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From Easter 1916 to Brexit 2016 - Reflections on Revolution

Remarks by Emily O'Reilly, European Ombudsman, at the opening of the Parnell Summer School

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At this rather late stage in this year's national commemoration of the 1916 Rising, I would like to thank the Parnell Society for the opportunity to "Remember, Reflect and Reimagine", those carefully chosen and alliterative words with which the Government has decided to frame our discourse.

I, of course, stand before you today as someone both unimagined and unimaginable in 1916; or at least following the death in the stonebreakers' yard of Kilmainham Jail of the last of the seven signatories of the Proclamation, some of whom, I like to believe, possibly might have imagined me or imagined a path at least to my creation.

Many this year have mused about how things might have been had those seven men survived. Perhaps we should ask instead how things might have been, and especially for women, had others not survived.

I stand before you today as an Irishwoman with equal rights to those of Irishmen. I stand before you as a representative of those "children of the nation" for whom the Rising was - at its most benign - an important historical event in their lives - but, at its most venal, simply the raising of the flag for a period during which the humanity of every Irish woman was not just denied but actively legislated against.

That period ended not in 1919, or in 1921, or 1926, or 1937, or 1948, but rather in 1973 when we entered what is now the European Union. Our Government then was forced, not just to "remember, reflect and reimagine" the equality they had denied, but actually to give it binding legal expression in line with the Treaty of Rome. Subsequent Treaties, and 13 Equality Directives arising out of those Treaties, finally gave to Irishwomen that which their own independent State had not.

It took the international world, it took foreigners and strangers, it took outsiders to bring us back into the light, back into the dancing of the public sphere.

That date in 1973 is when the Irish revolution finally happened for the women of this country. We had been to the 1916 party, worn the uniforms, fired the guns, sat in the jails, nursed the sick, waked the dead; the party ended and so, essentially, did we. So ended any possibility of playing a full and equal role in the subsequent development of this State. Constance Markievicz became a Minister in 1919. It would be 60 years, 1979, before another woman was allowed to grace the Cabinet table and 74 years before more than one woman sat at



Cabinet, and that in the 27th Dáil [Parliament] since the 1916 Rising.

I won't live long enough to take part in the 100th anniversary of our accession to the EU. But my daughters hopefully will and my granddaughters, if I have any. And perhaps we could mark the 50th anniversary of EU accession in 2023 with a celebration of all Irishwomen, of the generations that barely left the traps when it came to exploring all of life's possibilities as well as of those who have succeeded. I look forward to taking part in that commemoration and I hope the State sponsored extravaganza will be just as magnificent as this one.

A commemoration, and particularly a commemoration of a founding moment in the life of an autonomous state, generally suggests a linear progression towards a fuller flowering of the ideals of the revolutionaries that sparked it. It is undeniable that in many parts of Irish life that progression has happened. We have succeeded politically and economically as a state and we have impressed internationally.

Our independence has restored to us the sense of ourselves as a people, restored our pride in a culture barely kept alive under British rule, restored our self-confidence as a nation. And that culture and that confidence have enabled us to emerge as a modern state.

But we could have been, should have been, perhaps still can be, more. As a student teacher in Trinity College Dublin in the late 1970s, I wrote my Higher Diploma thesis on Pearse and St Enda's College, which he established. I was inspired by his writings on the "Murder Machine", his description of the English education system operating in Ireland; and incredulous that his outline and practice of the mode and matter of a child's education was so at odds with what had been served up in the decades since his death - even if the imposed English system was what Pearse had been decrying.

As many have pointed out, we cannot know what might have been had Pearse and others not died. Neither can we know how they would have viewed our progress since 1916. All we can know is what actually happened and not what we imagine might have happened. All we can know is what those who dodged the bullet, and those who came after them, actually did.

I have recently been reading about the way in which German law, and indeed German lawyers, under Hitler were used to habituate both the Jews and other German citizens to the reduction of the Jewish people to the single trait of ethnicity from which point every element of their lives and eventual deaths was controlled. The dry language of public administration, the murderous perversion of the high academic richness and fluency of the language of the rule of law, essentially anaesthetised a population to the barbaric reality of Hitler's and the Nazis' true intent.

I make this point, not to draw a parallel between the monstrous suffering of the millions murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators and the treatment of post-Rising Irish women - because there is none - but rather to show how the law is frequently used as the key instrument of suppression. This is particularly the case when it attempts to draw upon a single element of a human being as the sole determinant of her or his treatment by the State.

In their 2008 work, Una Crowley and Rob Kitchin from the University of Maynooth identified over 20 separate Government Acts and reports between 1923 and 1937 that essentially saw the State join with the Catholic Church in the



control of individual sexuality, a control which naturally impacted significantly more on women than on their remembered, imagined or actual sexual partners.

Women were reduced to living, breathing occasions of sin; such occasions to be limited as much as possible by narrowing a woman's sphere of operation to the domestic, by severely restricting her capacity to act independently though the systematic removal of her financial independence and even of her right to bodily integrity. It would be 1990 before a man's raping of his wife became a criminal offence.

