

Excerpt from the Transcript of the Charitable Irish Society's Annual Dinner - March 17, 2016

MR. FERRITER:

Chris, President Duggan, I want to also acknowledge the Board of Directors and the committee of the Charitable Irish Society, Minister Humphreys, Consul General, state representatives, learned judges and most importantly, of course, ladies and gentlemen, on this very special night for the Irish everywhere. It really is an honor and a privilege to be here.

I'm particularly grateful for all of the organization that has gone into tonight. Such a wonderful evening, and I know a huge amount of hard work was involved in making it all possible, and I want to thank in particular Catherine Shannon, the wonderful Catherine Shannon.

(Applause.)

MR. FERRITER: Catherine was the first to send the invitation to me to come here tonight, and Catherine is a remarkable woman and she's a resilient woman. In 1990 in Dublin, I was 18 years of age. I was able to vote for the first time, a very important rite of passage, and the first vote that I cast was for Mary Robinson, who went on to become President of Ireland.

And that was a very significant election for all sorts of reasons, not least because Mary Robinson became the first female president of Ireland but of course if you're familiar with the history of the Charitable Irish Society, you will be aware that Catherine Shannon was the first woman to be elected President of The Charitable Irish Society in 1990, the same year as Mary Robinson --

(Applause.)

MR. FERRITER: You never know, Catherine. You might be getting a call from Hilary Clinton soon!

This year is going to see an unprecedented commemoration of the 1916 Rising, which has been mentioned various times tonight. An interesting question is how this commemorative space has opened up and how it has become so wide and so big in recent times in comparison to what was there previously. This centenary is being taken very, seriously. As the Minister has said, there is a level of public engagement with the legacy of the 1916 Rising that has not been witnessed before.

And we need to think about what has been involved over the various decades in remembering 1916; the whole process of remembrance, or what Toni Morrison, the novelist, referred to as re-memoration, a very interesting mix of memory and commemoration.

Looking at that fluctuating status of 1916 and how it has been viewed at various stages also involves looking at difficult years where it seemed many wanted to forget or avoid 1916 and its legacy

There have also been times when it seems the 1916 Rising has been ripe for re-imagination and for reinvention, a reminder that commemoration tells us as much about contemporary currents and contemporary impulses as it does about the past.

Indeed, sometimes commemoration will tell us a hell of a lot more about the present than it does about the past. Sometimes, by emphasizing the dangers of history getting lost in the midst of commemoration, historians have to be party-poopers when it comes to commemoration and commemorative priorities. But in relation to its status and perhaps its fluctuating status at various stages over the decades, why is it so important in 2016 to look at how the legacy of 1916 has been dealt with?

Partly because looking at that theme invites us to examine different aspects of state, society, economy and culture at various stages in Ireland over the century since the 1916 Rising.

It also illustrates a lot of the themes, impulses, and controversies associated with the contested legacy of 1916, some of which still resonate. It would be an exaggeration to say that the 1916 Rising is no longer a

controversial issue. It is in many respects, and it's one of the reasons that the 1916 centenary is going to hold so much interest for so many people. This raises an obvious question at the outset: Why did the 1916 Rising matter? What was the significance of the Rising? I'm aware that some of you will be much more familiar with the finer details of the Rising than others. It was the biggest single military rebellion against British rule in Ireland over the last 200 years. It also was a huge surprise. Only a small core group were aware of the plans for rebellion in Dublin in 1916. Only in the region of 2000 men and women actually fought in Dublin in 1916.

It was audacious. It caused a shock. It threw down the gauntlet. It was a Great challenge to the British empire, then the largest empire in the world, but I would also argue that the 1916 Rising, while dramatic and audacious, was also born of despair.

For all the talk of the future Irish republic, of the Proclamation of 1916, of the declaration of equality, it was also a response to a despair, a despair that generated a belief something desperate was necessary in order to try and light a spark that could become a flame for Irish freedom.

