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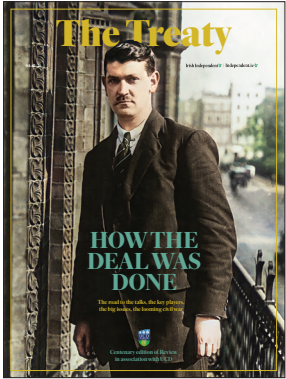
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Cover: Michael Collins in London for the Anglo-Irish Treaty talks. Image from 'Old Ireland in Colour' by John Breslin and Sarah-Anne Buckley/ National Library of Ireland

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The Treaty

1921-2021

Irish Independent

Fear and loathing on the road to treaty talks



Gretchen Friemann

The threat of renewed violence and confusion over the Irish delegates' precise mission cast a shadow over the 1921 negotiations before they had even begun

On June 28, 1921, on an afternoon when the summer heat had turned unusually oppressive, a small crowd gathered outside a handsome neoclassical building on Dublin's Upper Merrion Street to witness the opening of the Parliament of Southern Ireland. Since a boycott by nationalists made this a legislature without legislators, the ceremony promised to be notable for its sheer absurdity. The press descended in their droves, determined to milk the occasion for all it was worth. "Crown forces were to left and right and all points of the compass. So were photographers — platoons of photographers. There were more snapshotters than people and more Crown forces than snapshotters", the *Irish Independent's* sketch writer recorded. Meanwhile, *The Freeman's Journal* described the antics of a "barefooted... unkempt urchin", who amused onlookers by marching up and down whistling *The Soldier's Song*.

Some of these observations may have been invented, but it scarcely mattered. They reflected the new reality: outside of a sustained military effort, British rule in Ireland was finished. The old social and political hierarchies had been overturned, and for the first time in a long tradition of rebellion, the concerns of radical republicans had fused with those of the democratic mass of the population.

The boycott was not without political risk. Unless the Southern Parliament, situated in what is now known as Government Buildings, was properly inaugurated within two weeks the 26 counties of Southern Ireland would revert to Crown colony status and fall under martial law.

On June 24, British prime minister David Lloyd George thrust out the olive branch. He invited Éamon de Valera, as "the chosen leader of the great majority in Southern Ireland", along with Sir James Craig, premier of the freshly constituted Northern Ireland, to a conference in London to "explore to the utmost the possibility of a settlement".

The Sinn Féin president let days slide by before issuing a reply some hours after the aborted opening of the Southern Parliament. The next morning, the newspapers' damning coverage of that event ran alongside de

Valera's letter to Lloyd George, with its insistence on a peace based upon Ireland's "essential unity" — meaning that no part of the country would remain within the United Kingdom.

On July 20, Lloyd George offered the Irish dominion status (although what precisely he meant by this remains unclear). It was within the Commonwealth's

"sisterhood of nations — the greatest in the world", as he trumpeted it during one of a handful of post-truce meetings with de Valera in London that July, that Ireland's future lay. He ushered de Valera, who had insisted on meeting alone and whose arrival in the capital drew emotional crowds chanting the rosary, into the cabinet room at 10 Downing Street.

On the wall, as Lloyd George's secretary and mistress Frances Stevenson wrote in her diary, hung a large map of the British Empire "with its great blotches of red all over it". That

evening the prime minister told her that this was "to impress upon Dev the greatness of the [British Empire] and to get him to recognise it, and the King".

That approach fell on stony ground, so the velvet glove came off. "I shall be sorry if this conference fails," Lloyd George reflected. "Terrible as events have been in Ireland, it is nothing to what they will be if we fail to come to an agreement. The British Empire is getting rid of its difficulties ... [and] we shall [soon] be able to withdraw our troops from other parts of the world. I hesitate to think of the horror if the war breaks out again in Ireland."

An agitated de Valera protested that this was "a threat of force — of coercion".

"No," responded Lloyd George, "I am simply forecasting what will inevitably happen if these conversations fail, [and] if you refuse our invitation to join us."

INEVITABLE COMPROMISE

The evidence suggests that even before the Irish leader met Lloyd George, he understood that an all-Ireland separatist republic was beyond the reach of the revolutionaries. While the IRA had prevented the British from administering power in the 26 counties, full independence could not be won by force of arms. And as de Valera conceded in writing that summer, there could be no forcing the six counties of Northern Ireland to join an independent republic. Some form of political compromise was unavoidable.

People on both sides of the Irish Sea were thoroughly war-weary and neither de Valera nor Lloyd George could afford to wear the blame for a return to conflict. The problem was that Britain's proposed political solution, far from advancing the cause of peace, seemed only to have exposed the depth of the divide between the two governments. The British

summarised their offer as "dominion status" with all sorts of important powers, but no navy, no hostile tariffs, and no coercion of Ulster". Effectively what this meant was internal autonomy to be curtailed by six conditions relating to defence, trade and Ireland's unspecified debt obligation to the UK. A separate seventh qualification outlined Northern Ireland's "powers and privileges".

De Valera's "next word" turned out to be every bit as unacceptable to the British as his demand for a republic. His formal reply, dispatched some three weeks later on August 10, proposed an alternative solution: External Association. The concept, which became the basis of the Irish negotiating position, was designed to bridge the gulf between a separatist republic and British dominion status. Under this formulation, Ireland would be externally associated with, but not a member of, the British Empire. The idea hardly set republicans' souls on fire: there was no rousing reception when he introduced it in cabinet, where it was neither liked nor properly understood. Nonetheless, all approved it.

