

**TEXT OF AN ADDRESS
BY
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TO THE
IRISH ASSOCIATION/IBIS CONFERENCE
ON
THE COMMEMORATION OF THE ULSTER COVENANT
SATURDAY 22ND SEPTEMBER 2012**

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BELFAST

11.30 A.M.

In his address from a nationalist and republican perspective, Michael McDowell argues that the Ulster Covenant while a central symbolic moment from the Unionist perspective have the unintended effect of transforming the political landscape of nationalist Ireland as well by creating the “*perfect laboratory conditions*” for the publication of “*The North Began*” by Eoin MacNeill and the subsequent formation of the Irish Volunteers in November 1913 and was, ironically, an unintended “*foundation document*” for Irish separatism and Irish independence, in effect, the cause of the downfall of Redmond’s “*Home Rule and Empire*” vision of Ireland’s future.

He emphasises that the paramount vocation of Irish republicans today, in the tradition of Tone, Davis and Bulmer Hobson, is achievement of mutual respect and reconciliation of the major identities on this island and the creation of a genuine partnership of equality between those traditions in Northern Ireland.

TEXT

I am honoured to have been invited to participate in today's proceedings marking the 100th anniversary of the Ulster Covenant.

My good friend, Brian Kennaway, asked me to speak about the Ulster Covenant from a republican and nationalist perspective and I am very glad to have been able to accept his kind invitation.

DECADE OF CENTENARIES

It seems to me that one of the great potential benefits of the next ten years of significant centenaries in Irish political history is that it should encourage Irish men and women, and indeed our neighbours, to re-examine and re-assess many of the events that have shaped our present state, our problems and our challenges from a more objective historical perspective.

While centenaries are, as we well know, still capable of abuse for purely political ends and as opportunities for point-scoring, they also mark a point at which events are symbolically transported from the realm of what was recent controversy into the realm of what is viewed as largely "*historical*".

MY THEME

I will advance the view this morning that the Ulster Covenant, the central symbolic point in loyalist resistance to the 3rd Home Rule Bill, was also a point of departure – a central moment in the history of Ireland viewed from a nationalist and republican point of view. In so arguing, I acknowledge of course that the mobilisation of unionist opinion in what is now Northern Ireland was accompanied by a process of militarization over a number of years and not simply on one day, the 28th September 1912. It began in earnest in 1911 and culminated in the formal establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force in January 1913.

COMPLACENT NATIONALISM?

By any standard, the campaign for Repeal of the Act of Union chiefly supported by Irish Catholics was protracted and complex. Their path of "*constitutionalism*" as opposed to the use of force or the threat of force in pursuit of Repeal was confronted at every turn by obstacles in the shape of the Ascendancy interest, the political interests of Empire, the party exigencies of British politics, and economic and social divergence among the people of Ireland, not least the old sectarian cleavage.

From a nationalist perspective, the alignment of political planets in 1910 to 1914 seemed to promise final delivery of Home Rule. The Orange Card appeared to have been, or to be about to be, "*trumped*". The Irish Party seemed to be about to deliver their most

cherished ambition – Home Rule – a condition that was, in the eyes of Redmond and others, firmly fixed in the constellation of the Empire, as we shall see.

The extent and nature of loyalist resistance to Home Rule was something for which constitutional nationalists were simply not prepared. Of course they understood that there would be political resistance to Home Rule. But the energy – approaching ferocity – of the organisation of armed resistance culminating in the establishment and arming of the Ulster Volunteer Force was a factor which they had not really addressed or prepared for adequately.

And so the political challenge that lay behind the promulgation of the Ulster Covenant was, in terms of scale and intensity, something for which the Irish Party, as a constitutional nationalist movement, was ill-prepared. Still less so, the Liberal Government.

The prospect of political violence as a consequence of Home Rule, not to mention the possibility of an armed, largely denominational struggle approaching civil war, was a spectre that constitutional nationalist politicians tended to simply wish away.

They naively assumed that the will of Westminster would ultimately be imposed, and that the U.V.F. threat to use force would ultimately crumble in the face of a clear imposition of the authority of the Imperial Parliament.

A GOD-SEND TO RADICAL SEPARATISTS

In that context, events that led from the Ulster Covenant and the emergence of the U.V.F. created perfect laboratory conditions for the emergence in the Irish nationalist population of a counter-force.