Those who planned the rebellion in 1916 were well aware that this would not be a popular event or a popular gesture. They were well aware that they did not

have public opinion on their side. They were well aware that at the time of the 1916 Rising there were 146,000 Irishmen serving in the British Army, and there were, of course, all of the women they left behind also, the "separation women" as they were known, who reacted in a very hostile way, by and large, to the 1916 Rising.

So while there was optimism about what might be achieved, there is also the Rising as a response to despair. There were those who believed that this was the last chance to save a sense of Irish destiny, a sense of Irish identity.

There were and are those who regard the 1916 Rising as the founding act of a democratic state- as the foundational moment of the modern Irish Republic, the birth of the modern Irish Republic.

There were and are also those who see it as the bloody conspiracy of an unelected minority who did not engage in any process of consultation, who did not seek any kind of mandate.

We need to put these perspectives in some kind of context. What do revolutionaries not do in the late-19th and the early-20th Centuries? They did not look for mandates. They did not consult. But that also left a very contested and very difficult legacy in relation to the role of violence in Ireland. You also have then the question of who was affected by the 1916 Rising; consider

the area of Dublin City where the fighting was most heavily concentrated: 485 people were killed in Easter week 1916, a drop in the ocean compared with the scale of the slaughter internationally during that period; the period of the first World War, but that is not the point. Compared to the anonymity of first world war carnage, the 1916 Rising- urban warfare- created its own stage, and its impact reverberated beyond the numbers affected.

But what is indisputable is that the largest category of victims in 1916 was the civilian category. 256 of those 485 killed were civilians; civilians who had not asked to die for Ireland.

These deaths in overall terms, as I mentioned, are very insignificant when you consider the crude numbers game associated with death in the first World War. Indeed, that Easter week alone, 600 Irishmen died on the Western front fighting with the British Army.

But the 1916 Rising made an impact beyond its numbers and, indeed, beyond the number of fatalities. As I mentioned, What the rebels had in Dublin in 1916 was a stage to themselves. When you consider the anonymous, industrialized slaughter of the first World War, you'll get an appreciation of why the rebels in Dublin made such an impact. The Rising was almost consciously staged as a drama. The military strategy that was involved was not particularly sophisticated - the idea of insurgents locking

themselves into key city-center buildings and waiting to be removed or waiting to see how the British authorities, the British forces, would react - but it did have, of course, that element of drama.

Nowhere was that more apparent than in the occupation of the General Post Office in the center of what was then Sackville Street, now O'Connell Street, the main thoroughfare in Dublin City Centre.

So the military strategy had that element of drama and, so indeed, did the Proclamation of 1916; it had elements of war propaganda, elements of timeless republican values in relation to equality, in relation to social progress.

Its particular promise in relation to Women was that they would be granted a vote in the new Irish Republic, that they would be granted a suffrage at a time when women did not have the vote in Ireland was striking; the fact that it was addressed to Irishmen and Irishwomen on equal terms was a very significant development in 1916. 1916 also mattered because it destroyed the Home Rule project that had been the dominant project of Irish constitutional nationalists' since the 1870's and the 1880's.

In the aftermath of the 1916 Rising, Home Rule as a political project was essentially dead. Home Rule as a project that looked or sought for devolution within the

British empire, a Home Rule parliament that would retain the imperial connection.

1916 also mattered because it became the first step in a War of Independence that gathered momentum in the aftermath of the Rising. This period also witnessed the partition of Ireland in 1920, the creation of the new state of Northern Ireland, and then the Great Compromise of 1921 that brought an end to the War of Independence, the Anglo-Irish Treaty that was signed between representatives of the Irish Government and representatives of the British Government in December 1921, the compromise that destroyed the unity that had existed in the Irish Republican Movement, the Sinn Féin political party that represented, it seemed, the ideals and the aspirations of the 1916 Rising.

What came after that, of course, was civil war from 1922 to 1923, and the question arises in that context: where lay the spirit of 1916? Where lay the dreams, the aspirations of 1916 in the context of a civil war? How exactly was 1916 going to be remembered as a result of that civil war?

1916 had also created icons. You'll be familiar with many of them, especially the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation who were executed after the Rising. There were also three-and-a-half-thousand people arrested in the aftermath, a spectacular miscalculation on

the part of the British Government.

