

Twenty years of Irish Politics

(As seen by a Foreign Observer, from the Saorstat to a Republic)

Introduction

This chapter is part of the unpublished memoirs of Waclaw Tadeusz Dobrzynski, written in the late 1950s¹. It was originally published on this website with an essay entitled 'Battling with Logic but they have subsequently been split as stand-alone pieces.

The title refers to the period, 1929-49, when he was an active observer until the declaration of the Republic but the essay begins with the Anglo-Irish Treaty and foundation of the Irish Free State. It is a more general political view of Ireland of that time, in contrast to his essays of 1932-3, which are primarily constitutional.

His sources have been transferred from text to footnotes. Longer paragraphs have been split following modern conventions and for easier e-reading.

Ian Cantwell (2016)

¹ Both memoirs and *External Affairs* are in NLI acc. 4610 (folder 2)

I arrived in Ireland in April 1929. These were hectic days in Irish Politics. The country was then known as the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann), and I still cannot help marvelling at what an admirable definition it was to express the very essentials of the new State: it was Irish, it was free, at any rate, on its way to become completely free, but it was not yet Ireland, in other words – the whole of the island united not only nationally but politically as well.

The country was then under Mr. William Cosgrave's administration composed of Cumann na nGaedheal, whilst the opposition, which steadily grew in force, was led by Mr. Eamon de Valera, leader of Fianna Fáil. It looked at that time as if there was a virtual abyss between the ideologies of the two parties in so far as the ultimate form of the state's political existence would be concerned, a rift to divide these parties into irreconcilable groups.

The Split

Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil have, as is commonly known, grown out of the same Sinn Féin movements, and the same ideas of freedom and the liberation of the country enlightened all the participants of the movement without distinction as long as they were fighting side by side in the Easter Rising and shared in common all of the hardships of the things that followed. A complete brotherhood in arms was characteristic of the original Sinn Féin organisation and lasted until the first possibility of a settlement with Great Britain presented itself under the form of a treaty offering Ireland the status of a Dominion.

Since then hostilities as hitherto carried on between England and Ireland ceased; instead they revived a fratricidal war between two sections of the Irish community – the pro-treatyites and anti-treatyites. This calamitous strife affected the country not only under the shape of a material devastation; consequent upon it occurred the split, tragic and deeply rooted, which divided the living generation of Irish politicians into two mutually embittered camps fighting each other in a field much wider than what might be taken as a surface of friction between governing and opposition parties.

The Treaty with Great Britain proved to be too narrow an outlet to afford escape to all the national energy as pent up during centuries of obstructed development and, especially, as inflated all over the world at the epoch immediately following the First Great War when not only nations temporarily deprived of independence, but even such as never before enjoyed it

came into being as sovereign states. But the same Treaty offered at the same time certain advantages which have not been lost sight of or minimised.

Mr. McGilligan explains

In one of his speeches on the subject delivered by Mr. McGilligan, the Minister of External Affairs under President Cosgrave's administration, he thus explained his party's view upon the Treaty, Ireland's affinities with the British Commonwealth and the country's destiny:

"The Treaty with Great Britain achieved one great object – the right to develop and evolve on constitutional lines until every shadow and every trace of external rule should have been eliminated. We have used that right and through persistently friendly discussions and negotiations we have reached that stage in our internal and external development which the majority of our people rightly believe would result from the first ten years of the operation of that instrument...

There is no doubt at all that the destiny of the country is bound up with the destinies of the other members of the Commonwealth, and the sooner that all obstacles to the freest friendly relationship with Great Britain and the other member states are removed the better shall our individual and common interest be served... Complete co-operation is only possible with complete freedom... We have in mind also the natural relationship which binds us to those countries. We cannot and we never shall forget that there are many millions of our people amongst their citizens, and that it is especially true of our nearest neighbour, Great Britain...

