Between Armed Rebellion and Democratic Revolution

The Irish Question in 1917

By Mark Duncan

The House of Commons filled with noise and animosity. It was 10 May 1916 and John Dillon, the veteran Irish Parliamentary Party MP, was skilfully skewering the British Government’s response to the events in Dublin over the previous two weeks: the ongoing executions of the rebel leaders of the Easter Rising; the holding of secret military trials; and the widespread harassment, arrest and deportation of those who were not even involved in the uprising. Dillon, who had witnessed the rebellion close-up, saw in the prosecution of this punitive policy the unravelling of decades of constitutional nationalist progress which had been expected to soon deliver the prize of an Irish Home Rule parliament. This was, as Dillon put it, the ‘fruit of our life work.’

‘We have risked our lives a hundred times to bring about this result. We are held up to odium as traitors by those men who made this rebellion, and our lives have been in danger a hundred times during the last thirty years...and now you are washing out our whole life work in a sea of blood.’¹

Dillon’s words proved prophetic. Just over two years later, the life’s work of a generation of Home Rule Irish nationalists had been all but swept away: the Irish Parliamentary Party was routed in the British general election of December 1918 when Sinn Féin, campaigning on a platform of complete independence for Ireland and abstention from Westminster, secured 73 of the 105 Irish seats available.

The political order had been upturned, yet the line that ran from Easter 1916 to December 1918 – from armed rebellion to democratic revolution - was neither straightforward nor inevitable. The intervening period was marked by further missteps by the British government, by division and decline within the Irish Parliamentary and, over the course of a series of crucial by-elections, by the emergence of Sinn Féin as a popular and effective political alternative.

¹Hansard, House of Commons debates, 11 May 1916
For the British government, the crushing of the rebellion and the round-up of suspected sympathisers signalled only the beginning of a response that could hardly avoid issues of governance and policy. And it didn’t.

For a start, the Government established a Royal Commission to investigate the rebellion which exposed the dysfunctionality of an Irish administration that, remarkably, it left largely unchanged.

More significantly, perhaps, the events of Easter compelled the British Government to re-address Irish constitutional questions that it had hoped had been shelved for the duration of the war. In May 1916, Prime Minister Herbert Asquith charged a reluctant David Lloyd George, his Minister for Munitions and a member of the coalition government, with re-opening negotiations with nationalist and unionist representatives with a view to finding a settlement on the divisive issue of Irish home rule.²

This he did, but in his own way and in a manner that was markedly different to what had been attempted before. Lloyd George eschewed the round table approach that had failed at Buckingham Palace in July 1914 when negotiations ended without agreement, the sticking point being not the principle but the practice of Ulster exclusion from a home rule settlement. The points of difference then had centred on how many counties in Ulster would be excluded from the Home Rule territory and for how long? And would exclusion be temporary or permanent?

These remained the core dilemmas when negotiations were revived in the summer of 1916. On this occasion, however, there would be no bringing together of nationalist and unionist leaders for face-to-face discussion.³ The Buckingham Palace format would not be reprised. Instead, Lloyd George met separately with both sets of negotiators and found agreement for a solution on the basis that the Home Rule Act of 1914 would come into force as soon as possible but would not apply to the six north-eastern counties; that Irish representation at Westminster would be reduced; and that, at the conclusion of the war, an Imperial conference would be convened to find a permanent settlement for Ireland.

For unionist and national negotiators, the compromise offered sufficient crumbs of comfort to earn their support. For unionist leader Edward Carson, the negotiating goal had been to ‘save something from the wreckage’ of Home Rule and the exclusion of six counties certainly did

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² Herbert Asquith informed the House of Commons that there was a ‘unique opportunity for a new departure’ on Ireland and that Lloyd George entrusted with undertaking a ‘mission of peace and reconciliation’. Quoted in Charles Townsend, Easter 1916: the Irish Rebellion (2005) p. 310

³ The nationalist delegation comprised the Irish Parliamentary Party MPs John Redmond, Joseph Devlin and Thomas Power O’Connor, but did not involve the sceptical John Dillon. Unionists were represented by Edward Carson and James Craig.
that.\(^4\) For John Redmond, there was at least the prospect that they would now have something to show for the efforts in the form of a Home Rule parliament, albeit he and his Irish Party colleagues would need to rely heavily on the influence of their Belfast-based MP, Joseph Devlin, to reconcile to the proposals those northern nationalists – and there were many - who were understandably hostile to any accommodation rooted in partition.