You'll appreciate that if only 2000 people were involved in fighting in the Rising, arresting 3500 suspects was not the wisest of moves, and the executions and the imprisonments certainly played a role in turning public opinion in favor of the gesture of 1916. And what of those survivors who became icons? Eamon de Valera, the sole surviving commandant of the 1916 Rising, was able to build much out of his status as the sole-surviving commandant.

You also have the question of what it meant beyond Ireland. In a way, the 1916 Rising ensured that it became the Irish equivalent of America's 4th of July.

The idea that it was a tipping point, the idea that it was a transformative moment that led to a new reality and a changed politics. But we have to be conscious of the broader context; that broader context of the first World War. The 1916 Rising would not have happened had it not been for that violent backdrop of the first World War and the belief by the organizers that this was the time to strike, and those who were motivated by the outbreak of the first World War to do something drastic, to do something dramatic in Ireland in 1916.

The reference that has been made earlier on in the Proclamation to the exiled children of America; that indicates a consciousness and a recognition that this was a rebellion that was partly fomented by those in exile

and that it needed outside assistance. John DeVoy, for example, in New York, the leader of Clan na Gael, was an instrumental figure in the planning of the financing of what became the 1916 Rising, Clan na Gael raising in the region of \$100,000 at that time in the run-up to the 1916 Rising.

And you also have then the response of President Woodrow Wilson, who was doing some ducking and diving when it comes to the Irish question at this time.

Wilson was very conscious of his own Irish ancestry, very vocal about that at various stages, but also someone who was very reluctant to engage in demands for leniency to be shown towards the 1916 rebels because of the reality of American politics and the reality of the politics of the first World War at that time.

In relation to a campaign for clemency, he suggested in his own words, it would be "inexcusable for me to touch this. It would involve serious international embarrassment".

Another important theme during that period was the question of the compatibility of American patriotism with pride in Irish heritage and Irish political demands. Indeed, The Charitable Irish Society was very vocal in 1918 in pushing Woodrow Wilson to recognize the Irish claim to self-determination when it came to the close of the first World War.

But the connections went deeper than that. Five of the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation spent crucial periods of their lives, of their careers, in the United States of America. Tom Clarke, who I mentioned, the eldest of the Rebel leaders in 1916, was a naturalized citizen of the U.S.

Patrick Pearse had come here in 1914 where he had honed some of his communication skills. The idea of being able to work the audience was a crucial part of the formation of Patrick Pearse and the idea of being able to communicate what became ultimately his revolutionary message.

The United States was the only country that was specifically mentioned outside of Ireland in the 1916 Proclamation and, yet, the legacy and the remembrance became very, very difficult in the decade afterwards because of the Civil War, which while causing great tragedy in Ireland was also greeted with great consternation in the United States.

Solemn remembrance of 1916 was often undermined by its contested legacy, by the idea of politicians and other individuals trying to make political capital out of that contested legacy.

What we get in relation to commemorating 1916, in the words of one historian, Clair Wills, in the decades after the Rising, is a mixture of "pious reverence and political point-scoring"

There was also occasional satire.

In 1924 for example, Dublin Opinion magazine, the leading satirical magazine in Ireland at that time, reacted to a discussion about the potential for tourism in the new free state of Southern Ireland that had been created by the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

There was a concern that there wouldn't be enough quality hotel bedrooms in Ireland of 1924, that a tourist infrastructure was necessary. And Dublin Opinion printed a cartoon of the GPO, the General Post Office in Dublin, and included the caption "Accommodation is not a problem in this city. This building held 30,000 patriots in 1916".

-the idea that there were many who were despairing of the Rising at the time but then came to champion it to the extent that they insisted they had been in the GPO in 1916. We now know from the most recently released records that there were 508 people in the GPO in 1916; certainly not 30,000!!