Whatever the causes may have been, however unhappy the policy which gave rise to them, the most inescapable and human fact with which we are confronted is that our people have become a vital and essential part of the fabric of each one of the nations which compose this Commonwealth, and therein lies our chiefest strength and strongest lever for the securing of the conditions necessary for the fullest development of our national and international life"²

An extremely difficult task was facing the first Saorstát administration as, following the death of Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, it emerged in 1922 under President Cosgrave's leadership. The country lay in ruins, the civil war was raging. And yet, thanks to a long term in office, and to the tenacity, ability and civic courage of the Chief Executive and the team he

² Speech delivered at the Dublin Rotary Club, April, 1931

captained, the carrying out of the Cumann na nGaedheal programme, as conceived by Griffith, Collins and Kevin O'Higgins, became not only possible in its general lines but achievable even in respect of its details.

The Imperial Conferences

As regards the relations with Great Britain, Cosgrave's Government stood immovably by the loyal maintenance of the Treaty and by the observation of those clauses of the Constitution which were made dependent upon the Treaty provisions. Both these documents were, however, invariably interpreted on the Irish part in the spirit of equality of status as proclaimed by the Imperial Conference of 1926 and subsequently developed by the Conferences of 1929 and 1930.

As regards these great inter-imperial assemblies it can be said without exaggeration that, inasmuch as the abolition of all the obsolete forms of British supremacy was concerned, the Irish delegation played a leading part and distinguished themselves as the most centrifugal factor of those assemblies. The words of one of the British members to the 1926 Conference were quoted, in which he expressed the conviction that one more Imperial Conference with Kevin O'Higgins would announce the end of the Empire. Words of tribute, perhaps not so striking, but possibly more impressive were paid to the late Irish statesman by the then Canadian Prime Minister (R B Bennett) when addressing the Free State Delegates at the opening of the 1930 Conference, he said: "I speak, I believe, for all who live beyond these isles when I say that your loss is ours as well."

For the Irish Delegation to those conferences one thing came invariably before anything else, the maintenance, enlargement and recognition of the Saorstát position as of a free and sovereign state. The ultimate aim of this policy consisted in a constitutional transformation of the British Empire into a multiple monarchy, into a free association of six, or whatever might be the number in the future, independent Kingdoms united solely by a common Crown. In this sphere the Free State's participation in such mighty body would be of a nature to secure a much greater measure of importance and prosperity than would have been obtainable should this State shape its future as an isolated, comparatively small Republic.

Taken in its broadest outlines the external policy of Cosgrave's administration may be defined as aiming, first, at the manifestation of the Free State's international status by taking an active part in international organisations and by putting into operation the right to send and receive legations; secondly, by the maintenance of a close contact with the countries which are bound up with Ireland by the links of racial affinities.

As a strong supporter of the idea of universal solidarity the Free State based its participation in the work of the League of Nations on the thesis of a country whose geographical; and political situation appears to be exceptionally propitious for keeping a detached outlook on international affairs and for displaying its activities along the lines of the League's principles. A gratifying appreciation of the Saorstat's policy at Geneva can be found in its being elected Member of the League's Council in 1930. Four legations have been created within the space of time between 1924 and 1930 and four fully accredited envoys from foreign countries have been received and have established their offices in Dublin.

The Internal Conditions

The internal conditions as inherited by Cosgrave's administration were nothing short of desperate, and it required a tremendous effort to either rebuild them from the very foundations or overhaul them and adjust to the new position. Notwithstanding all the obstacles and difficulties the task was achieved, order and security restored, normal conditions of life regained. The assassination of Kevin O'Higgins in 1927 cast its deep shadow on Irish politics, but proved to be the last paroxysm of internal strife. The entrance in the same year of Fianna Fail into the Oireachtas greatly contributed to the pacification of the political atmosphere, and since then the struggle between the two parties had been transferred to the parliamentary ground.

Roughly speaking it may be concluded from a perusal of the first Saorstat Government's activities during their nine years long tenure of office that they have succeeded in obtaining almost in full what could have been defined at that time as the ultimate aim of Cumann na nGaedheal programme. A few more retouches such, for instance, as the abolition of the right to appeal from the national courts to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, would have placed the Free State in the position of a sovereign unit bound up to Great Britain and other members of the British Commonwealth solely by a common allegiance to the same Monarch.

With regard to domestic affairs it may be said that, subject to mistakes inherent in any human enterprise, Cosgrave's Government carried to the utmost limits the party's programme which was conceived in the sincere desire to make the country happy and prosperous.

