

A Century of Irish Statehood

The year of 2022 is the centenary of internationally recognised Irish statehood. An all-Ireland Republic was proclaimed in 1916 and ratified by the First Dáil in 1919. However, it was only following on the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 that general recognition was secured for an Irish State of 26 counties.

PRO AND ANTI TREATY

Following the Treaty of December 1921, opposition to that accord manifested itself within Sinn Féin. When the Second Dáil met in January 1922, this opposition narrowly failed to win a vote against the Treaty. In June that year, the opposition again was unsuccessful in obtaining a majority among the electorate in the 26 counties for rejection, returning 36 TDs while pro-treatyites got 92. Even if all the Sinn Féin elected representatives in the north (6) had been added to those anti-treaty TDs, there would obviously still have been an overwhelming majority for the Treaty.



OPTIONS FOR ANTI-TREATYITES

The question then arose as to how the anti-treatyites should proceed in their opposition. One choice would have been to take their seats in the limited Third Dáil, and perhaps also the Belfast parliament, merely signing but not orally swearing the oaths of allegiance to the King as Head of the Commonwealth, and under duress. The second choice would have been to abstain from the legislatures and strive politically to win support for their position with a view to achieving an elected majority in at least the Fourth or a subsequent Dáil. The third choice, which was adopted, was to take up arms, mainly against the newly established

Free State, which was in fact done.

The result was a civil war, chiefly in the 'south', which highlighted the oath of allegiance and underestimated partition. The situation was a godsend for northern unionists and helped consign two generations of northern nationalists to an apartheid statelet.

The course of action ended in defeat within a year. Three years after that, the anti-treatyites split and Fianna Fáil was established, with it accepting the first option described above of entering the Dáil according to Free State rules and under duress (1927). Eleven years later, in 1937, Fianna Fáil managed to transform the Free State into a full republic in all but name, with its Constitution laying claim to rightful, even if not being able to exercise actual, jurisdiction over the whole island.

THE IRA & SINN FÉIN

The remaining anti-treatyites, by then the only party designated as Sinn Féin (Cumann na nGaedheal having been formed in April 1923), endured as an abstentionist republican opposition whose elected representatives combined with the residuum of the Second Dáil of 1921, which amalgam claimed authority over a by then aspirational all-Ireland republic. This authority was transferred to a residual army council of the IRA in 1938 which thenceforth asserted that it was the legitimate government of Ireland.

Alternatively, the 26 county State could have been viewed as a valuable first step, albeit in a situation of retrenchment, towards the realisation of a true *Republic of Ireland*, and maximal control sought within it, along with imaginative defiance within

the north. And, from 1933 at least, an oath of allegiance would no longer exist and have been an obstacle to participation in the Dáil.

It was not to be until 1986, that Sinn Féin, with the endorsement of the IRA, dropped its abstentionism, both in regard to the Dáil and an eventual devolved parliamentary body within the UK in Belfast. In effect, the whole republican movement then also came to recognise and seek to participate in official Administrations, south and north.

TACTICS & STRATEGY

Looking back on it now, it may be seen that the anti-treatyite tactics from 1921 to '26 and Sinn Féin plus IRA tactics subsequently in respect of the official institutions in Dublin and Belfast, even in the context of an armed struggle in the six counties, were mistaken and lacking in revolutionary, and even specifically military, wisdom. In fact, they left much of the way open to anti-national and anti-left forces and hamstrung a lot of potentially radical resistance to them for over half a century.

In the south, at first, Cumann na nGaedheal was allowed to dominate with its class base of big farmer and haute bourgeoisie, while adopting a neo-Redmondite stance towards the north and Britain; next Flanna Fáil assumed power there, societally resting initially and principally on the small farmer and petty bourgeoisie, while at the same time making limited populist concessions to the urban working class and also engaging in verbal republicanism.

Throughout, the Labour Party was more like a minor extension of trade unionism than a genuinely socialist party and effectively tried to pretend that the national question didn't really exist.

In short, and to emphasise the point, it was not appreciated by republicans that the 26 counties could have been a vital bridgehead in the overall national struggle and could have been secured by addressing the social needs of the underprivileged within that polity.

THE WAY FORWARD

Saying all this is not to deny recognition for the commitment, courage and heroism of many of those who were involved in the republican movement over the earlier periods referred to. It is rather that one has to discern the tactical errors of the past and affirm that those sects which continue to adhere to them are rejected, while making sure that mainstream republicanism will never revert to the previous state of affairs.

Our enemies devoutly wish that we would go back into the cul de sac of dogmatic purism and self-inflicted ineffectuality. Then they would feel safe in their arrogant and reactionary exclusiveness. But that is not going to happen. We are at last proceeding realistically and meaningfully throughout the island towards the attainment of a truly sovereign independent Ireland of social justice under the guidance of a reborn republicanism. Let us ensure that Emmet's epitaph will at last be written.

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh, Aibreán 2022