

SPEECH AT CORK MASS MEETING, 12th March, 1922.

By Michael Collins.

I come here as one of the 'incompetent amateurs' who have seized the helm of the ship of the Irish State, and have driven it on to the rocks.

The captain himself was here addressing you two or three weeks ago, and I told you I went to America to speak to the people of America, and ask them to recognise the Republic that was set up in Ireland by the free will of the Irish people, but little did I dream that the day would ever come when I would have to come to the Irish people themselves asking them to affirm the Republic that itself had set up.

And while the captain was away from his ship—that time in America—the weather was very stormy. There was a regular hurricane blowing—you in Cork will remember. The helm had been left by the captain in the hands of those very same incompetent amateurs who afterwards in calm water had the ship on the rocks, and, while he was away, somehow or other we steered it safely through those troubled waters—the roughest through which the ship of the Irish nation has ever had to be navigated in all her turbulent history.

Mr. de Valera laments, he says, that it should be necessary for him to remind the Irish people to be firm for the Republic. I have to ask those who are confusing the issue whether it is or is not a fact that the Republic was established by the Irish people?

Why does Mr. de Valera not answer my question?

Well, perhaps he cannot! It is not too easy when one has been confusing issues to make them clear again. But I will help him.

What does Mr. de Valera mean by the Republic? Fortunately he has told us in a speech he made last Sunday week in Ennis. He means by a Republic, he says, the democratic right of the people of Ireland to rule themselves without interference from any outside power.

Accepting that definition, I can answer Mr. de Valera's questions. The Irish people have not disestablished their democratic right to rule themselves.

They have claimed that right and fought for it through many generations. They have now at last established that right. They have done more. They have secured recognition of that right by the Power which through all the centuries had denied it. The departure of his forces is the real recognition of that right. It was those forces alone that prevented the Irish people from exercising their right.

If Mr. de Valera's definition is right we could never have had a Republic hitherto. It was, therefore, never established, because it is only now by means of the Treaty that the interference by the outside Power has ceased. That interference has come to an end—that interference, the absence of which Mr. de Valera lays down as the condition necessary for the existence of a Republic. We took a certain amount of government out of the hands of the enemy while he was here.

We took as much as we could. But we could not grasp all of it, because he used the whole of his forces to prevent us doing so, and we were unable to beat him out of the country by force of arms.

But the enemy is going—will soon be gone, if, indeed, Mr. de Valera and his friends will but allow them to depart.

There is, however, now no longer any outside power to prevent us exercising our democratic right to rule ourselves. And if Mr. de Valera's definition is right, if he really means the democratic right of the people to rule themselves, then I say the people have secured that democratic right.

And perhaps it is I who should be exhorting Mr. de Valera and his followers to stand by that democratic right, and not to destroy it or disestablish it, and to cease fomenting strife and making difficulties and delaying evacuation.

They do these things by the disunion they are causing. That disunion in itself encourages the cowardly element in Belfast to an orgy of bloodshed and ruffianism. Generally, Mr. de Valera and his friends are stepping into the shoes of the departing enemy, by

preventing, or attempting to prevent, in their autocratic manner, the right of the Irish people to govern themselves.

And now let me say that I agree with Mr. de Valera's definition in that it is for their democratic right, for the power to exercise it, that Ireland has always fought.

It is for that right that we fought in the recent struggle, and it is for that right our fathers fought, and it was the desire to secure that right that inspired the Land War, and inspired the Home Rule agitation, and inspired the Repeal Agitation, and inspired the Young Ireland and the Fenian Movements. That simply is the case. It was an elementary right we fought for, not the name of a form of government.

Indeed, it would seem that Mr. de Valera himself holds the opinion that we never had a Republic. Now, if that is so, we never had one to disestablish. One of the signatories of the Treaty is now a supporter of Mr. de Valera. This man must, therefore, be a little wiser than other men, belonging to both parties as it were. When Mr. Cathal Brugha spoke here in Cork he quoted this former member of the Dáil Cabinet with approval. In view of this position, the words of Mr. Barton may be of importance. Mr. Barton wrote in a paper which they call *The Republic of Ireland* that it had become plain that it was physically impossible to secure Ireland's ideal of a completely isolated Republic, otherwise than by driving the overwhelmingly superior British forces out of the country.

Obviously then we could not have had a Republic before the Truce. It was as stated, and I agree, an ideal only possible to realise by driving the overwhelmingly superior British forces out of the country.

