

# Taoiseach Micheál Martin: “The Handover of Dublin Castle, A Centenary Conference”

From [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

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Published on 15 January 2022

Last updated on 20 January 2022

## Check against delivery

A dhaoine uaisle go léir.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh as an gcuireadh cineálta a sheol sibh chugam chun labhairt libh ag an gcomhdáil thábhachtach seo. Ba mhaith liom a aithint go háirithe - obair dóibh siúd atá freagrach as cur le chéile an liosta rannpháirtithe céimiúla agus léargas sa scolaíreacht leathan agus dhomhain ar an éirí amach agus dúshraith an Stáit. Go raibh míle maith agaibh as an sár-obair sin.

January 16th 1922 is by any measure an important date in our history. It touches upon many fundamental developments in the last century as well as movements and struggles of previous times.

However, it was not a day of great emotion and ceremony.

In fact, it was defined by improvisation and no small amount of uncertainty.

This should not be surprising to us given that the first planning meeting on the handing over of the administration didn't actually occur until two days later.

Whatever their feelings early in the day, as matters proceeded everyone involved began to see the deep symbolic importance of the moment.

Many of the senior civil servants present had been involved in running the war against the forces of Dáil Éireann and in negotiating both the truce and the treaty.

They only began to feel the full scale of the change that was under-way when they were summoned to the Privy Council Chamber to meet their new ministers.

On the other side, cabinet minutes record that those same ministers started the day discussing what they referred to as “taking over the various Departments of State” – and ended the day noting “the surrender of Dublin Castle.”

Kate O’Malley and John Gibney’s comprehensive account of the events as they unfolded gives us a new opportunity to get a sense of the human side of the day.

When you step back from the formalities and the public appearances, perhaps the most striking thing you see is that together with a sense of satisfaction there was also an undeniable sense of uncertainty and fatigue.

After all, it was only six weeks since the Treaty had been signed and each member of the provisional government had participated in intense and at times tumultuous campaigns and debates.

Bearing heavily on their minds were the sharp divisions in the Dáil together with the narrow majority backing the Treaty and the provisional government.

Just a few days earlier, rancour during the Dáil election of a new President went so far that figures as significant as Michael Collins and Constance Markiewicz were reduced to shouting abuse at each other.

On that eventful Monday everyone understood what had been done, but no one was clear about what would come next.

For many, there was hope and relief - but very few showed optimism and even fewer believed that a final destination had been reached.

The process of establishing a new state began here on January 16th but was not fully completed until December 6th. Between those two dates a remarkable number of decisions were taken and events occurred which had profound implications for the future of our country.

The British did not leave on January 16th, and the nature of the withdrawal during the year is something which deserves more attention for its impact on the divisions within the country.

And of course, the drift towards, and sudden outbreak, of civil war casts a shadow over everything.

This conference forms an important part of marking 100 years since the establishment of an independent state, and it is the beginning of a year of activities.

Amongst these, a commemoration will be held in September in the Garden of Remembrance in memory of all of those who lost their lives in the Civil War. A national academic conference will be hosted by UCC. This will provide another opportunity to explore the many aspects of our civil war; its causes, its impact, its context, and, as Anne Dolan has put it, the bonds which remained strong enough to “put this place back together”.

This conference marks a step in an ongoing programme to remember and reflect on events which are both central to our history and to understanding our social and political culture.

The tone and much of the content of the centenary commemorations have been set by the Expert Advisory Group led by Maurice Manning and Martin Mansergh. The Group has performed its role with both rigour and balance – showing yet again that we have nothing to fear from challenging debates about our history.

As Taoiseach, I am very conscious that there is a delicate balance to be found in a free democracy between appropriate commemoration and the promotion of a fixed national narrative.

Every state has a right to remember and honour its founders and the traditions which both won the support of the people and secured progress.

However, this can never be allowed to become inflexible and closed to new perspectives. It must respect the fact that diverse societies allow open, reflective debate.

I think our approach to commemorations is both meaningful and respectful.

The first major public commemorations were in 1998 for the bicentennial of the 1798 Rising and in 2006, marking the 90th anniversary of the 1916 Rising.

They showed that a modern and increasingly diverse republic could mark foundational events in a way which did not involve trying to impose find an official version of history.

Where appropriate, difficult issues like sectarianism were highlighted. They were not a demonstration of the institutional strength of the state, but a demonstration of social bonds and values.

This informed what has been the very successful approach to the Decade of Commemorations.

I think it's important for us to appreciate how our state's approach to history, our approach to commemoration, isn't some abstract matter which is irrelevant to the realities of today.

The truth is that we live at a moment when attempts to distort and manage public histories are becoming more and more serious.

