

**EMBARGO TO TIME OF DELIVERY - CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

**Speech by President of Ireland Michael D Higgins**

**At a Conference entitled “Living Well Together Beyond 2016”**  
**Corrymeela Community, Co. Antrim**

**Saturday, 4th June, 2016**

A Dhaoine Uaisle,

A Cháirde Gael,

Is mór an pléisiúir dom a bheith in bhur dteannta san áit álainn seo, Ionad Corrymeela i mBaile an Chaistil, suíomh tábhachtach athmhuintearais agus cneasaithe do mhuintir an oileáin seo.

When invited to perform an act of public remembering, and to do so in relation to what are assumed to be foundational, or contested, narratives, a protective humility surely suggests that one should try to anticipate how such act of commemoration will be remembered in the future, what motivations will be construed as informing our words.

It is important to appreciate, not just what the commemoration of a particular event indicates, but also how it will fit with competing narratives - how it will fall on the ears of the other. Commemoration, then, requires a critical engagement with its consequences; it demands from us, elected representatives and community activists alike, a thorough reflection as to what is appropriate for even a temporary excursion into collective memory.

This year in Ireland we are commemorating the centenary of two deeply interrelated episodes in Irish history: two events which unfolded in the same wider context of a European and global war; but also two events that are connected in profound and complex ways to a whole sequence of other developments in the previous and subsequent decades. We are challenged to forge a public discourse that can accommodate both the Easter Rising of 1916, a founding moment in the Irish Republic's journey to Independence, and the Battle of the Somme, a terrible loss of lives which has acquired such symbolic centrality for the Unionist tradition on our island.

How, then, should we go on to publicly remember those seminal events that stirred Ireland a hundred years ago? A difficulty lies surely in the setting of boundaries,

not just to interpretation, but to the range of the regress in memory itself. How far back does one go? Does one decide on periods of change in terms of their impact on population? Is one free to submit the rationalisations of conquest, occupation, defeat and dispossession to critique?

If all of this involves, in contemporary times, a revision of foundational myths and beliefs in the name of peace and hope, can it not - while including the positive values of freedom, equality and participation - also introduce an analysis of those impulses that are created by conflict? Can our revisions move easily and equally between the aspirations of communities seeking to get past the memory of old wounds so as to live in the present, not lose the future, and, on the other hand, the demands of those who read or cherish the legacy of Empire differently, and who may not agree, for example, that World War I, with its catastrophic destruction of young lives, was anything other than heroic?

My view is that commemoration involves more than a balancing act. It is unavoidably a transaction requiring admission of new facts, new analyses, the creation of different suggestions, and, even more importantly, the identification of unexplored possibilities and a readiness to build a future of solidarity and cohesion. What we must seek to achieve, I would suggest, is a transparency of purpose, an honesty of endeavour in keeping open the possibility of plural interpretations of the past and of future revision of accepted truths, based, not just on new historical findings, but on an ethical openness to differences of perspectives, a generosity and hospitality towards others. Indeed such generosity, a willingness to be surprised, confronted, even destabilised, in the assumptions of those foundational myths we all need as source - that is, I believe, what is required if the act of remembering is to enable us to make a fist of living together in the present.

I know that all of you here, by the sheer fact of your presence in this emblematic site of reconciliation and trust between communities, are open to such a generous approach to remembering. I am mindful that we come together, here in Corrymeela, fifty years after that foundational conference of 1966, when the then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill, made his passionate plea for dialogue across political and denominational barriers in Ireland. As he spoke, a protest was held outside by those who rejected any idea of political cooperation between groups within Northern Ireland, let alone between our Southern and Northern Irish institutions. We were then entering very painful times for the people of this island.

Our gathering today takes place in very different circumstances. We have come through the dark period of what has often been called "The Troubles", and as we engage in dialogue this evening, I am confident that all of us feel equally optimistic, and even, I would suggest, emboldened, in the knowledge that there is a great deal to be gained in sharing a process of commemoration, including of some of the most divisive episodes in Ireland's history.

May I, then, thank John Hunter, Chair of Corrymeela Council, and John Neill, of the Irish Association, for inviting me to address this conference. I am delighted to be afforded this opportunity to reflect with you all, in Northern Ireland, on what our commemoration of those defining events from a hundred years ago has done, can do, may stir, may heal, and may envision as hope or grief for this generation and those to come.

