attempts to 'deal with' the centenary anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland.

How do we recognise the revolutionary 'heroes' of the past and their contribution to the building of the new 'nation' state to which we may pledge allegiance, without exposing the contradictions inherent in the way that 'nation' state has transformed, subverted and indeed corrupted many of the *ideas* for which they fought?

More controversially, how do we honour the *actions* of revolutionaries in the past which led to death and destruction in pursuance of a grand ideal, while at the same time condemning others today who claim to have been likewise engaged, using similar methods, during the recent 'Troubles' (1969-98 and counting)?

Attempts by the Irish state to deal with the centenary seem to illustrate the point.

In many ways the political establishment south of the Irish border would prefer to ignore 1916, but to do so, as it did during most of the years of the recent 'Troubles', would be to hand over ownership to political organisations like Sinn Féin - something that cannot be countenanced by their political opponents, given the positive attitude which currently exists amongst the public towards the Rising. Certainly, the Government has shown little imagination or enthusiasm - its inaction over plans to demolish Moore Street in Dublin, where the end of the Rising and Surrender were acted out, and the ongoing[1] building works for a new Luas trackway in the middle of O'Connell Street in front of the GPO, the main site of the Rising, and where the main commemorations would be expected to take place, seem to bear testament to that. However, the prominent use of the Irish Army in commemorative events (including visiting every school with a tricolour and a Proclamation reading) shows the desire to link it to the volunteers who fought in the Rising rather than allowing that mantle to rest on any other competing republican organisations.

[1] At the time of writing, February 2016.

'History telling' in the Irish state, as in other states, has often been used for political purposes (by both the state and its opponents). It was used for example, to build allegiance to the new 'state' and its political establishment, in an atmosphere of division and dissent in the aftermath of the Civil War (1922-23) and in this it was largely very successful. It eulogised the 'martyred' leaders of the Rising, linking their sacrifice to the creation of first a 'Free State' (1922) and then a 'Republic' (1948) of twenty-six of Ireland's counties. Its narrative spoke of an integrated, united people in the South, homogeneous in thought, culture, language, politics and religion - a conservative, white, Catholic, Gaelic people. Socialists, radical thinkers and writers who challenged the stereotype and the conformity became outcasts. The small minority (5%) of Protestants left in the State after Partition and the rush to leave[2], may have been tolerated, but they were never viewed as really fully Irish in a state which gave patronage to the Catholic Church's 'special position' and followed its diktats in social policy provision.

However, there was always the nagging historical problem of that 'unfinished business' – the incomplete national project. When the 1916 'rebels' proclaimed the 'right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible' and 'the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State' they weren't talking about twenty-six counties of it. (Nor were they talking about a 'republic' which would then hand over much of it sovereignty to other European nation-states in the European Union).

When the 1916 'rebels' declared that their 'Irish Republic' would cherish 'all the children of the nation equally', they emphasized, immediately following, that this would be 'oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government which have divided a minority from a majority in the past'. Their aim, clearly, was to a create society in which both Protestants and Catholics, North and South, would belong equally. It wasn't to reinforce and reproduce existing divisions by developing two separate confessional states for two separate groups. James Connolly (one of the 1916 leaders) had predicted in 1914, in response to the proposed partition of Ireland that

'Such a scheme as that agreed to by Redmond and Devlin, the betrayal of the national democracy of industrial Ulster, would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South,

[2] Census data record that the number of Protestants living in the 26 counties declined by about a third between 1911—26.

would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured.'[3]

In many ways that prediction came true. The South remained a conservative, paternalistic, Catholic and indeed somewhat reactionary society (when it came to dealing with social or political dissent) for much of its existence. It was slow to introduce 'equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens' as proclaimed in 1916, especially in relation to women. It wasn't until the 1970s and EU entry that it even contemplated its first gender equality legislation. It never succeeded in 'cherishing all the children of the nation equally' - today it is one of the more unequal in terms of income and wealth of all EU states.[4] And it never succeeded in creating a society which would be attractive to the bulk of Protestants/unionists north of the border.

