

Address by Dr Maurice Manning, Chairperson of the Expert  
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***“A history of social change in Ireland”***

It is a great honour to be invited to speak here today at the opening of the Assembly and at the outset I would like to wish you well in this important and public spirited endeavour.

I remember as a young lecturer in UCD a group of distinguished and elderly professors who used meet in the Common Room at 5.30 every evening for a libation They became known as the 5.30 Club and their main purpose in life seemed to be to prevent change of any sort, even the slightest change in the life of the university. There were many such groups in most parts of our lives in those days.

And I remember too a book, a very good book published a decade ago about the Irish educational system in the early decades of the State, a book which described so called educational leaders, people who clung to outdated views and outdated methods –to the great detriment of education and of the country. The title of that book is *Preventing the Future*.

And in some ways these two examples reflect a prevailing attitude at different times in our history –the 1940s and

1950s in particular where very little seemed to change and not much seemed to happen.

But much as such people might resist change- and there will always be people who do- they ignore the reality that change is an ever present part of the challenge of living. Sometimes we are prepared and we even embrace it; other times it catches us unawares and when we are least prepared. But one way or other change is inevitable and sometimes we even have the opportunity to shape and influence it.

This Assembly is one such opportunity. You are called together to examine issues, both constitutional and policy issues which can profoundly influence the lives and well being – indeed the future –of our fellow citizens.

These issues you will examine are important and complex. They will not lend themselves to sound bites or glib evasions. Dealing with them will test you to the full.

The great quality you bring to this process is your freedom to be yourselves, beholden only to your reason and your conscience.

You are not answerable to a party whip; you are not in thrall to any interest group; you won't be running for re-election. You won't have to report back to any constituency; you don't have to hold press conferences or

answer to any electorate- and like Mrs May and Brexit you will not be asked to give running commentaries on what you are doing.

You come here as free citizens. You bring with you your own life experience, your own sense of duty, your own values and insights and you will use them to the best of your ability to examining the issues placed before you.

You are not a substitute for the Oireachtas, nor are you a challenge to it. Nor do you claim to be. The Oireachtas is and remains the only body that can make and unmake the law. Nobody here is saying otherwise.

But you can supplement and enrich the work of parliament. If you do your work well, as the first Assembly emphatically did your views and suggestions will have earned the right to be taken seriously, not just by politicians but by the wider public and media.

Your job is to be a breath of fresh air. To look clearly and honestly at problems, not as a group with vested interest but as an assembly of free citizens; to look at issues where usually the only voices heard are those of the vested interests, where the noise of conflicting claims drowns out all other views.

Your job is to reflect the quiet views, the matter of fact views, the ordinary views that don't find their way onto the airwaves or into the media- and to do so in a measured way that will carry weight.

Most politicians will welcome good advice and new insights and if you do your job as well as your predecessors you will invest your words with a moral authority that will not be easily resisted.

I began today by talking about change and the challenge of change.

Our country has faced many challenges over the past century and on balance I would say we got most of the big ones right.

That is not to say we always did. There are many missed opportunities, many times when we could and should have done better. There are times when we stubbornly resisted change either through inertia or through being worn down by the defenders of the status quo who saw all change as dangerous – or at least dangerous to their own vested interests.

When we look back at our near hundred years of Independence we can say that the biggest challenge of all was the first- the ability and capacity of the new state to

assert its sovereignty by setting up our state, by creating new institutions and forging a distinct national identity. Most of all it had to establish its own authority and win the trust of its people.

Just think of the challenges faced by that small group of largely inexperienced young men who made up that government.

They had to fight and win a Civil War- a war that was bitter and divisive and left a lasting and poisonous legacy.

They had to face up to repairing the roads, railways and buildings that had been destroyed in that war –rebuilding the GPO and Four Courts were just some of the buildings destroyed.

Unlike today they had to do all this with no outside help –the British saw no reason to help.