Eamon de Valera enters the Stage

The Fianna Fail attitude towards the constitutional position of the Free State as just set out was invariably directed by the principle which can find its meaning in the ancient Roman legal axiom stating that: *Quod ab initio vitiosum est tractu temporis convalescere non potest*. No matter how far-reaching might have been the constitutional achievements of the Cumann na nGaedheal Government, so long as they were kept within the limits of the Treaty provisions they could not respond to the national aspirations as conceived and fought for by the old Sinn Fein organisation. The Treaty could by no means be regarded as an agreement freely entered upon by the Irish party to it and, consequently, any act having its roots in this document is doomed to bear the indelible mark of its origin.

The true and unbiased tendency of the Irish people is towards a completely independent Republic. The Irish are a separate, ancient Celtic nation and Great Britain cannot be looked upon as being, in respect of this nation, a motherland. What, therefore, may conform to the wishes of other Dominions and correspond to their aims that cannot be taken as reflecting the real trend of Irish national opinion. A certain form of association between Ireland and the members of the British Commonwealth of Nations may come under consideration, but such association should be based on principles different from those enforced by the Treaty.

With regard to internal affairs the Cumann na nGaedheal administration had certainly restored order, but, in Fianna Fail party's opinion, this came as a result of drastic measures imposed upon the people. Now, coercion is not the method to govern any country and this should be true especially in respect of the Irish nation, which had suffered sufficiently from foreign oppression. The economic policy of Cumann na nGaedheal, they said, was permeated with the same calamitous tendencies which were so characteristic of the times of union with Great Britain.

The only way to take the country off the slanting plane and to avert it from an imminent economic collapse would have been to save the existing native industries and build up new

ones under the protection of a high wall of tariffs, to encourage tillage and to increase cultivation of cereals and production of foodstuffs to the limit of self-containedness. A complete overhauling along the contemplated lines would, moreover, have been at the same time the most efficient remedy to bring to a close the calamity of depopulation.

De Valera takes the Helm

In tackling all the problems which they became confronted with since the very day de Valera was elected President of the Executive Council, the new Government showed the full flush of this ardent enthusiasm which is so characteristic of all political parties compelled to linger for a long time in the shadow of the opposition benches until a turn of tide brings them to the crest of a wave. If, however, I venture to say at the beginning of these remarks that the ways adopted by the Fianna Fail Government did not differ intrinsically from the tactics of their predecessors in office – and this refers particularly to political matters – I based my conclusions on the following: since the Cumann na nGaedheal policy was a typically evolutionary one, the opposite to it could be expected to be revolutionary methods.

Now, any revolutionary act presupposes the existence of full cognizance of persons or bodies committing such act of placing themselves in direct conflict with the constitutional law or with the binding treaties or agreements. Nothing of the sort occurred in the Free State practice as established by the Fianna Fail Administration. Let us take for instance the issue of the removal of the Oath of Allegiance.

True, it had been done by an act of purely domestic legislation, but never, on any occasion, did they admit that the Treaty had been put in jeopardy by this act. On the contrary, they never ceased to point out that throughout the proceedings of the passing of the Bill there was no such stage which could have been, to the best of their understanding, taken as an infringement of the Treaty. This is how de Valera explained the situation at the last stage of the parliamentary debate:

“I believe that the passing of this Oath Bill is not a violation of the Treaty and if it were a violation of the Treaty to get that Oath Bill passed I, for one, would violate the Treaty because of the importance it would be to the Irish people to have settled conditions. No outside people have the right to keep us at each other’s throats by insisting of a thing of that

kind. If the Treaty had to go in order to get the Oath removed, than I would say ‘Away with the Treaty’. But, as it happens, I for one believe, and I am supported in my opinion by lawyers as good as any that in removing that Oath we are not violating the Treaty. We are similarly exercising a right which we have, even under the Treaty, under our present status. That has been the attitude of this Government during the whole of this controversy.”³

It is true that de Valera’s administration has done away with the paramountcy of the Treaty over the Saorstát’s domestic affairs by repealing Section 2 of the Constitution of the Irish Free State Act, 1922, and even the likelihood of the Treaty being withdrawn as a consequence of this repeal would not have stopped them doing this. Again, however, the constitutional basis alone, the unrestricted legislative power of the Oireachtas has been put into operation by the Government’s lawyers to substantiate such action.

