

**Speech by President Michael D. Higgins
At a Symposium entitled “Remembering 1916”
Mansion House, Dublin
Monday, 28th March, 2016**

A Cháirde Gael,

Is mór an phléisiúr dom tús a chur leis an gcomhrá seo tráthnóna ar an eachtra ríthábhachtach a bhí in Éirí Amach na Cásca 1916. Tugann sé sásamh faoi leith dom go bhfuil an ardán á roinnt agam inniu le scoláirí den scoth - gach duine acu, trína saothair agus taighde, a chur go mór lenár dtuiscint maidir leis an tréimhse sin inar saolú ár Stáit.

It is my great pleasure to be opening this discussion on the seminal event in the history of Ireland that was the Easter Rising of 1916. I am especially pleased to be sharing this exercise in collective reflection with such a distinguished panel of scholars – all of whom have contributed to enhancing our understanding of the founding moments of our State.

May I, then, take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of so many historians, in Ireland and abroad, who – with the benefit of newly available archival material – have enabled us to gain a deeper grasp of the cultural and intellectual ebullience that stirred the Ireland of 1916, the overlapping loyalties and passions held by the men and women of the time, the influences of the Enlightenment, romanticism, mysticism, suffragism, socialism, pacifism – all the complexities of the wider global context of which they were part and from which they drew.

It is especially fitting that we undertake this discussion here, in this Round Room of the Mansion House, where, in January 1919, the first meeting of the First Dáil was held. This was a key moment in our history, when the revolution of 1916 was to take on the form of a parliamentary democracy.

The presence of eminent historians here today also reminds us of the complicated relationship between the act of commemoration and the discipline of history. History and commemoration operate, of course, on different registers. Commemoration inevitably involves a selection of events, actors, ideas and consequences and it requires a dialectic between remembering and forgetting that tends to be mediated through the prism of contemporary concerns.

There is always a risk, then, that commemoration might be exploited for partisan purposes, and some historians have rightly warned us against the perils posed to historical truth by any backward imputation of motives, any uncritical transfer of contemporary emotions onto the past.

Commemoration can also lead to a form of public history aimed at securing the present, whether by invoking an 'appropriate' past, or, in desperation, by calling for such an amnesia as might allow a bland transition to the future. Such approaches are often those that least discomfit those who wield power.

As Diarmaid Ferriter will show, each anniversary of the Easter Rising has had a different focus, a distinctive way of looking back at the past, which tell us at least as much about the zeitgeist of every commemorative period, and perhaps about those who controlled the process of commemoration, as they do about the events of 1916 themselves.

Conscious of these risks, my emphasis, as President of Ireland, has been on the challenge of remembering ethically as we engage with the ongoing Decade of Commemorations – a Decade that encompasses not just the Easter Rising, but other defining events such as the Great Lockout of 1913, the outbreak of the First World War, the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War.

There are several aspects to such ethical remembering. On one level, it entails the inclusion of the voices of the marginalised and the disenfranchised in our recollections of the past, a willingness to do justice, for example, to the essential part played by women and the working people of Dublin in the Easter Rising.

The ethics of commemoration also entails an openness to the dissonant voices and stories of "the other", the stranger, the enemy of yesterday – a disposition described by philosopher Paul Ricoeur as "narrative hospitality." In speeches I have given in the North and South over the last years, I have often drawn on Paul Ricoeur's suggestive conceptual work, and I have emphasised in particular the importance of avoiding any false or comforting amnesia.

Neither is ethical remembering one that dispenses with historical empiricism, acknowledging as it does that the selection or exclusions of facts or from facts can close doors to reflection and research. Furthermore, while commemoration is always, as I have just observed, a process of selective remembering, ethical commemoration is that which seeks to respect context and complexity, as well as the agency and the integrity of the motivations of the men and women from the past.

Crucially, and perhaps most importantly, there is an introspective dimension to ethical remembering, inviting us to revisit critically the collective myths and beliefs by which we have defined ourselves as a nation. Commemoration provides an opportunity to address at a profound level the assumptions of competing foundational mythologies, mythologies that have turned our

historiography into a space of contestation with fluctuating passions. Such a critical examination of the nature of nationalism as it prevailed at the time of the Rising is the subject of my address today.

May I state very clearly, as a preface, that such a critical examination of nationalism by no means amounts to a disqualification of national pride or national feelings. Quite the contrary: my purpose is to salvage those elements within Ireland's rich and diverse nationalist tradition that are most meaningful to us today – elements from which we might draw; elements whose emancipatory potential, once retrieved, might better enable us to rekindle the purpose and joy of our living together as a nation.