They had to accept the reality of partition and the bitter disappointment of northern nationalists.

They had to demobilise an army of 50,000 and put it under the control of government and parliament.

They had to draw up a new Constitution – which they did in a matter of weeks. It was a good constitution which recognised human rights and was seen at the time as very

advanced. It also- and this is very relevant to your deliberations- favoured easy access to the referendum process, and saw this as an important element in the type of direct democracy they favoured . It did not happen but it raised some important issues worth re-visiting. I hope you will take a look at it.

They had to set up new government departments, establish for the first time Irish embassies and put in place a court system. The structures they established have been sturdy and enduring.

They wanted the new State to be outward looking and in spite of strong British opposition brought Ireland into the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation. For the first time Ireland had a role to play on a world stage.

And against the opposition of business, banks and newspapers it successfully set up the first nationalised industry in the world –the ESB.

All of this was done by the first generation of free Irishmen in less than a decade.

And within ten years of the State being set up and just nine years after the Civil War ended power was handed over

peacefully by those who won the civil war to those who had fought against the State just ten years earlier.

The new State had come of age.

If the first great challenge of Independence was to establish the state on firm foundations, the second great challenge was the very survival of the State as Europe and the World tore itself apart in the Second World war.

We were small and virtually defenceless and yet with good leadership and the backing of a united people and with all political parties working in common purpose we survived as an independent state with our neutrality intact.

We paid a heavy price and it took decades to recover but we survived.

The third great challenge and the biggest change since Independence was the willingness of the people to take a leap into the unknown by voting to join the European Economic Community in 1972.

For the first time in our history we could play a part in rebuilding Europe, we could have a less dependant relationship with Britain, open ourselves to new ways of doing things but most important of all share in the benefits of economic development- something we had not done well up to now.

Few today would regret that decision and little that we have seen in Britain would encourage us to do so.

And the fourth challenge was of course the economic collapse of 2008 onwards. Part of it may have been our own fault and we were not prepared, we had grown complacent and maybe over confident and we could have faced devastation for a decade or more. We should all remember the sense of prevailing pessimism almost despair of the time.

Our political system and our political leaders showed a unity of purpose; our people were patient and resilient and we came through – damaged yes but intact and positioned to recover.

It is important to remind ourselves there was nothing inevitable about our recovery but we made it happen. History may yet judge it as one of our greatest achievements.

Of course as I said earlier we have had our failures-the challenges we failed to face up to.

I will mention just a few.

There was the failure of the Boundary Commission of 1926 to settle on a fairer boundary for the new Northern Ireland. Had that been done better in 1926 much of the subsequent troubles might never have happened.

It was indeed a major failure

There has been the failure of generations of politicians to face up to the legacy of our Civil War. Its not an easy thing to do and even now as we enter the second half of our decade of centenaries it is unfinished buisness. Its impact was to draw energy out of the political life,making trust difficult and creating artificial differences.

And there was our consistent failure over much of the last century to face up to the problems of economic underdevelopment; the problems of an underachieving and under ambitious educational system, our blindness to those who became virtual non-citizens, the children and women incarcerated in the State's institutional care, people we all failed.

And we failed for so many years to break free of the insularity and lethargy which characterised the middle decades of the last century.

I mention these failures and I could add to the list but I do so to point out that we should never be smug or complacent but to have the humility as a people to learn from these failures.

As you set about your work I urge you to take inspiration and encouragement from the things we achieved when we worked together, when we put our minds to achieving agreed objectives.

I ask you to take encouragement from the enormous achievements of the present generation of younger Irish people both here and around the world. They are showing our potential for achievement in almost every sphere of human activity. These people are our future, our hope.

Your work is not to pamper the prejudices of older people like myself but to look at the changes we should and can make to build on the generous and noble principles that both our previous constitutions enshrined. They are good and solid principles.

Your job is to examine and enrich them in the changed world we all inhabit. It is a job well worth doing.

I wish you well with your work.