And now let us get away from these confusions and prevarications. Let us look at the position as it really is. Let us look at it honestly for a moment—just plainly as it is, not as it should be and not as we should like it to be.

A year ago, a time Mr. de Valera and his followers wish to bring back again, we were all in a different position from what we are today. I need not emphasise this to you people of Cork. You know what things were twelve months ago. You know it and you can put your

knowledge of the real position above any empty declarations regarding the supposed position.

We were suffering under a murderous tyranny the enemy were directing against us. We were making a very valiant effort to uphold and exercise our democratic right to rule ourselves. We were making every effort to get rid of the enemy that was preventing us from doing this. We did make it very difficult for him to govern us. He was really alarmed. He tried by violence to get his Government back. His Government rested entirely on his violence. That was his only way of governing us. He knew that if he did not succeed in retaining his hold on us by violence he would have to relax that hold.

He called it restoring law and order. You will remember he was ignoring all law and order in his attempt to prevent us having Irish law and order of our own. Our people were being hunted, tortured, imprisoned, murdered, hanged. Your houses were being burned. Women and children in many districts were spending the nights shivering in the fields. There was no peace in Ireland night or day.

But we were not broken, and the enemy flung himself in vain against the spirit of the Irish people, and by the time the summer came the British Prime Minister himself had to invite over the 'murderers' and 'head of the murder gang,' to discuss with him and his Cabinet terms of peace.

If we had been able to beat the British out, and this not only from the South of Ireland and the West of Ireland, but the North-East of Ireland as well, there need have been no negotiations.

There need have been no Treaty, because we would have had our freedom as a result of a military victory. When we had achieved that result we could have expressed that freedom in whatever form we liked. We could have expressed it by a republic or by a monarchy. I am sure we could have found some descendant of the last King of Ireland modestly hidden away in one of our villages, and we could induce him to come out into the light.

We had not beaten the enemy, but neither had he beaten us. That was the plain position. And we met to see if agreement were possible, to arrange what we could get from him in return for what we wanted—namely, his departure.

What we wanted was that he should leave Ireland so that we might have our country for ourselves to live in the way we liked best.

Actually the British were prepared to go if terms could be agreed on. They had given over their claim to dominate us and to hold us in subservience to their wishes. We had made this country too uncomfortable for them. There were too many ambushed positions in our country, and there were too many gloomy street corners in Cork and Dublin.

But even so they were not militarily defeated, and we were not in the position of dictating terms of peace. The British had not surrendered. Therefore, they need not agree to what would have been to them humiliating terms, any more than we would agree to what would be to us humiliating terms.

And we did agree to a settlement. They agreed to withdraw their forces, military and administrative and economic. If we would agree to maintain an international association with them and the nations they called their 'Commonwealth,' we got a guarantee that our freedom so secured would not be violated.

Now, what I want to tell you is that it is not the Treaty that is all-important in this regard. It is the fact of their withdrawal and evacuation that is all-important. The Treaty is the written endorsement of the freedom which we have obtained.

We have been told that 'if the Treaty was signed under duress, then the men who went over broke their faith with the Irish people. If they signed it without duress they were traitors to their cause. He said it was under duress it was signed'—that is a typically de Valera argument. It's a 'heads I win, tails you lose' argument.

There is always duress present on both sides during such negotiations. I made it plain to all the plenipotentiaries in London that I did not regard seriously the threat of immediate and terrible war.

Let me bring you back to realities. First, there was the 72 hours' notice of termination of the Truce—three days. Nothing immediate or terrible about that. I made it clear what my feeling was. I stated over and over again that the conflict in Ireland would be resumed not after a formal declaration of war—immediate and terrible or otherwise, but would develop simply as a result of a policeman shot here, an Irish

soldier or an Irish citizen there; then again restoration of law and order in Ireland; then again the day of the Stricklands; the day of the Smyths and Prescott-Decies; the day of the lunatic murderers of Canon Magner and Father O'Callaghan. Mr. de Valera talks of signing under duress. Duress there was, and let me tell you what it was.

It was the duress that the weaker nation suffers under against the stronger. And the plenipotentiaries were not responsible for that. On the British side there was duress in that world opinion pressed upon them to conform their practice to their professions—to make an honourable peace with us, if possible. And there was on our side the duress to accept really substantial terms when we are at the pinnacle of the greatest amount of success to which we could hope to reach in this particular national effort.

