A DECADE OF CENTENARIES:
COMMEMORATING SHARED HISTORY

—Opening Address
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—Keynote Speech
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ABSTRACT

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IBIS is grateful to the Department of the Taoiseach for its support in funding the conference.
Sir George Quigley is the Chairperson of the IBIS Board. He obtained a PH.D. in medieval ecclesiastical history from Queens University, Belfast. Entering the Northern Ireland Civil Service he was Permanent Secretary, successively, of the Departments of Manpower Services, Commerce, Finance, and Finance and Personnel. In 1989 he became Chairman of Ulster Bank. He also served on the Main Board of Nat West and as Chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland Pension Fund. His roles in public life in Northern Ireland have included Chairmanship of the NI Economic Council and the Royal Group of Hospitals and conduct of a Review of the Parades Commission. In the Republic he has been President of the Economic and Social Research Institute. His current appointments include the Chairmanship of Bombardier Aerospace Northern Ireland and of Lothbury Property Trust. In 2009 he was elected a Member of the Royal Irish Academy.

Brian Cowen served as Taoiseach from 2008 to 2011. He was first elected as a TD in 1984. Mr Cowen was appointed as Tánaiste and re-appointed as Minister for Finance on 14th June, 2007 having first been appointed Minister for Finance in September 2004. He served as Minister for Foreign Affairs from January 2000 to September 2004; Minister for Health and Children from June 1997 to January 2000; Minister for Transport, Energy and Communications from January 1993 to December 1994, and Minister for Labour from February 1992 to January 1993.
I want to take these few minutes of Introduction to offer some reflections on the theme of Commemoration generally.

Those who chose the theme for this year’s Conference chose wisely. This decade comes 50 years after the 1960’s, which was densely populated with commemorative occasions: the 50th anniversary of the Solemn League and Covenant, the Larne gunrunning and the Easter Rising; the 200th anniversary of Wolfe Tone’s birth, and the centenary of the Fenian rising. The tensions to which they gave rise were doubtless at least a contributory factor in the outbreak of the Troubles. The potential for destabilisation if there is a proliferation of Commemoration events in this new decade is obvious.

The role of Commemoration in a national context was persuasively argued by the French philosopher Ernest Renan. National solidarity required “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories”. But he recognised that, in the interests of preserving that solidarity, the art of forgetting as well as remembering might be necessary. Out of that process, identity is forged. Communities acquire historical depth. In the words of the Brazilian funeral song, “Far, far away, I hear the voice that time will not take away”. That voice, over the centuries, creates a narrative which stresses continuity, linearity, consistence and inevitability. We can see this in the two grand narratives emerging from Irish history. On the nationalist side, a story of dispossession, oppression and destiny unfulfilled. On the unionist side a story of a community of insecure settlers on the frontier, constantly at risk of siege. Significant events and personalities give the narratives their thread. One historian has graphically instanced how loyalism has been “constructed upon a grid of talismanic dates—1641, 1690, 1912”. For nationalists, there is the pantheon of republican martyrs from Wolfe Tone to Patrick Pearse.

However, Renan’s formula does not work when memory is so contested that no amount of forgetfulness can produce a unified narrative. It is difficult, therefore, to argue with Professor Longley’s forthright statement that in Ireland “endemic division maintains sites of memory as sites of conflict” and “one man’s iconography, commemoration or ritual is another’s coat-trailing”. Or, as another historian has put it, “public commemoration has turned into a battlefield where selective, discrepant and antagonistic narratives of the past clash and compete”.

Are we doomed to experience down the generations the destructive aftershocks of the bitter conflicts of the past? The playwright Frank McGuinness has called one—dimensional folk memory a lethal cultural weapon and called for the mutual understanding which produces not political unity but “an imaginative unity, an imaginative understanding of why people were behaving the way they did”. Sebastian Barry has
asked if it is possible to walk out of the closed rooms of history and embark on a narrative which has no ends other than those yet to be determined. Taking the Somme and the 1916 Rising as examples, it has been asked whether we might acquire the ability to recognise the emotional equivalence of two parallel narratives within the same historical moment, thereby escaping the traditional binaries of loyalty and treachery. All of these interesting ideas from the literary world involve each side very consciously offering the other a full effort at understanding.