The 1920's also witnessed the Re-emergence of the defeated Irish republicans of the Civil War, through the formation of a new political party, Fianna Fáil

raising the question as to how this new party would deal with the legacy of the 1916 Rising and what transpires towards the end of that decade are rival parades and parallel commemorations from both sides of the civil war divide De Valera, the leader of Fianna Fáil, insisted he would not take part in the state commemorations of 1916 that had been inaugurated in 1924. He led, instead, his republican supporters to Glasnevin Cemetery on the outskirts of Dublin City to the graves of some of the dead republicans and insisted " While the task to which they devoted themselves remains unfulfilled", it would be completely inappropriate for us to be involved in state commemoration. But commemoration was just about politicians. It was also about playwrights and writers and how they were dealing with the legacy of 1916.

Sean O'Casey, for example, the great Dublin playwright, in 1926 was associated with one of the most dramatic events in the history of the Irish National Theater, The Abby Theatre. He had written a wonderful play called "The Plough and the Stars," and it was staged in 1926, the 10th Anniversary of the 1916 Rising, and it led to a riot because O'Casey was not interested in the stained-glass approach to the 1916 rebels.

O'Casey was interested in exploring the impact it had had on the civilians in the tenement slums where most of the fighting was concentrated.

The same year that he wrote "The Plough and the Stars," his representation of 1916, he wrote a letter to a corespondent, and he maintained " it isn't a question of English culture or Irish culture when it comes to the inanimate patsies of the tenements, but a question of life for the few and death for the many". This was at a time when 800,000 people in Ireland in 1926 were living in overcrowded accommodation. Now, O'Casey was attacked by some of the veterans of 1916 and their relatives; by the Keepers of the Flames who accused him of "making a mockery and a byword of a revolutionary movement". He wasn't doing that. He was trying to shine a light on the dark interior of the reality of what Easter week 1916 meant in practice for different individuals.

O'Casey was very hard on some of that revolutionary generation, not just for artistic reasons or not just for social reasons, but because he, himself, had been a player in socialist politics and believed that Irish socialism had been sacrificed on the altar of Irish nationalism, and he wasn't necessarily a supremely objective witness to history, but he did raise some interesting, challenging questions.

In another letter he wrote in the 1950's looking back on this period, and on the controversies associated with his play, he wrote " We need to be careful of personal idealism, good and well-intentioned as it may

be, its flame in a few hearts may not give rise to new life and hope for the many but dwindle into ghastly funeral pyres". He was underlining the extent to which that generation had difficult questions to face about the gulf between revolutionary rhetoric and the reality of the Ireland they were living in.

Rows over commemorating 1916 continued in the 1930's. The unveiling of a Statue of Cuchulainn at the General Post Office in 1935 led to a very heated controversy over who was controlling the legacy of 1916. This sculpture was to be a centerpiece in the General Post Office.

De Valera at this stage was in power and William T. Cosgrave was the leader of the opposition. Cosgrave refused to attend the unveiling of this Statute of Cuchulainn on the grounds that commemoration had become too partisan and that Fianna Fáil was seeking to claim ownership of the 1916 legacy.

"The time is not yet ripe", he said, "for sober reflection. Bitterness, suspicion and envy we have in abundance. Our national humiliations cannot be hidden by the lifting of a bronze veil from the Statue of Cuchulainn". The United Ireland newspaper that supported Cosgrave's stance went further and editorialized that "it is almost unseemly, if not indecent when political parties

engaged in a figurative scramble for the bones of the patriot dead". That assertion was one that was to resonate at various stages in relation to 1916.

But De Valera also had his own challenges. The 20th anniversary of the Rising in 1936 was also the year that his government made the Irish Republican Army, the IRA, an illegal organization.

The IRA was also maintaining that while the task to which the 1916 rebels had devoted themselves remained unfulfilled, the IRA would have to continue its work, but De Valera of course at this stage is committed to a constitutional path.

So there was this difficult balancing act going on in relation to the legacy of 1916, and the same challenges were there in 1941 for the 25th Anniversary of the 1916 Rising. The Irish quest for sovereignty, for independence for Southern Ireland was taken to its logical conclusion with the announcement that Ireland would remain neutral during the second World War which created great tension between Ireland and the United States and, of course, between Ireland and Britain.

But De Valera was adamant that you had to be able to implement an independent foreign policy if you had any real claim to being independent.

