


# POLITICS AT A TIME OF WAR

One hundred years ago the local elections help shape a new nation - in Limerick the turmoil of war and politics lead to the murder of two mayors, writes Dr Brian P Murphy OSB

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Crowds applaud as striking workers march through Wickham Street onto William Street in Limerick, in April 1919 during the general worker's strike. The Limerick Trades and Labour Council called the strike to protest against British militarism and appalling working conditions. It led to the two week period known internationally as the Limerick Soviet when the city was controlled by the Trades Council's Special Strike Committee, which printed its own money, controlled food prices and published newspapers. The large banner in the picture depicting an Irish wolfhound, a round tower and a harp reads 'Lisdoonvarna Demands Justice', indicating the solidarity of neighbouring County Clare. Nine months after this picture was taken local election took place at the start of 1920. This picture is from the Franz S. Haselbeck's Ireland - Selected Photographs collection



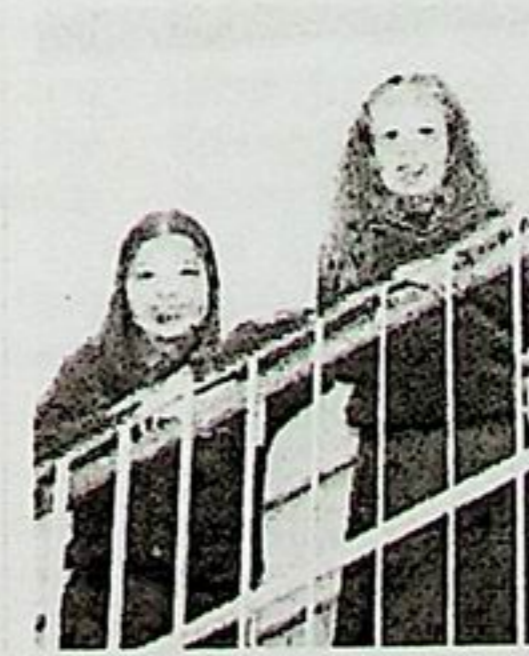
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# Election 1920: Limerick voters shape their future

At the height of the Irish War of Independence the local election of 1920 mark a turning point in history

**L**OCAL elections were held in Ireland on January 15, 1920 for 11 Corporations and 99 Urban Councils.

The Limerick Town Clerk, William Nolan, in declaring the results, stated that the elections had taken place under the franchise of the 1898 Local Government Act and that they were the first elections held for six years.

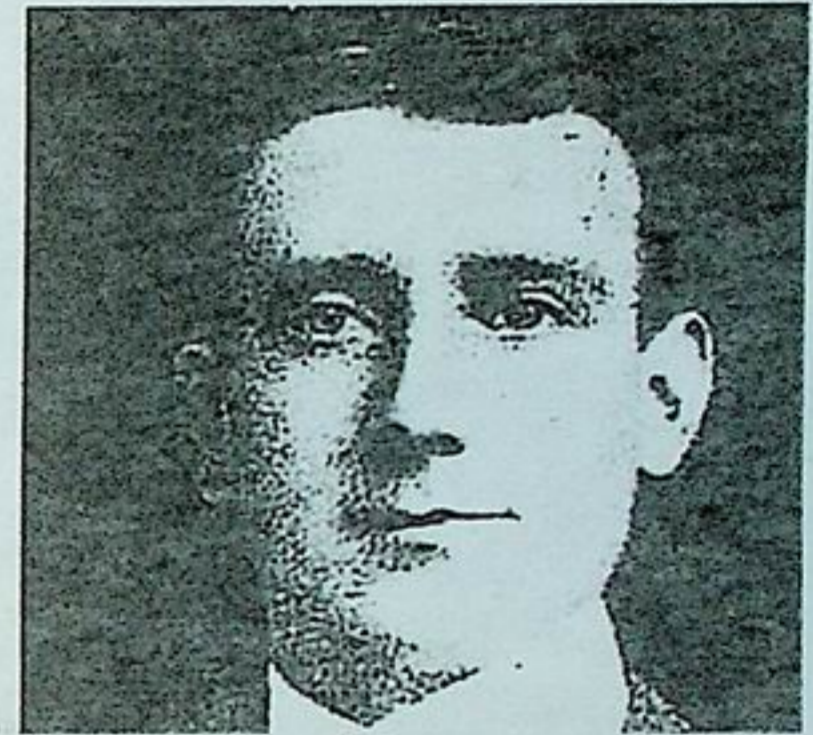
The delay was caused by the start of the First World War in August 1914. The Town Clerk's reference to the Act of 1898 serves as a forcible reminder that without the concession of the vote to ratepayers by this Act the character of the Corporation would have been far different.