But what exactly was the nature of that partition and how long would the exclusion of the six counties last? Here, in what historian Eamon Phoenix has described as an act of ‘pre-meditated duplicity’\(^5\), Lloyd George offered assurances to the two parties that were not only incompatible, but inimical.

To Carson, in writing and using language of calculated ambiguity, he implied that Ulster’s exclusion would be permanent - ‘at the end of the provisional period, Ulster does not, whether she wills it or not, merge with the rest of Ireland’; John Redmond, meanwhile, was assuaged by an understanding that it would only be temporary in nature.

It was on the basis of these divergent understandings that the nationalist and unionist leaders won the support of their respective organisations. But that was not the end of it for Lloyd George. His proposals faced opposition from southern unionists and their supporters within the coalition government who, not having been consulted in advance, now threatened resignation. It was this internal opposition and the revelation in the House of Commons on July 19\(^{th}\) that exclusion could indeed be permanent that ultimately sunk the proposals.

The failure of the negotiations of May-July 1916 was devastating for the Irish Parliamentary Party. Its position within Irish nationalism, already weakened by a protracted war and the severity of the British response to the Rising, was further eroded.

To what extent can be gauged from the unsparing reaction from quarters it might once have considered naturally sympathetic. From a meeting of nationalists in Derry, one of the counties to be excluded from the proposed Home Rule settlement, the *Ulster Herald* delivered the following stark message: ‘We have done with Mr. Redmond. It is with regret, almost bordering on the tragic to make such a pronouncement.’ It wasn’t only Redmond, however. The Derry nationalists were likewise done with the long-serving Belfast MP Joseph Devlin, who, at the

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same meeting, found himself written off as ‘politically discredited’ and the ‘fallen idol of northern nationalism.’

The *Irish Independent* similarly focussed on the failings of an Irish Party leadership who had been ‘hoodwinked’ and ‘tricked’ in their negotiations with Lloyd George. This was not simply a knee-jerk response on the part of the country’s largest selling daily newspaper. Its opposition to partition was sustained and unyielding: throughout the two months of June and July 1916, the paper ran 52 editorials, 38 of them enunciating an anti-partition message.

And to this chorus line of influential critics were joined the Catholic bishops, among the most vociferous and trenchant of them the Bishop of Limerick, Dr. O’Dwyer. Writing to a Belfast Anti-Partition Committee, O’Dwyer denounced Irish political leaders for agreeing to sell northern nationalists ‘like chattels’ and cut them ‘off from their own country.’

Not prepared to be easily sold, some constitutional northern nationalists, in what was construed by the authorities as a ‘revolt of ...against Mr Redmond and his colleagues’, launched a new vehicle for resisting any carve-up of the country - the short-lived Irish Nation League. Founded following an anti-partition meeting in Derry in late July, the League was, within a month, reported to have had as many 29 branches and 1,000 members in the counties Derry, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh and Tyrone. Although its momentum slowed to a virtual stop, it was not before the League made a brief splash beyond its Ulster base: in September 1916, an estimated 15,000 people attended an Irish Nation League demonstration in the Phoenix Park. They went to protest partition but also to drown the Irish Parliamentary Party in their disapproval. The mere mention of the Party's leadership was enough to elicit ‘vigorous booing’ from the crowd and, in their absence, Redmond and his colleagues found themselves accused of falling short of the ‘ideals bequeathed to them by Parnell’.

However, their ‘crowning offence’, according to P. W. Kenny from Waterford, who chaired the rally, was the manner in which they had ‘tried to barter, for personal or party advantage, part of the sacred soil of Ireland and tampered with the birthright of the Irish people. Their methods were as discreditable as the ends in which they were aimed.’