How is the 1916 Rising remembered in the midst of international conflict? By emphasizing that the sovereignty that now existed in Ireland to the extent that neutrality could be declared, was as a result of what was begun in 1916.

But De Valera thought it would be inappropriate during the period of the second World War to have a very elaborate military ceremony to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Rising in 1941, though many of his colleagues ensured that there was a significant commemoration in 1941.

But De Valera also made broadcasts about the IRA, which at that time was engaged in a bombing campaign in Britain. There were IRA hunger strikers who died on a hunger strike in Ireland during the period of the second World War, and De Valera insisted they had no moral right to claim a mandate from 1916; that the campaign that they were engaged in could not be "substantiated by an appeal to the facts of 1916 nor to the sentiments of the leaders of 1916."

There were also questions raised at that time, the 25th Anniversary of the Rising, about what has not been achieved. Sean O Faolain, for example, the great Cork writer, writing in 1941, insisted "if there's any cleavage amongst us today, it is between those who believe tradition

can explain everything and those who believe that tradition can explain nothing. We are living during a period of conflict between the definite principles of past achievement [of 1916] and the undefined principles of current ambition."

Where were the projects, the plans for the future? Where was the promise to deliver on the 1916 Proclamation? O Faolain wondered if James Connolly, the iconic socialist leader who was executed for his role in the 1916 Rising and who had signed the Proclamation, would be happy with the Ireland of 1941? And the veterans of 1916, as they become old men and women, have their own concerns about ensuring that their sacrifices, that the message of 1916 survives.

There are heartbreaking letters in the Irish National Archives from the late-1950's and early-1960's, written by old IRA veterans who feel they're not appreciated anymore, who feel that a younger generation do not have enough understanding or enough knowledge about 1916.

Two men from an old IRA brigade wrote to Taoiseach Sean Lemass in 1962. They were concerned about the proliferation of small parades to commemorate 1916.

The public, they wrote, "had become so used to handfuls of old men marching behind faded Irish flags that they no longer even turned their heads to look".

Indeed, some of them in their motor cars were "hooting them out of the way with contempt", in the words of those veterans.

Lemass had his own struggles in the 1960's over how to deal with the 1916 legacy. Lemass was a 1916 veteran, but he was an understated one. As he approached the end of his tenure in office, he was concerned about the approaching 50th Anniversary of the Rising in 1966. Lemass wanted to look forward, forget the Ireland, he said, "of the Sean bhean bhocht"- the poor old woman - and think of the Ireland of the technological expert"- the idea of a need to look to a modern industrialized future for Ireland.

But he also had to deal with the Keepers of The 1916 Flame. The remarkable Kathleen Clarke, for example, the widow of 1916 Proclamation signatory Tom Clarke and the Keeper of the Flame of Tom Clarke, a formidable politician in her own right and the first female Lord Mayor of Dublin.

She wrote to Lemass in 1965 and insisted that unless Lemass dealt honestly with what she insisted had happened during Easter week in 1916, she would go public with her version of 1916.

Patrick Pearse, she insisted, had not been the President of the Irish Republic in 1916. Her husband, Tom Clarke, had been the President of the Republic in 1916; Pearse, she maintained, had taken advantage of the confusion

during the events of Easter week 1916 to sign himself as President, and she wanted this to be acknowledged.

Sean Lemass certainly did not want to debate that, particularly when you consider the vitriolic tone of the correspondence from Kathleen Clarke. Pearse, she insisted, "should have been satisfied with the position of Commander in Chief of the Irish Republican Army, given that he knew as much about commanding as my dog".

You will appreciate that Sean Lemass did not want to open that particular Pandora's Box in 1965, but Lemass was not able to stop the degree of triumphalism that was there in 1966, though sometimes that has been exaggerated.

What Lemass did do in 1965 was make a very important public intervention in relation to those who had died as Irishmen fighting in the first World War in the British Army.

He suggested they had "died as honorably as any who had given their blood for Ireland", a very significant intervention by a senior politician at that time and an acceptance that definitions of loyalty in Ireland in 1916 were multifaceted and complicated.