Attempts to demand a closed national narrative, to limit research, to reanimate historical animosities, and to block progress in the name of historical traditions are becoming more and more common.

We have seen this very dramatically in recent weeks where the Russian government actually criminalised an organisation devoted to documenting the enormous crimes of the Stalinist period. Historians are literally being threatened and jailed for publishing details about forced labour camps which existed from sixty to a hundred years ago.

In a development which any former colonial country should carefully note, there is an attempt to revive imperial claims of rights of dominion over others. Concepts which we had thought disappeared with the lengthy dissolution of empires are actually being tabled in negotiations at this very moment.

Elsewhere, curriculums are being altered to promote a more uniform and closed set of narratives about the past. Different countries are seeing calls for 'patriotic history' to be taught. New monuments are being erected to focus on reopening historic grievances.

When I see all this, I cannot help remembering what Orwell talked about in his famous essay on totalitarianism when he described the "Nightmare future in which the leader or some ruling clique controls not only the future but the past".

Now, more than at possibly any point since the end of the Second World War, the practice of history and commemoration matters profoundly. It goes to the heart of who we are and the society we want to be.

The harsh reality is that ours is a world where disinformation and populism are a very real threat to the sustainability of free democracies. And in fighting this threat, an absolutely essential requirement is to have a diverse range of independent historical scholarship.

And to not stop at this, but to make it accessible, to support it through independently administered grants and to open archives as widely as possible. Above all we have to stand against attempts to distort the complex reality of our history to meet partisan needs of today.

That is why our approach to commemoration is so important. It is why we have, beginning with the opening of the Bureau of Military History's archives twenty years ago, followed a systematic approach of opening the historical record in all its messy reality.

I believe that an open and challenging approach to history, one which honours success but is not afraid to evolve or to acknowledge failings, is an essential foundation for our democracy. And it is something that we cannot take for granted.

January 16th 1922 is a moment in our history which we should do more to understand together with the process of taking over public administration.

In doing this we can, I believe, illuminate important aspects of our political culture, our state-building processes and the impact of imperialism. We can find new perspectives beyond what are often simplistic views about the importance, motivation and inevitability of various developments.

When the Lord Lieutenant greeted the new provisional government and formally began the transfer of power it was a moment which marked a once unthinkable success for Irish nationalism and republicanism.

It was not a moment of unity, but it simply could not have occurred without the broadly-based revolution which had proceeded it.

This was a revolution which was founded on the ultimately radicalised and separatist view of the majority that Ireland should be in control of its own destiny.

Ireland had different traditions, frequent demonstrations of loyalism in unexpected parts of the population and different levels of political interest, but the reality is that for decades groups which emphasised moving away from London's control won every election with a broad franchise.

And when the franchise was broadened again in the 1918 election it helped propel the overwhelming victory for the Sinn Fein party which Eamon de Valera had recently become the leader of.

Why this earlier history matters is that the nationalism of the majority, and the agenda of wishing to take control, was deeper and established for longer than in most countries who were seeking and achieving independence in the early twentieth century.

But unlike in many of those countries, the transition here was not a clean break. It was not defined by a broad national unity and it left critical issues open.

I believe that in the elongated handover, and in the conflicting priorities of those involved, you find many of the seeds of the tragedies which were to follow during 1922.

When the provisional government left Dublin Castle they were in no way in control of even the Castle.

Two months later the Lord Lieutenant was to be found still regularly attending events in the Chapel Royal. British troops were in the Castle celebrating St Patrick's Day. It was only in early May that most departments were reported as transferred to the control of the new ministers.

When the Irish Free State formally came into existence and the Viceroy departed, the new state faced divisions and challenges many times more serious than it faced in January.

The great failure of 1922 is the number of times when opportunities to at least look for common ground were spurned. Only limited and temporary efforts were undertaken to deescalate. A momentum built which was subsequently portrayed as inevitable, but there is no reason to believe that other outcomes were not possible.

Through most of the year, and especially at critical times, London and its representatives in Dublin acted in an inflexible way which both limited the provisional government's options and reinforced divisions.

The approach to the Treaty text was, as it had been during the negotiations, about insisting that nothing more could possibly be done. They were not only looking over the shoulders of the new ministers, they were using all the leverage they could muster to retain influence on security decisions.

It is hard not to wonder if some way back from conflict could have been found if there had actually been a cleaner break on January 16th.

The slow transition also emphasised continuity leading in part to the remarkable, in fact near complete, dominance of the Westminster model of parliament and government in the new state.

The only significant difference was proportional representation, but most innovations, especially a constitution based on separation of powers and removing amendment by parliament alone, came much later when the agenda focused on subverting the Treaty text.

I think we should also consider if the short ceremony of that day and the events which followed have shaped our political culture in ways which we have missed - particularly because we over-emphasise the political divide of the civil war.