II

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6 From Ulster Herald, quoted in *Irish Independent*, 26 July 1917.
8 Meleady, p. 381
9 UK National Archives, CO 904/100, Inspector General’s Monthly Report for August, 1916
10 Ibid.
11 Irish Independent, 10 September 1916
The message to be drawn from such gatherings was an obvious one. Far from re-asserting its ascendancy over the country’s constitutional future, the failed home rule negotiations of 1916 had left the Irish Parliamentary Party more enfeebled and mistrusted. The fall-out went further, however.

With the ending of the Lloyd George-led negotiations, the British government effectively disengaged from the work of seeking an Irish settlement as all was subordinate to the overriding goal of winning the war. Indeed, concern over the British administration of that effort led to Herbert Asquith's replacement by Lloyd George as Prime Minister in a more unionist-leaning coalition in December 1916 that pitch-forked Edward Carson into the role of First Lord of the Admiralty. How far Ireland fell in the priorities of British policy-makers was reflected in the absence of any reference to it in the period that followed.

What Ronan Fanning, the late historian of Anglo-Irish relations during this period, has described as the ‘almost utter indifference to Ireland’ can be gauged from the fact that, in the months from January 1917 to March 1918, ‘where the Cabinet met each weekday, only one substantive discussion of Irish policy’ took place.

It wasn’t as if there wasn’t much to discuss.

One of the first acts of the Lloyd George government was to release from British jails the remaining Irish prisoners that were interned in the aftermath of the Rising and the reception they received – all six hundred of them – suggested that separatist sentiment was gaining ground.

In fact, interest in, and sympathy for, the rebels took many forms and found expression in multiple ways: in the routine reportage of the nationalist press; in the public appetite for the ‘instant histories’, books and souvenir brochures that sprung up in the Rising’s wake; in the popularity of songs and lyrics honouring the rebel dead; and in the increased public visibility of republican badges, flags and rosettes.

Easter fell in the first week of April 1917 and from then until the end of the month, police recorded that about 256 Irish republican flags had been displayed at 165 separate locations across the country, garlanding the roofs of buildings, old ruins, telegraph poles and high trees.

14 See, for instance, Irish Independent, 26 December 1916
15 These have been presented in numerous collections, but nowhere as clearly or comprehensively as in Terry Moylan ed. The Indignant Muse: Poetry and Songs of the Irish Revolution 1887-1926 (2016). Moylan, in researching the book, says that he discovered over seventy 1916 related songs in the Samuels Collection in TCD.
They were hung for the principal purpose, it was alleged, of ‘annoying the police’, who risked assault in removing them.\textsuperscript{16}

What was missing from all these visible manifestations of separatist sentiment were the major public military drills of Irish Volunteer armies carried out with such frequency prior to the Rising; these were now outlawed, though members still met up under the guise of attendance at social and sporting events which served as fertile recruiting grounds.\textsuperscript{17}

If the growth of separatist politics throughout 1917 owed much to political circumstance, it benefited too from political good fortune.

At the very moment that credibility was draining from the Irish Party, opportunities arose to at once test and parade separatist strength. They presented in the form of a series of by-elections that allowed the Sinn Féin movement – the term had become shorthand label for rebel movement – to beat the Irish Parliamentary Party at their own constitutional game. This they did.

Repeatedly, in by-election after by-election: with Count Plunkett in North Roscommon in February, the father of the executed rebel leader Joseph standing as a Sinn Fein candidate in spirit if not in name; with Joseph McGuinness, still incarcerated in Lewes Jail, in South Longford in May; with Eamon de Valera, a recently released prisoner, who in July seized the East Clare seat left vacant by the death at war of Willie Redmond; with William T. Cosgrave, another ex-internee, who in August claimed a vacant seat in Kilkenny City, the smallest constituency in the country which hadn’t seen an election in twenty two years.\textsuperscript{18}

All of these by-election triumphs were notable for the profile of the victorious candidates – each of them had a direct link to the Rising – and for the remarkable vigour with which their campaigns were prosecuted.

