



Parliamentarians

Electoral politics and physical force were not ideologies in Ireland — they were tactics, writes **Conor Mulvagh**

IN this, the first of a special series of magazines leading up to the centenary of the 1916 Rising, we examine the transformations in thinking and the political landscape of Ireland, Britain, and Europe that predated the events of Easter 1916. Violence stands as one of the remaining contentious issues in interpreting the Rising. The 20th century was one of profound violence. It is difficult to look back upon the political violence experienced in Dublin in 1916 without taking cognisance of later phases in Irish political violence.

Indeed, both proponents and detractors of militant Irish nationalism perceive a lineage of political violence going right back to the rebellion of 1798 and up to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 in which the 1916 Rising is the pivotal midpoint. Despite the violence

and bloodshed of the western front and the Gallipoli campaign, the violence of the Rising was also something that shocked the citizenry of Dublin and even participants in the Rising themselves.

In the closing phase of the insurrection, the deaths of innocent civilians in the crossfire on Moore Street was a key factor in convincing the rebel leadership to negotiate a surrender. More than half of all those killed during the Rising were civilian bystanders.

An age of innocence ended with the 1916 Rising. Prior to that, both unionists and nationalists were able to parade with guns and shoot at targets without the burden of consequence. They felt their power but not, as yet, the grave and irreversible responsibility that came with taking lives. If the last vestiges of innocence were lost in the rebellion, a much more gradual

transformation had occurred prior to that point. This was the shift from debating to parading, from rhetoric to rallies, and the transition from holding opinions to holding guns to defend them. Elected representatives followed rather than led their flocks into paramilitary volunteer forces. Nonetheless, when the leaders of Nationalist and Unionist Ireland held control of their own private armies, they were very happy to use them as sources of legitimacy and power. Subsequently they realised their potential as a valuable bargaining chip after the British government realised its pressing need for recruits in the First World War.

Society had become militarised not only through the First World War, but through preceding events. Events prior to 1914 had shown that guns, violence, and even the mere threat of violence worked. It was not the case that those who believed in peaceful and constitutional means were suddenly swept aside by bellicose gunmen; rather there was a slow shift in attitudes. The public and parliamentarians alike began to see how effective arms and army-like organisations could be in overturning the decisions of parliaments and governments.

Ulster unionists had led the way in

Ireland. Drilling, parading, and arming had forced government to take seriously the demands of Unionist Ulster. Cautioning against the Nationalist tendency to mock Carson's army as merely toy soldiers, in the summer of 1913, Patrick Pearse, still a relatively unknown figure outside of education and Irish language circles, proclaimed that 'the Orangeman with a rifle is a much less ridiculous figure than the Nationalist without a rifle'.

In a similar vein, Eoin MacNeill, founder of the Irish Volunteers, proclaimed that 'they have rights who dare to maintain them'. Even before the breakdown of European diplomacy in 1914, this was the emerging spirit of the age. However, in Ireland, the resort to arms came on foot of apparent triumph for Nationalist Ireland in electoral terms.

At the end of 1910, after two general elections in one year, Irish Nationalist MPs held the balance of power at Westminster. They could make or break Herbert Henry Asquith's Liberal government. Within months, the veto of the House of Lords, which had scuppered the previous Home Rule Bill in 1893, was ended. Never had constitutional and peaceable means towards granting Home Rule for Ireland



Clockwise from left: Conor Mulvagh outside the GPO in O'Connell Street, Dublin; Irish National Volunteers practise with rifles in Dublin in 1914; an advertisement in the 'Irish Independent' for outfits for Volunteers from July 16, 1914

MARK CONDREN AND GETTY IMAGES

to *paramilitaries*

seemed surer. However, within five years, in the wake of a violent rebellion in Dublin, Irish parliamentarianism was in crisis and violence was viewed as a surer path to freedom than votes. Why was this so?

Terminology is important here. Parliamentarians were those who participated or believed in parliamentary methods. Similarly, constitutionalists are those who limited themselves to the bounds of legality. Anything extra-constitutional entailed going beyond those boundaries. However, to be unconstitutional did not necessarily entail being violent. The sending of threatening letters was unconstitutional, as was boycott, intimidation, the holding of proclaimed meetings, membership of certain secret societies, and the distribution or publication of literature which was deemed to be seditious or, during wartime, contrary to the Defence of the Realm Acts.

None of the above had to include physical violence although actions such as boycott and intimidation frequently did. All of the above forms of political activity were common at various times in late 19th and early 20th century Ireland despite the fact that they contravened one or more laws.

Paramilitary activity, then more

commonly referred to as volunteering, was likewise not intrinsically violent, although it naturally carried with it the threat of violent action. The holding of armed demonstrations became a new feature of Irish political pageantry from 1913 onwards and training and drilling with arms became increasingly common features of Irish life. Again, while physical force was implied by the holding and parading of arms, it was not necessarily accompanied by violence. Frequently, armed reviews or the training of armed volunteers by either unionists or nationalists were displays of discipline and strength. Ordinarily, the weapons on display were not loaded, although vast quantities of ammunition were shipped to Ireland from the winter of 1913 onwards.

Contrast all the above to physical force. Physical force is the use of physical violence to achieve an end, in this case a political end. Physical force does not need a firearm. During the Irish land war and

the subsequent ranch war which ran in parts of the Irish midlands as late as 1909, physical force, including the maiming of animals, was a common part of agrarian agitation. Likewise, physical force was a common feature of Irish political meetings.

