

Centenary of Irish Independence - 100 years on

Good evening, everybody and welcome to my academy. My name is Joey Kennedy and tonight I will be speaking about the Centenary of Irish Independence, and I look back on the past 100 years, since our beautiful country was officially created, and I will also be looking forward to the future at the possibility of a United Ireland.

Tonight, I will speak about the following

- Signing of the treaty
- Irish Civil War 1922-23
- The Troubles
- The Good Friday Agreement
- The Prospect of a United Ireland
- The Rise of Sinn Féin

Signing of the treaty

In July 1921, a truce was arranged between British and Irish republican forces, negotiations were opened and ended in the signing of the Treaty. The treaty was signed in 10 Downing Street on the 6th of December 1921. Michael Collins said it provided "Freedom to achieve even more freedom".

The Treaty gave the 26 southern counties of Ireland which led to the Irish Free State as we know it today. The treaty gave the state a considerable degree of Independence – the same within the British commonwealth as Australia and Canada. The treaty did not overturn the partition of Ireland but instead made provision for a boundary commission to review the border.

In the end, the border remained unchanged. The British military garrison (which is a group of troops who were stationed in Ireland) was to be withdrawn and the Royal Irish constabulary police was to be disbanded.

However, the settlement dissolved the Republic declared in 1918 by Sinn Féin and pledged Irish TDs or members of parliament to swear allegiance to the British monarch. The British retained three naval bases along the Irish coast at Cobh, Bearhaven and Lough Swilly. It also confirmed the partition of Ireland between North and South, which had already been instituted under the 1920 Government of Ireland Act.

For all of these reasons, the Treaty was viewed as a step backwards by many Irish Republicans and nationalists. It was narrowly passed by the Dáil or republican parliament in January 1922 after heated debate, but the President of the Republic, Eamon de Valera and two of his ministers resigned in protest. Having declined to take part in the Treaty negotiations, Arthur Griffith said "it was like playing a match with having your best player in the reserves,"

Eamonn de Valera promoted a revision whereby Ireland would have 'external association' with the British Commonwealth. Those who had signed the Treaty, headed by Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith formed a Provisional Government to oversee the handover of power from the British to the new Irish state.

However, what brought about civil war was the split in the ranks of the IRA. From February 1922, Collins began building a new National Army from pro-Treaty IRA units. In March 1922 the IRA called a convention and the majority refused to accept the right of the Dáil to dissolve the Republic. The two sides almost came to blows over who would occupy Limerick. In April a hard-line anti-Treaty IRA group under Rory O'Connor (Who is in fact an Old Clongownian) occupied the Four Courts, the centre of the courts system in Dublin, in defiance of the Provisional Government and the Treaty. Michael Collins managed to avert bloodshed in the short term by organising a pact with Eamon de Valera to re-unite Sinn Féin and a similar initiative with the anti-Treaty IRA, which proposed joint operations against Northern Ireland.

In June 1922, the first elections were held in the Free State. Just before the elections were held, the pact between pro and anti-Treaty sides broke down over the inclusion of the British monarch in the Free State's constitution. Michael Collins' pro-Treaty Sinn Féin won a majority of seats

The treaty came at the end of a pivotal year in Irish history. In May 1921, Northern Ireland was created, and the unionist leader Sir James Craig subsequently became its first prime minister. King George the fifth officially opened the Northern Ireland parliament in June and used his speech to appeal for peace and reconciliation on the island.

But the treaty stopped one war but started another.

The Irish Civil War

The Irish Civil war was a conflict between Irish nationalists in 1922-23 over whether to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

Just ten days later, after the treaty was agreed, a confluence of events conspired to spark civil war out of the tensions over the Treaty. First a retired British general, Henry Wilson, was shot dead in London by two IRA members, who were later hanged. It has never been proved who ordered the killing, but the anti-Treaty IRA certainly had nothing to do with it and it may even have been ordered by Collins himself in revenge for Wilson's role as military advisor in Northern Ireland.