On election day in South Longford, for instance, a ‘bewildering array of motor cars’, festooned with such slogans as “free Joe McGuinness and Ireland”, carried voters to the polling booths.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} UK National Archives, CO 904 102, Inspector General’s Report, April 1917. Only in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, were police attacked removing a republican flag. However, following a memorial mass in Cork for those executed in the rebellion in late April, police baton charged a crowd of 600 who were singing in Irish and hailing them with stones. The episode occurred in spite of an appeal by the Bishop of Cork, Dr. Colohan, that no street demonstrations accompany the memorial masses.

\textsuperscript{17} UK National Archives, CO 904 102, Inspector General’s Report, April 1917

\textsuperscript{18} The small size of the constituency was reflected in its poll: Cosgrave defeated his Home Rule opponent, John Magennis, by 772 votes to 392.

\textsuperscript{19} The Irish Times, 10 May 1917
From his English prison cell, McGuinness scraped to victory by a mere 37 votes (1,498 votes against 1,461 for his Irish Party opponent, Patrick McKenna), the outcome undoubtedly swayed by an eve of poll letter in the press attacking Home Rule on partitionist lines, written by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. William Walsh, and quickly circulated around the constituency.20

When the votes were counted and the result declared, the reactions – veering from jubilation to dismay – spoke of an increasingly polarised political atmosphere.

As Sinn Féiners celebrated with bonfires, flag waving, processions and taunts at the defeated Irish Party - in Ballaghadereen, the windows in the homes of some known republicans displayed “In Memoriam cards’ bearing the words “Sacred to the memory of the deceased Irish Party” – the Freeman’s Journal took aim at the ‘discreditable methods’ of Sinn Féin, which it accused of intimidating and pressurising non-committed voters.21

For the unionist-leaning Irish Times, South Longford was no more than a ‘reward’ for John Dillon’s ‘ostentatious championship’ of rebel prisoners in the House of Commons, the paper seeking grains of solace in its belief that the nationalists who voted for McGuinness were not ‘so mad as to have any faith in the prospects of an Irish republic.’22

Of course, The Irish Times was hardly the best gauge of the country’s political temperature.

For if the result from South Longford in May was close that from East Clare in July was emphatic. The constituency had been a sinecure of an Irish Parliamentary Party which hadn’t had to defend its seat since the 1890s and whose local party apparatus showed all the signs of the rustiness and decay that comes from a lack of electoral exercise. Sinn Féin simply swept them aside.

The campaign of the party’s candidate, Eamon de Valera - sentenced to penal servitude for life for his role in the Rising and only released in the weeks preceding polling day – was notable for the involvement of young priests and for its army of canvassers who, using motor cars, collected farm workers from the fields and brought them to and from the polling stations.23

When the votes were counted, de Valera had secured more than twice that (5,010 votes to 2,035) of his Irish Party opponent, Clare-native Patrick Lynch.

A triumphant de Valera emerged from Ennis Courthouse where he spoke in Irish to cheering crowds waving republican flags. Then, switching to English, he declared: “England has her answer. What

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20 UK National Archives, CO 904 102, Inspector General’s Report, April 1917; See also Freeman’s Journal, 10 May 1917.
21 Freeman’s Journal, 10 May 1917.
22 Irish Times, 11 May 1917. The Inspector General suggested otherwise in his report for July 1917. Remarking that the successful Sinn Féin candidates had all asserted that but for the rebellion conscription would have been enforced and declared that they will accept no form of Home Rule short of an Irish republic. This policy has captivated the Nationalist youth of the country, and although many of the older converts to Sinn Féin are not republicans, it is evidence that even they now accept a more ample measure of Home Rule than that provided by the existing Act.’ UK National Archives, CO 904/103 Inspector General’s Report, July 1917.
23 Irish Times, 11 July 1917.
shall I say to you? I shall simply say to you that you are men of Clare, that you are worthy descendants of Claremen who fought for Brian Boru, with the same spirit in your hearts today that your forefathers had a thousand years ago.”

III

De Valera never took his seat in the House of Commons. None of those elected on the separatist mandate did. They were avowed abstentionists, the refusal to take up places in a Westminster Parliament representing a core principle of the Sinn Féin party. But nor did Sinn Féin take up a position at the Irish Convention, which launched in Dublin in the very month that de Valera swept to victory in Clare.