To those who did not share John Redmond's view of Home Rule Ireland as an integral part of the Empire, the threat of armed loyalist resistance to Home Rule offered a God-sent opportunity to revive and tap into the physical force radicalism of the Fenian tradition as well as the possibility of radicalising cultural nationalism into a form of Irish separatism far removed from Redmond's world view.

It was onto this stage that my grandfather Eoin MacNeill, a Glensman from Antrim who was a leading figure in the cultural and legitimate national revival, stepped with his article "*The North Began*".

Far from seeing the Covenant and the U.V.F. as deadly threats to his political ambitions for Ireland, MacNeill welcomed their emergence as an assertion of "*right*" – akin to on the concept of what we would now call the "*right of self determination*" – a useful precedent for any separatist counter-movement. In modern parlance, they were "*game-changers*".

The Fenian tradition, through the IRB, also saw the Ulster Covenant and the U.V.F. as creating the context for mobilising and militarising Irish nationalists in the cause of Irish independence. They grasped equally the usefulness of MacNeill's intervention.

Redmond's initial disdain for the Irish Volunteers was based on his confidence that his goals would still be achieved by entirely constitutional means. But he soon changed course and attempted to subsume the Irish Volunteers into the broad nationalist movement as an ally of the Irish Party.

Viewed objectively, the Covenant's legal implication in the context of the U.V.F. and the establishment of a Provisional Government was close to treasonable. Mobilisation and arming of a large section of the population to resist by force the implementation of laws enacted at Westminster was clearly seditious and bordering on actual treason. A. V. Dicey, the great "*father*" of English constitutional law and theory, while signing the English variant of the Ulster Covenant, privately warned Carson and Craig that once the Bill became law it might be treasonable to take up arms against its implementation. The establishment of a Provisional Government for Ulster backed by the U.V.F. would likewise have been an objectively treasonable step.

Support from Bonar Law, F. E. Smith and others for the Covenant and for the U.V.F. in terms of British law, flirted with treason.

Tolerance of, or ambivalence about, the threat to use force to overthrow the will of parliament was, by any standards, an open invitation to those Irish separatists who could countenance the use of physical force to demand the same tolerance for any mobilisation and militarization that they could bring about.

Indeed, it seems that the political and moral "*logic*" of the Ulster Covenant and the Ulster Volunteer Force was that the people of Southern Ireland had an equivalent political and moral "*right*" to prepare to use force to assure their preferred constitutional status – even if that meant political independence from Westminster and, in the ultimate, leaving the Empire. Those in the Establishment who were prepared to "*legitimate*" armed loyalist resistance to Home Rule were logically "*legitimizing*" the use of force by the other side to decide the "*Irish Question*".

Small wonder then that the creation of the U.V.F., the Provisional Government for Ulster and the signing of the Ulster Covenant was looked to by radicals within Irish nationalism and republicanism as a potential precedent to drive their own agenda forward.

DID THE COVENANT SUCCEED?

On one level, the Ulster Covenant was originally intended to de-rail the entire Home Rule project rather than to partition the island. Looked at in that way, it was in the ultimate a failure because, ironically, it became the "*victim of its own success*".

The Covenant, the U.V.F. and the threat of a Provisional Government brought about exclusion of the majority of historical Ulster from Home Rule and, in the ultimate, from the Irish Free State.

But it can be argued with some force that the separatist Irish Free State, and ultimately the Irish Republic, owe a very great deal to the intransigent stance of the signatories to the Ulster Covenant.

The very existence of Northern Ireland as a Home Rule state can of course be claimed as a victory for the Covenant. But, I think, the question as to whether the Covenant generally delivered what its drafters intended is by no means so clear-cut.

TRADING REDMOND FOR COLLINS?

Speaking at a St. Patrick's Day Dinner in London on 17th March, 1913, John Redmond had this to say about his vision for Ireland under Home Rule:

“We will, under Home Rule, devote our attention to education, reform of the Poor Law, and questions of that kind which are purely domestic, which are, if you like, hum-drum Irish questions, and the only way in which we will attempt to interfere in any Imperial question will be by our representatives on the floor of the Imperial Parliament at Westminster doing everything in our power to increase the strength and glory of what will be our empire at long last; and by sending in support of the empire the strong arms and brave hearts of Irish soldiers and Irish sailors to maintain the traditions of Irish valour in any part of the world. That is our ambition.”