Indeed, one can trace a radical strain in Limerick Corporation politics from that time and it provides an indispensable background to the 1920 election.

Certain mayoral elections stand out: firstly, John Daly (1845-1916), with his Fenian background, including lengthy prison sentences, was elected mayor in 1899 and was in office until 1902.

He was supported by many Labour councillors, who held 24 of the 40 seats. Secondly, Alphonsus O'Mara (1887-1958), who was elected mayor, on January 23, 1918, implemented a policy which was in sympathy with the ideals of the new republican Sinn Fein party, founded in October 1917, with the objective of 'securing the International recognition of Ireland as an independent Irish Republic.'

O'Mara and the Limerick Corporation took this declaration to heart. When Sir John French, who had been appointed Lord Lieutenant and Military Governor in May 1918, imprisoned hundreds of Sinn Fein supporters without trial, the Corporation granted the Freedom of the City, on September 5, 1918, to Eamon de Valera, Eoin MacNeill and Kathleen Clarke.



Mayors of Limerick Michael O'Callaghan and George Clancy

Significantly, only MacNeill was at liberty to receive the award on November 7, 1918. Following the first meeting of Dail Eireann on January 21, 1919, O'Mara and the Corporation supported the Dail's claims for the recognition of an independent Irish Republic; and, on May 7, 1919, granted the Freedom of the City to the three Irish American delegates who were attempting to secure a hearing for Ireland at the Versailles Peace Conference.

The delegates failed in their objective. Following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, the English government of Lloyd George increased its armed forces in Ireland and attempted to suppress the actions of both Dail Eireann and Sinn Fein.

It was in that context that the local elections of January 1920 took place. These elections were marked by two distinct characteristics: firstly, Irish republicans contested the election as members of the Sinn Fein party; and secondly, the British administration in Ireland attempted to minimise the vote for Sinn Fein by introducing a system of proportional representation based on the single transferable vote.

The results in Limerick were announced on January 19, 1920 for the 40 seats that were contested. Sinn Fein won 26; Labour 6; Ratepayers

4; and Independents 4. In the new council Sinn Fein had 21 councillors and 5 aldermen; Labour had 3 councillors and 3 aldermen; Ratepayers had 4 councillors; and Independents had 4 councillors.

George Clancy was the senior alderman. Emily Crowe of Sarsfield Street, who was elected for the Custom House and Markets Wards, was the only woman elected. She was the aunt of Robert Byrne whose death in April 1919 had led to the strike known as the Limerick Soviet.

However, Emily Crowe was not the only Limerick woman to be elected at that time: Kathleen Clarke (1878-1972), the daughter of Edward Daly of Limerick and the widow of Tom Clarke who was executed in 1916, was elected in Dublin.

The result in the Limerick election was repeated in other elections across Ireland: Sinn Fein won 9 of the 11 Corporations; and 62 of the 99 urban councils.

In all Sinn Fein won 560 seats; Labour 394; Unionists 355; Home Rulers 238; Independents 161; and Municipal Reformers 108.

While the Sinn Fein party did not win a majority in Belfast, it did secure a majority in Ulster thus undermining on the status of a six county Ulster.

When the Limerick Corporation met on January 30, 1920, Alderman Michael

Colivet, TD for Limerick City, proposed that Michael O'Callaghan should be selected as the new mayor.

This proposal was seconded by Emily Crowe and George Clancy. Members of the Labour party also supported the proposal and Michael O'Callaghan was confirmed as the new mayor.

It was then proposed by Michael Colivet that the council should declare 'its full allegiance' to 'Dail Eireann as the lawful government of Ireland.'

The Ratepayers on the council expressed some opposition to this proposal but it was carried by a large majority. The Corporation of Cork, with its mayor Thomas McCurtain, was the only other council to make such a declaration at this time, although Dublin took the same step in May. Thomas MacCurtain was killed by British Crown forces on March 20, 1920; Michael O'Callaghan and his successor as mayor, George Clancy, were killed by Crown forces on the night of March 6 and March 7, 1921. It is clearly important to remember the days of their deaths; but it is also fitting to remember the day, and the context, in which they first assumed public office.

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