

Irish Eyes Are Smiling on Britain

In his great speech in 1775 on Conciliation with America, Edmund Burke concluded that the best way to change the stubborn spirit that was generating trouble was to remove the causes. It is a welcome sign that this has been the basis for reconciliation between the Republic of Ireland and the UK. It should be seen as a model and show the path to full reconciliation in Northern Ireland, not to mention change in behavior by Palestinians.

This was shown at the demonstration on March 27, 2016 of thousands attending in Dublin the official commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising against British rule during which more than 450 people, half of them civilians and 40 were children, were killed during the week of fighting. This time an Irish military parade passed the exact spot, the General Post Office, where the rebellion began. It was also the place where on Easter Monday, the Irish Proclamation had been read by the poet and revolutionary Patrick Pearse.

Interestingly, the Proclamation, in advance of its time, began with the words "Irishmen and Irishwomen." The Rising was a military failure and Pearse and other leaders were shot or executed, but those executions constituted a crucial moment in changing the sensibilities of many in Ireland against Britain. Yet the overall nationalist aim of a 32 county Republic has not been realized. The country has been divided: 26 counties formed first the Free State, and in 1948 a fully dependent Republic of Ireland or Eire. The Irish population in 1999 voted to drop the claim to the other 6 counties.

Obviously differences with Britain still remain, and memories of figures associated with the Rising, such as Pearse who talked of blood sacrifice, James Connolly, Sean Heuston,

Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Fein, William Cosgrave, Darrell Figgis, are not forgotten. Pearse believed "We shall be remembered by posterity and blessed by future generations." Indeed, a number of them, Pearse, Connolly, Heuston, are remembered as names of Dublin railroad stations.

But the former intense animosity has largely disappeared, and more positive images have been celebrated, including the commemoration of the 90,000 Irish men who fight for Britain in World War I, some of whom helped end the Rising. A welcoming sign was the visit in 2011 by Queen Elizabeth to Dublin, the first to the Republic by a monarch.

This was followed by two other significant and symbolic events. One was the invitation in May 2014 by the Queen to Martin McGuinness, formerly of Sinn Fein and now a major political figure, to Windsor Castle,. The other was the meeting in Galway on May 19, 2015 and the handshake between Prince Charles and Gerry Adams, formerly antagonistic towards the UK.

The cordial relationship and cultural links between the two countries was displayed in April 2016 by a remarkable series of events in Wigmore Hall in London, arguably the site with the best acoustics in the country. The concerts, honoring both Irish and British victims of the past, featured music by Irish composers as well as Beethoven and Schubert, and Irish singers. They ended with the traditional Danny Boy.

The overall objective of the series was admirable. It aimed to help the strengthening of the bond of friendship and reconciliation between the two countries, while recognizing and enhancing Ireland's reputation for cultural progress. To that end, the Irish Ambassador to UK, Daniel Mulhall, delivered the keynote address on 100 years of Ireland, including culture.

What is pertinent now is not any bitterness between Ireland

and Britain but rather the continuing rivalry between the two major political parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail that goes back to the Irish civil war of 1922-1923. Since the inconclusive election of February 2016 Ireland has not had a stable government since Fine Gael with 50 seats in Parliament (Dail) and Fianna Fail with 43 have not been able to form either a coherent coalition, or agree on which party leader should be the dominant political figure (taoiseach).

These political differences are appropriate in a democratic and peaceful system. Democracy and a full peaceful system would be welcome in Northern Ireland.

The situation in Northern Ireland has improved significantly since the animosity and violence within the country between republicans and unionists has been reduced. Violence between republicans and Britain were exacerbated after Bloody Sunday on January 30, 1972 when 13 civilians were shot by the British army during a civil rights march in Londonderry. This led to direct rule of the North by Westminster, but it also led to assassinations by the IRA in Britain of prominent figures, Airey Neave in 1979, Lord Mountbatten, the Queen's cousin, in 1979, and the bombing of in 1984 of the hotel in which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was staying.

Things are on the mend with the 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, which created a number of institutions and called for civil rights, decommissioning weapons, and reforms in policing. To this has been added the disbanding of the IRA, which is now supposed to have disposed of its weapons, and the extraordinary power sharing between the Democratic Unionist Party led by Ian Paisley and Sinn Fein, represented by Martin McGuinness.

What remains is for the Republic of Ireland to persuade the body that calls itself the New IRA to give up its threats to attack prison officers and security forces in Northern Ireland. The New IRA, one of three groups opposed to the peace

process and political power sharing must give up its claim that IRA armed actions against Britain are as legitimate as they were in 1916. Their view that the 1916 Rising was an “unfinished revolution” is not only unwise but is also not supported by the majority of nationalists who support the peaceful political strategy of Sinn Fein.