

EASTER SUNDAY COMMEMORATION, MILLSTREET, 2014

A Chairde,

It is a great pleasure to be asked to give this address today to commemorate the 1916 Rising and I am proud to do so.

In recent years there has been a concerted attempt to denigrate and disparage the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. We are encouraged to have a bad conscience about them. There is rarely a comment on either these days without various qualifications about their merits and the methods used.

We are approaching the centenary commemorations of 1916 and it is pretty clear that the government, any government, will be going through the motions in the commemorations they are planning. Their heart will not be in it.

The Rising is painted in all kinds of negative colours - that it was a blood sacrifice, led by hopeless idealists, was a failure, was unnecessary, etc. A most typical critique of the Rising is that it was not democratic. Being a rebellion, or an insurrection, means it automatically was not democratic in the accepted sense. You cannot have a vote for a rebellion. You cannot advertise it.

But the Rising has to be put in its context – as has democracy itself at the time. Was there an alternative?

Those who criticise it would not deny the case for having an independent state. But when they criticise the Rising they should therefore feel obliged to show a practical alternative at the time. Not in theory but in practical terms – what was the alternative?

We could all wish for other ‘nicer’ ways to have achieved independence. If wishes were horses we would all go for ride.

What was the state of democracy then? The fact is that what existed of parliamentary democracy in the UK at the time had broken down, had become a bad joke. And it had broken down over Ireland. And this is the context in which the Easter Rising must be judged.

How did this happen?

Home Rule, a fairly timid form of devolution had been debated for decades in Parliament. When passed by the House of Commons on two occasions it was rejected by the House of Lords. When the House of Lords could no longer prevent it a rebellion was organised in 1912 by the Unionists of Britain and Ireland to prevent it. An illegal army, the Ulster Volunteer Force, was formed; guns were imported from Germany and a Provisional Government was planned. This was a rebellion against the perpetrators' own government. It was treason and the perpetrators made no bones about it.

The Government did not prevent any of this which meant it was a successful rebellion. When the British army refused to move against the rebels in the Curragh Mutiny, 100 years ago last month, it meant that this kind of action, rebellion, was the way to succeed with your political aims. The gun was back in Irish politics and it was winning.

Seeing this, the Nationalists in the South followed suit and formed the Irish Volunteers to guarantee Irish Home Rule. They wanted to help implement the law – not break it. They did not think a rebellion was necessary at this point. They believed that Parliament would deliver Home Rule.

So what was the turning point towards rebellion?

There was a very unusual event in 1915 that is little mentioned these days. In fact it is never mentioned. There was a new Government formed but without an election. This meant that by 1916 the British Government was not an elected government. Hardly democratic. In effect there was a parliamentary coup d'état.

The rule was that there should be an election within 5 years and as the last election was in 1910 a new election was legally obligatory in 1915. But an election would have been awkward for the government so it was abandoned under pressure from the Unionists on condition that they were brought into government. This element of democracy, a general election, was dispensed with. Instead there was a new government formed with Unionist leaders in the Government.

It was now as plain as the nose on one's face that there would be no Home Rule and there would certainly never, ever, be an Irish republic. It remained treasonous to even consider it.

The people who broke the law against their own government over Home Rule were now in government. The lawbreakers had become the lawmakers. This success set the obvious precedent on how to be politically successful at the time in the UK. Rebellion rules – OK!

These events laid the basis, the rationale, the logic for the 1916 rising. The 1916 rebels were simply doing the only thing that the Government would take any notice of.

Being a Rebellion it was naturally not supported by the majority at the time. But within two years it had got the overwhelming support of the electorate with the landslide victory for Sinn Fein in the 1918 Election.

And what did the Mother of Parliaments do when they got this totally democratic result? Nothing. This proved yet again that democracy did not matter at that time. When the elected representatives began to implement their policies on the basis of the election victory we got martial law, the Auxiliaries and then the Black and Tans. This confirmed yet again that democracy did not exist.

And this ignoring of the election result came immediately after up to 50,000 Irish had died fighting for what they believed was the 'freedom of small nations'. These poor Irishmen in a sense died twice. They died physically and their political ideals died when they were betrayed by the Government that they fought for. They were cynically betrayed. And this betrayal should be remembered when they are commemorated today. The Great War was a Great Fraud for them. But with all the talk about commemorations of WWI these days we never hear this pointed out loud and clear. And of course nobody in Ireland voted for that war.

So the Rising made sense in its time and place.

It is recognised and admired throughout the world especially by those countries that achieved their independence later and were encouraged by its success. When we commemorate its centenary the representatives of our 'gallant allies' and the other nations inspired by the Rising should be invited to take part. If we did there would be marvellous turnout – like a meeting of the United Nations. Instead we hear that the big idea will be to invite a member of the British Royal family. It looks like the commemoration planners have no imagination and lack the sense of occasion to do justice to the commemoration. Even John A. Murphy has described this as 'bizarre. 'The government can't see beyond London.

The Rising deserves a wholehearted commemoration without apology or reservation and I hope that it will continue be done in that spirit here and throughout the country and especially on the 100th anniversary."

Jack Lane
20 April 2014