The idea for the Convention was a British one – ‘Lloyd George’s new expedient for the pacification of Ireland’, as William O’Brien subsequently described it.25 The Convention was intended to involve ‘Irishmen of all parties for the purpose of producing a scheme of Irish self-government’26, but the executive of Sinn Féin was at one in declining the offer to participate.

Why? Because the ‘circumstances’ were not right and their conditions of entry were such as to preclude others from involvement.

Sinn Féin demanded that the Convention’s terms of reference allow for it to recommend complete Irish independence; that the Convention be elected on universal suffrage; and that Irish political prisoners be treated as prisoners of war.27

The absence Sinn Féin served to undermine the Convention from the very start, shattering its ambition to be fully ‘representative’ of Irish opinion.28

Instead, those that gathered at Regent House in Trinity College, Dublin, on its opening day in July 1917 were ostensibly drawn from ranks of middle class constitutional nationalists and unionists, their number encompassing not only parliamentarians but representatives from local authorities, chambers of commerce, labour organisations and the principal churches.

For a chair, the Convention eventually chose Sir Horace Plunkett, the founder of the Irish co-operative movement, who clearly felt the heavy burden of responsibility that had been placed upon him. On his election to the role, Plunkett confessed to his diary that he had ‘entered upon about the hardest task a modern politician has had to face.’29

24 Cork Examiner, 12 July 1917
The Irish Convention would generate much paperwork and debate, but end inconclusively in April 1918 when its final report exposed divisions that were the very reason it was needed in the first place.\(^{30}\)

However, the Convention was intended to assist in more than the achievement of an unlikely Irish consensus. To an extent, its establishment had also been an exercise in British deflection and delay. As long the Irish were talking amongst themselves, their problems would not intrude on the more pressing business of the winning the war.\(^{31}\) There were also those who believed the Convention would aid the Irish Party in seeing off the challenge of Sinn Fein. This it most certainly didn’t do. As the historian David Fitzpatrick elegantly put it: ‘The Irish Convention, like Lloyd George’s Home Rule proposals of 1916, was offered up to the Irish Party as a lifeline; but the party grabbed it too eagerly, caught up its limbs in the slack and drowned.’\(^{32}\)

IV

What waning life was left in the Irish Party was absorbed in the workings of the Convention. Meanwhile, an undistracted Sinn Féin was bursting with vitality, its growth fed by a complex of favourable factors. Writing in April 1917, months before the Irish Convention launched, the Inspector General for Ireland reported: ‘Many circumstances tend to promote sympathy for the [Sinn Féin] movement; notably a general belief that the Sinn Féin rebellion forced the Home Rule question to the front; resentment at the failure of the settlement proposals; dread of conscription, and a feeling that Ireland has not been equitably dealt with as regards the establishment of War industries...’.\(^{33}\)

None of this can be denied, but the rise of Sinn Féin also owed much to the efforts of the organisation itself. Throughout 1917 and 1918, as the historian Michael Laffan has asserted, it ‘pulled itself up by its own shoelaces’.\(^{34}\)

The series of by-election triumphs acted as both a measure and driver of Sinn Féin’s ballooning appeal, manifest in a growing party membership and the creation of an impressive network of local branches.

\(^{30}\) Key sticking points included control over customs and excise in any proposed Home Rule settlement and the Unionist refusal to agree to any all-Ireland solution. A good summary of the Convention is provided in Tomás Irish, *Trinity in War and Revolution 1912-23* (2015) pp. 185-191

\(^{31}\) As the historian Ronan Fanning has put it: ‘It allowed for the appearance of policy where none at all existed. FE Smith told an American newspaper in January 1918: “Let them keep talking, if they don’t agree it’s the fault of Irishmen and not of the English, for there is not an Englishman on the Convention. It’s an Irish problem and not an English problem.” ‘ See Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution, 1910-1922* (2013), p. 162


\(^{33}\) National Archives UK, CO 904 102, Inspector General’s Report, April 1917

Each advance begot the next as the formation of every new branch effectively galvanised efforts at further local recruitment.35 By the time Sinn Féin held its historic Convention in Dublin's Mansion House in October 1917 – only its 10th ever – its size was such that it drew over 1,700 delegates from about 1,009 clubs. What’s more, a further 200 delegates were refused entry because their clubs had not been affiliated by the prescribed time. The weight of such impressive numbers led the Irish Independent to editorialise that Sinn Féin was now representative of ‘by far the largest body of Irish Nationalists.’36

The truth of this statement was undeniable.

