

## **Karoli Gaspar 1916 Conference, 2 September 2016**

Jó napot kívánok!

I would like to extend my thanks to the Dean of the Humanities Faculty, Dr. Enikő Sepsi, and to the Vice-Dean, Dr. Dóra Pődör, for their very kind invitation to deliver the opening Address at this special conference organised by Károli Gáspár University to mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising.

2016, indeed, is proving to be a most momentous year. We mark not only the centenary of the Easter Rising but also the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian Uprising against Soviet domination. It is a happy coincidence that both countries are marking such significant anniversaries of what were undeniably key events in each country's history.

There are undoubtedly strong parallels between the two Uprisings. Both were singularly unsuccessful in military terms while at the same time leaving an indelible and profound impact on popular and political thinking not only in both countries but also on the wider international stage.

Both Uprisings exerted a very high cost on ordinary Irish and Hungarian civilians respectively, with thousands of civilian casualties and widespread destruction. Both Uprisings were profoundly impacted by the wider international context, the carnage on the Western front in dictating Britain's harsh response to the events of Easter Week and the unfortunate coincidence of the Suez Crisis probably inevitably dooming those seeking greater freedom on the streets of Hungary.

As Irish Ambassador in Hungary, it has been a great honour to contribute, along with my Embassy colleagues, to helping to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising in an appropriate fashion here in Hungary. Among the highlights were the live simulcast screening last March in the Urania Cinema in Budapest of the world premiere from the National Concert Hall in Dublin of the documentary on the 1916 Rising produced by the Institute of Irish Studies at Notre Dame University in the US.

The Embassy was also delighted that Budapest was one of eight European capitals which hosted the prestigious Portraits and Lives exhibition based on the volume of the same name produced by the Royal Irish Academy to commemorate the centenary of the Rising.

These events, along with others organised by the Embassy, including a photographic exhibition illustrating the parallels between the 1916 and 1956 Uprisings, formed part of a world-wide series of over 450 events organised as part of the Irish Government's official Ireland 1916 commemoration programme.

It has been very gratifying to see the strong local interest here in Hungary in the events of Easter 1916 and the clear resonances believed to exist with Hungary's own troubled past. It is just another affirmation of the affinity, close identity and common themes which Hungarians and Irish people identify in each other's history.

The theme of our conference today is both a remembrance and commemoration of the Easter Rising as well as examining how Ireland has changed and evolved in the intervening 100 years. This is very appropriate as it chimes very much with the carefully considered approach which the Irish Government has adopted to marking this centenary and indeed the whole turbulent decade which preceded the formal foundation of the Irish State in December 1922.

Before speaking about the issue of suitably commemorating highly significant and sensitive historical events, I would like to speak a little about the significance of the Easter Rising itself and try to give some background to what has led us to commemorate it in the way we have.

As I have already stated, the Easter Rising is clearly a seminal event in modern Irish history and in the evolution of an independent Irish State.

Speaking at the launch of the Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme at Collins Barracks in Dublin in March 2015, an Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, T.D., spoke about how Easter 1916 has come to be regarded in the period since independence as "marking the birth of our sovereign Nation."

The Taoiseach went on to say that "...the narrative of 1916 is an intrinsic part of our DNA as a state. It is our inheritance. It is our story."

In terms of its significance as a key historical event, the Easter Rising, in Irish terms, could be justly compared with the storming of the Bastille in 1789 or with the 1848 revolution here in Hungary.

Yeats summed it up perfectly in his famous words from *Easter 1916*:

“All changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.”

The Easter Rising, of course, took place in the midst of World War I, at a time when the old global order was collapsing amidst the carnage of the trenches.

Ireland at that time was very much part of the Imperial war effort, with some 210,000 Irishmen having volunteered to serve in the British Army. Many of those had been encouraged to enlist at the outbreak of war by the promise, made by respected nationalist leaders of the time such as John Redmond, that this was a fight for small nations, an opportunity for Ireland to demonstrate its entitlement to statehood and to that prospect of self-rule set out in the Home Rule Bill finally enacted by the Imperial Parliament in 1914 but then suspended with the onset of war.

Against such a background, it is not difficult to understand why the Easter Rising, which resulted in almost 500 deaths and reduced much of the centre of Dublin to rubble, was initially so unpopular with many ordinary citizens of Dublin and was viewed as an act of treachery, not least by many of the families of those serving in the trenches in France.