In a number of my past speeches on the subject of remembering, I have, as many of you will know, made a case for it being an activity that must be lodged within an ethical space. There exists a rich literature to support such an approach, and one on which I have often drawn. I am indebted, in particular, to Paul Ricoeur and Hannah Arendt, two great thinkers who are more than helpful as to moral intention, as to method, and as to the need to anticipate the inevitable moral consequences of the act of remembering.

A central dimension of what I call "ethical remembering" - and one which, I know, I share with so many of you here - has been a refusal of any kind of conscious or unconscious amnesia. Thus in the speeches I delivered on this theme at Queens University, and, last year, at Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, I insisted that to reject important, if painful, events of the past, to deny those affected by them recognition of their losses and memories would be counterproductive, and may even be amoral.

Rather than any false denial of the past, then, what can be achieved through ethical remembering is, I would suggest, a certain *disposition*, a way of relating to the past that does not serve to form exclusive judgements or reinforce grievances, but, rather, to embrace the stories, the memories and the pains of the other. Drawing from the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, I have described this particular disposition as "narrative hospitality", that is, an openness to the perspectives of the other carved out at the very heart of public commemorative discourse.

This approach has the merit, I believe, of guarding us from glossing over differences and from jumping too quickly - if for the most generous of reasons - from the conflictual to the consensual, in our eagerness to reconcile diverging opinions and aspirations. Indeed were we to dissolve differences too hastily, the long and troubled history of Northern would swiftly remind us that there is a hard core to collective feelings of belonging, one that does not easily lend itself to suspension or disbandment, and that requires transaction.

The concept of narrative hospitality therefore opens up, I believe, a most productive avenue for dealing with the past in that it encourages all of us to lay down our own stories of past events while at the same time listening with respect to other versions of those same events. Of course, it is likely that neither side will come out unaffected from such process, and that the prism of the other will soon

begin to imprint a new shape on our old stories, adding to their complexity and texture, luring us to novel, yet unexplored, places, and inviting in intriguing characters, people we had never encountered before.

Perhaps, most tantalisingly, can we learn through commemoration to understand ourselves better - to engage critically with our own assumptions and prejudices.

We are blessed, I believe, to be able to go back to the events of a hundred years ago with the help of many very fine historians, who have done so much to enrich our comprehension of both the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. There is now a far more extensive scholarship on those two events than was available 50 years ago. This recent scholarship has both widened the lens of our understanding to include the broader political and intellectual context in which those two events unfolded, and it has also refined our grasp of the complexity and texture of the period, by drawing attention to the detail of individual experiences, including those of the marginalised.

As to the first dimension, the importance of context - All of us who engage in commemorative activity should endeavour to locate the shared ideals of the men and women of a hundred years ago, as well as their diverging aspirations for Ireland's future, within their wider historical circumstances. Without such a length and breadth of perspective, we cannot, I contend, even begin to understand the full impact and legacy of those events on our recent past and indeed on our present circumstances. An appreciation of the complex and entangled strands of our past can help us cope more effectively with the intricacies of our current situation.

It is, therefore, as equally vital to hold together the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, the formation of the Ulster Volunteers and that of the Irish Volunteers, the Larne gunrunning and the Howth gunrunning, as it is to place all those events within the wider European and international context of a formidable rift between the world's mightiest Empires.

Indeed Empire was a central theme of the time - the War in Europe was a clash between Empires and their ambitions in Europe and in the colonies; and the Rising, inspired by older French and American ideas of Republic, was for many of the participants a strike, not just against the British Empire, but against Empire itself.

Those were days of heavily militaristic atmosphere, when reference to the virility of the nations at war and to ideas of blood sacrifice and martyrdom were prevalent, not just across the British Empire, but across Europe, and contributed in no small

measure to the disastrous descent into war which would claim so many lives.<sup>1</sup> In Ireland, it was a time when various groups were invoking what they saw as previous, military, incarnations of their present struggle - the insurrection of 1798 for the Irish Republican Brotherhood; the Battle of the Boyne for Unionists.

