

IRELAND'S CASE FOR INDEPENDENCE



Official Memorandum in support of Ireland's demand for recognition as a sovereign independent state. Presented to Georges Clemenceau and the members of the Paris Peace Conference by Sean T. O'Ceallaigh and George Gavan Duffy in June 1919.

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IRELAND IS A NATION, not merely for the reason which, in the case of other countries, has been taken as pre-sufficient, that she has claimed at all times, and still claims to be, a nation, but also because, even though no claim were put forward on her behalf, history shows her to be a distinct nation from remotely ancient times.

For over a thousand years Ireland possessed, and fully exercised, Sovereign Independence, and was recognised through Europe as a distinct Sovereign State.

The usurpation of the foreigner has always been disputed and resisted by the mass of the Irish people.

At various times since the coming of the English the Irish nation has exercised its sovereign rights as opportunity offered.

The hope of recovering its full and permanent sovereignty has always been in the breasts of the Irish people, and has been the inspiration and the mainspring of their political activities, abroad as well as at home.

English statecraft has long and persistently striven in vain to force the Irish people to abandon hope. The English policy of repression, spiritual and material, has never been at rest from the first intrusion of English power until the present day.

English policy has always aimed at keeping every new accretion of population from without separate from the rest of the nation, and a cause of distraction and weakness in its midst.

Nevertheless, the Irish nation has remained one, with a vigorous consciousness of its nationality, and has always succeeded sooner or later in assimilating to its unity every new element of the population.

The Irish people has never been intolerant towards its minorities, and has never harboured the spirit of persecution. Such barbarities as punishment by torture, witch-burning, capital punishment for minor offences, etc., so frequent in the judicial system of other countries, found no recognition in Irish law or custom. Twice in the seventeenth century – in 1642-8 and in 1689 – when, after periods of terrible persecution and deprivation of lands and liberty the Irish people recovered for a time a dominant political power, they worked out in laws and treaties a policy of full religious equality for all dwellers in the island. On each occasion the English policy, becoming again dominant, subjected the Irish people to further large confiscations of property, restrictions of liberty, and religious persecutions. And when, notwithstanding the English policy of maintaining as complete a severance as possible, Irish Protestants became attracted to the support of the National cause, the Catholics of Ireland accorded political leadership to a succession of Protestant Leaders.

The Irish have long been a thoroughly democratic people. Through their chosen leaders, from O'Connell to Parnell, they have provided the world with a model of democratic organisation in opposition to the domination of privileged classes.

If Ireland, on the grounds of National rights, is entitled to recover her Sovereign Independence – and that is her demand – the recognition of her right is due from other nations for the following reasons:

1. Because England's claim to withhold independence from Ireland is based on a principle which is a negation of national liberty and subversive of international peace and order. England resists Ireland's demand on the ground that the independence of Ireland would be, as alleged,

incompatible with the security of England, or of Great Britain, or of the British Empire. Whether this contention is well or ill-founded, if it is admitted, then any State is justified in suppressing the independence of any nation whose liberty that State declares to be incompatible with its own security. An endless prospect of future wars is the natural consequence.

2. Because England's government of Ireland has been at all times, and is conspicuously at the present time, an outrage to the conscience of mankind. Such a government, especially in its modern quasi-democratic form, is essentially vicious. Its character at the best is sufficiently described by a noted English writer, John Stuart Mill: -

'The Government of a people by itself has a meaning and a reality; but such a thing as government of one people by another does not and cannot exist. One people may keep another as a warren or preserve for its own use, a place to make money in, a human cattle farm, to be worked for the profit of its own inhabitants. But if the good of the governed is the proper business of a government, it is utterly impossible that a people should directly attend to it.'

(Representative Government (1861), ch xviii).

Consequently, the people of England devolve the power which they hold over Ireland upon a succession of satraps, military and civil, who represent no interest of the Irish people; and recent events show that the essential vices of this government are as active now as in former times.