Of course, a critique of Irish nationalism such as it manifested itself at the turn of the last century is a task that many have already undertaken. By relocating the Easter Rising within the frame of the First World War, but also in the context of the wider currents of ideas that then stirred the world – movements such as socialism, feminism, but also militarism, imperialism and racist ideologies – there has been a great deal of critical reassessment of aspects of the Rising and, in particular, of the myths of redemptive violence that were at the heart, not just of Irish nationalism, but also of Imperial nationalism.

My view is that the latter has not, perhaps, been revisited with the same fault-finding edge as the former. Indeed, while the long shadow cast by what has been called “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland has led to a scrutiny of the Irish Republican tradition of “physical violence”, a similar review of supremacist and militarist imperialism remains to be fully achieved. In the context of 1916, this imperial triumphalism can be traced, for example, in the language of the recruitment campaigns of the time, which evoked mythology, masculinity and religion, and glorified the Irish blood as having “reddened the earth of every continent”. But this is for another day.

Today I would like to offer to our collective reflection a brief, but, I hope, constructive, appraisal of Irish nationalism from the point of view of the egalitarian tradition which manifested itself before and during the Easter Rising, but which was progressively and, I shall argue, consciously, repressed over the subsequent decades.

What is the nature of our nationalist movement, and where is its egalitarian element? Why and how has the flame of equality and social justice been quenched? What Republicanism are we talking about in Ireland? Can these centenary commemorations be an occasion to redefine what constitutes a real Republic, a polity of meaningful and celebratory co-existence, reaching back to the generous aspirations of the men and women who preceded us – to the “unfulfilled future of our past” – and reaching forward to the generations who will succeed us? In taking up these questions and tracing the journey which

took us from the promises of equality contained in the Proclamation of 1916 and in the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil, through to the socially conservative clauses enshrined in the Constitution of 1922 and that of 1937, it might be useful, I suggest, to consider in more detail the sequence of events along the way.

One of the great milestones of Ireland's egalitarian tradition is, of course, the Lockout of 1913, which galvanised the Irish trade union movement, and precipitated the formation of the Irish Citizen Army as an organisation whose members distinguished themselves, amongst all the formations that took part in the Easter Rising, by their commitment to equality and revolutionary social transformation.

The combination of public intellectuals and activists who engaged in the events surrounding the Lockout was an extraordinary one. It included people who differed on certain issues and on questions of tactics, for example George Bernard Shaw and James Connolly; but they were united in an appeal for justice that was far greater than what divided them. It was their response to the Lockout which brought James Connolly and Patrick Pearse closer together, as attested to by Pearse's references in his letters of the time to the appalling living conditions in the tenement slums of Dublin. This rapprochement was manifested in the lines on equality woven into the Proclamation of the Republic which Patrick Pearse read out from under the porch of the GPO on Monday, 24th April, 1916. If I may quote those lines which remain with us as, perhaps, the most meaningful promise bequeathed to us across the century by the men and women of 1916: "The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and all of its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally..." Addressed to Irishmen as well as Irishwomen, in years when women in most of the wider world had not yet secured the right to vote, the Proclamation was, for its time, an exceptional document. It was not a description of the actual state of Irish society, but a compelling vision of what it might become. And while we might, nowadays, chose to forget some of the other ideas or formulations contained in the Proclamation, its emancipatory call is certainly one that still resonates strongly with us, a century later. Importantly, this call for egalitarianism was taken on in another, and too often neglected, founding document of our State, i.e. the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil. This Programme, which was drafted in January 1919 by Labour member Tom Johnson, with the help of William O'Brien and Cathal O'Shannon, and with some final editing by Seán T. O'Ceallaigh, was indeed, chronologically, the next important text that would proclaim the equal right of all citizens to access education, decent housing, clothing, and other essential social goods.

As I have written elsewhere, the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil was: “The shining evidence of a possibility being expressed at the birth of a State, a vision that was powerfully egalitarian, celebratory, asserting a deep humanity, and linked to an international movement that was pushing a great change towards a socialist version of politics, economy and society ...

The Democratic Programme gave a glimpse of the possibility of dealing with the injustices that motivated the founders of Labour – that is, of eliminating poverty, inequality, the exploitation of vulnerable workers; of advancing the rights of women and children; of dealing with inadequate access to education and healthcare, amongst other things.”