To the extent that the Ulster Covenant, the U.V.F. and the Provisional Government, with the help of the English Tories and the Curragh Mutiny, created the conditions in which nationalist Ireland was diverted from this imperialist vision of Redmond to the republican vision of Michael Collins, the question that must be asked is as to whether the result was not in another sense a profound failure. Could Unionists not have lived in Redmond's Ireland?

Of course, some will argue that Home Rule in any event would have led to Irish independence over time. That is something about which we may debate but about which we can never know.

On a personal note, I incline to the belief that Irish independence, in which I am a strong believer, owes its existence to the armed resistance to Home Rule, and thus by supreme irony, it seems to me, the Ulster Covenant therefore numbers among the founding documents of Irish freedom.

It was that perception that caused MacNeill at the founding meeting of the Irish Volunteers in the Rotunda in Dublin in November 1913 and Casement at a subsequent

Volunteer meeting in Cork to rather naively cause some confusion by calling for “*Three cheers for Carson’s Volunteers*”.

Because the English Establishment was so ambivalent about the threat of force articulated in the Covenant, it handed a perfect precedent to Irish separatists. It also may have poisoned the minds and hearts of those nationalists who found themselves on the wrong side of the Border in 1922 and right up to the Belfast Agreement in 1998.

We must also leave to the debaters of insoluble issues the other question as to whether the partition of Ireland avoided civil war between Nationalism and Unionism or whether, in a sense, it confined that civil war to a “*phony civil war*” which here in Northern Ireland intermittently simmered and occasionally boiled over until the Belfast Agreement.

THE REPUBLICAN PERSPECTIVE

Speaking as an Irish Republican in the philosophical tradition of Tone, Davis and indeed Bulmer Hobson, I cannot identify completely with the separatist ideology of the Ulster Covenant. But it seems to me that Irish history – North and South – is moving on.

The establishment in the Belfast Agreement as a matter of international law of the right of the people of Northern Ireland alone the right to decide their own constitutional future is something I celebrate as an Irishman and which I profoundly respect.

I spoke a couple of years ago in the Magill Summer School about the logic of genuine republicanism and about what should be the true significance for Irish republicans of the Orange panel on the tricolour – it is not in my mind a flag of “*green, white and gold*”.

The vocation of promoting reconciliation among Irish people in my view takes precedence over the promotion of more immediate constitutional projects.

Those of us whose unconditional priority is for reconciliation between the identities on this island and for the creation of genuine respectful partnership between those identities take hope from the Belfast Agreement that we are about to enter upon an era of partnership, equality, reconciliation and mutual empathy between those traditions.

We all know that a straight line is said to be the shortest distance between two points. It has also been said that “*straight line extrapolation is the shortest distance between two mistakes.*”

I say that because I read an article by Gerry Moriarty in the Irish Times last January about some straws in the wind of Northern Ireland’s demography. He was previewing the expected release of census data here later this year. He pointed out that figures from the educational sector show the emergence of a new balance between the two religious identities, 57% of school children are described as Catholics and 42% Protestant. In Queen’s University there are 8,700 Catholic students and 6,700 Protestants. In NUU the numbers are 11,000 and 7,000 respectively.

A more recent article by Gerry Moriarty shows that Northern Ireland's population is now 1.8 million and the Republic's population is 4.6 million, giving the entire island a larger population (6.4 million) than at any time since the post famine census of 1851, and a higher population than ten European states including Finland and Denmark.

My reaction to reading this news was that the newly established era of legal equality between the major identities in Northern Ireland seems to be happening in the context of a coming numerical equality between the two main traditions.

Rather than vainly attempting to extrapolate future political trends or outcome from present sectarian head counts, it seems to me that the real challenge on this island, in all its parts, is now to set about the demanding task – nay the imperative task – of recognition of the values, the dignity, the ideals, the histories and the aspirations of the mixed identities we have and share on this island.

In this spirit and with these reflections, in this week of the centenary of Ulster Day, 28th September 1912, genuine Irish republicans, myself included, extend a warm hand of friendship to the descendants of those who signed the Covenant.

ENDS