3. Because the English temper towards the cause of Irish national liberty produces atrocious and intolerable results in Ireland. Among the results are: a depopulation unexampled in any other country, howsoever badly governed; wholesale destruction of industries and

commerce; over-taxation on an enormous scale; diversion of rents, savings, and surplus incomes from Ireland to England; opposition to the utilisation by the Irish people of the economic resources of their country, and to economic development and social improvement; exploitation of Ireland for the benefit of English capitalists; fomentation of religious animosities; repression of the national culture; maintenance of a monstrous system of police rule, by which, in the words of an English Minister, all Ireland is kept 'under the microscope'; perversion of justice, by making political service and political subservience almost the sole qualification for judicial positions, by an elaborate corruption of the jury system, by the organisation of police espionage and perjury, and the encouragement of agents provocateurs, and recently and at present, by using for the purpose of political oppression in Ireland the exceptional powers created for the purposes of the European war. Under these powers military government is established, some areas being treated as hostile territory occupied in ordinary warfare; a war censorship is maintained over the press and over publications generally; printing offices are invaded and dismantled; the police and military are empowered to confiscate the property of vendors of literature without any legal process; persons are imprisoned without trial and deported from Ireland; Irish regiments in the English army are removed from Ireland, and a large military force, larger than at any previous time with full equipment for modern warfare, has been maintained in Ireland; civilians are daily arrested and tried by court-martial, and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

What are England's objections to Ireland's independence?

The one objection in which English statesman are sincere is that which has been already mentioned – that the domination of Ireland by England is necessary for the security of England. Ireland, according to the English Navy League, is 'the Heligoland of the Atlantic,' a naval outpost, to be governed for the sole benefit of its foreign masters. This claim, if it is valid, justifies not only the suppression of national liberty, but also the weakening of Ireland by depopulation, repression of industry and commerce and culture, maintenance of internal discord, etc. It can also be held to justify the subjugation of any small nation by a neighbouring great power.

The proximity of Ireland to England furnishes another plea. But Ireland is not as near to England as Belgium, Holland, Denmark, etc., are to Germany, Norway to Sweden, Portugal to Spain. In fact, it is this very proximity that makes independence necessary for Ireland, as the only condition of security against the sacrifice of Irish rights to English interests. Another plea is that, England being a maritime power, her safety depending on her navy, and her prosperity depending on maritime commerce, the domination of Ireland is for her a practical necessity. This may explain why Ireland's harbours, the best in Europe, are empty of mercantile shipping, except for such shipping as carries on the restricted trade between Great Britain and Ireland.

Once more, Ireland protests that the interests of one country, be they what they may, cannot be allowed to annul the natural rights of another country. If that claim be admitted, then there is an end to national rights, and all the world must prepare to submit to armed interests or to make war against them. We in Ireland are determined not to submit.

We may expect to find the plea insinuated, in some specious form, if not definitely and clearly made, that the English rule in Ireland has been and is favourable to the peace, progress, and

civilisation of Ireland. We answer that, on the contrary, English rule has never been for the benefit of Ireland, and has never been intended for the benefit of Ireland; that it has isolated Ireland from Europe, prevented her development, and done everything in its power to deprive her of a national civilisation. So far as Ireland at present is lacking in internal peace, is behind other countries in education and material progress, is unable to contribute notably to the common civilisation of mankind, these defects are the visible consequences of English intrusion and domination.

The Irish people have never believed in the sincerity of the public declarations of English statesmen in regard to their 'war aims,' except in so far as those declarations avowed England's part in the war to have been undertaken for England's particular and Imperial interests. They have never believed that England went to war for the sake of France or Belgium or Serbia, or for the protection or liberation of small nationalities, or to make right prevail against armed might. If English statesmen wish to be regarded as sincere, they can prove it to the world by abandoning, not in words, but in act, the claim to subordinate Ireland's liberty to England's security.

Ireland's complete liberation must follow upon the application [of] President Wilson's principles. It has not resulted from the verbal acceptance of those principles; and their rejection is implied in the refusal to recognise for Ireland the right of self-determination. Among the principles declared by President Wilson, before and since America entered the war, and accepted by the spokesmen of the chief Allied powers, we cite the following:-

'No peace can rest securely on political or economic restrictions, meant to benefit some nations and cripple or embarrass others. Peace should rest upon the rights of peoples, not on the rights of governments – the rights

of peoples, great and small, weak or powerful; their equal right to freedom and security and self-government, and to participation, upon fair terms, in the economic opportunities of the world.

What we demand in this war is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in, and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation, which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by other people of the world, as against force and selfish aggression.

An evident principle runs through the whole of the programme I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation, no part of the structure of international justice can stand.'