An awareness of this wider context is important also in that it enables us to read the past through the prism of the beliefs, the dreams, the hopes and the fears of the men and women of the past, and thereby to better do justice to their motivations. We must appreciate the fact that those people acted in their own time, as we do in ours, uncertain of how events might unfold or be judged in the future, but motivated by a particular sense of what was right.

From the prism of separatist nationalists in the Ireland of the early 20th century, there was an urgency to strike before the end of the War, lest, it was imagined, the prospect of realising independence would vanish again for a generation. For loyalists, the extreme demands of the war effort and the great losses suffered in Europe and the Middle East became increasingly linked with the political cause of Unionism, and only heightened their sense of betrayal when the Rising erupted in Dublin.

Nor should we ever forget that Dublin City was both the site of the Rising and the place of origin of so many Irish who died at the Somme. Dublin was a unique city, located near the very heart of the seat of empire, but with tenements whose living conditions were described by contemporary medical and administrative opinion as being comparable to, or worse than, those of Calcutta.

Social historians write of a city where 26,000 families lived in 5,000 tenements and where 1,500 of those 5,000 tenements were classified by authorities as "unfit for human habitation"; a city where 5,000 families lived in but two rooms and 20,000 families in only one room. Those were the living conditions from which soldiers were recruited for the First World War, and they were the conditions, too, that produced so many who took part in the Lockout of 1913 and then joined the Irish Citizen Army.

Attention to context also enables us, finally and importantly, to better grasp and render the complicated feelings of identity of so many of the men and women of our past. We now know that unionism, nationalism, republicanism and loyalism were all complex and variegated ideologies containing many different strains and

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<sup>1</sup> In Ireland as elsewhere in Europe, we remained challenged with the task of tracing and tackling the harmful and enduring remnants of those ideologies of exacerbated nationalism and militaristic triumphalism that held sway at the turn of the last century.

with overlapping histories and origins. Political and cultural preferences have never been interchangeable with religion, as some would have it today.

It is important to remember, for example, how, historically, the Republican tradition on this island included and cut across various strands of Protestant identity, and that many of the United Irishmen of 1798 were in fact Presbyterian Dissenters. Such mixed composition also underpinned the cultural movement and the related efforts to preserve and revive the Irish language and our island's rich musical tradition.

What happened to us all in the intervening decades for such important aspects of the intertwined history of the island to have been excised from the consciousness of so many of our citizens? Then too, why were the tens of thousands of men from the South of this island who took part in the First World War marginalised for so long in the official narratives of our Republic? They numbered approximately 250,000, of which maybe as many as 35,000 never came home.

In this regard at least, we can say that much has been done to right that historical omission, and we must all pay tribute to the powerful symbolism of particular acts of public commemoration that have taken place in recent years. Our artists, poets and writers have also played a great part in that process. Thanks to the creative work of such as Frank McGuinness or Sebastian Barry, we are invited to depart from simplistic explanations of identity and belonging and to seek the core humanity of those who shared the terrible experience of war.

We must all welcome, too, the great awakening of popular interest across the island in the terrible experiences of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers during the First World War.

Throughout this centenary year, so many of our citizens have also expressed great enthusiasm in recovering, indeed discovering, the multiple loyalties of so many men and women from the period, such as Bulmer Hobson, Roger Casement or Francis Ledwidge, the Irish nationalist and poet.

The case of the latter, Francis Ledwidge, is particularly relevant to our theme today, capturing as it does the profound entanglement between the Somme and the Rising. The son of a poor labourer, Francis Ledwidge enlisted with the British Army at the beginning of the War, hoping, like many others, that Ireland's loyal support to the British war effort would advance the cause of Irish independence. He learned of the execution of the leaders of the Easter Rising while he was recovering from his wounds in Manchester, a year before he was killed alongside five comrades, in a shell hole in Flanders.<sup>2</sup> Ledwidge wrote one of his best-known

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Ledwidge was one among the 31,000 Allied soldiers who were killed on that same day.

poems in honour of his close friend Thomas MacDonagh, alluding in it to MacDonagh's famous translation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Irish poem by Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Ghunna, *An bonnán buí*, "The Yellow Bittern":

He shall not hear the bittern cry  
In the wild sky, where he is lain,  
Nor voices of the sweeter birds,  
Above the wailing of the rain.

