

Mr Brian Cowen TD An Taoiseach,

20 May 2010 11.00am Institute for British Irish Studies UCD, Speech - “A Decade of Commemorations Commemorating Our Shared History”

It is a great honour to be here with you this morning to speak on the important theme of commemorating our shared history.

Before I turn to that topic, however, perhaps I might refer to more recent history.

Recent weeks have seen historic developments in Britain, with the formation of a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government led by David Cameron.

I had the opportunity to speak with the Prime Minister on his first full day in office and we reaffirmed our joint commitment to the peace process and to the agreements that have helped us make so much progress in Northern Ireland and in British-Irish relations.

I know that he is very committed to continuing the work of his predecessors. His visit to Northern Ireland today is a clear testament to that commitment and I look forward to working with him in that shared endeavour.

I would also like to recognise, in this context, the enormous contribution of the former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, in helping to bring about a truly historic agreement on the devolution of policing and justice earlier this year.

That issue was often described as the last piece of the jigsaw – a term sometimes criticised as a cliché.

I believe it truly was of historic significance.

I also believe that the election result in Northern Ireland shows that we have indeed crossed an important threshold in terms of where public opinion is in relation to the Agreement we have reached.

All of those elected, and indeed the vast majority of those who stood, are firmly committed to the Agreement and the democratic institutions.

The democratic will of the people is clear.

It is that strong and solid platform on which we stand, as we look to the decade ahead.

This is a decade when we will mark the first centenary of the founding acts of this republic, of the division of this island, and all that has flowed from that.

In addressing this subject, I am acutely conscious that all of us in leadership positions on the island, in marking the past, carry a huge responsibility for the future.

The events of the decade between 1912 and 1922 were momentous and defining ones for all of the people of this island, and indeed for these islands.

This was the decade of the covenant and the gun, of blood sacrifice and bloody politics, a time of division and war, not only on this island but across the world.

It was the decade that defined relationships on these islands for most of the last century.

I recall with immense pride that it was a period that saw the achievement of Irish independence and the foundation of this State.

But I also reflect with deep sadness that it saw the partition of this island and its people, and the two parts of the island losing touch with each other and with our shared heritage.

For most of the last century when we looked across the border, we saw and were wary of the 'other'.

We forced each other into making choices, into defining ourselves in exclusive terms.

We failed to recognise that, even though we have different traditions and perspectives, what we share is much more important than what separates us.

We collectively failed to capture the complexity of identities on the island.

For too long, we concentrated on our differences.

For too long, those differences were magnified.

And for too long, the similarities and commonality of our interests were forgotten or ignored.

We created separate histories - British and Irish, orange and green, republican, nationalist, unionist, loyalist – deep wells from which we thought we could draw succour.

In homes and in schools across this island, we grew up knowing and hearing only one set of stories, singing only one set of songs.

Gradually, in recent years, a recognition has emerged that regardless of whether we consider ourselves to be Irish, or British, or both, our history is - inescapably – a shared one.

Our island story cannot be accurately viewed or properly understood through a single prism.

The events of that formative decade a century ago do not belong exclusively to one tradition or another.

They are threads in the tapestry of all our histories.

I deeply regret the loss of our shared history, and more importantly the loss of mutual respect and understanding that accompanied that loss.

Nor do I agree with those who contend that Ireland has too much history.

I am proud of my country’s history – the fight for our freedom and the many achievements that flowed from it.

And I recognise and respect the pride which the protestant, unionist and loyalist people take in their story.

The poet Robert Greacen wrote an autobiography in 1997 that drew on that story. It was entitled **The Sash my Father Wore**.

In it, he recalled the history that he learnt as a boy – a proud history that continues to resonate across much of Northern Ireland today.

But he also observed that “in Ireland, especially in the North, the past hangs round people’s necks like an albatross”.

The year after that book was published, the Good Friday Agreement was signed.