The Easter Rising was a violent act, a breach in what had been a thirty year struggle to achieve Home Rule by parliamentary means. Pearse, Clarke, Connolly and the other signatories of the Proclamation clearly intended it as such.

They feared that, faced with the continued resistance of the Ulster Unionists ably led by Dublin-born Edward Carson and with the active support of the Conservative Party at Westminster, no British Government, whatever its composition, could be trusted to make good the offer, indeed the legal obligation, of Home Rule for all of Ireland once the war ended.

Perhaps even more, they feared that, even if Home Rule was realised, it would not prove a stepping stone to greater independence but instead would see Ireland settle more comfortably to its place within the United Kingdom and the wider empire, in much the same way that Scotland had been persuaded to throw in its lot following the 1707 Act of Union.

The real question which therefore arises with the Easter Rising is, “was it necessary?”

Was it necessary to assert through arms and in blood her “old tradition of nationhood” and her “right to national freedom and sovereignty”, to quote the words of the Proclamation declaring the Irish Republic? Or could the British Government led by Herbert Asquith have been trusted to make good its pledges and to enact Home Rule once the war was concluded?

On the latter point, and with the benefit of hindsight, there seems little doubt that Home Rule for the entire island of Ireland would not have been attainable. At best, some lengthy suspension of its provisions from being applied to Ulster would have been the price tag demanded by London, confronted with the very real prospect of political conflict and violence in Ireland.

It might also be worth noting that a Scottish Home Rule Bill had also received its second reading in May 1914 before being similarly suspended due to the onset of war and subsequently more or less forgotten about, once the Armistice was declared in November 1918.

1916, therefore, and the Easter Rising is contested territory, a seminal event in our history which has given rise to conflicting interpretations and viewpoints which continue to be debated to this day.

It was not always thus.

I'm not quite old enough to remember the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966. But I was around and had just started my journey through the then Irish educational system in which, without too many exceptions, the heroes of 1916 were venerated.

It was certainly standard practice for a copy of the Proclamation to adorn at least the entrance hall, if not every classroom, in primary schools throughout the State.

Our aging President, Eamon de Valera, still the living embodiment of the patriotism and idealism which had inspired the Easter Rising and, of course, an actual participant in the events of that week, through his command of the garrison in Boland

Mills. Dev, as he was popularly known, who had been sentenced to death with the other leaders but spared through his birth in the US.

In short, there was an unquestioning attitude towards the Rising which had more or less obtained ever since the foundation of the State.

Certainly, the historical narrative of the time, such as it was and as vigorously inculcated by the Irish Christian Brothers who taught me, was that Pearse and the other signatories were true patriots who, through their actions, had virtually saved the soul of Ireland and dealt the crucial blow which would ultimately end English rule in Ireland.

Move on twenty-five years to 1991 and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising, and a very different picture emerges.

I had just started some months previously in what was still the Department of Foreign Affairs, working in our development aid division. Mary Robinson had just been elected the previous November as President of Ireland, the first woman to occupy the office.

My memory may be beginning to fade but I certainly have no recollection of any major events being held to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. While it may be going too far to say that the anniversary was ignored by officialdom, there certainly was a discernible sense of discomfort and a belief that to mark or celebrate the anniversary in any major way would not be appropriate.

The reason for this, of course, was the conflict in Northern Ireland or the Troubles as they were more popularly known, then well into its third decade.

More pertinently, there was no wish, through marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, to give a stage or platform to those in the Provisional IRA and their political movement, Sinn Féin, who claimed to be the only true heirs of Pearse, Clarke and the other signatories who had proclaimed the Republic on the steps of the GPO, before a small, bemused group of onlookers on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916.

Just as the Troubles represented the difference between how the 50<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the Easter Rising were marked in independent Ireland, so also the formal end of the Troubles, as signified by the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998,

represents the reason why we have now been able to reclaim our inheritance and once again embrace, if not necessarily fully endorse, the Rising and all that occurred during that final fateful week of April 1916.

And just as the Easter Rising represented the seminal event in the early decades of twentieth century Ireland, so also the Good Friday Agreement, endorsed by overwhelming majorities in both parts of the island, can be equally regarded as the seminal event to have occurred in Ireland during the latter part of the twentieth century, alongside our entry to the then European Economic Community in 1973.

Writing in the Belfast Irish News last year, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Charles Flanagan, T.D., has described how “through the Good Friday Agreement the people of this island, North and South, found the democratic resolution to the constitutional questions which convulsed Ireland one hundred years ago. The Agreement brought with it a new political reality, grounded in the wish of the people of the island of Ireland for peace and reconciliation.”