A further, very important gain of recent scholarly work on both World War One and the Easter Rising has been to encourage us to take advantage, not only of the passage of time, but, in a most welcome sense, of the view "from below."

In relation to the Rising, much has been learned, for example, from the oral accounts of the time as recorded in our public archives. One cannot but be struck, too, by the emergence of a fine set of critical studies which have explored the specificity of female militancy as exemplified, for example, by such as Charles Stewart Parnell's sisters through The Ladies Land League, and which manifested itself in the following century through the women's involvement in military action, and not simply in a nursing or supportive role. The story of the women and the Rising, much of it told in the women's own words - through interviews, diaries and memoirs - do not just inform us on the women who played a leadership role in the insurrection, but on their friends, partners, dependents, relatives and survivors.

In relation to World War One, the recovering of the voices from below has shifted the focus of the heroic to the intimacies, the injuries endured, the generosity, of those who experienced life in the trenches. Today we have a fuller sense of the unspeakable terror faced by the young men who found themselves catapulted into an industrial war of an unprecedented scale and nature. Those who were at Gallipoli and the Somme - unionists and nationalists - were there for different and often contrasting reasons, but their embodied experiences were shared. Shared too was the grief of the families who lost their sons.

In my preparations for the World War I commemorative ceremonies I have attended in Belgium, in Turkey and in Dublin, I have drawn on the voices and experience of individual soldiers such as reflected in their letters, diaries, memoirs and, of course, in the literature and poetry they have bequeathed to us.

It is worth noting that the First World War has given rise to both biographical and literary work that powerfully challenges the dangerous link between patriotic duty and heroic death. Poets such as Robert Graves or Blaise Cendrars, for example, have so memorably refuted the supposed ability of the human spirit to overlook gruesome everyday reality and bodily suffering.

Such voices are, I would suggest, the best possible antidote against any heroic, totalising narrative. Their deep humanity continues to speak to us and to our

present circumstances, echoing through time and space, and resonating, for example, in Michael Longley's magnificent lines on forgiveness in "Ceasefire", a poem I have often quoted.

For those who read them, the personal narratives of the soldiers are not only extremely moving, but they have a unifying effect too. What we learn from those diaries, letters or memoirs is that, in the intimacy of trenches, under terrible bombardment, incredible expressions of human courage, manifestations of care and compassion far beyond the ordinary, were delivered on a daily basis.

Ethical remembering calls on us, therefore, to reach out beyond the political framing of events, to the humanity that was at once brutalised and magnified in the actions that took place on the battlefields of the Somme at hundred years ago. I very much look forward, as President of Ireland, to honouring the memory of those who fell at the Somme when I travel to France this July 1st.

Doing so, it is not some abstract idea of sacrifice that I will be invoking, but these men's lives in their families and communities, the special circumstances of their lives together in the conditions of war, and also of the immense human potential that was lost in that war - those futures that were taken from them.

Indeed a concern with the future - the future that could have happened; and the future that is yet to take place - is at the heart of the commemorative process.

With the distance of a century, we can find a new generosity towards the different strands of people's historical and go forward in a new way, acknowledging that the past has happened but that the future remains alive with possibilities yet unimagined.

As Marie Luise Knott wrote, in her study of forgiveness in the work of Hannah Arendt:

"The ability to forgive and the ability to promise are the human characteristics that guarantee our freedom from being ruled by the past or the future. If forgiveness and forgetting did not exist, every past action would be irrevocable and the present would be dominated by the past. If promising did not exist, the entire future would be unforeseeable and the present would be dominated by all the fears and uncertainties of the future."

Forgiveness, in other words, is a sort of political covenant that robs a wrong of its future effectiveness without forgetting it.

We cannot, however, define the potentialities of our living together in cohesion and harmony on this island only in terms of a mere emergence from the past. We need, as I have often argued, to go further and salvage the emancipatory promise encapsulated in so many of the defining events from our past. We need to recover



those unfulfilled promises of the past that can still illuminate our present circumstances and guide our endeavours in the name of future generations. As Paul Ricoeur put it:

"The past is not only what is bygone – that which has taken place and can no longer be changed – it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted. The unfulfilled future of the past forms perhaps the richest part of a tradition."