By the end of September, the two governments essentially agreed to disagree. Negotiations in London on a political settlement would go ahead without preconditions. Crucially, there would be no prior recognition of Ireland's sovereign independence, as requested by de Valera.

In a somewhat hectoring speech on August 23, the day that his confirmation as president of the Irish Republic was put to the Dáil, de Valera instructed the one-party assembly not to "fetter me in any way whatever". Then he announced perhaps the most controversial decision of his career: he would stay at home rather than lead the Irish delegation in the upcoming talks. He did not want to "be a

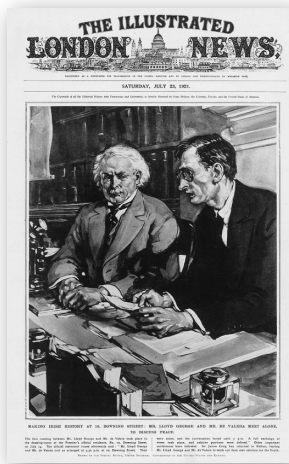
member ... of the particular body that would negotiate peace". He noted: "We are not in the position that we can dictate terms, we will, therefore, have proposals brought back which cannot satisfy everybody." In that instance, de Valera explained: "I will be in a position, having discussed the matter with the cabinet, to come forward with such proposals as we think wise and right. It will be then for you [the Dáil] either to accept the recommendations of the ministry or reject them." The latter course, he warned, would involve the creation of "a definite active opposition".

On September 9, more than a fortnight after he informed the Dáil of his intention to remain in Dublin during the peace talks, de Valera encountered the first significant challenge to his authority in the cabinet, when Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins and WT Cosgrave demanded he reverse his decision. Pitted against them were Cathal Brugha, Austin Stack and Robert Barton. It took de Valera's casting vote to settle the debate in his favour.

Scarcely a week later, on September 14, the dissent spilled over into the Dáil. Cosgrave leapt into the fray, arguing that without de Valera's "extraordinary experience" of negotiations, they were effectively leaving their "ablest player in reserve". Collins interjected along the same lines, adding tersely that he himself "would very much prefer not to be chosen".

One former comrade, Batt O'Connor, recollected the "deep distress" that de Valera's decision caused Collins: "He came to see me [and] would not sit down but kept pacing the floor, his face set in lines of pain and anxiety." Collins felt de Valera was making a terrible mistake and told O'Connor how he had pleaded with the president to change his mind. "Who ever heard of

Prayers of the faithful: Irish residents of London outside Downing Street during the first of the meetings between Éamon de Valera and David Lloyd George. Below, artists at *The Illustrated London News* give their impression of the early talks
PICTURES: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY



the soldier who fought the enemy in the field being sent to negotiate the peace," he cried, according to O'Connor. "I am being put in an impossible position."

In this telling, the row over who should go to London becomes a set-piece contest between Collins' patriotism and de Valera's treachery. It is the story of the hero soldier choosing the nation over politics, while the Machiavellian de Valera forces him to risk his life for a battle he cannot possibly win.

Little of this stands up to scrutiny, at least with regard to Collins. As Peter Hart, the most scholarly of his biographers, has shown, Collins was, above all, "a revolutionary politician" with little combat experience, whose role within cabinet, position on the executive of Sinn Féin and evident skills as an administrator and strategist all qualified him for the delegation.

IRRESISTIBLE OPPORTUNITY

Collins had been disappointed not to be included in the delegation that accompanied de Valera to London in July, and Hart argues convincingly that, far from wanting to quit the main stage at this momentous hour in Ireland's history, he found the opportunity irresistible. What Collins dreaded was de Valera's absence, for if the negotiations failed, his "natural power base in the army and among republican militants" risked being fatally compromised. In any event, Collins accepted the responsibility.

It was the ambiguity over the powers conferred on the delegates that created the catalyst for all that was to come. De Valera described the negotiators as plenipotentiaries, which would ordinarily mean that they had full powers of independent action, though that ran contrary to what he had told the Dáil in August. In the Dáil on September 14, he retorted that plenipotentiaries were "people who had power to deal with a question subject to ratification", then immediately contradicted himself by stating that the Irish representatives would "go first with a Cabinet policy... on the understanding that any big question should be referred home before being decided by them". This was de Valera's have-your-cake-and-eat-it formula. He wanted to remain aloof from the negotiations, but still be involved and in full control.

Nothing exemplified this more than the decision to issue the delegates with private, contradictory instructions, requiring them to refer any draft settlement first to "the members of the cabinet in Dublin". The negotiators were informed of these fresh orders on October 7, the eve of the delegation's departure for London and weeks after the Dáil had voted unanimously to approve the delegates' plenipotentiary powers. The last-minute manoeuvre enhanced de Valera's ability to reject any agreement in London, since the new instructions bypassed the Dáil's authority and gave the first right of refusal to a cabinet dominated by hardliners who had not been prepared to negotiate directly with the British.

Unlike the British, who remained united around the July 20 proposals, the Irish delegates were packed off to London unsure of what they wanted and without a coherent plan for the battle ahead. They would have to hope that luck, that incalculable component which exists in any diplomatic situation, would be on their side.

For his part, Lloyd George refused to relinquish the menace of war. From the truce to the commencement of the treaty talks, and right up until the dénouement on December 6, 1921, the negotiations were overshadowed by the threat of renewed violence. There was no inevitability about the eventual outcome. On the contrary, the perceptions and behaviour of the decision-makers were structured by a constant sense of imminent crisis. Conflict hovered at every turn, and after two years of war, these anxieties held a nightmarish plausibility.

● *This is an edited extract from The Treaty by Gretchen Friemann (Merriam Press)*