The Good Friday Agreement has created a new political dispensation in Ireland. Eighteen years on from its signature, it can still be regarded in some senses as very much a work in progress. However, it has transformed politics and society, both North and South, for the better and has instituted partnership government and the primacy of politics as indisputable facts within Northern Ireland.

Much as we must rightly applaud the Good Friday Agreement, it has thankfully not ended all historical debate in Ireland. Interpretations and views of the Rising still differ significantly. Many Irish people will openly admit to still being uncomfortable at commemorating an event which, in their view, only succeeded in re-introducing the gun into Irish politics.

And, it might be added, this is itself a debatable point, with others more inclined to point the finger at the Ulster Volunteers as more culpable in that regard, given their extensive gun-running activities following their establishment in 1912.

Reverting to the political philosophy which I studied back in UCD in the early 1980s, one might suggest in terms of historical interpretation of the Rising that we have gone through the thesis of triumphalism and hagiography, and the anti-thesis of revisionism, to now arrive at a new synthesis which emphasises the sheer complexity of the Rising and the need to appreciate and understand fully the turbulent global events which formed its backdrop.

This appreciation of the complexity of the Easter Rising, as well as the imperative now existing under the Good Friday Agreement to actively work for peace and reconciliation on the island, has informed the official approach adopted by the Irish Government to the commemoration of the centenary of the Rising.

It clearly would have been wrong to attempt to commemorate the Rising in isolation or as a stand-alone historical event. It can only be truly understood when viewed in its proper historical context, against the background of the period of profound global political turmoil and societal upheaval initiated by World War I.

It was for this reason that the Irish Government decided some years ago to commemorate not just the Easter Rising but rather the entire decade which preceded the foundation of the State at the end of 1922.

This decade, from 1912 and the onset of the Home Rule Crisis to December 1922 and the formal establishment of the Irish Free State, has been described by An Taoiseach as "...the single most important decade in modern Irish history – the one that laid the foundation of two States and radically altered the relationship between the island of Ireland and the United Kingdom."

Historical commemorations are invariably a sensitive subject. The reality often is that one man's triumph is another man's disaster.

The decision to commemorate not just one or two historical events but rather an entire decade reflects both a recognition as to the formative importance of this entire period as well as the fact that we were facing into a whole series of commemorations which would carry great significance for Irish people of all political creeds as well indeed for a wider European and global audience.

Included in this was the start of World War I as well as key moments and events in that war, such as the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 or the Battle of the Somme whose centenary we have just marked on 1 July this year.

In arriving at its decision to launch the Decade of Commemoration, the Government received the expert advice of an Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations chaired by Maurice Manning which recommended that the overall aim "...should be to broaden sympathies, without having to abandon loyalties."

Accordingly, Ireland is committed to remembering the key events of the Decade in a respectful and inclusive way, which we hope will help build a greater understanding of all traditions, as well as of different perspectives and narratives.

A number of key principles underpin this approach: full acknowledgement of the totality of the island of Ireland's history, the legitimacy of all traditions, mutual respect, and historical accuracy.

By embracing the plurality of narratives surrounding our island's history, by being truly inclusive in how we approach the past, by respecting all traditions of this island, it is our hope that this Decade of Centenaries will not be an obstacle but rather an opportunity for reconciliation and greater understanding.

This inclusive approach has entailed our President, Taoiseach and members of our Government participating in events which would previously have been considered inappropriate. The Taoiseach has regularly attended the annual Remembrance Sunday ceremony now for a number of years in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, scene of one of the worst Provisional IRA atrocities in November 1987. Similarly, Foreign Minister Flanagan has laid a wreath at the Cenotaph in Belfast on Remembrance Sunday in both 2014 and 2015 while our Ambassador to the UK, Dan Mulhall, has represented the Government at the Remembrance ceremonies at the Cenotaph in London.

President Higgins, along with Foreign Minister Flanagan, attended the centenary commemorations of the horrific Gallipoli campaign in Turkey in April 2015 while the President was also present at the main centenary commemorations of the start of the Battle of the Somme which took place in Thiepval on 1 July of this year.

Nor should we overlook the powerful symbolic importance of the two recent State visits, by Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland in April 2011 and by President Higgins to Britain in 2014. During her visit in 2011, the Queen laid wreaths in both the Garden of Remembrance, to honour those, including the 1916 leaders, who had died in the cause of Irish freedom, as well as at Islandbridge where Ireland's dead from the First World War are commemorated.