It was truly a turning point in our history, the moment when we all – together – began to lift the albatross from our neck.

That achievement has sparked a new decade of reinvention, of hope and of optimism, one which has seen relationships on this island redefined anew.

If a momentous decade a century ago defined so much about Ireland for the 20th century, then surely the decade just passed will redefine it for the 21st century.

A space has now been opened for a new and inclusive discussion of our foundation stories.

This coming decade of commemorations, if well prepared and carefully considered, should enable all of us on this island to complete the journey we have started towards lasting peace and reconciliation.

Twelve years have passed since the Agreement.

In the next twelve years we will witness a series of commemorations which will give us pause to reflect on where we have come from, and where we are going.

With the centenaries of the Ulster Covenant, the Battle of the Somme, the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, the Government of Ireland Act and the Treaty, the events which led to the political division of this island come up for re-examination.

We will also reflect on the crucial roles played by the Labour movement in that defining decade.

And we will not forget how Irish women helped to lead the way in the fight for universal suffrage.

All of these events and processes are part of one historical whole.

They did not happen independently and they cannot be evaluated or remembered in isolation.

To illustrate this, we need only look to the backgrounds of some of those whose actions drove the events we shall commemorate.

Edward Carson, whose silver pen left the first signature on the Ulster Covenant, was born in Dublin. He studied in Trinity College. He was a member of their hurling team.

James Connolly was born in Edinburgh. He served in the British army for seven years. In 2002, this hero of Irish nationalism, executed for his part in the 1916 rising, was voted 64th in a BBC poll of history's Greatest Britons.

Constance Markiewicz was born in the shadow of Buckingham Palace, to a titled family. She went on to be an Irish revolutionary, socialist and suffragette – and the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons.

Willie Redmond was an Irish Nationalist MP from Co Wexford, the brother of the Irish nationalist leader, who died fighting in the fields of Belgium.

There are many more stories of that period that reflect the intertwining of our history and our lives.

They help us all to remember that things are rarely as simple as they seem – not then, and not now.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Commemoration, of course, is a selective act.

We choose what to commemorate and how to commemorate it.

We decide that some events are worth remembering, honour them with exhibitions and pageants, films and novels. Others are quietly forgotten.

We commemorate what we believe to be important.

We commemorate to honour bravery and heroism and great ideals.

We commemorate because we want our children to understand their heritage, to know where they come from, to appreciate the sacrifices our forefathers made, and the reasons for them.

But while respectful of the past, and honouring of the dead, we should not allow ourselves to be history's slaves. We must strive instead to take the opportunity commemorations afford us to reflect on and better understand our shared identities.

Together we can build our future, respectful and understanding of the past, which, after all, has created the island we share and love today.

As political leaders, policy makers, opinion formers, academics, teachers - and most importantly, as active citizens - we all have a role to play.

For our part, the Government has considered these issues in recent weeks and has decided that its approach will be guided by several principles

We want to see full acknowledgment of the totality of the island's history and the legitimacy of all the traditions on the island that draw their identity and collective memory from our shared history.

We want the process of commemoration to recognise the totality of the history of the period, and all of the diversity that this encompasses,

We believe that mutual respect should be central to all commemorative events and that historical accuracy should be paramount.

Based on those principles, we will engage in a programme of outreach to all those who are interested in commemorating our history, in all its dimensions, with pride and with respect.

That will, of course, include all of the political parties on the island, as well as leaders of civic society and cultural institutions. The parties in the Oireachtas have been working together on these issues and that consensual approach will be crucial in the period ahead.

This is a young and fresh-faced audience, but no doubt some of you will remember 1966.

The fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter rising saw a great national outpouring of celebration here in the Republic. Schoolchildren paraded in their thousands to Croke Park to look at Glór Réim na Cásca, the Pageant of the Rising.

Telefís Éireann produced a fantastic drama about the rising which the whole nation – at least those who had television sets – were glued to.