The 1926 Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Act effectively barred women from certain civil service exams. The 1924 and 1927 Juries Acts effectively removed women from serving on juries. In 1932 married women were barred from being primary school teachers; and this bar was not lifted until 1958. The 1935 Conditions of Employment Act gave the Government the power to prohibit women from working in some industries and the power to restrict the number of women working in other industries. The 1956 Civil Service Regulation Act formalised the practice of female civil servants having to retire on marriage; a requirement not lifted until 1973. For many years, women could not even collect the children's allowance without the written permission of their husbands.

Various reports argued for more incarceration and other punishments for "fallen women". The 1937 Constitution neatly packaged the dehumanising intent of these and future laws through its explicit positioning of women outside of the public space. Pearse and his comrades were barely 20 years in their graves, and the presumed equality intent of the Proclamation was already buried deep in the quicklime with them.

Dáil [Parliament] debates from that period, but way beyond those decades also, give full voice to the misogyny that was as much a part of our daily lives as oxygen. The recruitment of women Gardaí [police officers] was resisted but if it had to be accepted, urged one TD [Member of Parliament], the choice should be restricted to the physically plainest of applicants, those with little chance of finding a partner.

The writer Dermot Bolger recently reflected on the opposition of the Catholic Church and of others to women athletes in the 1930s and 40s, to female participation in the Olympic Games where the first Irishwoman to win a medal, Letitia Hamilton, did so in 1948 in the category of landscape art painting.

There were few avenues available to women to express themselves and their talents beyond the measured confines of homes they were not allowed even to own. Those who persisted, those who made it to the top of the civil service or into public life, did so only by foregoing in most cases the possibility of marriage and of children. This was a cruel, calculated and coerced choice which few men had to make.

Vast swathes of women were essentially infantilised through the laws of this newly independent state, their rights little greater than those of their children, their bodies, minds and actions controlled through the cultural, legal and religious apparatus of the Republic.

It would be wrong of course to think that Ireland was unique in its treatment of its female citizens. Magdalen laundries flourished elsewhere, Swiss women got the vote as late as 1971, employment bars also existed. But what's interesting



for us in this centenary year of the 1916 Rising is the gap between the words of the Proclamation – the guarantee of equal rights and equal opportunities for all – and what followed immediately afterwards, even if that guarantee was as revolutionary and novel in its day as the fight for independence itself.

In many ways we are this year celebrating a mirage. Imagining, reinventing, reimagining, whatever, something that, if it ever was real, was real for women only during that brief time between Pearse's march to surrender and the peals of rifles that stilled his voice forever one week later. Perhaps it was the Proclamation itself that was actually shot to ribbons in those days and weeks.

An interesting way to consider this is to reflect on the other revolution that was happening almost simultaneously with our own, and with the later War of Independence and Civil War, and that was the suffragette movement in England. It is interesting to observe the parallels between both revolutionary waves.

Essentially, the militant suffragette movement of the late 19th and early 20th century grew out of a failure to give women the vote; just as the 1916 revolution and what followed in the War of Independence stemmed from the failure to enact Home Rule. In both cases, the failure of the political system to act cued decisions to fight in other, bloodier ways.

And the suffragettes – despite the benign image of Mrs Banks marching with her sash in Mary Poppins – could arguably be called at some points a terrorist movement. That label is resisted by many because of the nature of the grievance and therefore, presumably, the rightness of the tactics. But in the literal sense, those women very deliberately spread terror in pursuit of political ends just as Michael Collins and others did in the years after 1916. They terrified Lloyd George in particular, a man described by some commentators as a physical coward.

The media of the time described the suffragettes' actions in the same language in which they described what they considered as equivalent Irish outrages. And, like Irish republicans of both early and late vintage, the suffragettes too had their hunger strikes, their denial of political prisoner status, their force feedings, and their martyrs.

The point I make is that for those women, the denial of the right to vote was as fundamental a denial of their citizenship and humanity as was the denial of a Free State to the Irish revolutionaries. Women's lives, and the possibilities of their lives, mattered just as much as those of men. And it was this wilful, independent state-mandated denial that marked the utter failure of 1916 for the daughters of that revolution.

Our entry to the EEC did bring about change that combined with the efforts of women who essentially challenged the post-revolutionary cultural DNA.

It would be foolish to think that the motivation, at least as regards equal pay, was just some enlightened feminism on the part of the EEC. It was, more prosaically, a desire by the French – who had actually taken the equality piece of their revolutionary mantra seriously – not to be competitively undermined by the absence of equal pay laws in other member states.

Nonetheless a good deal of kicking and screaming had to take place before the Irish were refused a derogation from the 1975 Equal Pay Directive. Equal Pay



was finally realised in 1976 but not before Mary Robinson had to urge Irishwomen to write to the European Commission to draw attention to the foot-dragging.

Subsequent Directives broadened equality and other rights in areas including social protection and maternity leave, measures that slowly enabled women to begin to explore the world outside of the domestic.

It has often struck me, when listening to arguments against EU membership, that the fear of losing sovereignty, the fear of not having complete control over a country's affairs, is based on an assumption that one's own government, one's own state apparatus, is going to do better by you. Had that view held in 1973 when Ireland joined the then EEC, that fallacy – in respect at least of women's rights - would have been laid bare.