And let me put another aspect of it to you. Let me recall to you that in July last 25 or 26 men lay under sentence of death. Hundreds of our people were in penal servitude, thousands were in internment, dozens of others were lying with capital charges over their heads. An offer was made by Britain. That offer to go before the people required the signatures of the plenipotentiaries. That was the reason we signed it—in order that the people would have a chance of deciding.

Will anyone tell me that we five should have refused to give the people an opportunity of deciding? Will any man stand up in this assembly and tell me that he would have refused to sign, and would, by his refusal, commit these 25 men to death, commit dozens of others to death, and commit the country generally to further bloodshed and destruction?

I know we had forced the British to the utmost limit they would go. I know what the alternative was, and every man who faces the situation in an honest and straight manner knows what the alternative was.

The suggestion underlying the criticism of the opposition is that little or nothing has been achieved. Our opponents claim that they alone are the custodians of the nation's honour. The suggestion is, in a veiled way, sometimes openly, sometimes by innuendo only, that the British Parliament still has power to legislate for Ireland. It has not, and our opponents know it has not, and you know it has not.

It is a difficult thing enough to resume normal life after a struggle such as the Irish have had. It is the duty of people, calling themselves leaders, to help the nation in that effort, not to hinder it. It is a difficult thing to change the sword for the ploughshare. The enemy has gone, or is going, and the sword will not plough the fields that are lying fallow.

Is it the doctrine of Mr. de Valera and his followers that suffering and fighting are to go on just because they are good in themselves? We hear about the hard road which the opposition is pointing out to the Irish nation, and the inducements that are put before the people towards ease, 'towards living practically the lives of beasts.'

This is the language of madness, or worse. There is no slavery under the Treaty. The chances of materialism are not greater than they would be under a Republican form of government, or any other form of government. It is undoubtedly for ourselves to decide.

We have a chance now of giving our people a better life, we have a chance of doing the thing that the people require. We have a chance of securing that the people shall no longer live the life of beasts. We have a chance of ending our slums. We have a chance of ending the hovels of some of our country places. We have a chance now, not by travelling any soft road, God knows, but by a hard, united effort to make Ireland something for the next generation, which it was not for ourselves.

It is suggested that martyrdom and suffering are necessary as a refining influence. We know as well as any of our opponents their refining influence. We know what their value has been in the past, in 1916 and from 1916 onwards. But martyrdom and suffering were for an end, not for their own sakes—the end being freedom and the noble life that can be lived in freedom.

Our opponents have failed by argument to win the Irish people to support their barren and destructive policy, or rather their negation of policy. Other tactics are now necessary on their part.

Incitement to mutiny takes the place of argument in the hope of stirring up turmoil. Their only hope now lies in wrecking by arranging and exploiting incidental troubles. For factionist ends they

are jeopardising the unity of Ireland. They are jeopardising its independence; they are jeopardising its progress.

‘Go another round in the race,’ says Mr. de Valera to you, ‘and who knows that the other fellow will be able to finish it.’

Yes! Who knows? And suppose he were able to finish it—what then? Is the safety and future of the nation to be staked on such a gamble?

The captain is trying to pull the ship off the rocks, we are told.

And how is he doing it? When the former Minister for Defence has by political propaganda been inciting mutiny in the army, and when Mr. de Valera is asked to speak on the situation, ‘It is too serious,’ he says, ‘to make a pronouncement.’

Is that the way in which he is pulling the ship off the rocks?

The former Minister for Home Affairs obstructs the formation of a police force—a police force intended by us to deal with the outbreak of violence and crime which is endangering us—he cavils as to whether the force is to be under the authority of Dáil Éireann or the Provisional Government. Do Mr. de Valera and his followers acquiesce in this obstruction—in this action which is conniving at lawlessness?

Is this his way of pulling the ship off the rocks?

At this moment—and it is a serious moment in the nation’s life—the only policy of our opponents has become, it seems, by hidden manoeuvre, to stir up trouble.

Their desire evidently is by any trickery to delay the expression of the people’s will in an election; to prepare intimidation for the time when that election must inevitably come. Is this for the chance of being able to declare another war against the enemy who is departing? If this is so, let them tell us; let them inform us as to what they are going to do and how they are going to do it. Let them put their policy, their constitution, their programme, before the people.

What is their object? I, for one, do not know. I know what their tactics are—they are the tactics of a discredited and defeated faction.