But scholars are increasingly challenging the view that we are indeed prisoners of our past, with the practice of Commemoration ensuring that we remain firmly shackled. Ian McBride, for instance, explores the possibility that present actions are not determined by the past but rather the reverse—that what we choose to remember is dictated by our contemporary concerns. The idea goes back to Thucydides who said that people make their recollection fit with their present experience. Roy Foster also put it starkly: “Commemoration is always present-minded, for the purpose of present politics”.

Memory is certainly not a constant. As Professor Horne has put it, all memory has a history. Others have spoken of memory as being, like history, “inherently revisionist” as memory is reinterpreted. A very clear example is how the 1798 rising of the United Irishmen was commemorated in 1898 and 1998. 1798, viewed from the perspective of 1898, was a phase of the struggle for faith and fatherland. A hundred years later, reflecting the burgeoning peace process, the attention shifted, as the Commemoration Committee put it, from the military aspects of 1798 towards the principles of democracy and pluralism which the United Irishmen advocated and there was acknowledgement of the Ulster dimension and particularly the contribution of the Presbyterian tradition, with its emphasis on justice, equality and civil liberty.

Turning to the Great War itself, one can see the evolution in nationalist perspectives. IRA veteran Ernie O’Malley could refer critically to the way in which Irish Republicans “dismissed the agony, gloom and misery of the trenches as we dismiss another man’s sorrow”. As he watched the Poppy wearers parade on Grafton Street in November 1926, he felt sympathy for them “for many had relatives killed I am sure”. His brother had served in the British army. The Royal Irish Academy publication Our War has a photograph of the huge numbers who had assembled in College Green two years previously, with the Civil War barely ended, to remember the dead of the Great War. The new Government was represented each year in the 1920s at the wreath-laying at the Cenotaph in London. Mr De Valera’s government gave a subsidy in 1932 for the construction of the national memorial at Islandbridge, with the British imperial architect Lutyens as designer. One has to fast forward over two generations to the joint inauguration by the President and the Queen of the Round Tower at Messines in 1998 to identify a similarly iconic moment.

The peace settlement on the island has recognised that the old ideological verities and certainties on all sides cannot accommodate the complex interactions of what are really varieties of Irishness and that a broader narrative framework is required. So how do we ensure that Commemoration, which is such a powerful transmitter of
memory, reflects these new realities and does not constrain the shared future which is the aspiration dictated by those realities?

This poses a challenge for the creative imagination. In the volume Our War to which I have already referred there is a fascinating reference to the cantata “A Terrible Beauty is Born” by the Irish composer Brian Boydell which emerged during the 1966 Anniversary of the 1916 Rising. The libretto drew not only on Yeats’ famous poem but on poems by nationalists killed on the Western front, including Tom Kettle’s “Cancel the Past”. Professor Jeffrey, in whose chapter of the volume this is dealt with, comments on how the cantata “recognised the essentially “seamless robe” of the Rising and the war”, though he admits that the powerful connections between the two may still not be universally accepted. He also refers in this context to the decision by the government of the Republic in 2006 to commemorate the ninetieth anniversaries of both the Rising and the Battle of the Somme.

The conflicts of the past are fact but the challenge for this and future decades is whether, as it has been put, they can encounter, clash and argue with one another on different terms. Historians can play a powerful role by not just telling what happened but also by showing how the event became memory and how the memory evolved.

The title of the Conference has a nice ambiguity about it: Commemorating Shared History. In Irish terms the Great War is a peculiar instance of an iconic event in which people who were politically poles apart participated in a common cause. What is surprising is not that Commemoration of this event has evolved as it has but that it took so long to do so. Much more problematic are the tracts of historical space that are contested. Can one say that these, too, are “shared history”? They certainly constitute a common past and peace needs to be made with that past. The coming decade will test our resolve.