IN Belfast, paving stones and iron bolts stolen by the employees of the city's shipyards were a common weapon. In Dublin and in provincial towns countrywide, fists and cudgels were not unusual. Notably, in 1909, the former anti-Parnellite MP and then maverick Nationalist, William O'Brien, was beaten out of the annual convention of the United Irish League, the electoral wing of the Home Rule movement which O'Brien himself had founded 11 years previously. Those doing the beating on this occasion were the Irish party faithful, allegedly members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians under the direction of

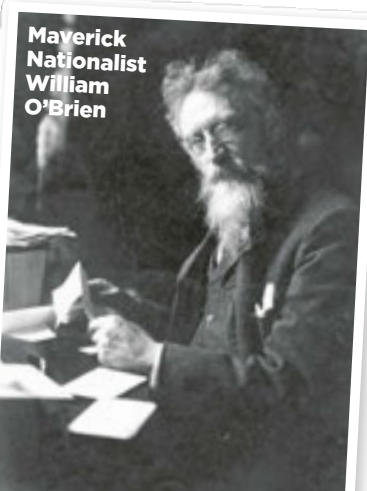
John Redmond's protégé, the MP for West Belfast, Joseph Devlin.

Even on the suffrage issue, it was impossible for women to rely on parliamentary methods as it was the very right to vote for which they were fighting. Instead, a range of extra-parliamentary, frequently illegal, and occasionally violent methods were employed. Among the tactics employed by suffragists in Ireland were the boycotting of the 1911 census, smashing window panes of public buildings, hunger strike, arson, and even the throwing of an axe at John Redmond and Prime Minister Asquith as their carriage crossed Dublin's O'Connell Bridge.

In contrast to these predominantly non-lethal forms of political violence, the physical force unleashed in 1916 was entirely different in scope and scale. It was linked to a revolutionary tradition going back — either notionally or actually depending on how one views it — to 1798. The Fenian uprising of 1867 was both the closest time and outlook to the events of 1916. Finally, to further muddy the waters here, physical force could also be both constitutional and parliamentary.

The clearest case here is the First World

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6 >>>





Edward Carson inspects a parade of armed Ulster Volunteers

Parliamentarians to *paramilitaries*

>>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

War. While admittedly on a different scale and operating in different circumstances, in understanding why the 1916 Rising happened, it should not be forgotten that violence and the assertion of rights in arms had been given tremendous new legitimacy by the outbreak of the First World War. Likewise, in justifying physical force among revolutionary, anti-Imperialist, and insurrectionary movements, legitimacy and inspiration had been derived from previous conflicts in the Balkans, South Africa, and in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05.

In a prophetic tone, the *Freeman's Journal* wrote on 3 August 1914, the day before Britain formally declared war on Germany, 'it has long been the happy fate of Ireland ... to be the detached spectator of foreign wars ... but no nation that ... hopes to be free ... can escape the fortunes of this conflict. All our fates are about to be decided.' Whether it was on the western front or the streets of Dublin, by the war's end, violent action spoke louder than words for the generation of 1914.

IN light of the above, while ideologies ranged from moderates to extremists, unionists and nationalists, Home Rulers, dual-monarchists, and separatists, all and any of these groups could transition between advocating constitutionalism, parliamentarianism, and physical force either of a lethal or non-lethal nature. There was no clear dividing line between the parliamentarians and the physical force sections of Irish society in these years. John Redmond had petitioned for the release of Tom Clarke from jail in the 1890s. Even into the 20th century, there were members of the Home Rule party who had been members of the IRB.

Put simply, parliamentarianism and physical-force were not ideologies, they were tactics. All sides either used or threatened the use of physical force at one time or another.

The same phenomenon can be found in reverse at the other end of Ireland's revolutionary decade where one sees how quickly and easily the leading figures of Ireland's independence struggle became peaceable politicians between 1922 and 1927. Likewise, there were both unionists and nationalists who favoured physical force and there were those who favoured the parliamentary route.

Even more importantly, the majority saw

the merit of both approaches. Celebrated parliamentarians could transition to the use of physical force when it suited them, the prime example being Edward Carson, an elected MP who presided over a private army and, along with other elected representatives, was involved in the Ulster Unionist Council, a body that actively planned for the establishment of an autonomous provisional government and for the military defence of Ulster by force of arms. The work of the Ulster Unionist Council was couched in terms directly replicated by the insurrectionary leaders of 1916.

Although Nationalist MPs were not as heavily involved in extra-parliamentary agitation to the extent that Unionists were, Irish party sentinels had been placed within the Irish Volunteers from its inception in November 1913. By June 1914, John

Redmond had installed 25 nominees onto the provisional committee of the Irish Volunteers, gaining him majority control of the organisation that had previously acted in his name but outside his control.

It is ironic that, in 1913, ballots needed to be backed up by bullets but, following the Rising, bullets needed to find a retrospective mandate through the ballot box. The people, many of them voting for the first time, chose revolution and the promise of a republic over Home Rule and the Irish party in 1918.

Ireland's abandonment of constitutionalism in favour of armed struggle is just one of the important contexts which begins to add further depth to the story of the 1916 Rising.

Returning to the figure of Patrick Pearse, just as John Redmond's commitment to constitutional methods has been questioned here in view of his use of a private nationalist army as a bargaining chip during 1914, one should also not fall into the trap of viewing Pearse as simply a blood-sacrificing revolutionist.

While Pearse has been remembered as such in death, in his life he was an educationalist, he was a language activist, he was a pamphleteer and poet. A unidimensional portrayal of any of the figures of this period does a disservice to their memory and to history.

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'BLOOD UPON THE ROSE'