The British blamed the IRA group in the Four Courts and threatened Collins that they would attack the Four Courts, using the 6,000 British troops still in Dublin, if he did not do it.

Secondly, pro-Treaty forces arrested anti-Treaty IRA officer Leo Henderson and in response the Four Courts garrison abducted a Free State officer, JJ Ginger O'Connell.

Michael Collins and the Provisional Government gave the Four Courts garrison a final chance to surrender and hand back O'Connell or they would attack the Courts. The ultimatum ran out and pro-Treaty troops opened fire on the Courts with artillery borrowed from the British on June 28, 1922. This action caused IRA units around the country to take sides and most, especially in the south, sided with the anti-Treaty faction, now headed by Liam Lynch.

Eamon de Valera initially re-joined the IRA as an ordinary volunteer but later, in October 1922, set up a clandestine republican government to oppose the Free State.

Both sides developed rival narratives to support their position. The pro-Treaty or Free State line was that the Dáil had voted for the Treaty and the people had endorsed their decision in an election in June 1922. They were therefore upholding democracy, the 'will of the people', and the 'people's rights' to establish an Irish government under the Treaty. Those in the IRA who opposed them had mutinied against their civilian authorities and were 'mutineers' or 'irregulars'.

The anti-Treaties, or republicans argued that the Treaty had been imposed by the British under threat of war, that there could be no free vote while there was British threat of re-occupation, and that the Treaty did not represent true Irish independence.

They claimed that the Provisional government was really a 'military junta' doing Britain's bidding.

The pro-Treaty forces took Dublin after a week's fighting and then proceeded to secure the other towns and cities held by the anti-Treaties. Anti-Treaty strongholds in Cork and Kerry were taken by sea in a series of landings in July and August 1922, meaning that by the end of that month, it appeared that the pro-Treaty forces had won. British supplies of armoured vehicles and artillery effectively decided the war's conventional phase in their favour.

The Troubles

The Troubles is what we call the period in time from 1969 to the late 1990's. There was conflict in and around Northern Ireland. It was all about who should run Northern Ireland and who should Northern Ireland belong to. Some people in this room will remember turning on the news every evening and being told that more and more people were being killed.

Who were the sides of the conflicts?

Firstly, the nationalist and republican sides want a free, Independent, and united Ireland, its members are broadly catholic

Secondly the loyalists and unionists, they owe their heritage to the 17th century when protestant settlers came particularly from Scotland, and they want to remain in the UK and want to retain this strong link with the United Kingdom.

The crucial thing to understand is that within each of these sides you have a multitude of groups all with different ideas not just how best to achieve their goals but what is the most important thing to achieve. That's why you have multiple political parties representing both of those sides.

We talked about sides wanting different things, that's a really important thing to remember. Saying two sides kind of hides the reality many of the competing issues

What were the origins of the conflict?

This was a conflict built on identity and historical memory. Take the year 1916

- To the unionist and loyalist community that was the year that the Ulster division made its sacrifice at the battle of the Somme
- To the republican and nationalist community, 1916 was the year of the Easter rising in an attempt to throw off British rule

Both events were in the same year, but people in the same community living only a few kilometres away will have different reasons to commemorate the year. These kinds of events build into an identity, that you have an island, and the majority of the island is catholic and the minority mainly living in the north which are protestants. You then have the first world war you, have a war of Independence, you then have a treaty at the end of that, you have a civil war in Ireland as to the extent of which people are happy accepting this, accepting the breakup of this island that they fought for and you have that war coming to an end with the victory of the pro treaty creating the Irish free state.

The Irish free state is then created, which then morphs into Northern Ireland as we know it today because drawing a line on a piece of paper, drawing a line on a map doesn't really quite reflect what is going on in reality. You still have after the partition of Catholics living in Northern Ireland and Protestants living in the republic and their lies the tension that begins to escalate until the 1960's. Then fast forward to the sixties, this is a period when life for the less well-off people in Northern Ireland was very hard. Unfortunately, the catholic community in Northern Ireland did not have access to the same services and the same systems as the protestant communities. That then causes problems, divisions and resentment for the catholic community who then wish to redress that and that is when you get clashes and violence and that brings you back to 1916 when British troops come in and try to keep the peace, that then leads you to the situation where Northern Ireland is the run directly from London and that then sets the scene for the Troubles.