The Irish Republican Brotherhood, though, did not approve of this Programme, and indeed there were some in the IRA leadership who undertook to suppress it. Kevin O’Higgins later referred to the text as “largely poetry”, while the leader of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, who was in prison with others and therefore precluded from attending this historic meeting of the First Dáil, did not only object to the principles of the Programme, but wrote comprehensively in that regard before the meeting. These were but a few of the signs announcing a wider rolling back of the aspirations for social and economic equality over the decades following the Easter Rising. Before I proceed to describing in more detail the nature of that conservative reaction, it is important, I think, that we go back to the process of socio-economic transformation which occurred in rural Ireland over the period preceding the Rising. Indeed those were changes which informed the ideological substance of the form of nationalism that ultimately triumphed in the first decades of our independence. This ideological influence thoroughly shaped the character of the new State, manifesting itself, not only in the immediate actions and policies of the first Irish government, but also in how it structured future intentions.

I believe that Irish historiography, with some notable exceptions, has insufficiently addressed the way in which those later developments were fuelled by the differences that were deepening in the Ireland of the turn of the twentieth century; especially those differences between an impoverished urban working class and a rural Ireland from which so many of the marginalised had been forced to emigrate.

More specifically, it is important to recall how the implementation of the Land Acts, a great achievement for parliamentarism in combination with rural agitation, had turned tens of thousands of rural tenants into peasant proprietors. Concomitantly, famine and emigration had seen the virtual disappearance of the class of land labourers.

This profound change of rural Ireland was vividly captured by Joe Lee, when he described how, before the Great Famine, fields gave way to families,

whereas after the Famine families gave way to fields. And, may I add, as the stone walls outlined the boundaries of new property, the desire for such property grew to become insatiable.

Beyond any notion of sufficiency or security of tenure, a new grazier class emerged, often in alliance with professionals and with those who controlled rural commerce and credit. These were the classes who would be set to rise in the new State.

Thus, by the time the Easter Rising happened, this native class of land owners, many of whom defined themselves as nationalists, had largely replaced Anglo-Irish landlords. The collusion between ideas of class, property and respectability heralded by that new category of native land owners made up the ideology that was to have a huge influence on Irish political life throughout the 1920s and 1930s. And while there were many socially transformative dimensions to Irish nationalism – expressed, for example, in the movement for women’s suffrage, in labour tendencies, and in the outburst of creativity that characterised part of the cultural Revival – this ascendancy of the more conservative trends within Irish nationalism proceeded to smother the call for equality expressed in both the Proclamation of 1916 and the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil. We should not forget, however, that for a brief period after the Rising, ordinary men and women did seek to make the principle of popular ownership a living reality. Between 1918 and 1923, five general strikes and 18 local strikes occurred in Ireland. Workers took over the running of more than 80 workplaces, and established soviets at the Cleeves factory in Limerick, in the neighbouring coalmines of Castlecomer, and at the foundry in Drogheda. The West was particularly awake. A network of popularly elected, local arbitration courts sprung up, sometimes to decide the terms of land redistribution. But these bold moves resulted in the country’s wealthier land owners turning from Westminster to the Sinn Féin party to put an end to “agrarian Bolshevism”.

The events and debates that surrounded the drafting of the Constitution of the Irish Free State, in 1922, further signalled the gradual retreat of conservative nationalist leaders from any 'dangerous' ideas of redistribution. The suggested inclusion of the Proclamation’s lines on equality were dismissed as “Bolshevist” by the British authorities to whom the draft 1922 Constitution was submitted. The words were dropped.

Such rejection of egalitarianism by some members of the Provisional Government was, in several instances, expressed in the most forceful manner. Hugh Kennedy, the Provisional Government’s senior law officer, argued, for example that popular disorder would have to be overcome by “utterly ruthless action”.

Similarly, when the Labour Party, appalled by what was happening, threatened in 1922 to withdraw its 19 members unless the Dáil was called into session – so that terms might be discussed and a horrific Civil War brought to an end – the response from the Irish Republican Brotherhood members of the War Council was sharp. As Eoin O’Duffy put it in a letter to Michael Collins on 19th August 1922: “I believe the Labour element and the Red Flaggers are at the back of all the moves to make peace, not for the sake of the country but in their own interests.”

The letter also made it clear that a military victory was necessary because it would give notice as to how any future egalitarian movement would be dealt with: “When the National Army have entered this conflict with such vigour,” O’Duffy wrote, “labour realised that there would be much more vigorous to crush any Red Flag or Bolshevist Troubles.”