And true too was the statement delivered in the House of Commons by an exasperated John Redmond in very same week that the Sinn Fein Convention was gathering in Dublin. In a speech that attempted to waken British politicians to the disastrous consequences of their ongoing mismanagement of Irish affairs, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party observed that political passions were ‘probably at a worse pitch than at any time since the Rising in 1916.’37

Redmond accused both the Irish executive in Dublin Castle and the Irish military authorities of being ‘tactless’ and of engaging in ‘silly measures of aggression’ aimed at antagonising and confronting Sinn Féin.38

There could be no more tragic illustration of this ham-fisted approach than the death on hunger strike, in late September 1917, of Thomas Ashe, who had led the rebel forces in Ashbourne, Co. Meath, during the previous year’s Rising. Ashe’s death and the extreme treatment that brought it about - a subsequent inquest condemned his forced feeding as ‘inhumane and dangerous’ - had the effect of inflaming the nationalist press and bringing large crowds onto the streets of towns and villages across the country in protest.39

And at his funeral at Glasnevin Cemetery, which carried echoes of that of Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa in 1915, tens of thousands of sympathisers turned out to pay their respects to the latest in Ireland’s lengthening cast of martyred dead. Here, amid scenes of extraordinary family grieving, the trappings of a political funeral were observed. The last post was sounded and a volley of

35 Historian Michael Laffan explained the process as follows: One of the ‘main tasks of dedicated party members was to educate and indoctrinate their neighbours....Most inaugural meetings of Sinn Fein clubs consisted of an explanation of the party’s programme by someone who was prominent in either the district or at national level, and this was usually followed by the enrolment of new members and the selection of officers.....Branch meetings frequently took place after Sunday mass.”. Quoted from The Resurrection of Ireland, Op. Cit., pp. 204-205
36 Irish Independent, 26 October 1917
37 Freeman’s Journal, 24 October 1917
38 Ibid.
39 The Westmeath Independent declared: ‘The death of Thomas Ashe, and the circumstances attending it, has practically removed the last remnant of Redmondism from Irish life.’ Quoted in Irish Independent, 8 October 1917
shots was fired. Then, standing at the edge of Thomas Ashe’s grave, Vice-Commandant Michael Collins, a revolutionary leader still in the making, brought proceedings to a conclusion. "Nothing remains to be said", he remarked. "That volley which we have just heard is the only speech which it is proper to make above the grave of a dead Fenian."  

V

The guns, the military uniforms and the invocation of Fenian martyrs point to a movement seemingly in step with a tradition in Irish politics of physical force nationalism. And there were certainly those who presented themselves as such and who would have welcomed the opportunity to strike again at the old imperial enemy.

But these were very much in a minority. Even the police, who kept a close track on Sinn Féin’s developments and reported extensively on anything it considered seditious behaviour (there was no shortage of that), were unconcerned at the prospects of another rebellion. They rightly concluded that the separatists had neither the means to initiate such a revolt, nor the necessary inclination.

For certain, the inflammatory speeches and political activism bred an atmosphere of hostility towards British rule in Ireland and drilling by Volunteers – often using hurley sticks as rifles – was in places carried out, but this didn’t equate to a wholesale rejection of constitutional methods.

'The majority of the adherents of Sinn Féin are believed to be averse to physical force', the Inspector General reported in October 1917, 41 an interpretation that was largely echoed in the pages of the best-selling Irish Independent, which observed how the movement embraced 'many thousands of sympathisers who cannot subscribe to the whole policy propounded by its leaders. Former supporters of the Irish Party have flocked in their tens of thousands to Sinn Fein, not because of wholehearted conversion to its doctrines, but because they are so sick of the empty tricks and sorry stage-play of the Irish Party and their leaders that they want to get rid of them in short supply.' 42

The rejection of the Irish Parliamentary Party in favour of Sinn Féin was less a rejection of constitutionalism than of its established Irish form.