1966 did, nonetheless, witness a very elaborate commemoration of 1916, which included pageants, the opening up of the Kilmainham Gaol where many of the 1916 prisoners had spent time and where the leaders were were

executed and the opening of the Garden of Remembrance.

There was also a very dramatic Development just prior to the 50th Anniversary when Nelson's Pillar was blown up by renegade Irish republicans in Dublin City Centre. This was one of the great symbols of the historic Irish connection to the British empire. Horatio Nelson was the great hero of the Battle of Trafalgar, and the statue had been erected in the early 19th Century. Now, those who were determined to bring Nelson down didn't quite get him fully down. It was necessary for the Irish Army to come in and finish off the job.

But this was a very popular act of commemoration or, should I say, anti-commemoration. A song called "Up went Nelson" topped the Irish charts for a number of weeks in 1966!

You will appreciate that this was not a project that had been authorized by the government of the day and it's a reminder, of course, that commemoration can prompt these unofficial gestures.

Thankfully, nobody was injured during that explosion, but what you had a couple years later in 1969 was the outbreak of the troubles in Northern Ireland, over the course of which three and a half thousand people were to lose their lives. This created huge complications in relation to remembering 1916 from the 1970s onwards. There were years where it was forgotten. There were years when it

was condemned. The troubles also in some ways led to a degree of silence about 1916.

The annual military parade coordinated by the state was abandoned in the early-1970's because of the Troubles and by 1979, there was a reluctance to engage with the military legacy of Patrick Pearse and, instead, for the centenary of his birth that year the government emphasized the idea of Pearse as the educator, Pearse as a cultural figure, Pearse as somebody who was first and foremost a teacher and linguist as opposed to a soldier.

Connor Cruise O'Brien, a dominant politician in the 1973 to 1976 coalition of Fine Gael-Labour, was a government minister at the time of the 60th Anniversary of the Rising in 1976, and he referred to Patrick Pearse in very harsh terms, caustically describing him as "a manic mystic nationalist with a cult of blood sacrifice and a strong personal motivation towards death. The nation that takes that kind of character as its mentor is on a path to moral obliquity and engaged in a project of intellectual disaster and dishonesty".

That is an example of the kind of sentiment being expressed in the 1970's about the 1916 legacy. It seemed that much was being reduced to black-and-white; that the rebels had either to be seen as democrats or dictators; that they had either to be seen as courageous or spineless; that they had either to be depicted as sectarian or

inclusive, but there did not seem to be any kind of gray area at all.

As a result, what was witnessed for the 75th Anniversary of the Rising in 1991 was understated; a very brisk wreath-laying state ceremony but in reality, an official reluctance to engage with the legacy of 1916, and you will appreciate how difficult the contemporary climate was due to the carnage in Northern Ireland.

Remembering 1916 was largely led by Artists and cultural figures for the 75th Anniversary, and there were some relatives of 1916 participants who felt that pride in 1916 was being bullied out of existence; that there was an official embarrassment about it. But of course that changed, and dramatically so and here is where we come to recent times and the idea of the re-invention, the re-imagining, the re-engagement with 1916. The re-emergence of a pride in 1916.

What was involved in that process? First and foremost it was the peace process which was mentioned earlier on; the process that led to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

In tandem with that political process, the notion of a "shared history but different memories" was developed; the idea of respecting the different allegiances- nationalist and unionist- and the different history associated with those allegiances on the island.

I know the Charitable Irish Society played its part in that in relation to encouraging that kind of dialogue and inviting people from those different backgrounds and traditions to share their experiences at Charitable Irish Society events.

The World War I context also came back into the frame. The idea that definitions of loyalty in Ireland in 1916 were complex and that Irishmen of that generation served for multiple reasons. New information has also come into the domain to ensure that we have a much more in-depth knowledge of what motivated the 1916 generation. The statements that they left behind, that were collected from the veterans in the 1940's and 1950's were only released to the public in 2003 in the Bureau of Military History collection.