In the North, by the time of Partition a type of economic, social, cultural and political apartheid had evolved and while many working class and rural Protestants suffered poverty and deprivation, Catholic/nationalists (initially one third of the population and now nearly half) generally occupied a much more disadvantaged position. Partition was to reinforce and reproduce that disadvantaged position – through the experience of discrimination, gerrymandering and intimidation.[5] It also ensured almost continuous conflict, both violent and non-violent, throughout the existence of Northern Ireland. It led eventually to nearly 30 years of violent conflict from the late 1960s until the late 1990s, during which nearly 4,000 people died from all sides/communities and many more were injured, while thousands lost their homes and an estimated 40,000 were imprisoned.[6] Despite the peace process and the Belfast Agreement (1998) the North remains a deeply divided society and the dream of the 1916 leaders of creating an all-Ireland Republic appears to remain as far away as ever.

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[3] Connolly, James, (1914) Labour and the Proposed Partition of Ireland, *Irish Worker*, 14th March 1914.

[4] Tasc (2015), Cherishing All Equally: Economic Inequality in Ireland, Tasc, Dublin

[5] Aunger, E.A., (1976), Religion and Occupational Class in N. Ireland, Economic and Social Review, 7 (1).

[6] Jamieson, R., Shirlow, P., and Grounds, A., (2010), Ageing and social exclusion among former politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland and the border region of Ireland, Community Foundation for N. Ireland, Belfast.

In the South, the rewording of articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 Constitution resulting from the 1998 Agreement, and the dropping of the 'claim' that the 'nation' includes all 32 counties seems to reinforce this. There no longer appears to be a Constitutional imperative to end Partition (though little had been done about it anyway by successive Irish Governments from 1922).

In recent times, some commentators have attempted to deal with the contradictions posed by 1916 for the Irish political establishment by suggesting that maybe the state should now start distancing itself from the Rising. Former Taoiseach, John Bruton, for example, has argued that the Rising and subsequent events from 1916-23 should not be 'glorified' as they only achieved, with much suffering and death, what was actually being offered by the British anyway at the time. That may be true of course, but it misses the point. The rebels of 1916 were not fighting for what subsequent Irish governments were to accept. They wanted a 32 County Republic and one that promoted equality amongst its people.

Others commentators have argued similarly to Fr Seamus Murphy, a Jesuit scholar in Loyola University Chicago, that 'to celebrate the Rising is to celebrate anti-democratic elitism and bloodlust'.

Clearly the Irish people didn't vote for the Rising so in that sense it wasn't democratic, but then they didn't vote for British rule either or indeed World War 1. It may well be that most of their elected representatives –nationalists and unionists – both opposed the Rising and supported the British war effort, but there is a difference between democracy and liberal representative democracy. There is also a difference between a liberal democracy which allows everyone the vote and one that does not. In 1916 for example, large sections of the labouring classes and all women were denied the vote. The present day concept of liberal representative democracy was slow in developing. At the time of the Act of Union (1801) for example, less than 2% of people had the vote [7] and although the franchise was extended incrementally throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries it wasn't until the 1918 Election that all males in Ireland (over 21) and females (over 30) had a vote. And of course we know how Ireland voted then. Sinn Féin won 70% of seats on a platform opposing conscription, but also advocating abstention from Westminster and the establishment of an independent republic in Ireland. That democratic mandate of course was subverted by a British Government which didn't want to lose Ireland or witness the start of the break-up of its empire. The result was that the First Dáil was suppressed (1919) and Ireland partitioned (1920).

A treaty was eventually signed in 1921 but only under threat from the British of 'terrible and immediate war'. The democratic wishes of the Irish people were viewed as irrelevant. In the

[7] Lavalette, M., and Pratt, A., (1997), Social Policy: A Conceptual and Theoretical Introduction, Sage, London.

end there was never any vote on Partition. Most Irish people wanted peace not war and were prepared to give into British bullying, but was that democratic?

It could be argued that the 1918 election was the first and last time most of the people (males over 21 and females over 30) in Ireland, North and South, had a vote which might have affected the constitutional arrangements on the island and they voted for a party advocating the republic proclaimed in 1916. However, there was a vote in 1998, which was similar in many ways. People North and South got to vote on the arrangements decided upon in the Belfast Agreement. The questions asked of course were different on both sides of the border and there were no alternatives offered other than acceptance or rejection of the proposed changes. The Republic proclaimed in 1916 remains unrealised and not voted on.

Thus the uncomfortable 'truths' associated with the 1916 Rising remain, in this year of its centenary anniversary. It may take another 100 years before they are finally resolved – one way or another.