Since my election as European Ombudsman in 2013, I have often said that the EU liberated my generation of Irishwomen. I tend to follow that up, however, by saying that the current generations of young men and young women also need to feel that uplift in their lives. They need to feel the possibilities for their lives offered by the EU if the Union is to gain the trust and confidence it needs to sustain itself.

I don't have to tell this audience about the multiple challenges the European Union currently faces - with the British referendum result being the most recent and arguably the most challenging. I don't need to tell this audience either that no one can predict, with any certainty, what the likely outcome of that and other challenges will be in terms of the short, medium and long term viability of the Union.

But what I do know is that the British decision to leave has created a space for all of us to "Remember, Reflect and Reimagine" not alone our own place in the Union and in the world, but also to insert ourselves in a truly imaginative, creative thinking space in which we can seek to influence the direction of the Union to a place where the old and too long forgotten words of the 1916 Proclamation may actually be reimaged not just for we the Irish but for everyone within that Union.

I have spoken today of the long denial of the reality that women's lives matter, that everyone must have the possibility of the fullest possible realisation of our too short lives. And that is as true for every man, woman and child within the EU as it was for the post-1916 generation of Irishwomen.

Most people don't seek great glory or great wealth in their lives; their wealth is simply to live in peace, with dignity, with opportunities for their families to prosper, to learn, to access good healthcare, adequate housing, education, jobs that have longevity and decent pay, and an old age that is not degrading of the spirit even as the body declines.

So far the post Brexit debate has, understandably, centred on the economy with some feelers also being put out concerning new arrangements between the North and South of Ireland, the two islands etc. Across the EU, the move is on not to waste a good crisis, whether it be Gibraltar and Spain, Scotland and independence, Catalonia ditto, and so on. None of us can know how and where the eventual cards will fall.



But if this year is to leave a legacy beyond the commemorative stamps, the DVDs and the books, perhaps it should be an intellectual legacy, a reflection on our own journey to a state which, while far from perfect, at least affords now to many the possibility of lives that will be well lived. But in the case of women, that possibility derives largely from our membership of that now struggling Union. The great minds that have contemplated the meaning of 1916 might perhaps now consider the European Union, as currently constituted or reimagined.

What should be this second binding narrative for the European Union? How do we, or can we feel again that which was felt by those who first imagined it in fledgling state? What binds us or should bind us in true and equal union beyond the horror of Auschwitz, and the story of the creation of the EU from the ashes of a war that has perhaps decreasing resonance for a generation that year by year forgets?

Some of the 1916 leaders spoke to the deepest of human needs, some through poetry, others like Pearse (also a poet) to the essence of an education, to the need to allow every child to give expression to her or his fundamental nature and talents, the deepest of wants for every human being.

I don't have the answers and no one person possibly can. But if we are to find our way to a place where we increasingly see those most human of needs, beyond the abstract jargon of an EU that feels alien, despite the best intentions of so many of those who work within the institutions, we need to think creatively and not destructively. We need to apply our minds to build a populism that inspires and creates through empathy and solidarity and not through fear, alienation, and isolation. It is too easy, too glib, too merciless to evoke dystopia.

To end, I want to reflect a little on just one woman from that revolutionary period. Her name was Grace Gifford and I mention her partly because I was given a gift of the pendant I wear today, a piece of jewellery created to commemorate the women of 1916 and this one is called "Grace".

Like some of you perhaps, I knew little about Grace other than her being the wife of Joseph Mary Plunkett and the story of their marriage in Kilmainham Jail on the eve of his execution.

What I have since learned is that Grace Gifford was not simply the subject of a romantic story and later a song, but an artist and cartoonist, a woman who studied at the Slade School of Art, a favoured pupil of William Orpen, an illustrator for William Butler Yeats and whose work was published, if not widely, at least widely enough for her to be recognised as a cartoonist and illustrator in her own right.

And when I read of Grace and her largely unremarked upon career in cartooning, I thought of all the other women in post-revolutionary Ireland, of their talents, unimagined perhaps even by themselves, and almost certainly crushed by our post-revolutionary heroes.

So when these celebrations end, let's remember the other story of Grace, let's reimagine this island as a place where equality of possibility matters and figure out what that actually means in practice and not just for women but for every child that draws breath on this island.



Pearse and his colleagues died before they could do that, before we could know even if they meant it, if they willed it, if it was for them, unlike for their colleagues who survived and thrived, an integral part of the independence, of the republic that they craved, killed, and died for.

Finally, by your presence here today, you are demonstrating an engagement with the world and particularly with this country that goes beyond the interest of self, that seeks to engage with, and understand, a world outside of our private and personal lives.

If we are to learn and atone for the missed opportunities of 1916, that impulse must be better harnessed and those who lead – and not just politically - need to begin to look to a legacy that will straddle the decades beyond their own deaths.

Who are, or who might be, the Schumans and Monnets of this difficult and edgy period of European history? How might the roles that they played in the creation of the EU be reimagined in these, the early years of the 21st century? Why should the ambition of this small member state not be to Remember, Reflect and Reimagine that?