At the start of this decade Belfast’s (then) Lord Mayor Alex Maskey said that it was his objective “to seek to identify common ground for all of us in this generation” and indicated his intention to “contribute in a positive way” to the development of a public debate about the use of (inter alia) commemorations.

That debate is long overdue. Hence the significance of today’s proceedings, which will hopefully prompt a serious debate on how we can commemorate the past in a way which enables us to share the future.
It is a great honour to be here with you this morning to speak on the important theme of commemorating our shared history.

Before I turn to that topic, however, perhaps I might refer to more recent history. Recent weeks have seen historic developments in Britain, with the formation of a new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government led by David Cameron. I had the opportunity to speak with the Prime Minister on his first full day in office and we reaffirmed our joint commitment to the peace process and to the agreements that have helped us make so much progress in Northern Ireland and in British-Irish relations. I know that he is very committed to continuing the work of his predecessors. His visit to Northern Ireland today is a clear testament to that commitment and I look forward to working with him in that shared endeavour.

I would also like to recognise, in this context, the enormous contribution of the former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, in helping to bring about a truly historic agreement on the devolution of policing and justice earlier this year. That issue was often described as the last piece of the jigsaw—a term sometimes criticised as a cliché. I believe it truly was of historic significance.

I also believe that the election result in Northern Ireland shows that we have indeed crossed an important threshold in terms of where public opinion is in relation to the Agreement we have reached. All of those elected, and indeed the vast majority of those who stood, are firmly committed to the Agreement and the democratic institutions.

The democratic will of the people is clear.

It is that strong and solid platform on which we stand, as we look to the decade ahead. This is a decade when we will mark the first centenary of the founding acts of this republic, of the division of this island, and all that has flowed from that. In addressing this subject, I am acutely conscious that all of us in leadership positions on the island, in marking the past, carry a huge responsibility for the future.

The events of the decade between 1912 and 1922 were momentous and defining ones for all of the people of this island, and indeed for these islands. This was the decade of the covenant and the gun, of blood sacrifice and bloody politics, a time of division and war, not only on this island but across the world. It was the decade that defined relationships on these islands for most of the last century.

I recall with immense pride that it was a period that saw the achievement of Irish independence and the foundation of this State. But I also reflect with deep sadness that it saw the partition of this island and its people, and the two parts of the island...
losing touch with each other and with our shared heritage. For most of the last century when we looked across the border, we saw and were wary of the “other”. We forced each other into making choices, into defining ourselves in exclusive terms. We failed to recognise that, even though we have different traditions and perspectives, what we share is much more important than what separates us. We collectively failed to capture the complexity of identities on the island. For too long, we concentrated on our differences. For too long, those differences were magnified. And for too long, the similarities and commonality of our interests were forgotten or ignored.

We created separate histories—British and Irish, orange and green, republican, nationalistic, unionist, loyalist—deep wells from which we thought we could draw succour. In homes and in schools across this island, we grew up knowing and hearing only one set of stories, singing only one set of songs. Gradually, in recent years, a recognition has emerged that regardless of whether we consider ourselves to be Irish, or British, or both, our history is—inescapably—a shared one. Our island story cannot be accurately viewed or properly understood through a single prism.

The events of that formative decade a century ago do not belong exclusively to one tradition or another. They are threads in the tapestry of all our histories. I deeply regret the loss of our shared history, and more importantly the loss of mutual respect and understanding that accompanied that loss. Nor do I agree with those who contend that Ireland has too much history. I am proud of my country’s history—the fight for our freedom and the many achievements that flowed from it. And I recognise and respect the pride which the protestant, unionist and loyalist people take in their story.

The poet Robert Greacen wrote an autobiography in 1997 that drew on that story. It was entitled “The Sash my Father Wore”. In it, he recalled the history that he learnt as a boy—a proud history that continues to resonate across much of Northern Ireland today. But he also observed that “in Ireland, especially in the North, the past hangs round people’s necks like an albatross”.

