De Valera in Australia: 1948

by Patrick O'Farrell

On February, 1948, a general election in Ireland ended sixteen years of Fianna Fail government, and with it the prime ministership of Eamon de Valera: from 1932 to 1948, de Valera and his party had dominated Irish politics, and were to do so again for a further twenty-two years from 1951 to 1973. De Valera’s fall from power in 1948 took place during a marked revival in Ireland of the issue of partition. He had been long prominent in demands for an end to partition, a subject on which, in its wider context, John Bowman has written the definitive book De Valera and the Ulster Question, 1917-1973 (Oxford, 1982). Immediately upon his electoral defeat he turned his whole energies to the partition agitation, in an endeavour whose purpose of rousing the overseas Irish into a world-wide anti-partition movement, designed to get the government parties to do likewise, and, in tactical terms, this amounted to his seizing the political initiative and forcing his opponents on to ground where, for reasons of national sentiment, he had a considerable advantage.

On 27th April, 1948, de Valera, accompanied by Frank Aiken, his former Minister of Finance, arrived in Sydney from the U.S.A. to begin a six weeks’ tour of Australia and New Zealand. Much to the surprise of the organisers, he had accepted Archbishop Mannix’s invitation to attend the Melbourne Archdiocesan centenary celebrations, an invitation which provided de Valera with a reason for his visit and the certainty of a larger audience assembled for the Melbourne occasion. Between fifteen and twenty thousand assembled in the Melbourne Exhibition Hall, and a variously estimated seven to thirteen thousand were at his Sydney Stadium meeting. Smaller audiences attended his meetings in Brisbane, Adelaide and Hobart: de Valera himself regarded his Tasmanian trip as the most memorable part of his visit, for there he followed the steps of Mitchel and Meagher and the other exiles of 1848.

De Valera’s longest and strongest Australian contact had been with Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne. They had first met in the United States in 1920 and thereafter

Mannix had strongly and consistently supported de Valera’s republican position, at the cost of considerable isolation and unpopularity even among Australia’s Irish. Mannix had visited Ireland in 1925 and had repeated discussions with de Valera: one of Mannix’s biographers credits him with advice that ‘may conceivably have been decisive in leading the Republicans to revise their policy of abstention from the Dail’. At subsequent major turning points of Irish history, at the oath crisis in 1927, on the 1937 constitution, over neutrality, and at various points between, Mannix gave de Valera advice, some private, often public, always supportive. The distant Archbishop could be relied on invariably to understand the de Valera viewpoint and to applaud his actions.

Despite the Melbourne and Sydney thousands, de Valera’s Australian tour was not a success. It—and its aftermath—were to prove conclusively that Irish Australia was at an end, and that Australians of Irish descent or even Irish birth, could not be roused to any interest whatever in the affairs of Ireland. The cause which de Valera sought to promote in Australia—anti-partition—failed to attract Australian support. At long last, a basic truth about Irish Australia as a historical phenomenon had surfaced above the tides of sentiment and controversy. The affairs of Ireland were of interest to her descendants in Australia only if they called on their charity, or somehow appeared to involve their own circumstances within Australian society. Partition evoked neither response. If
The crowd at de Valera’s Sydney stadium meeting, 1st June, 1948, a venue usually used for boxing matches.

anything, it was counter-productive, for most of those few Australians of Irish descent who advertised to the matter saw that the cause of anti-partition would alienate them from the general climate of Australian opinion, a position they had neither wish nor reason to occupy.