It is understandable that a lot of focus has been given to the post-colonial context of our independence. This has particularly been done in comparing how transitions to independence were handled by the British empire after 1922.

There is no question that London approached Irish independence through the perspective of empire, and its experience with the transition in Ireland directly shaped how it managed the gradual withdrawal of colonial rule through the following century.

Ireland was the first part of the empire to violently secure autonomy since the Treaty of Paris in 1783 acknowledged the independence of the American colonies. Ireland also served as an example for other countries seeking independence through the twentieth century.

This perspective is important in understanding the efforts to retain as much influence as possible and to still seek to define the Irish state in terms of its relationship to the British state. However, I think we need to pay much more attention to the European context in trying to understand the dynamics of the time.

In the period 1917-20 there were 27 violent transfers of power in Europe. It was the most concentrated period of state formation in European history, with some states gaining restored sovereignty, and others created for the first time. It was also a period which saw sustained outbreaks of violence as part of what some historians have called 'an extended European civil war'.

The Wilsonian doctrine of a Europe of nation states was implemented in an incomplete, confused and often unstable way, but it was the only coherent vision offered of a Europe without three of its historic empires.

Ireland was the only new state which achieved independence from a victorious state, but there are so many other comparisons with the experience of state building in Europe that it is something we should explore more. For example, the approach to legal continuity followed here is something which you find in many new European states.

Just as the first legal measure of our provisional government was to confirm all existing laws as remaining in place, throughout Europe, revolutionaries went immediately from the streets where they were pulling down statues to parliaments where they voted to retain the laws of the departed regimes.

In the decades before the War many territories linked a rising nationalism with new regional elected bodies – very much the same as our experience with the Local Government Act reforms.

Our complex and unresolved attitude towards the death and injury of so many of our people in the World War is also seen elsewhere. Throughout Europe new states had to navigate conflicting feelings about the sacrifice of their communities in the name of departed empires.

In doing more to explore European perspectives we would also be reflecting the historic centrality of European ideas and events to the development of Irish identity and nationalism.



For example, the Proclamation of 1916 can only really be understood in the context of generations which closely followed and were influenced by European developments far earlier than the First World War.

Finally, we need the European perspective to be able to explore why Ireland did not fall into the ideological extremes seen in many other newly independent countries – particularly where they had experienced significant social divisions.

I think we should also consider if the manner of the transition in 1922 caused us to have some significant ambiguity towards our state – an ambiguity well beyond the obviously important issue of the division of the island.

We did not have, for those who wanted independence, a clean rupture and emotional attachment to the emerging state. Yes, we had many cheering crowds and ovations, but we had those before.

This is after all the country whose nationalism gave the world the first mass political meetings.

Loyalties were not a given, they had to be argued over. Institutions had to build trust rather than assume it. And we lacked a figure who could unite the nation. We had no Masaryk or Pilsudski to inspire our pride in the new state.

I think we ultimately found our way to showing our pride in the achievements of our state and its place in the world. While we are one of the few countries which does not have an Independence Day or a Republic Day, we do have one of the largest, most colourful and most inclusive national days.

The emphasis which this places on community is a great strength for us. It is also ironic in a historical sense because the early marking of St. Patrick's Day in the late-eighteenth century was designed explicitly to promote loyalty to the state.

In terms of the impact of the transition and 1922 on our political system I think we have been overly distracted by the, I believe incorrect, idea that everything which followed should be seen through the lens of the civil war divide. This is dismissive of individual choices, it ignores major changes in popular support and it brushes aside the often-significant differences between governments in favour of an essentially populist narrative.

Fundamentally, this is an approach which robs us of more interesting perspectives on our politics.

The War of Independence marked a dramatic propaganda victory. Every opportunity to shame and embarrass the British government in the eyes of the world was exploited as much as possible. It inflicted deep damage on the international standing of a government which thought that its victory in the World War should have meant an expanding empire rather than having to subdue its oldest colony.

The nature of propaganda is that it paints an emotional picture of good versus evil, right versus wrong. It is personal and it seeks to damage. And where once it was an effective tool against the British government now it was used against former friends and comrades.

Sadly 1922 was a year of propaganda not a year of debate.

Margaret O'Callaghan, Diarmuid Ferriter and others have written about how the war to shape the historical narrative started earlier and went on much longer than the physical war. The other side's leaders were denigrated not just for where they stood on the Treaty, but their role in earlier events was diminished or dismissed.

This divisive and aggressive rhetoric actively fed into the escalating conflict. It had a disproportionate influence for many years, perhaps even to today when so see how much of our public discourse is framed in a populist manner.

I believe we must also do more to understand the impact of 1922 in rolling back the recognition of women as full partners in the new state.