The Violence

The people of Northern Ireland got very used to violence, they also got very used to segregation because that's the way it has been in the north.

Communities that don't mix and in many cases communities that were divided and still are divided by physical barriers, children not going to the same school, people not supporting not just different football teams but different sports. There is very little that brings these people together, the only common denominator in these two communities is loss because layered all over their community is violence. Both the larger scale events that we are all familiar with like Bloody Sunday, bloody Friday, massacres, and battles are all these different things, but laid against them is the reality of sectarian violence. A murder or a beating of a member of one community is retaliated against with extreme force, there is violence and vast amount of distrust between each side.

But both sides are all trying to win this PR war, that violence is a means to an end, but violence in itself can be counterproductive, and no side wants to be seen in the wrong. The way things looked was often as important as the way things actually were.

Major events of the Troubles

- Oct. 5, 1968: First clash between civil rights marchers and RUC in Derry.
- July 14, 1969: First death of the Troubles when a 70-year-old farmer, believed to be an onlooker, is struck in melee outside Dungiven Orange Hall in County Derry
- Aug. 9, 1971: Internment. Fifteen die and 300 arrested.
- Jan. 30, 1972: Derry's Bloody Sunday. The British army kills 13.
- July 21, 1972: Bloody Friday. IRA kills nine with bombs in Belfast.
- May 17, 1974: Car bombs in Dublin and Monaghan kill 31.
- March 1, 1981: Bobby Sands starts his hunger strike
- April 9, 1981: Bobby Sands, leader of the hunger strikes, wins seat in Westminster election
- May 5, 1981: Bobby Sands was found dead in his cell in HM Maze prison after 66 days of hunger strike
- Nov. 15, 1985: Garret FitzGerald and Margaret Thatcher sign Anglo-Irish Agreement
- Nov. 11, 1987: Eleven die in IRA bombing of Enniskillen Poppy Day commemoration.
- October 1993: IRA bomb explodes prematurely on Shankill Road killing 10 including the bomber. A week later loyalist gunmen kill seven in retaliation in pub at Greysteel, Co. Derry.

- Aug. 31, 1994: IRA announces first cease-fire, followed by UDA and UVF several weeks later.
- February 1996: Canary Wharf bombing in London kills two and ends IRA cease-fire.
- Sept. 15, 1997: Sinn Féin join multi-party peace talks.
- April 10, 1998: Finally, the Good Friday agreement was signed by all sides. This brought the end to the violence of the Troubles and for once people could look to the future for hope.

Over the course of the Troubles over 3500 were killed.

The Good Friday Agreement

Like I just said there, the Good Friday Agreement was reached on the 10th of April 1998.

There was a growing realisation that nobody was going to fully achieve all of their aims, you had so many people with so many different goals and nobody could agree, and it came to the realisation that you weren't going to fully achieve everything that you had hoped to, and that realisation ran parallel with the weariness of the violence.

The Good Friday agreement was a pathway to peace on our island, that Northern and Southern Ireland will move forward without violence on both sides and the crucial thing from the agreement that Northern Ireland would govern itself. The fact that the peace process lasted through all the violence and the disagreement is Hope. The peace process shows that a situation where people on either side want to cause harm to each other for the freedom of their country, that they all sat down together and talked made a massive difference. It took courage from each side to compromise for the better of the people.

After hundreds of years of violence there was finally peace on our island, but none of this could have been achieved without the work of one man who is the most influential person of this process for me, myself personally is the great John Hume

We all owe John Hume an enormous debt for his extraordinary vision and courage. He achieved virtually what everyone had said was simply impossible and not just changed the course of Irish history but all our lives forever. John Hume always said that the problem wasn't a divided country, but it was that the people on the island were divided. One of my favourite quotes from John Hume is when he won the Nobel Peace prize.