The year after that book was published; the Good Friday Agreement was signed. It was truly a turning point in our history, the moment when we all—together—began to lift the albatross from our neck. That achievement has sparked a new decade of reinvention, of hope and of optimism, one which has seen relationships on this island redefined anew. If a momentous decade a century ago defined so much about Ireland for the 20th century, then surely the decade just passed will redefine it for the 21st century. A space has now been opened for a new and inclusive discussion of our foundation stories.

This coming decade of commemorations, if well prepared and carefully considered, should enable all of us on this island to complete the journey we have started towards lasting peace and reconciliation.

Twelve years have passed since the Agreement. In the next twelve years we will witness a series of commemorations which will give us pause to reflect on where we
have come from, and where we are going. With the centenaries of the Ulster Covenant, the Battle of the Somme, the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, the Government of Ireland Act and the Treaty, the events which led to the political division of this island come up for re-examination. We will also reflect on the crucial roles played by the Labour movement in that defining decade. And we will not forget how Irish women helped to lead the way in the fight for universal suffrage. All of these events and processes are part of one historical whole. They did not happen independently and they cannot be evaluated or remembered in isolation. To illustrate this, we need only look to the backgrounds of some of those whose actions drove the events we shall commemorate.

Edward Carson, whose silver pen left the first signature on the Ulster Covenant, was born in Dublin. He studied in Trinity College. He was a member of their hurling team. James Connolly was born in Edinburgh. He served in the British army for seven years. In 2002, this hero of Irish nationalism, executed for his part in the 1916 rising, was voted 64th in a BBC poll of history’s Greatest Britons. Constance Markiewicz was born in the shadow of Buckingham Palace, to a titled family. She went on to be an Irish revolutionary, socialist and suffragette—and the first woman to be elected to the House of Commons. Willie Redmond was an Irish Nationalist MP from Co Wexford, the brother of the Irish nationalist leader, who died fighting in the fields of Belgium.

There are many more stories of that period that reflect the intertwining of our history and our lives. They help us all to remember that things are rarely as simple as they seem—not then, and not now.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Commemoration, of course, is a selective act. We choose what to commemorate and how to commemorate it. We decide that some events are worth remembering, honour them with exhibitions and pageants, films and novels. Others are quietly forgotten. We commemorate what we believe to be important. We commemorate to honour bravery and heroism and great ideals. We commemorate because we want our children to understand their heritage, to know where they come from, to appreciate the sacrifices our forefathers made, and the reasons for them.

But while respectful of the past, and honouring of the dead, we should not allow ourselves to be history’s slaves. We must strive instead to take the opportunity commemorations afford us to reflect on and better understand our shared identities. Together we can build our future, respectful and understanding of the past, which, after all, has created the island we share and love today. As political leaders, policy makers, opinion formers, academics, teachers—and most importantly, as active citizens—we all have a role to play.

For our part, the Government has considered these issues in recent weeks and has decided that its approach will be guided by several principles. We want to see full acknowledgment of the totality of the island’s history and the legitimacy of all the traditions on the island that draw their identity and collective memory from our shared history. We want the process of commemoration to recognise the totality of
the history of the period, and all of the diversity that this encompasses. We believe that mutual respect should be central to all commemorative events and that historical accuracy should be paramount.

Based on those principles, we will engage in a programme of outreach to all those who are interested in commemorating our history, in all its dimensions, with pride and with respect. That will, of course, include all of the political parties on the island, as well as leaders of civic society and cultural institutions. The parties in the Oireachtas have been working together on these issues and that consensual approach will be crucial in the period ahead.

This is a young and fresh-faced audience, but no doubt some of you will remember 1966. The fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter rising saw a great national outpouring of celebration here in the Republic. Schoolchildren paraded in their thousands to Croke Park to look at Glór Réim na Cásca, the Pageant of the Rising. Telefís Éireann produced a fantastic drama about the rising which the whole nation—at least those who had television sets—were glued to. This was the proud expression of a nation still establishing its identity.