The Proclamation may well have been the first declaration of independence which included a promise of extending the franchise and political rights to women.

For the next five years there were small but important advances – with women elected to parliament and taking prominent roles in the conflict. Constance Markiewicz, who would later chair the founding meeting of my party, remains one of the great symbols of the time.

After that moment of hope, 1922 marked the opening of a long and cold period for women in Irish public life. The Treaty debates saw women TDs dismissed as hysterical and their arguments ignored.

A decisive move to exclude women began - with January 10th 1922 being the last day for 57 years that a woman would sit in an Irish government.

And of course, it was not just the new government which regressed in this way. Other governments followed, and built new exclusions - and women even bore a rising burden in the political violence in more recent decades.

The last recorded case in Europe of the barbaric medieval practice of tarring and feathering women for fraternising with the enemy is to be found in the 1970s in Belfast.

It is impossible to talk of the impact of the new state and miss the central fact that the state did not have jurisdiction over the whole island.

Partition was not introduced by the Treaty but how the Treaty was implemented did unmistakably help to reinforce partition.

I think the absence of partition from much of the Treaty debate stems from the fact that Deputies believed that the Northern Irish state was simply unsustainable - or would be as soon as the Boundary Commission had done its work. Nobody claimed that it would be or should be permanent.

In almost every way possible bad faith was shown toward the Nationalist majority on this island when it came to addressing partition in 1922 and the years following.

The Council of Ireland and the promised replacement for it were not implemented and the Boundary Commission refused to even consider significant action. While county boundaries had been used to create the border, other approaches were used to block obvious changes to it.

London's indifference the reality of the sectarianism faced by Northern nationalists also caused immense damage.

Partition became a regular part of the pattern of later acceptances of independence, and the parallels with Ireland are unmistakable.

For the majority, it was a deep and lasting shock to see a divide introduced where they had until very recently never considered one to be possible. Their churches, unions, sporting organisations, legislators and much more had never before been divided in this way. Even for many unionists this was an unnatural

divide which I believe is rightly seen as shaping much of our subsequent history – and not for the good.

In the days after the Castle ceremony, groups of Southern unionists went to great lengths to express their willingness to be loyal citizens of the new state. And in the Dáil, there was no dissent when Griffith confirmed the intention to make sure that there was a strong unionist representation in the new parliament.

At the same time, much and all as I believe we have a right to question if they were justified, we cannot ignore the fact that there were many who feared an independent state and that this motivated their push for partition.

We have today an agreed blueprint for how to decide the future of our island. We have begun by far the largest ever programme for funding new connections and growing understanding between North and South. Our focus must be on overcoming the challenges of today, especially the high levels of poverty and underinvestment seen in too many areas.

However, I think it is impossible to look back a century and not see what we lost. We lost a chance for a more diverse, challenging, creative and successful state. One which, with goodwill, might have found ways to lead the world in working to overcome sectarianism.

As I have argued, I believe we have much more to learn from the events of a hundred years ago.

The context and the events of the long handing over of power can offer us many new insights and perspectives on not just our history but on our social and political culture.

Given its place in our history, Dublin Castle simply had to play an important role in the departure of the British government. For centuries it had been a detached citadel which symbolised the elite and, at critical points, repression.

While newspapers and even Collins himself inevitably referred to January 16th as the fall of our Bastille, it does not have that symbolic place in our history.

The reasons why, tells us much about those times and how we have changed since then.

To the French, the fall of the Bastille represents a euphoric moment of popular sovereignty. It is the action of an impersonal crowd against a symbol. It is a single moment, chosen to represent a revolution which had been slowly developing for decades and was anything but short.

Against the background of the divisions of January 1922, a formal exchange of pleasantries and a few brief waves to the crowd could never provide this euphoric moment of unity and resolve which could sum up a revolution.

The context and reality of how the transfer happened was central to a year which could have been one of celebration but was ultimately one of regret and loss.

However, I think that over time we have as a country developed a strong sense of pride in our revolution and have done so in a unique way.

Throughout our country we have hundreds of places where the decisive moments and personalities of our revolution are marked.

These modest monuments speak of heroic fights and tragic losses – and they replace the impersonal idea of a war for independence and give it a human dimension.

There is no one alive who remembers the people listed on those monuments. No one who knew the sound their voices or the touch of their hands – but those monuments are nonetheless deeply personal.

Where once they were a mark of loss and sadness - a determination to not forget - today they have become a focus of pride. And they show us that the sovereignty of this state was achieved in those places and by thousands of volunteers supported by the clear majority of the Irish people.

They are a positive link between popular sovereignty and an enduring civil society.

These hundreds of individual Bastilles give our people a personal attachment to their revolution and the messy and far from perfect, but undeniably successful state we have built.