Speaking on behalf of the American people at New York, on the 27th September, 1918, President Wilson said:-

'We accepted the issues of the war as facts, not as any group of men either here or elsewhere had defined them, and we can accept no outcome which does not squarely meet and settle them. These issues are these: Shall the military power of any nation or group of nations be suffered to determine the fortunes of peoples over whom they have no right to rule, except the right of force. Shall strong nations be free to wrong weak nations, and make them subject to their purposes and interest? Shall peoples be ruled and dominated, even in their own internal affairs, by arbitrary and irresponsible force or by their own will and choice? Shall there be a common standard of right and privilege for all peoples and nations, or shall the strong do as they will, and the weak suffer without redress? Shall the assertion of right be haphazard and by casual alliance, or shall there be a common concert to oblige the observance of common rights?

No men, no group of men, chose these to be the issues of the struggle. They are the issues of it, and they must be settled by no arrangement or compromise or adjustment of interests, but definitely and once for all, and with a full and unequivocal acceptance of the principle that the interest of the weakest is as safe as the interest of the strongest. ...The impartial justice meted out must involve no discrimination between those to whom

we wish to be just and those to whom we do not wish to be just. It must be justice that plays no favourites and knows no standards but the equal rights of the several peoples concerned.'

If England objects to the application of those principles to the settlement of the ancient quarrel between herself and Ireland, she thereby testifies:

1. That her international policy is entirely based on her own selfish interest, not on the recognition of rights in others, notwithstanding any professions to the contrary.
2. That in her future dealings with other nations she may be expected, when the opportunity arises, to use her power in order to make her own interest prevail over their rights.
3. That her particular object in keeping possession of Ireland is to secure naval and mercantile domination over the seas, and in particular over the North Atlantic and the nations which have legitimate maritime interests therein; ruling Ireland at the same time on a plan of thoroughgoing exploitation for her own sole profit, to the great material detriment of Ireland, and preventing the establishment of beneficial intercourse, through commerce and otherwise, between Ireland and other countries.

It is evident that, while Ireland is denied the right to choose freely and establish that form of government which the Irish people desires, no international order can be founded on the basis of national right and international justice; the claim of the stronger to dominate the weaker will once more be successfully asserted; and there will be no true peace.

It must be recognised that Ireland has already clearly demonstrated her will. At the recent general election, out of 104

constituencies (Trinity College, Dublin, having the power to elect two representatives), 73 returned Republican Candidates, and 6 returned representatives who, though not Republicans, will not oppose the free exercise of self-determination by the Irish people. Nor is there the slightest likelihood that this right will at any time be relinquished.

Here it may be necessary to anticipate special pleas that may be put forward to the effect that Irish independence may properly be conceded gradually or that a 'breathing space,' as it is called, ought to intervene. The Irish people will regard any proposal of this character as deceptive and dangerous. They are thoroughly capable of taking immediate charge of their national and international affairs, not less capable than any of the new states which have been recognised since the beginning of the war, or which are about to be recognised.

The effect on the world of the restoration of Ireland to the society of free nations cannot fail to be beneficial. On the part of the nations in general, this fact will be a guarantee of the new international order, and a reassurance to all the smaller nations. On the part of England, if justice to Ireland be not 'denied or sold or delayed,' the fact will be an earnest to other peoples, especially to those whose commerce is borne upon the Atlantic Ocean, that England's naval power is not hostile to the rights and legitimate interests of other countries.

Ireland's voice in the councils of the nations will be wholly in favour of peace and justice. Ireland will have no possessions and no territorial claims outside her own well-defined geographical bounds. Her liberty cannot infringe on that of any other people. She will not make any war of aggression or favour any. The prosperity to which, in remembrance of her unexampled progress during a brief period of legislative, but not executive independence (1782-1798), she looks forward confidently, will

contribute to the prosperity of all countries in commercial relation with her.

The longest agony suffered by any people in history will be ended, the oldest standing enmity between two people will be removed. England will be relieved of the disgrace she bears in the eyes of all peoples, a disgrace not less evident to the remote Armenian than to her nearest continental neighbours.

In proportion as England gives earnest of disinterestedness and good-will, in like proportion shall Ireland show her readiness to join in with England in allowing the past to pass into history. The international ambition of Ireland will be to recreate in some new way that period of her ancient independence of which she is proudest, when she gave freely of her greatest treasures to every nation within her reach, and entertained no thought of recompense or of selfish advantage.