"All conflict is about the same thing, no matter where it is, it's about difference, whether difference is your religion, your race, or your nationality, and the message you have to get across, is that difference is an accident of birth, none of us chose to be born and we certainly didn't choose to be born into any particular community, there are not 2 people in the room now who are the same, there are not 2 people in the whole world who are the same, difference is the essence of humanity and therefore respect for difference should be a very normal and common thing but it is the first and deepest principle of REAL PEACE.

Just before the signing of the Good Friday agreement, John Hume was on the BBC being interviewed and at the time the IRA was showing some resistance to signing the agreement, but John Hume turned to the camera and said "This is a message to the IRA, when you are thinking of signing the agreement remember the words of Padraig Pearse just before he was executed "Lay down your arms, lest you bring too much suffering to your own people".

I think many people are eager to forget the Troubles, and many people turned their back on Northern Ireland as if their problems were not our problems but even in the darkest days like all great peacemakers John had a vision and along with David Trimble, he found the light in all the darkness. He was known as the architect of the peace process. John Hume was a giant, he changed Ireland and it is very hard to think of the country that it would be without him. It is John Hume's Ireland and according to Colm Eastwood we are now living in the Ireland he had fashioned and imagined. A man dreamed of peace and that dream became a reality

The Prospect of a United Ireland

100 years after the signing of the treaty, is it time to now start talking about a united Ireland, or would a border poll be dangerous and divisive?

The 310-mile-long border separating Northern Ireland and the republic was once marked by barbed wire, with watch towers manned by machine gun holding soldiers, today it has been replaced with a motorway and there are 208 public roads crossing the border and it is impossible to tell where one country ends and where the other begins.

These motorways and roads are a symbol of peace. Although the border is nearly invisible, it was once marked by hatred, hostility from Republicans aligned with the Republic of Ireland, and the Unionists who want Northern Ireland to remain tied to the United Kingdom.

Since the Irish War of Independence against Britain ended in 1921, the island of Ireland has been divided into North and South. But reunification has always remained an aspiration for Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland and political parties in the Republic —without any clear path to fruition. Now, nearly a century after the island was divided, reunification is back on the agenda as a realistic possibility and not just a long-term goal. It's one of the main points on the election manifesto of Sinn Féin, the political party that's topping the polls at the moment and is favourite to form the next government.

Where do the Republic of Ireland's political parties stand?

Since the Good Friday Agreement, both of the main parties — Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil — have said that they ultimately want to see a united Ireland. But it remains a talking point without a clear pathway. The former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said he believed a border poll in the wake of Brexit "would not achieve a united Ireland but what it would do is give rise to further nationalism, further sectarianism and further polarisation."

He added that he believed in working with all sides of the divide in Northern Ireland. "What I believe in is the politics of John Hume who spoke less about united Ireland and more about an agreed Ireland, that we need to agree the arrangements and the relationships, north and south, east, and west

What would it take for Irish unity to happen?

While a border poll might be successful in the Republic, there is a good chance it would be voted down in the North. The Good Friday Agreement recognized that a substantial portion of the population of Northern Ireland wished to bring about a united Ireland and that a border poll could be called by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State if it appeared likely that a majority of those voting would express a wish for Northern Ireland to form part of a united Ireland. The agreement states that "A poll should be called "if at any time it appears likely to him or her that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland".

If this ever occurred, then you would have a referendum in the North and similarly in the Republic. It's not clear exactly what the terms of the referendum would be, so on the legal constitutional side, the pathway to a united Ireland is a little bit fuzzy about how it would come about,

The core arguments around a United Ireland

For a United Ireland

The split along the island of Ireland has long been justified because of cultural, and mainly religious, differences. The Protestant majority in Northern Ireland is traditionally loyal to the United Kingdom, whereas the Catholic majority in the Republic, have traditionally fought against British authority. But changing demographics are distorting this picture.