The context of de Valera’s Australian meetings was that of public hostility. In Sydney there were two large protest rallies, one conducted by the British Ex-Servicemen’s League, the other by various Protestant organisations. In Brisbane, the city council refused the use of the Brisbane stadium for de Valera’s meeting. Hundreds of Melbourne University students hissed him when he gave them Irish instead of English hissation. Hundreds of Melbourne University students hissed him when he gave them Irish instead of English hissation. Hundreds of Melbourne University students hissed him when he gave them Irish instead of English hissation. Hundreds of Melbourne University students hissed him when he gave them Irish instead of English hissation. Hundreds of Melbourne University students hissed him when he gave them Irish instead of English hissation. Hundreds of Melbourne University students hissed him when he gave them Irish instead of English hissation. 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The enthusiastic - such as it was - generated by de Valera’s visit was likely to be highly evanescent, a tendency sharply increased by the way in which de Valera preached his message. It amounted to this: “Partition will go – it must go. It is inevitable that this blot from the Irish scene will be removed. Why? Because it is fundamentally wrong, immoral, based on unnatural foundations”. Pitched at the level of high-principled, emotional sloganising, de Valera’s attacks on partition required no more from his audiences than an immediate sympathetic response on the occasion, which they readily gave. He made no demands on them for any continuing commitment.
or for practical action. His treatment of the central practical difficulty – what should be done about Ulster Unionists – implied either an evasion, or some kind of majority dictatorship. While this approach might well have been appropriate to whipping up political support, it was highly simplistic as a solution to a profound practical difficulty. Yet it seems that de Valera’s actual thinking as well as his speaking stopped well short of engaging the realities of the Northern situation. In 1950 he wrote to Dryer in Sydney about ‘the old cry that a majority of the people in the Six Counties want to remain separated from us here. This is the cry that has to be dealt with on all occasions. It is not easy to give a simple reply to counter it. One has to go so much into detail that the real position is not brought out sharply. The only reply I can think of is to say that the majority of the people of Ireland as a whole want Ireland to be one, etc...’. Even Dryer, an ardent disciple, was baffled by the vagueness of this response: ‘I’m afraid, Sir, that I do not fully grasp the point... but would the following sentence approach the essence of your meaning: “The majority in thirty-two of the nation’s counties invalidates (or counter-balances) that in six of them five times over...”. Seen in the perspective of events in Northern Ireland since 1968, de Valera’s attitude, and Dryer’s, seem irrelevant to the real difficulties of solving the partition problem, and those of Northern Ireland generally. In part, the absence of this practical dimension reflected the then common Irish nationalist assumption that as Britain had created the partition problem, it was up to Britain to solve it. In part, it expressed an aspect of de Valera’s political style. He was, or at least appeared to be, as a Brisbane Catholic journalist described him, a ‘public figure who believes ... that it is his country’s high duty to teach the world the might of moral beauty and stamp God’s image truly on the struggling soul’. This was a conviction and cast of political mind shared by Dryer in Australia, and it lent itself to declaiming principles of politics as articles of faith and morals rather than to devising pragmatic detailed programmes. The Sydney Morning Herald had a rather different view of de Valera’s capacities for idealism, dubbing him in 1937 ‘the Godfather of the Fairies of illusion’.

In Australia, de Valera sought to bring about the formation of an Australian League for an Undivided Ireland, that is, an organisation which would promote the anti-partition cause, and bring Australian pressure to bear, in this matter, on the British government. In each of the Australian centres he visited he took this up privately with the organisers of his meetings. There are several possible explanations for his not announcing his wishes publicly, but the main one would seem to be his anxiety that an Australian anti-partition movement should seem to arise spontaneously, from Australians, rather than from the Irish abroad.
thoughtful in British Melbourne, at the Archdiocesan centenary celebrations, Xavier College, May, 1948.

Ireland's withdrawal from the Commonwealth to form the Republic provoked an intensely hostile Australian public reaction. Moreover, de Valera had lost interest: a photograph of a pensive de Valera in Melbourne, in a setting draped with the Union Jack, raises an obvious question. Did that most acute and nationalist politician sense that Mannix's Irish sentiment was no true gauge of the disposition of the Australian environment, and there was nothing of importance to Ireland to be gained at that time here? However, even as early as October, 1948, six months after their visit, de Valera and Aiken had demonstrated that pious nationalist exhortations at irregular intervals was all the help they could or would give Dryer. His requests for advice and information and contacts in Ireland went unanswered. De Valera poured cold water on Dryer's suggestion of a World League for an Undivided Ireland. Dryer did not abandon the idea, which was logical in terms of the strength of the American and British anti-partition movements, but he seems not to have conceived the possibility that de Valera's opposition-sprang from unwillingness to permit any organisation which might detract from his own prominence in the anti-partition campaign.

The Australian League had never really lived: by 1954 even its vestiges were dead. Throughout, and until his death in 1963, Dryer continued to report the elements of this dismal situation to de Valera: de Valera's secretarial machine responded each year with a Christmas card, bearing the facsimile signature of the great man. Dryer treasured these. He exemplified at its end a tradition of de Valera veneration that wept back in Australia to 1916. In the 1920s, when houses commonly carried names, a Sydney republican supporter had her house labelled 'de Valera'. It was defaced and torn off, until she hired the Waverley Fire Brigade to place it at the top of her house beyond reach, by virtue of their long ladder. Like much of Ireland in Australia, even the name of de Valera was magic, inspiration, a dream.

NOTES

1. This article is, in substantial part, a section of my lecture 'Irish Australia at an end: the Australian League for an Undivided Ireland, 1948-1954' Tasmanian Historical Research Association. Papers and Proceedings. Vol. 21, No. 4, December 1974. Detailed source references are given there.

2. This is with the exception of a brief period of inter-party government from 1954 to 1957. De Valera resigned as Taoiseach in 1959 and was elected President, an office which he held until his retirement in 1973.