The applications that many of them made for pensions based on their military service in 1916 have been released on a phased basis in the last few years. Digitization projects, including the digitization of the Irish census returns from 1901 and 1911 have been funded by the state have been made available to researchers at home and abroad for free to ensure that people can engage with the texture of life in Ireland in 1916.

And it is no longer just about " the men of 1916". One of the pageants in 1966 had the title "Seven Men, Seven Days," referring to the signatories of the

Proclamation and the week of the 1916 Rising.

We don't refer to "the men of 1916" in this centenary year of the Rising. We know much more about the 300 women who were involved in the Rising and their testimonies and accounts are now central to overall understanding of the events of 1916.

But we also know about the difficult Afterlife; the hierarchy of benefit that existed for 1916 veterans, as you can trace through the applications for pensions. There were those who did well out of 1916 and those who suffered greatly as a result of 1916 service or were sometimes even humiliated. That archive is a chronicle of great disappointment because the vast majority of people who applied for pensions were not successful in their applications.

We also know much more now about the civilian experience of 1916, the 40 children under 16 years of age who were killed during the 1916 Rising and who did not ask to die for Ireland.

The mother of one those child victims was asked if she felt it was necessary after the Rising for more people to die for Ireland and her response was that "Ireland needed people to live honestly for Ireland", and those kind of voices and perspectives now are coming in to our commemorative domain as we approach the 100th Anniversary of the 1916 Rising.

There's also a strong pride in a sense of Irish nationhood that is a legacy of 1916, but also a consternation that there will always be the possibility of hijacking. There always has been with the commemoration of 1916 and different political parties will have their different perspectives; some will claim that they are the true inheritors of 1916 or that they are the only people who are fit or capable of delivering on the promises of the 1916 Proclamation. That kind of jockeying for position has always gone on in relation to 1916, and even within individual political parties there may will be disagreements as to the importance significance or legitimacy of the 1916 Rising.

There are those who insist that we should shamelessly celebrate 1916. We don't have an Independence Day in Ireland. Perhaps we should have an Independence Day in Ireland and it should be on 24 April, the date the Rising commenced.

There are also those who insist in the words of Charles Flannagan, the current Minister for Foreign Affairs, that commemorating 1916 "cannot be Divisive". How do you square the circle of competing impulses? A shameless celebration that is not divisive when you're dealing with the reality of divisive events in Ireland 100 years ago?

What we have a much stronger sense of, though, compared to previous commemorations is what it felt like to be part of the generation of 1916 whether as a rebel or as a bystander or as somebody who was deeply caught up in the aftermath. There was a lot of confusion around in 1916 and let's not forget that as we commemorate.

I know the Charitable Irish Society has in the past honored the late Brian Friel, one of our greatest playwrights. One memorable line that he used is that "confusion is not an ignoble condition". Let us embrace the reality of how people were confused by 1916 at the time and sometimes still are.

W.B. Yeats was surprised as a poet that any public event could move him so deeply as the 1916 Rising did, but look at what his response was in "A Terrible Beauty," his iconic poem of 1916.

It really was an honest playing out of the doubts in his own mind about what had happened. There's pride there, but there's also fear about what the consequences might be. And, again, getting those perspectives is crucial during this centenary period.

We need to restore to 1916 the complexity that these new sources demand. We need to be mindful of context. What we have now today, 100 years on is distance and perspective. We have a relative peace. We have this abundance of new information, so we can try and understand

what motivated that revolutionary generation and cynicism should not be part of our perspective.

I'm aware that the Charitable Irish Society's motto is "With Good Will Doing Service." Many of those who fought in 1916 felt that that's exactly what they were involved in; doing their national service as they saw fit. They were guided by the lights of their time, and we need to understand what the lights of their time were.

This is also about the public, and not the state, owning 1916 and the legacy of 1916. That sense of ownership now is now civic.

We have to look back now and see the 1916 Rising as a bold, courageous, complicated, bloody and dramatic gesture that began a new phase of Irish history, of the Irish experience.

It also, of course, began a new phase of Irish American history and the Irish American experience. It was led by a fascinating generation of Irishmen and Irishwomen, and I am delighted that you who are here tonight are so deeply interested in what it all means.

(Applause.)