By 2031, it is estimated there will be a massive demographic shift in Northern Ireland with Catholics at 50% and Protestants at 38%, with 12% proclaiming neither religion. This data suggests support for a United Ireland will grow in the future.

Besides the political and cultural arguments that are made, proponents of a United Ireland point to the economic rationale behind reunification. In the 1990s, business leader Sir George Quigley argued that regardless of how Ireland was governed, it made sense for such a small island to operate as a single economic unit. Sinn Féin has described the current economic settlement as 'a democratic deficit that stunts economic development'.

Against a United Ireland

Supporters of the Union argue that if Irish reunification were to ever happen, it would place serious financial pressures on the Republic of Ireland. 30% of Northern Ireland's workforce are directly employed by the United Kingdom's public sector, and some 20% of the workforce earn less than a basic living wage.

Given that Northern Ireland is the slowest growing economy in the British Isles, it is suggested that the only way the Republic could afford the costs of a United Ireland would be through large tax increases and spending cuts.

Unionists also argue that reunification would risk further political violence and terrorism. While violence in Northern Ireland is often associated with the IRA and republicanism, a small majority of unionists is dedicated to the Union, that there is a risk that future constitutional change, may lead them to resort to violence to maintain the relationship. In the 70s, the IRA showed that even a small minority can fight a guerrilla war for decades and kill thousands of people.

The unhappiness of a certain section of the Unionist population, sensing a growth in republicanism and dissatisfaction with Northern Ireland's new trading arrangements post Brexit, was evident in a number of consecutive nights of street violence in April 2021.

Poll in my year group

While doing my research for my academy I asked a handful of people in my year group this question "Would you like to see a united Ireland in your lifetime"

Here are the results:

70% of people said NO
25% of people said Yes

5% of people said that they are unsure

Here are the most common replies I received

If they voted no, then most people said that "it doesn't make economic sense"

If they said that they were unsure, then they replied "I don't know enough about it"

And if they said yes, then most people said it was because "It would look good on the map"

The Rise of Sinn Féin

If a United Ireland were to happen soon it will happen because of this political party - Sinn Féin - Many people who hear that name think of hope, promises and a brighter future, but still, a lot of people think of the past and the strong links with the IRA and the bloodshed they have caused, but more than 20 years after the Good Friday agreement it is the most popular political party, and how did this come about? Is there a rise of nationalism in the country? Are young people forgetting about the past? These are the questions that are needed to be asked for the future of the country.

Many people say that it is because of the failure of current and previous governments who in no doubt have made mistakes. In my opinion I don't think Sinn Féin is the right future for our country. To me Sinn Féin has a lot of empty promises. Drifting away from a United Ireland Sinn Féin say that they will sort out the housing crisis, but when researching for this academy I was watching the Claire Byrne show and Michael O'Flynn who is a housing developer said that Politics must be taken out of social housing because it is just a cat and mouse game, and no political party will be able to sort it out"

One thing I must give to Sinn Féin, is their massive presence on social media, because they know that all the young generation are social media, for example TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. They know that one day they will need our vote and they are telling us all the things we want to hear for our future.

But when it comes to a united Ireland there must be respect for each side because there are people in Northern Ireland who identify as British and there are people who identify as Irish. But it all comes down to democracy at the end of the day.

To Conclude:

When I look back on what happened the past one hundred years on this island, like so many people from the republic and Northern Ireland. I do so with a deep sense of loss and sadness, because for the past 100 years, partition has polarised people on this island, it has institutionalised difference and it remains a symbol of cultural, political, and religious division between our communities. If one day we do see a United Ireland, I hope and I pray that it will happen with a great deal of respect for both sides, that it will happen because of the will of the people but most importantly I hope it will happen peacefully because all the hard work of so many people to retain peace on our island cannot just evaporate.

We need to learn from our mistakes of the past, work together as a nation to have respect for every race, religion, and nationality, and we must retain real peace within our communities.

We need to create an Ireland we all feel part of an Ireland we all feel proud of, an Ireland for All!!!

Thank You