The Fianna Fail Government discontinued any further transfer of land annuities into the British Treasury; once more, however, this step was by no means regarded as a deliberate breach of the Treaty. Being aware that their interpretation of the land annuities issue could not be taken as infallible, that Government were prepared to submit the case to an international tribunal, and only the impossibility of reaching an agreement in respect of the personnel of the contemplated tribunal brought the whole matter to nought. Article 41 of the Constitution, providing for an obsolete right to reserve any Bill duly passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas, disappeared as well. But, as a matter of fact, this right was already reduced to nothingness by the resolutions of the Imperial Conference of 1930, and the merit of this achievement goes to the then ruling party, Cumann na nGaedheal.

The right to appeal from the decisions of the Free State Supreme Court to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council went as well. But here again it could be said that this right was already condemned by the Cumann na nGaedheal administration which, notwithstanding their somewhat wavering policy in this matter, would have, sooner or later done away with this ‘invasion of the judicial sovereignty of the Irish people’.

“I still hope to see the day,” said de Valera in a statement in the Dail on the 3rd of May, 1933, “when I will have the pleasure... of taking the whole batch (an allusion to the contemplated

³ Parl. Deb. Offic. Rep., 1933, Vol. 47, No. 2, col. 439

removal of other restrictions imposed by the Constitution) and finally end up declaring a Republic.”⁴

Republic at Last

This, however, was not to be. True, a whole series of constitutional changes took place under de Valera’s exceptionally long tenure in office, the paramount among them being the promulgation of a new Constitution and the election of the first President of Eire. But it fell to the lot of a Coalition Government, exclusive of Fianna Fail and presided by Mr. John Costello, member of Cumann na nGaedheal, to proclaim the Republic about fifteen years after the just quoted words of de Valera had been spoken.

About thirty five years in the life of the Irish nation, years all crowded with problems and decisions, are now nothing but history: the problems had been grappled with, the decisions taken. There seems, however, to remain one question, heritage of the past, still lingering as an unsolved riddle: since it was a Government strongly represented by Cumann na nGaedheal that proclaimed the Republic and since it is the same party that seems to have adopted, with mild modifications, Fianna Fail’s economic policy, the question is –where exactly lies the line dividing the two parties? Barring, of course, the emotional bitterness of the bygone years, I would venture to say that I am not the only impartial observer of Irish politics who cannot find an adequate answer to that riddle.

Partition

I believe that when closing those few remarks on Irish politics it would be simply unthinkable to omit the problem of the six North-Eastern counties. As the very vastness of the problem is certainly of a nature to provide food not for one but for many volumes of the size of the present one, I decided to pay my contribution to the problem by simply extracting from the accumulated material of my despatches the following few sentences.

“The artificial creation known as Northern Ireland could, perhaps, be best defined as a monument to the incredible versatility of David Lloyd George who knew how to manipulate

⁴ Parl. Deb. Offic. Rep., 1933, Vol. 47, No. 2, col. 544

the watchwords of the self-determination of nations in the way that would suit best his own political aims... In this case the right to exclude themselves from Ireland was granted to a certain minority which forms a majority within an artificially selected area of Ulster...

To achieve this *tour de force* the Welsh Wizard did not hesitate to ally his liberalism to the ultra-conservatism of the unionist Carson. As a result of this uncanny coalition there sprang into being that incongruous organism known as Northern Ireland, where all conceptions of majority and minority emerged in a topsy-turvy sequence: the ruling majority forms in respect to the whole nation a rather insignificant minority, whilst the ruled minority constitutes a part of the nation's overwhelming majority".

Have I any suggestion to make in this case? None whatsoever, except so far as advocating mutual goodwill and understanding. Provided these factors exist and are let to work for some considerable time and the whole problem is left to starve of interference then, perhaps, it may solve itself. The Communists would, obviously, have a ready-made recipe: "What about an all-Irish Communist Government? The barriers would fall by themselves!" I very much doubt, however, if such 'solution' would have the slightest chance to appeal to either side to the dispute.