The Constitution of 1922 did, admittedly, make space for some innovative political advances. Provisions for direct democracy, for example, facilitated a citizen’s initiative to draft legislation. But subsequent governments amended the Constitution with a view to preventing any such subversive provisions from coming into effect, with the result that the new Constitution was ultimately a minimalist document, which belied the radical proposals advanced during the early stages of its drafting. There are, of course, constitutional theorists, who hold for minimalism in constitutions, but in the Irish case, I suggest that the why and the how of such minimalism is of historical interest and significance.

A further sign of the conservative reaction that unfolded in Ireland after the Easter Rising was manifested in the muting of cultural creativity over these early decades. While the period 1890-1910 had witnessed an extraordinary output of new ideas and debates, reflected in a remarkable flood of publications, the new State brought about a form of censorship which derived more from the authoritarianism of the war period than from the flowering of intellectual and cultural creativity of the Revival years. From the 1920s onwards, anti-conformism and cultural innovation were encouraged to express themselves abroad.

Many women who had participated in the Rising, either directly or indirectly, such as Kathleen Clarke or Helena Molony, vehemently opposed the inscription, in the new Constitution of 1937, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, of those articles limiting the participation of women in the public sphere.

But despite such efforts, new levels were reached in the 1930s, in terms of bigotry, censorship, and a subjugation of the State and its institutions to hierarchical and patriarchal values. A property-driven conservatism thus grew into the dominant ideology, at the expense of any wide-ranging social transformation of an egalitarian kind. The fetishing of land and private property, a restrictive religiosity, and a repressive pursuit of respectability,

affecting in particular women, became the defining social and cultural ideals of the newly independent Ireland.

How, then, to Remember 1916? The question has often been raised during these ongoing commemorations, as to whether, in our political independence, we have lived up to the ideals articulated during the foundational events of the Irish Republic. This is, as I have suggested, an insufficient question. Indeed we must never forget how, at the beginnings of our independence, Irish society as a whole was neither factually equal, nor ideologically drawn to egalitarianism. It was then, and it remains, a challenge to create such a society as will enable all of its children, women and men to flourish in equality. We did not descend from equality into inequality; an inequality that may be described today as ever deepening. The early years of our State did not represent any idyll of liberty and freedom – but the a study of the revolutionary moment does present to us a moment of idealism and hope, the promise of what our nation might yet become. Let us put it positively: the joy of making equality the central theme of our Republic remains for us.

Agus muid ag tabhairt faoin saothair seo, b'éigean dúinn, i mo thuairim, athchúirt a dhéanamh ar an tuiscint atá againn ar cad is brí le fíor Phoblacht; Poblacht ina mbeadh smaointe maidir le dlúthpháirtíocht, an Pobal agus an réimse poiblí ina cheartlár.; fíor phoblacht a aithníonn go bhfuil an Stáit féin ina fhreagracht do chách, agus a thuigeann an ról lárnach atá ag an Stát chéanna ar mhaitheas a saoránaigh ar fad.

As we set to this task, we are also called, I believe, to revisit our conceptions of what constitutes a real Republic – a Republic that would have solidarity, community and the public world at its heart; a Republic that would acknowledge the State as a shared responsibility, and recognise, too, its vital role in achieving the common welfare of all citizens.

This conception of the State and the Republic is so much richer than any limiting, individualistic definition of citizenship – and it is also, I suggest, closer to what the leaders of 1916 had in mind. They were advanced thinkers, selfless women and men, who took all the risks to ensure that the children of Ireland would, in the future, live in freedom and access their fair share of Ireland's prosperity.

The passage of one hundred years allows us to see the past afresh, free from some of the narrow, partisan interpretations that might have restricted our view in earlier periods. We have a duty to honour and respect that past, and retrieve the idealism which was at its heart. But we have a greater duty to imagine and to forge a future illuminated by the unfulfilled promises of our past.

All of us are invited, then, in this year of 2016, to reach for the ideals and hopes that animated so many of the men and women of 1916 in their struggle for freedom, equality and social justice. Informed by the manifest needs of our times, let us test again these ideals; let us retrieve the courage, the utopianism, of 1916 – and let us add to it, as we craft, together, a new and inspiring vision for the coming generations. Let us revive the best of the promise of 1916, so that those coming generations might experience freedom in the full sense of the term – freedom from poverty, freedom from violence and insecurity, and freedom from fear.