Marie Luise Knott summarises this by describing how

"Ricoeur sees it as the historian's task to salvage forgotten possibilities for action and to liberate the unkept promises of the past from the ruins of history."<sup>3</sup>

In many of my speeches about the Easter Rising, I have highlighted how the context of the time was one of limitless imagination. It was a moment of conflict, yes, but also one of great creativity, idealism, cultural flourishing and intellectual vibrancy, and had been so for several decades before the Rising. The men and women of 1916 were dedicated to independence, but many among them were also passionately involved with the social experiments of their time and with movements, such as the cooperative or the labour movements, which were committed to the construction of new models of living together.

They may have had mixed success, but their utopian ethic and their emancipatory ideals found many inspiring expressions, as did their strong sense of the public world and of service to one's people and one's community. Their efforts - which were inclusive and all-island in their foundation and project - can be a wellspring of inspiration for us today. Those men and women should be adduced and judged in terms of the ethical disposition they represented in their time. It would be little less than a travesty to judge them by comparison to any models of an authoritarian kind, as some, unfairly, have done.

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
A chairde go léir,

We are here at Corrymeela, a site of healing, where the sensitive and quiet work of reconciliation, the building of trusting and respectful relationships between communities is carried out on a daily basis. The great work performed by our two hosts this evening - the Irish Association, whose members have done so much to transform cultural, social and economic relations on this island since its foundation in 1938; and Corrymeela, a spiritual community founded in the hopeful spirit of the

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<sup>3</sup> Knott, M.L. 2013. *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*. Other Press. New York, pp 84-86.

mid-1960s - their work shows us that we cannot afford to view reconciliation and peace building solely in terms of narrow historical categories of Green and Orange, petrified in a process of endless reaction to one another's latest move.

Our island of Ireland is now home to people from many corners of the world – just as for so many centuries we Irish have moved to other parts of the world, renewing our senses of identity and belonging in contact with new peoples and new opportunities.

The greatest collective task ahead of us is, therefore, I would suggest, that of crafting such a renewed and shared vision of citizenship as might guarantee the equal access of all to basic social goods and to their fair share of Ireland's prosperity. Indeed when seeking to build a better future for the people of this island - when reflecting on how we can "live well together beyond 2016" - we must acknowledge, as the report we are launching this evening invites us to do, that the greatest suffering – in all parts of the island – is caused by the denial of opportunity to some, based, not on religious or political distinction, but on the social exclusion, vulnerability and inequality which characterise the lives of too many citizens in our cities and in our towns.

The challenge for this generation is to achieve prosperity and social cohesion within the frame of our global responsibilities towards sustainability and climate change.

If I may conclude with a phrase in Irish: *Tarraingíonn sceal sceal eile* - One story leads to another. A simple phrase but one which captures the dense and intertwined nature of our history on this small island – the fact that no single story can ever be separated from the story of the neighbour, the putative "other". Importantly, this phrase also suggests a further liberating possibility - the hope that our stories can lead us somewhere new.

My hope is that we will, together, manage to find new life in an ethic of solidarity and social cohesion that goes beyond the necessity of healing one set of historical differences. We cannot build an Ireland of peace and justice without addressing the grievances of yesterday, but neither can we hope to build new communities of prosperity and happiness for all of our people unless we seize resolutely on the realities and possibilities of today and tomorrow, and unite efforts in tackling the great challenges of our times, including climate change, sustainable development, global poverty, fair trade, the consequences of conflict and extremism, and the obligation - or rather the opportunity - to act as conscious, global citizens by offering hospitality to that current suffering other, to the refugees and the displaced.

May our united endeavours at living well together in this new century strengthen our hope in the unrealised possibilities of being human, truly free, in celebratory, joyous co-existence, with and for others.

Go ndéanfaimid dianiarracht maireachtáil le chéile san aois nua seo, go dtiocfaimid le chéile chun ár bhféidearthachtaí nach bhfuil comhlíonta againn go fóil a bhaint amach, agus go mbeimis saor, sona agus sásta agus muid ag gabháil ar bhóthar an saoil i dteannta a chéile.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.