The inclusive approach we have adopted to the Decade of Commemorations has also allowed us to begin to confront certain uncomfortable realities. Not the least of these is the way in which the thousands of Irish people, from North and South, who fought and served in the British Army during World War I have been treated.

The unpalatable reality we are now confronting as a country is that, for far too long, these individuals were virtually airbrushed from our history, with little if any official or popular recognition of their efforts and their sacrifices. In the process, immeasurable pain has been caused to their families and descendants.

I have already mentioned the Battle of the Somme, the centenary of the start of which we have just marked on 1 July. One of the major battles of World War I, if unfortunately far from in any way decisive, the scale of the casualties endured on all sides was horrendous. By the time the battle ended in November 1916, there were 420,000 British, 200,000 French and 660,000 German casualties.

The Irish contribution to the Battle of the Somme was a significant and important one. It is estimated that over 3,500 Irish soldiers died during the battle, with many more wounded. The true total number of Irish casualties is unlikely ever to be known as many more Irish soldiers would have fought and died in other divisions of the British Army other than the specific Irish regiments, such as the Royal Irish Regiment, the Royal Irish Rifles, the Inniskilling Fusiliers and the Irish Guards, which fought.

Particularly poignant was the 5,500 casualties suffered by the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division on the first day of the battle when, displaying tremendous gallantry, they succeeded in breaching the German front lines and capturing the supposedly impregnable Schwaben Redoubt. These 5,500 casualties were men drawn almost entirely from one small community in Ulster. Nearly 2,000 soldiers from cities, towns, villages and town lands of the North were killed in the first few hours of fighting, an event and sacrifice which has seared itself into the folk memory of their community and inspired Frank McGuinness' wonderful play, "Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme".

Equally gallant were the soldiers of the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division whose deeds in capturing the towns of Guillemont and Ginchy in early September while enduring huge losses are being commemorated this weekend in France.

When the carnage and madness of the Somme eventually concluded, there was scarcely any corner or part of the island of Ireland which had not been affected and suffered losses. However, for those who eventually managed to make it back from the Somme and the trenches, they returned to an Ireland transformed and in turmoil following the Easter Rising and its aftermath and where, certainly in much of nationalist Ireland, there was precious little sympathy or welcome for those now viewed as having fought for King and Country rather than in response to John Redmond's clarion call to defend the Rights of Small Nations.

Ultimately, the great value of an inclusive approach to historical commemorations is that it empowers and enables us to reclaim our history. This includes recognising that, in any conflict, there is pain and suffering on all sides.

One of the final events held in the Ireland 1916 programme of events earlier this year was a remembrance ceremony held in Grangegorman military cemetery in Dublin for those British soldiers killed during the Easter Rising, many of whom would have been themselves Irish. For Irish nationalists, this could be regarded as the equivalent of holding a ceremony in Budapest to commemorate all the Soviet troops killed during the 1956 Hungarian Uprising.

Again, this underlines how the process of commemoration, which we might define as remembering events in all their complexity, is not always easy or comfortable. But it is necessary.

As a former student of history myself, I believe that 2016 has in many ways proved to be a most liberating experience for a great many Irish people. The Decade of Commemoration has allowed and, indeed, encouraged us to debate openly our past, to appreciate the complexity of the times confronting all those involved in the Rising, and ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, to once again feel comfortable about the Easter Rising as a significant moment in modern Irish history.

Speaking at the launch of the Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme in March of last year, the Taoiseach spoke about how the Easter Rising "...is a story that deserves to be told unambiguously and with pride."

It was a seminal event in our history which decisively set us on the road to full independence as a State.

The Easter Rising also proved to have major international resonance, serving as a reference point for independence movements far beyond the island of Ireland, in Africa, India and elsewhere in Asia.

And while one does not necessarily have to agree or approve of every action committed in the name of the Rising during that momentous week, the genuine motivations of its leaders, their legacy in the form of a Proclamation which still resonates and offers an inspiring vision of equality, individual rights and liberty, and the bravery of the signatories and other Rising leaders in being prepared to make the

ultimate sacrifice for their beliefs, all these are circumstances that have at this remove to be recognised and appreciated.

Again, I want to thank Karoli Gaspar University and the Faculty of Humanities for organising this important and timely conference. I have no doubt that it will contribute to much greater understanding of the complexity, significance and importance of the Easter Rising and equally of the importance of an open-minded and inclusive approach in dealing with sensitive historical commemorations.

Thank you again for your attention, köszönöm szépen.