This was the proud expression of a nation still establishing its identity.

But our commemorations in this State of the 1916 did not fully capture the range of experiences which affected our island in that momentous year.

Veterans of the Somme and Messines kept a low profile. In general, apart from in Northern Ireland or in the quiet of their own homes, their story went untold.

My predecessor Sean Lemass, an illustrious veteran of the struggle for Irish freedom, captured this very well, when he said in February 1966:

“In later years, it was common – and I also was guilty in this respect – to question the motives of those men who joined the new British armies formed at the outbreak of the war, but it must, in their honour and in fairness to their memory, be said that they were motivated by the highest purpose, and died in their tens of thousands in Flanders and Gallipoli believing they were giving their lives in the cause of human liberty everywhere, not excluding Ireland.”

As in so many things, Lemass was ahead of his time.

The opening of the Peace Park in Messines, the official state commemorations in 2006, and the ceremonies attended by the President of Ireland at Gallipoli earlier this year, are all significant acts by the State in recognising the ultimate sacrifice paid by those Irish men and women who died in that war.

In 2016, the centenary of the Somme will be commemorated here in Dublin, as in Belfast, to honour the heroism of those who fought and died there, Protestant and Catholic, side by side.

I expect, too, that the events of Easter 1916 will be commemorated with respect and dignity in every part of this island.

That, I respectfully submit, is a challenge that must be considered by the leaders of unionism.

And we must all of us reflect that the experience of the nationalist community in the North is unique. They treasure our country's history, but for them the outcomes of the decade 1912-1922 were different.

Many in the North legitimately view the period between 1912 and 1922 from a quite different angle to the direct successors of those who came to power in Dublin or in Belfast at that time.

That, too, should give us all pause for measured reflection.

There will be those who oppose any such reflection - who will seek to hijack history, to fight again the old battles, to re-establish hostilities and to perpetuate division.

Some will look to use the memory of the dead to bring suffering to the living.

To them I say: Count me out.

Count out all of the people of Ireland – North, South, East and West.

We are united now in moving forward together to a peaceful future.

As Yitzhak Rabin said:

‘Enough of blood and tears. Enough.’

As an Irish republican, it is my hope that the island of Ireland and its people will again be united.

But, if that is to be achieved, it can only be done through persuasion and agreement.

It can only be done on the basis of consent freely given and expressed, all our traditions and identities acknowledged and respected.

It can only be done through peace and politics.

That is the possibility which the people of Ireland voted for when they approved the Good Friday Agreement by referendum.

In that vote, a historic act of self-determination, all of the people of Ireland recognised that there are no short cuts.

We voted for the path of peace and of politics.

We are all on a common journey together where we have not decided on the ultimate destination.

We have to make the here and now a better place.

It is time to consolidate and build on the benefits of peace, and ensure they are shared with all.

There are huge challenges ahead – including how to tackle enormous economic difficulties and how to eradicate sectarianism and division.

We must work together to meet these challenges.

We cannot afford not to.

That is what the people, North and South, want and expect us, their political leaders, to do.

As we work for a better future, we can look back on a defining period in this island’s history, one characterised by great heroism as well as great suffering.

We will honour the memory of the dead, and reflect on their achievements.

And we will reflect too on all that has happened in the intervening years, on the tremendous pain we have endured and on the priceless peace we now enjoy.

Over the past twelve years, the people of this island have embraced great change with great results.

As we look ahead we can expect further change.

Change is nothing to fear.

In fact, there is so much to look forward to if we are prepared to seize the future.

We can banish that “giant albatross” of history from around our necks and replace it with a garland of hope for our better future.

I am greatly encouraged by the conversation that has already begun – across the entire island of Ireland.

It is a conversation which can deepen the process of reconciliation and help us to write another proud chapter in our history.

I am grateful to the Institute for British Irish Studies for allowing me to make my contribution to the debate.

I wish you well in the rest of your proceedings.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

ENDS