But our commemorations in this State of the 1916 did not fully capture the range of experiences which affected our island in that momentous year. Veterans of the Somme and Messines kept a low profile. In general, apart from in Northern Ireland or in the quiet of their own homes, their story went untold. My predecessor Sean Lemass, an illustrious veteran of the struggle for Irish freedom, captured this very well, when he said in February 1966:

> In later years, it was common—and I also was guilty in this respect—to question the motives of those men who joined the new British armies formed at the outbreak of the war, but it must, in their honour and in fairness to their memory, be said that they were motivated by the highest purpose, and died in their tens of thousands in Flanders and Gallipoli believing they were giving their lives in the cause of human liberty everywhere, not excluding Ireland.

As in so many things, Lemass was ahead of his time.

The opening of the Peace Park in Messines, the official state commemorations in 2006, and the ceremonies attended by the President of Ireland at Gallipoli earlier this year, are all significant acts by the State in recognising the ultimate sacrifice paid by those Irish men and women who died in that war.

In 2016, the centenary of the Somme will be commemorated here in Dublin, as in Belfast, to honour the heroism of those who fought and died there, Protestant and Catholic, side by side.

I expect, too, that the events of Easter 1916 will be commemorated with respect and dignity in every part of this island. That, I respectfully submit, is a challenge that must be considered by the leaders of unionism. And we must all of us reflect that the experience of the nationalist community in the North is unique. They treasure
our country’s history, but for them the outcomes of the decade 1912-1922 were different.

Many in the North legitimately view the period between 1912 and 1922 from a quite different angle to the direct successors of those who came to power in Dublin or in Belfast at that time. That, too, should give us all pause for measured reflection. There will be those who oppose any such reflection - who will seek to hijack history, to fight again the old battles, to re-establish hostilities and to perpetuate division. Some will look to use the memory of the dead to bring suffering to the living. To them I say: Count me out. Count out all of the people of Ireland—North, South, East and West. We are united now in moving forward together to a peaceful future. As Yitzhak Rabin said: “Enough of blood and tears. Enough.”

As an Irish republican, it is my hope that the island of Ireland and its people will again be united. But, if that is to be achieved, it can only be done through persuasion and agreement. It can only be done on the basis of consent freely given and expressed, all our traditions and identities acknowledged and respected. It can only be done through peace and politics. That is the possibility which the people of Ireland voted for when they approved the Good Friday Agreement by referendum. In that vote, a historic act of self-determination, all of the people of Ireland recognised that there are no short cuts. We voted for the path of peace and of politics. We are all on a common journey together where we have not decided on the ultimate destination. We have to make the here and now a better place. It is time to consolidate and build on the benefits of peace, and ensure they are shared with all.

There are huge challenges ahead—including how to tackle enormous economic difficulties and how to eradicate sectarianism and division. We must work together to meet these challenges. We cannot afford not to. That is what the people, North and South, want and expect us, their political leaders, to do. As we work for a better future, we can look back on a defining period in this island’s history, one characterised by great heroism as well as great suffering.

We will honour the memory of the dead, and reflect on their achievements. And we will reflect too on all that has happened in the intervening years, on the tremendous pain we have endured and on the priceless peace we now enjoy. Over the past twelve years, the people of this island have embraced great change with great results. As we look ahead we can expect further change. Change is nothing to fear. In fact, there is so much to look forward to if we are prepared to seize the future. We can banish that “giant albatross” of history from around our necks and replace it with a garland of hope for our better future.

I am greatly encouraged by the conversation that has already begun – across the entire island of Ireland. It is a conversation which can deepen the process of reconciliation and help us to write another proud chapter in our history. I am grateful to the Institute for British-Irish Studies for allowing me to make my contribution to the debate. I wish you well in the rest of your proceedings.

Go raibh maith agaibh.