

TDs were split but the nation gave its blessing

Shane Browne

The settlement was widely welcomed at home and abroad as the war-weary Irish public made it clear they were in no mood for further conflict

The signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty brought relief to many quarters. After the truce between the IRA and Crown forces on July 11 of 1921, the threat of hostilities resuming was a constant worry. Some in the IRA certainly believed fighting would recommence. Liam Deasy, commander of the 3rd Cork Brigade, saw the truce as “breathing space”. In the months leading up to the treaty negotiations, the IRA was reorganised and rearmed throughout the country. Following the agreement, Christmas 1921 would be the first without war in nearly three years.

Full details of the settlement were slow to emerge in Ireland. Éamon de Valera was in Limerick when the treaty was signed and did not learn of the particulars until the evening of December 6, when details were leaked in the *Evening Mail*. He was later provided with a full draft of the agreement at the Mansion House in Dublin. The treaty provided for the establishment of a self-governing dominion for 26 counties and, under Article 12, a boundary commission would decide on the border with Northern Ireland.

Most nationalists, historian Michael Laffan noted, were “content with a compromise



Opposing views: Arthur Griffith and Éamon de Valera
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settlement”. Those arguing for the treaty viewed it as a stepping stone, with rejection meaning renewed war. Pádraic Ó Máille, a pro-treaty Galway TD, saw it as choice between “a policy of destruction on one side and a policy of construction on the other”.

The position of Northern Ireland was a bone of contention for some but the Boundary Commission allayed doubts that northern nationalists would be abandoned. Many thought a restructuring of the border would make Northern Ireland unworkable. For instance, in a telegram to the Ministry of Publicity, the Mid-Tyrone comhairle ceantair of Sinn Féin deemed that “the treaty confers practical freedom on the country, and... our interests in the North shall be safeguarded”.

For those opposed to the settlement, dissatisfaction stemmed from the treaty not granting full Irish independence. The swearing of fidelity to the Crown was one of the main sticking points. Dr Ada English, TD for the National University of Ireland, saw the taking of oaths as “a complete surrender... It is a moral surrender. It is giving up the independence of our country and that is the main reason why I object to this treaty”.

Meanwhile, Liam Mellows, the Galway TD and IRA director of arms purchases, argued that the negotiating team “had no power



Great debate: Dáil Éireann in session in the Mansion House, with Éamon de Valera presiding. Above: Desmond and Mabel FitzGerald
PHOTOS: GETTY

the Mid-Ulster Farmers’ Association called on Dáil Éireann “to ratify the treaty as they believe it will eventually lead to peace and the better government of the country”.

As to the broader international context, there was widespread praise for the settlement. The Ministry of Publicity received letters commending the treaty from the Permanent Council of the Commonwealth of Catalonia in Spain and the Mayor of Prague, the capital of the newly formed Czechoslovak Republic.

Many Irish-Americans also saw the treaty as a positive step. To the prominent New York lawyer J Power Donellan, de Valera’s opposition to the treaty was dragging “long-suffering little Ireland down into the valley of absolute death”. The *Boston Globe*, meanwhile, delighted in the fact that the treaty settled “a world problem, for Ireland was irritating the conscience of all mankind”. Some leading figures in Irish-American organisations opted to act as mediators in Ireland.

POSITIVE REACTION

Overall, at home and abroad, reactions to the treaty were positive. For deputies on the fence, the adjournment of the debates for the Christmas recess put things into perspective. Albeit not delighted with the treaty, Dr Vincent White claimed that “when I went to my constituents in Waterford during Christmas, they suggested to me that it deserved ratification”. This was a shrewd position to take. As the *Roscommon Herald* observed, “the men who vote for rejection would find it as difficult as the members of Redmond’s old Parliamentary Party to get re-elected in the next appeal for the verdict of the voters”.

The Dáil voted to ratify the treaty by 64 votes to 57 on January 7, 1922. Just under a week later, ceann comhairle Eoin MacNeill wrote to Desmond FitzGerald with a suggestion. Building upon the public mood, MacNeill felt that pro-treatyites should “act on the offensive and show up the weakness of their opponents. They should make full use of the press, Dublin and local, and of public bodies, for this purpose. Deputies who are against the will of their constituents should be called on to resign — publicly, insistently, repeatedly... Deputies should... not mind apologetics for the treaty”.

Though MacNeill, as speaker, did not vote on the treaty, he heavily supported a settlement. He saw in the positive public response to a compromise a chance to shape the outcome of a future vote on the issue, as the Dáil vote to approve the treaty had not solved the crisis. A resolution with Britain merely brought Ireland closer to civil war. Despite broad public acceptance, the treaty had completely split the republican movement.

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The Treaty

1921-2021

Irish Independent

‘Are we to have the spectacle of one set of Irishmen in revolt against the other?’

From the *Irish Independent*, January 6, 1922

There is no doubt that the country has become tired and impatient of the long speeches and tedious proceedings at Dáil Éireann. Deputies are faced with a definite task, and instead of tackling that task in a business-like way, they have wandered into all sorts of excursions, and made speeches that could have been delivered if there were no such issue as a treaty in question.

Irish Independent

There have been countless irregularities and irrelevancies, and people have been quite naturally asking why has not the Speaker confined the debate strictly to relevant issues. Unity and cohesion are, at

the present juncture, essential if peace and an Irish Government are to be established. All that has been so far achieved by the debate is a sharp and most regrettable division in the Dáil itself, although outside

95pc of the people are on the side of the Treaty. Aimless and ceaseless talk will never result in business. Cannot the deputies face the situation as practical men, summoned to deal with a concrete proposition?

We are glad to observe that certain deputies representing each side in the wearisome wordy wrangle have informally met together as a committee to see whether an agreement could not be reached. This is a wise and practical step.

Mr de Valera said yesterday: “If we allow a chance like this to pass without making a definite peace, we are not doing our duty to the Irish nation or to humanity as a whole.”

Ireland has now a chance of making peace and of establishing forthwith a government which can control all the affairs of the nation. Should this chance be thrown away?

The point for deputies to remember is that Ireland consists of 4,400,000 inhabitants and

that their wishes, already plainly indicated, should be taken into account. The fate and fortunes, liberties and lives of these people are involved. If the Treaty is ratified by a small majority and the opposition pursues an active campaign against it, how can an effective Provisional Government be formed? Are we to have the disedifying spectacle of one set of Irishmen in revolt against the other?

They were all comrades in the struggle;

they were all animated by a high and lofty patriotism. Why should they hesitate to remain united in working the scheme won through the struggle in which they took a common part?

If the Treaty is rejected we see no prospect but chaos and disunion, and it may be war. This is a time for the exercise of common sense and for the display of practical statesmanship. We hope that at last both will prevail.