What was being jettisoned was a constitutional politics centred on the parliamentary chambers of Westminster.

40 Irish Independent, 1 October 1917
41 UK National Archives, CO 904/94, Inspector General’s Report, October 1917
42 Irish Independent, 26 October 1917
In October 1917, Eamon de Valera, addressing the Sinn Féin Convention after being unanimously elected the party's new President, spoke to this very issue: ‘Some people talk of Constitutionalism’, he said. ‘Let them show us a constitution that is acknowledged by the Irish people and then tell them I will loyally obey that constitution.’

Sinn Féin emerged from that Convention with not only a new leader, but a different organisational structure and a clear, agreed sense of direction. Unlike the Irish Parliamentary Party, whose *modus operandi* had been to court British political support for Irish nationalist ambitions, Sinn Féin's objective was to ensure that Ireland's case would be considered as part of a much wider reconstruction of the post-war international order.

The ambition was clear-cut and set out in its new Constitution: ‘Sinn Fein aims at securing the international recognition for Ireland as an independent Irish republic.’

Not content to wait until that recognition had been conferred on the country, Sinn Féin more immediately committed to the denial of British authority in Ireland by 'any and every means available.'

That would involve the party in a campaign of opposition to the proposed introduction to Ireland – in April 1918 - of Conscription, the fallout from which saw the arrest and imprisonment, yet again, of many of Sinn Féin’s leaders, its four MPs included.

If the purpose of this internment had been to check the Sinn Féin ascent, it failed spectacularly. Electorally, the momentum of Sinn Féin’s advance had slowed somewhat in the early months of 1918 (albeit the three successive by-election defeats they suffered were in constituencies where they were always likely struggle), but in the wake of the Conscription crisis and the ending of the war, the party’s pre-eminence in nationalist Ireland was confirmed.

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43 Report of the proceedings of the Sinn Fein Convention held in the round room Mansion House, Dublin, on Thursday and Friday 25th and 26th October 1917. A digital version of this report is accessible online at [http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=SamuelsBox1_027](http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=SamuelsBox1_027)

44 Michael Laffan devotes a chapter to ‘The Party: Structures and Members’ in his book, *The Resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin Party 1916-23* (1999). Until October 1917, he writes, the ‘movement or party was run by ad hoc groups which functioned great ceremony’; what was adopted at the Convention, and what served the party until its disintegration in 1922, was an ‘elaborate pattern of assemblies and committees, of interlocking and overlapping bodies’. It was, Laffan suggests, ‘democratic almost to excess.’ *Resurrection*, Pp. 170-173.

45 Report of the proceedings of the Sinn Fein Convention held in the round room Mansion House, Dublin, on Thursday and Friday 25th and 26th October 1917. A digital version of this report is accessible online at [http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=SamuelsBox1_027](http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=SamuelsBox1_027)

46 Ibid.

47 There were a series of by-elections in 1917. The first in North Armagh and Mid-Armagh were safe unionist seats, where Nationalists hadn’t challenged since 1886. However, in South Armagh, a bitter campaign was fought, ending with the Nationalist candidate Patrick Donnelly comfortably defeated Sinn Féin’s Patrick McCartan, a Tyrone-man who was then working as a doctor in a New York hospital, by 2,324 votes to 1,305; In Waterford, John Redmond’s son William chose to inherit his seat and defeated his Sinn Féin opponent. William Redmond had been a MP for East Tyrone from 1910 and his
The general election of 1918 was the first in eight years and the first to be held with a revised franchise that transformed the very essence of Irish (and British) democracy.48 Never before had so many Irish people – men and now, for the first time, women – been given the vote and their choice was emphatic.

The election result did nothing to instantly alter the constitutional position of Ireland within the British Empire, but there was no doubting the democratic revolution that had taken place.

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48 The Representation of the People Bill, 1918, added 8 million voters to the electoral register across the UK.

decision to contest in Waterford left his own seat vacant – in the subsequent by-election, the IPP defeated Sinn Féin again, by 1,802 votes to 1,222.

48 The Representation of the People Bill, 1918, added 8 million voters to the electoral register across the UK.